Soft Power, Hard Times: Russian Influence in the Post-Soviet Space during Periods of Military Conflict

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the Faculty of Humanities

2020

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AOC</td>
<td>Abkhazian Orthodox Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>Critical Discourse Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEPA</td>
<td>Center for European Policy Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIS</td>
<td>Confederation of Independent States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLA</td>
<td>‘compatriots living abroad’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRM</td>
<td><em>Fond ‘Russkii Mir’</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSB</td>
<td>Federal’naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti (Federal Security Service)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOC</td>
<td>Georgian Orthodox Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GONGO</td>
<td>government-organised non-governmental organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPW</td>
<td>Great Patriotic War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMA</td>
<td>Holy Metropolis of Abkhazia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HW</td>
<td>‘hybrid war(fare)’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IW</td>
<td>‘information war(fare)’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIIS</td>
<td>Kiev International Institute of Sociology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MFA</td>
<td>Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSMP</td>
<td>Ofitsial’nyi Sait Moskovskogo Patriarkhata (Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RM</td>
<td><em>Russkii Mir</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROC</td>
<td>Russian Orthodox Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROCOR</td>
<td>Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAOC</td>
<td>Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UGCC</td>
<td>Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UOC-KP</td>
<td>Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kiev Patriarchate)</td>
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<tr>
<td>UOC-MP</td>
<td>Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)</td>
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Abstract

Russia’s assertive foreign policy since 2004 has caused much concern in the West. Since Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, many Western commentators have claimed that Russia has adopted a new military strategy called ‘hybrid warfare’, in which the country’s main cultural organisations that have a presence in neighbouring post-Soviet states are mere tools at the disposal of the Russian government. In response, these cultural organisations deny such accusations, with many of Russia’s state representatives arguing that they simply engage in public and cultural diplomacy and, as a result, are agents of Russian ‘soft power’.

To understand the nature of Russia’s activities on the international stage, this thesis investigates the role of two main cultural organisations, the Russian Orthodox Church and Fond ‘Russkii Mir’, in support of the Kremlin’s policies during two major cases of Russian military intervention in the so-called ‘near abroad’ – the Russo-Georgian War (2008) and the Ukraine crisis (2013–present day). To address this issue, conflict representations disseminated on the media outlets of these organisations were assessed and compared to those on the state-controlled, Kremlin-aligned television channel Pervyi Kanal. A content analysis, thematic analysis and frame analysis were conducted in order to evaluate the outlets’ narrative framing of these two military conflicts.

Whilst concluding that neither the concept of ‘hybrid warfare’ nor ‘soft power’ are useful analytical tools for understanding the activities of Russia’s cultural organisations during these military conflicts, this research reveals a significant difference in the activities of the ROC and FRM. Despite organisational autonomy being restricted in times of crisis, the Russian Orthodox Church expressed significant agency, which was evident from its deviation from the Kremlin-preferred line on issues of direct relevance to its own interests. Conversely, no such deviation occurred with Fond ‘Russkii Mir’. Consequently, this thesis demonstrates that the specific agendas and agencies of Kremlin-affiliated actors within Russia are dependent on the nature of such actors’ relationships with the country’s political leadership.
Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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Note on Translation and Transliteration

Unless stated otherwise, translations of Russian citations were made by the author of this thesis. A simplified form of the BGN/PCGN Romanisation system of Russian has been partially adopted in this thesis for the names of authors and titles of publications, allowing for the omission of apostrophes for the letters ‘ъ’ and ‘ь’. Thus, Kommersant’’, for example, becomes Kommersant.
Acknowledgements

In undertaking this research, I have benefited immensely from the wisdom, guidance and support of others. In particular, I would like to thank my supervisors, Vera Tolz-Zilitinkevic and Yoram Gorlizki, for all of their efforts in overseeing this thesis. Their academic expertise, scholarly rigour, invaluable feedback and saintly patience improved this research beyond measure, although any mistakes or oversights in this thesis are my responsibility alone. I am blessed to have been in such safe pairs of hands.

I was generously granted financial support by AHRC’s CEELBAS CDT to carry out this research project, for which I am immensely thankful. The School of Arts, Languages and Cultures (SALC) at the University of Manchester also kindly provided some additional funding for my fieldwork trips. Throughout my time as a doctoral student, the PGR administration team in the Graduate School supported my research in the background, whose reliable and efficient services were appreciated. I am also grateful to the University of Manchester for granting me the opportunity to study at this level.

A special debt of gratitude is owed to Larisa Yakovleva. Over the years, I have benefited greatly from Larisa’s expertise, professionalism and conscientiousness as a teacher of the Russian language. As well as offering her teaching services, Larisa provided valuable assistance in making arrangements for my fieldwork trips to Russia. Oleg Kusmartsev and Larisa were the source of many enjoyable and stimulating conversations during my time in Russia. Without their generous hospitality, encouraging support and active engagement, these fieldwork trips would most certainly not have been as rewarding and fruitful, both professionally and personally.

A number of figures within the Russian Orthodox Church kindly accepted my requests for interviews, which contributed to this thesis. For their time and engagement, I am much obliged. Additionally, BBC Monitoring provided me with an internship during my doctorate. This rewarding internship indirectly improved the research conducted for this project.

I would also like to thank my father for starting my fascination with Russia, and my mother for putting up with it. Last, but by no means least, encouragement, advice and support were gratefully received at times when it was most needed from Alexandra, Beatrix, Konstantin, Hannah, Steven, Porumbel and Măcăleandru.
Introduction

The political relationship between Russia and the West has become, according to many commentators, increasingly antagonistic over the past fifteen years, particularly under the presidential terms of Vladimir Putin. The causes of this deterioration in diplomatic relations are found in numerous disagreements over major foreign policy issues which developed and intensified in the early 2000s, such as EU and NATO enlargement into central and eastern Europe, recognition of Kosovo as an independent state by the West, and the USA’s proposed missile defence system in central Europe. The involvement of Russia’s armed forces in the most significant military conflicts to have taken place in the post-Soviet space – the Russo-Georgian War (2008) and the Ukraine crisis (2013–present day) – further worsened relations. Thus far, these conflicts have resulted in several disputed territorial changes, tens of thousands of casualties and hundreds of thousands of refugees.

A number of commentators have argued that these cases of Russian military intervention are symptomatic of the Russian government’s increasingly assertive and aggressive foreign policy post-2004, with some even claiming the onset of a ‘new Cold War’ between Russia and the West.¹ Whilst most analyses of Russia’s role in the two conflicts focus on political and military activity, few adequately explore cultural aspects.² Owing to their notable impact, cultural aspects need to be included in any comprehensive investigation of these conflicts for a full and rigorous understanding of events. The purpose of this thesis is to address this gap in scholarly research by conducting an in-depth

¹ For examples of discussion of a ‘new Cold War’, see: Lucas (2014); Legvold (2016); Conradi (2017); McFaul (2018).
² For the two most notable pieces of scholarly research to examine specific cultural aspects of the military conflicts (i.e., religion), see: Werkner (2010); Hudson (2018).
investigation into the activity of Russia’s cultural organisations in times of military conflict.

Owing to the dominant status and leading role enjoyed by Russia during the imperial and Soviet periods, Russia’s language and culture has historically had considerable influence beyond the current nation-state borders of the Russian Federation.³ The presence and influence of Russian culture in the ‘near abroad’ has attracted significant attention under the presidencies of Putin and Medvedev as a means of maintaining and increasing Russia’s status and power in the region.⁴ As a result, aspects of the national culture have featured prominently in the government’s foreign policy.

Since the 2000s, there has been much discussion of the concept of ‘soft power’ as a tool for assessing non-coercive state influence in the international arena. In short, ‘soft power’ describes the influence that is derived from national attraction amongst foreign publics, allegedly generated from a number of sources, such as language and culture.⁵ In theory, ‘soft power’ can be utilised for geopolitical ends in international relations. The concept gained popularity amongst many of Russia’s national elites in the late 2000s and early 2010s.⁶ In the scramble for an analytical framework to make sense of Russian state activity during the crisis in Ukraine, however, many commentators in the West have enthusiastically embraced the concept of ‘hybrid warfare’.

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³ For more information on the impact of language and culture on national identity and nation-building in the Russian Empire and the USSR, see: Tolz (2001).
⁴ The term ‘near abroad’ is a geopolitical label that has been in use amongst Russian (political and military) elites since 1991, describing the territorial space of most of the former USSR. As it is Russia-centric and its use allegedly reinforces the idea of Russia’s ‘sphere of influence’, ‘near abroad’ is a contested term for some in post-Soviet states. On the origins and use of the term, see: Safire (1994). By contrast, the term ‘far abroad’ is used to describe the territorial space beyond the ‘near abroad’.
⁵ Nye (1990 and 2004).
Since 2014, ‘hybrid warfare’ has come to broadly describe a state’s use of any combination of military and/or non-military levers of power – including cultural resources – in order to exert unwarranted influence over another country for geopolitical ends.\(^7\) It has been argued by many commentators in the West that Russia is conducting ‘hybrid warfare’ in the post-Soviet space, with some claiming that Russian cultural organisations play an important role in such a military programme.\(^8\) An examination of Russia’s leading cultural organisations in this thesis raises the following question: is ‘soft power’ the best tool for analysing Russia’s cultural organisations in times of military conflict, or is the widely circulated concept of ‘hybrid warfare’ better suited to this task?

The literature on the conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine has mostly focused on politics, with relatively little dedicated to cultural aspects. The motives and intentions of those Russian cultural organisations that were operating in the ‘near abroad’ during these conflicts have been called into question by some commentators, particularly as the organisations can be strongly linked to the Russian government and several state structures. A number of commentators in the West have argued that the Russian government has increasingly become involved in the country’s cultural sphere and cultural organisations post-2000, with some also claiming that Russian culture has been ‘weaponised’ by the Kremlin to serve state interests.\(^9\)

The role of cultural organisations in the government’s projection of Russia’s influence in the ‘near abroad’ is the subject of this thesis. In order to establish the extent to which claims of significant government influence over the country’s cultural organisations are accurate, the thesis details how such organisations represented Russian military

\(^7\) For example, see: Orenstein (2019).
\(^8\) For example, see: Halchenko (2014); Sherr & Kullamaa (2019).
\(^9\) For example, see: Sherr (2013); Pomeranatsev and Weiss (2014); van Herpen (2015a); Davis (2019). For more information on Russian and pro-Russian organisations and groups in the ‘near abroad’, see: Lutsevich (2016).
intervention in the post-Soviet space through the crisis-related output on their media outlets. In doing so, it evaluates the ability of Russian cultural organisations to pursue their own independent interests during times of national emergency. This research project, as a result, bridges the gap between studies of Russian politics and Russian culture in relation to the aforementioned post-Soviet military conflicts by addressing the question: what was the nature of the relationship between the Russian government and Russian cultural organisations during the conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine?

In order to tackle this question, ‘autonomy’ and ‘agency’ are explored in this thesis. An actor self-governing and acting in accordance with their own motivations, which could be in opposition to government positions regarding situations of particular importance to the political administration, denotes ‘autonomy’; ‘agency’ is demonstrated when an actor makes decisions for oneself and undertakes self-directed actions. As is the case with autonomy, agency can be demonstrated by an actor pursuing their own, rather than the government’s, agenda on specific issues, even when broadly following a particular government line. However, it is not necessarily the case that an actor is acting on one's own motivations when exercising agency; although agency can be exercised through rational choices, those choices might not be autonomous due to the context in which they occur (for example, in cases of coercion or oppression). In public and, even, scholarly discourses in the West, it is often the case that Russia’s state-affiliated actors are often depicted as possessing no agency, as well as no autonomy. This depiction is reductive, misleading and, therefore, unhelpful in formulating appropriate and effective government policy. As organisational autonomy is difficult to establish in scholarly research, this thesis instead explores the agency of Russia’s main cultural organisations – the Russian Orthodox Church and Fond ‘Russkii Mir’ – during periods of military conflict.

In the West, many political commentators adopt an understanding of the Russian ‘state’ that is too narrow – often reducing the ‘state’ either to the country’s government or to the president personally. A simplistic understanding of the Russian ‘state’ – especially one that overly focuses on high-level politics – creates a misleading impression of power relations in contemporary Russia. Although the Russian government does exercise significant political authority, power in contemporary Russia is not completely centralised. To varying degrees, different groups and individuals possess and wield influence in Russia, making power relations in the country more nuanced than is often portrayed by many Western commentators. It follows that such a narrow impression of power in Russia likely leads to Western governments making ill-informed and misguided decisions on foreign policy and security issues.

**Concepts and Case Studies**

In recent years, the concept of ‘soft power’ – as theorised by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. – has emerged as a popular analytical framework for assessing state influence in the international arena. Defined in opposition to ‘hard power’ (for example, military activity, overt coercion, direct economic and/or financial incentives and pressure), this concept relates to national attraction, which is purportedly generated from a number of (mostly intangible) sources, such as language and culture, ideology and values, transnational business, and membership of influential regional and international organisations.

Nye (2004) argues in his foremost book on the topic, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, that ‘soft power’ is the product of attraction amongst foreign publics towards one’s own country and that the purpose of actively engaging with ‘soft

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11 On the nature and networks of power in contemporary Russia, see: Galeotti (2017).
power’ should be to facilitate ‘[getting] others to want the outcomes that you want’.\textsuperscript{12} The chances of a government’s desired foreign policy outcomes being realised in international relations are, theoretically, greatly increased by ‘correct’ engagement with the concept, according to the author’s prescriptive guidelines. Nye identifies ‘public diplomacy’ as an important tool for this end.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, proponents of the concept argue that ‘soft power’ is geopolitically rewarding. As has been the case in other countries across the world, the concept of ‘soft power’ as a means of achieving foreign policy objectives has not gone unnoticed by national elites in Russia.

Since the mid-2000s, successive political administrations in Russia have acknowledged the perceived geopolitical importance of ‘soft power’ (myagkaya sila), which has led to significant government engagement with the concept.\textsuperscript{14} As discourse and activity relating to ‘soft power’ continued to grow in Russia, so did interest in and the prominence of organisations that are claimed to produce ‘soft power’ for the country. Over the past decade, numerous texts have been published on what supporters of the concept claim to be sources of Russia’s ‘soft power’. For example, some of these publications have explored the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), the country’s broadcast mass media and Russia’s organisational membership of the Eurasian Economic Union.\textsuperscript{15} Whilst these

\textsuperscript{13} The concept of ‘public diplomacy’ describes the government-sponsored communication to foreign publics of particular initiatives (be they political, social, cultural or technological), which encompass certain ideas, values and/or a particular ‘worldview’ that a country’s political administration espouses. Nye argues that engagement in public diplomacy is a means for a national government to generate more ‘soft power’ for the country.
\textsuperscript{14} For examples of Medvedev and Putin discussing the concept, see (respectively): RIA Novosti (2012); Prezident Rossii (2012). Additionally, many other high-profile political figures in Russia have discussed this concept during the presidencies of Putin and Medvedev.
\textsuperscript{15} For example, see (respectively): Richters (2013); Beumers, et al. (2009); Dragneva and Wolczuk (2015).
publications do not discuss ‘soft power’, they do provide essential background information for a number of key topics, concepts and debates that are discussed in this research. Other authors, such as Nicu Popescu and Andrew Wilson (2009), Lara Ryazanova-Clarke (2014) and Marlene Laruelle (2015), have specifically explored alleged areas of Russian ‘soft power’.

As a number of scholars have argued, Russia’s political elites understand and engage with the concept of ‘soft power’ differently to their counterparts in the West. The manner in which Russia’s cultural organisations are structured and operate is notably different to that of analogous Western cultural organisations. Whilst the independence of cultural organisations is considered in the West to be essential for the effective production of ‘soft power’ (i.e., in order to have ‘credibility’ amongst foreign publics), cultural organisations are treated more instrumentally in Russia (i.e., as arms of the state that can be used by the government when required). The Russian government’s approach towards cultural organisations that are claimed to produce ‘soft power’ for the country is similar to that which is adopted in other similar political systems, most notably, in China – another neo-authoritarian state which understands ‘soft power’ differently to the West. In both countries, major cultural organisations are reported to be much more state-aligned than in the West, enjoying little or no autonomy. Therefore, as autonomy is considered by Nye to be a key requirement for organisations to effectively generate ‘soft power’, the alternative approach taken by the Russian government regarding its outward-facing cultural organisations appears to undermine the applicability of Nye’s concept to Russia.

16 For example, see: Nye, Jr. (2013); Sherr (2013); Wilson (2015); Rutland and Kazantsev (2016); Popovic, et al. (2020).
17 For more on the similarities between Russia and China in their approach to ‘soft power’, see: Nye, Jr. (2013); Wilson (2015); Walker (2016); Popovic, et al. (2020); Trunkos (2020).
18 For example, on Russian cultural organisations, see: van Herpen (2015a); Rotaru (2018).
A number of organisations that are claimed to generate ‘soft power’ originate from and are based in Russia, but, owing to historical connections, also have a significant presence across the post-Soviet space. These organisations can be divided into two separate categories, which are defined in this thesis as \textit{organic} and \textit{manufactured}. Functioning as a shorthand to reflect the important differences between the organisations that have been selected for study, these categories are necessary for the research design of this thesis. This categorisation could appear too binary, however, as many organisations could be regarded as having been ‘manufactured’ at some point in time. Yet, it is essential to acknowledge the differences between the functioning of organisations with long histories, which have endowed them with significance and prestige that are independent from the current ruling political elite, and those which have been created very recently on the government’s initiative in order to help pursue government policy.

In the 10\textsuperscript{th} century, Prince Vladimir established Orthodox Christianity as the state religion of Kievan Rus’, creating a Church to which the ROC proclaims itself as direct successor. Therefore, at that time, the Church was ‘manufactured’. The Church, however, has a long history, during which it developed and pursued its own agendas that were largely based on its religious goals and independent of the state. Consequently, the ROC has experienced significant tension, as well as alignment, with political power at various junctures. Thus, as the Church developed over time the ability to exercise agency in pursuit of its goals, is grounded in (socio)cultural phenomena that long predate the concept of ‘soft power’ and, in theory, is not politically oriented, the term ‘organic’ is used in this thesis to categorise the ROC as an organisation. This historical background differentiates the ROC from recently established cultural organisations, to which the term ‘manufactured’ is applied. It must be acknowledged, however, that the ROC has greatly benefitted from a
substantial intensification in church-state relations under Putin since early 2012.\textsuperscript{19} As a result, the status, prominence and influence of the Church have increased, domestically and, in some respects, internationally. This complexity regarding the relationship between the ROC and political power in Russia is explored in the analysis of the Church in this thesis.

The co-operation and alignment between the ROC and Russia’s government and state organs – a process that gathered pace under Patriarch Kirill following his enthronement in 2008 and accelerated under Putin after becoming president for the third time in 2012 – has further undermined the self-proclaimed political neutrality and independence of the Church. Owing to the close proximity of the Church to the Russian government, some commentators have argued that the influence of the ROC in the post-Soviet space has been negatively affected by major geopolitical events involving Russia, such as Russian military intervention in Georgia and Ukraine.\textsuperscript{20} In turn, these commentators have argued that Russia has been losing its ‘soft power’.\textsuperscript{21} As autonomy is claimed to be a major factor for an organisation to be interpreted as attractive by foreign publics and considered to be a legitimate agent of ‘soft power’ by foreign elites and commentators, the positive correlation between the production of ‘soft power’ and distance from political power is expected. Thus, the more the ROC has drawn closer to the Russian government over recent years, the less commentators have considered it to produce ‘soft power’.

Operating alongside this long-established religious-cultural body, a number of \textit{manufactured} culture-oriented organisations were formed by the Russian government at a

\textsuperscript{19} It was in the latter half of the 1990s under (then) President Boris Yeltsin that the church-state relationship began to progressively strengthen. The church-state relationship in Russia is explored in greater detail in Chapter I.

\textsuperscript{20} For example, see: Kuzio (2018c).

\textsuperscript{21} For example, see: Nye, Jr. (2013); Rutland and Kazantsev (2016); Kuzio (2018b).
time when the country’s political elites were expressing great interest in the concept of ‘soft power’: the two main organisations from this group are *Fond ‘Russkii Mir’ (FRM)* and *Rossotrudnichestvo*. The defining feature of this group is that such organisations are (relatively) recent political creations: both FRM and Rossotrudnichestvo were established by presidential decree (in 2007 and 2008 respectively), belong to key government ministries, are headed and (largely) run by political actors, are funded from the federal budget and engage in activity that relates to (geo)politics.\(^{22}\) Whilst FRM is officially tasked by the government only with ‘the goals of popularising the Russian language […] and supporting study of the Russian language overseas’, the organisation’s own stated goals also include the ‘formation of favourable public opinion […] on the country’.\(^{23}\) These objectives can be closely linked to Nye’s prescriptive guidelines for the production of ‘soft power’. Although it is not explicitly stated as being such by either the government or the organisation itself, these stated objectives mean that FRM can reasonably be considered an organisation that serves to generate national attraction and, consequently, produce ‘soft power’ for Russia. Indeed, FRM is presented in official Russian discourse as a vehicle for the generation of ‘soft power’ for Russia.

In addition to its strong ties to the Russian government, FRM engages in political activity by reporting on major, controversial geopolitical issues in the post-Soviet space through its news media outlet. The outlet produced, for example, significant coverage of and commentary on the Ukraine crisis. This political activity does not correspond with the organisation’s ostensibly non-political remit. FRM, as a result, has become politicised by engaging in such contentious activity.

\(^{22}\) FRM is subordinated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Enlightenment; Rossotrudnichestvo is subordinated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. \(^{23}\) Russkii Mir, ‘Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiiskoi Federatsii o sozdannii fonda “Russkii mir”’. Russkii Mir, *Fond “Russkii Mir”*, n.d.
Thus, the following questions arise: to what extent do the aforementioned cultural organisations’ strong links to the Russian state impact on their activity, influence and interests abroad? Is the primary objective of the ROC and FRM to pursue their own agenda independently from the national government, producing ‘soft power’ in the process? Alternatively, do they function more as useful instruments for the country’s authorities as compliant tools in Russia’s alleged ‘hybrid warfare’ during times of national emergency? From a review of the literature on Russian ‘soft power’, it can be concluded that, for many commentators, autonomy and agency are indicators that a cultural organisation primarily generates ‘soft power’, whereas less autonomy and agency indicate that an organisation, at the expense of producing ‘soft power’, functions more as an instrument for the government.

The Russo-Georgian War of 2008 was the Russian Federation’s first inter-state military conflict since the collapse of the USSR in 1991; Russia fought against Georgia in support of the latter’s separatist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Since 1991, however, wars, armed skirmishes and acute political tensions have periodically broken out between Georgia and Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In August 2008, the Georgian government launched a military campaign in South Ossetia in order to regain control of the territory from separatists. The military operation, the Georgian government claimed, was in retaliation to repeated deadly armed attacks in South Ossetia from Russian-backed Ossetian separatists on Georgia’s peacekeeping troops and on villages populated in the majority by ethnic Georgians. According to the Russian authorities, however, Georgia’s military operation in South Ossetia was a case of unprovoked and disproportionate military

24 The most notable examples of these military tensions in the region are: the 1991-2 South Ossetia War, the War in Abkhazia (1992-3), and the flare-up of military activity, under Saakashvili, in South Ossetia in 2004.
aggression. Thus, in accordance with Russia’s international treaty commitments concerning peacekeeping in the territory, political figures in Russia argued that military intervention was a matter of legal, as well as moral, obligation.25

Since the Russo-Georgian War ended, three comprehensive English-language publications on the conflict have been released, exploring events, causes and blame attribution. These books largely focus on the geopolitical and military aspects of the war, which place the conflict in the context of geopolitical developments in the post-Soviet space and, more broadly, internationally. By largely assessing the conflict from a Georgian and Western perspective, the authors do not adequately explore the Russian government’s reasons for going to war with Georgia.

Per Gahrton, in Georgia: Pawn in the New Great Game (2010), presents a concise overview of both the events and consequences of the Russo-Georgian War. Acknowledging the protagonists’ conflicting accusations, Gahrton avoids apportioning blame on any one side for starting the war.26 Ronald D. Asmus, however, in A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West (2010), alleged that the war was, in fact, pre-planned by the Russian authorities.27 Asmus claims that the Russian government’s objective was to coax Georgia into starting an armed campaign in either or both of the country’s separatist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which would warrant military intervention from Russia and justify its remaining presence and influence in the

25 The EU’s Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (IIFFMCG) (unofficially known as the ‘Tagliavini Commission’), whilst attributing blame for the conflict to both Georgia and Russia, concluded that the Georgian authorities initiated the war. The mission’s three volumes can be found at: Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law (n.d.).
26 As a Swedish MEP and the European Parliament’s ‘rapporteur’ for the South Caucasus at the time of the Russo-Georgian War, Gahrton is a political figure.
27 Asmus was a political actor in the USA. Asmus was an early proponent of and, through his work at The German Marshall Fund of the United States, involved in NATO’s expansion into several of the former Warsaw Pact states of central and eastern Europe.
regions post-conflict. As a result, Georgia’s government under Mikheil Saakashvili would be prevented from further aligning the country with the West militarily, as, for Asmus, the acceptance of post-Soviet countries into NATO lay at the heart of the war: ‘Moscow was rebelling against a European security architecture […] [that] was facilitating a geopolitical shift against it’, believing that the ‘security system […] encouraged or enabled countries like Georgia to go West against its [i.e., Russia’s] interests.’\(^{28}\) The author argues that the ultimate objective for Russia was to ‘kill any chance of NATO ever expanding […] anywhere else along its borders’.\(^{29}\) Svante Cornell and Frederick Starr in *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia* (2009), made the same charge of premeditation from Russia, arguing that, based on the chapter contributions of Andrei Illarionov and Pavel Felgenhauer, ‘it will be all but impossible hereafter for anyone to deny that Russia had engaged in detailed planning for the war that occurred […] for months, even years, prior to August 2008’.\(^{30}\)

A number of scholarly journal articles were also published in the West in the aftermath of the conflict by authors such as Roy Allison (2008 and 2009), Stephen Blank (2008 and 2009), Nicolai Petro (2009) and Mike Bowker (2011). On the whole, most Western scholarly literature blamed Russia for the war to some degree. Conversely, most Russian authors apportioned blame for the war to the West (e.g., Barabanov, 2008a; Kashin, 2008; Tseluyko, 2008; Lukyanov, 2009b). For example, Mikhail Barabanov, et al. (2009), indirectly lay responsibility at the feet of the West and strongly suggested that,


\(^{29}\) Ibid., p. 5.

owing to the unpreparedness of the country’s military, the war was not pre-planned by Russia.\footnote{Barabanov, et al. (2009). For a comparative analysis of newspaper coverage between Russia and the West on the war, see: Niedermaier (2008).} Therefore, commentators based in Russia largely interpreted the conflict differently to those based in the West.

Following the 2004 ‘Orange Revolution’ in Ukraine, the country’s domestic and foreign policy received increased scholarly attention. The outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine almost a decade later led to the publication of even more scholarly work on the country – books, journal articles and think-tank reports. Largely concentrating on geopolitical and military aspects, these publications provide important contextual information as well as detailed accounts of events. The major geopolitical powers involved in the crisis in Ukraine (i.e., the EU, the USA and Russia) are the central focus of many of these publications. In the West, those authors writing about the crisis in Ukraine are roughly split with regard to blame attribution, offering conflicting interpretations as to the nature of and reasons behind the crisis. The first two major publications on this topic, written by Andrew Wilson (2014) and Richard Sakwa (2015), illustrate this division, with the fundamental difference between the two analyses being the apportioning of blame for the crisis.

Assessing events in Ukraine from a liberal idealist perspective, Wilson argues, as does Allison (2014) and Michael McFaul (2014), that responsibility for the crisis lies with Russia.\footnote{In the academic discipline of international relations, ‘liberalism’, which has been the field’s dominant school of thought since the end of the Cold War, refers to ‘a variety of concepts and arguments about how institutions, behaviours and economic connections contain and mitigate the violent power of states.’ Meiser, J. W., ‘Liberalism’, in: McGlinchey, et al., eds. (2017), p. 22. This approach emphasises, for example, cooperation through and, in some cases, integration into rules-based, value-promoting multilateral organisations.} The crisis, according to Wilson, is a product of the Russian government’s aggressive and subversive foreign policy towards its neighbouring countries. Wilson claims that this foreign policy is driven by revanchist imperialist ambitions that aim to
coercively prevent post-Soviet states from orienting towards and integrating into liberal-democratic international organisations at the expense of political and economic alignment with Russia. The author depicts Russia as an anti-liberal values, authoritarian state that is forcefully trying to deprive Ukraine of its autonomy and sovereign rights. Wilson’s book has faced criticism regarding balance and objectivity on the basis that it only offers a Western-oriented Ukrainian perspective that is grounded in his first-hand ‘on the ground’ account of events, thus failing to adequately explore opposing positions and arguments from Ukraine’s eastern and southern regions.

Conversely, Sakwa (2015), analysed the crisis from a realist perspective. Sakwa, as well as John Mearsheimer (2014), Andrei Tsygankov (2015), Samuel Charap and Timothy Colton (2017) and Constantine Pleshakov (2017), argues that blame for the crisis in Ukraine lies primarily with the West. At the crux of such realist analyses lies the post-Cold War security architecture – the West did not pursue building a new, shared security architecture that incorporated, or at least meaningfully co-operated with, the Russian Federation. As a result, according to these authors, the West failed to take into consideration Russia’s national (security) interests following the collapse of the USSR. Sakwa concludes that repeated reckless and provocative behaviour towards Russia by the West, including its expansion eastwards into the post-Soviet space through organisations such as the EU and NATO, has led to this major geopolitical crisis. The Russo-Georgian

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33 Also sometimes known as ‘realpolitik’ or ‘power politics’, ‘(political) realism’ is a long-standing and diverse school of thought found in the academic discipline of international relations which ‘emphasises the constraints on politics imposed by human nature and the absence of international government. Together, they make international relations largely a realm of power and interest.’ Donnelly, J., Realism and International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 9. This analytical approach ‘emphasises the competitive and conflictual side of international relations.’ Antunes, S. & Camisão, I., ‘Realism’, in: McGlinchey, et al., eds. (2017), p. 15. Consequently, realism tends to foreground matters of defence and national security with regard to powerful actors. For another realist analysis of the Ukraine crisis, see: Menon and Rumer (2015).
War, he argues, was the first of the ‘wars to stop NATO enlargement’, with the crisis in Ukraine being the second. Thus, liberal and realist interpretations of this conflict contrasted sharply.

In response, Kravchenko (2016), Kuzio (2017 and 2018a), Kuzio and D’Anieri (2018) and D’Anieri (2019) criticised such realist analyses of the Ukraine crisis. For example, Kuzio argues that, despite the strong emphasis that others place on geopolitics, foreign policy and international relations, it is actually national identity that lies at the heart of the crisis, as Russia is unable to view Ukraine as a separate country and, moreover, its citizens as a separate people. According to Kuzio, the conflict ultimately stems from illiberal attitudes – such as imperialist nationalism, ‘Ukrainophobia’ and ethnic chauvinism (including anti-Semitism) – that are held by members of Russia’s elite with regard to Russo-Ukrainian identity relations.

These debates over causal factors and blame attribution regarding the two military conflicts map onto this research project’s investigation into Russian cultural organisations in the ‘near abroad’. A link can be made between ‘soft power’ and an organisation’s autonomy and agency and, conversely, between ‘hybrid warfare’ and a lack of autonomy and agency. Thus, an understanding of the organisations as relatively independent resources of ‘soft power’ aligns with the idea that the conflicts were not totally premeditated, whereas an understanding of the organisations as mere tools in a programme of ‘hybrid warfare’ is closely connected to the idea that the conflicts were premeditated. Can the organisations’ continued engagement in contentious activity in the ‘near abroad’ during times of military conflict, however, truly be described as the activity of autonomous actors that generate ‘soft power’?

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On a broader level, can ‘soft power’ ever remain ‘soft’ in the ‘hard’ context of military conflict, or is it inevitable that it will always ‘harden’ by resources (voluntarily or otherwise) defending the ‘national interest’ (for example, as with the activity of the BBC during World War II)? It could be argued that nation-states often ‘pull together’ during times of military conflict and crisis, with the agency of a country’s non-political organisations becoming more limited as a result of associating closer with and supporting the national government. This phenomenon – occurring particularly in times of military conflict – involves various arms of the nation-state, including cultural organisations. Under restrictive circumstances during such tense periods, instances of divergence from government positions would, therefore, be more noticeable and likely more significant.

This thesis explores the nature and extent of cultural organisations’ divergence from the official conflict-related narratives produced by the Russian government in order to identify and investigate cases of agency being exercised by the ROC and FRM.

Since 2014, it has been argued by many commentators in the West that wartime national consolidation of different areas of the state has taken place in Russia due to the crisis in Ukraine. If activity in foreign countries from the cultural organisations of a non-democratic, neo-authoritarian state such as Russia cannot be regarded as generating ‘soft power’ because of a perceived lack of autonomy and agency, how can this activity be better defined conceptually? Can the concept of ‘hybrid warfare’ reveal more about the autonomy and agency of Russian cultural organisations than ‘soft power’, particularly in times of conflict?

35 Although Russia’s military activity in eastern Ukraine following the annexation of Crimea has never been officially acknowledged – despite a large body of evidence strongly indicating significant involvement from Russia in the armed conflict – and, as a result, a state of national emergency was never declared, the events did constitute a major military, foreign-policy and national-identity crisis for Russia. On these grounds, the Russian government could have coerced the state to ‘pull together’ in its direction.

36 For example, with regard to changes in the Russian media, see: Lipman (2014).
Having dramatically risen to prominence during Ukraine’s crisis-related events of 2014-15, the concept of ‘hybrid warfare’ has become a popular analytical tool amongst many elites in the West for assessing Russia’s activity in the post-Soviet region. In the process of its rapid uptake and dissemination, however, the concept has become controversial and contentious. As Chapter II explores in greater detail, the concept has become highly politicised in entering the discourse of political and military elites at a time of heightened tensions between Russia and the West. Is the concept of ‘hybrid warfare’, therefore, applicable to Russian activity during these conflicts and useful as a tool of analysis for the two case studies? If ‘hybrid warfare’ suggests premeditation and the consolidation of the Russian state, were these conflicts pre-planned and were Russian cultural organisations mere tools in a strategy of ‘hybrid warfare’?

In relation to the Russo-Georgian War, it was argued by various commentators that Russia lost the ‘war of images’, the ‘media war’, the ‘propaganda war’, the ‘public relations (PR) war’ and the ‘information war’.

37 This perception of ‘defeat’ for Russia in the media and information domain was damaging for the Russian government because winning over the ‘hearts and minds’ of the international public would have provided the state with a degree of legitimacy in taking military action. In response to the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, however, it has been frequently reported across the West that Russia has been winning the ‘information war’. 38 Russia’s success on the ‘virtual’ communication battlefield this time around has, according to such commentators, largely resulted from the effective mobilisation and instrumentalisation of the country’s mass media, which included

38 For example, see: BBC Russkaya Sluzhba (2015).
the adoption of various new tactics. Unlike in relation to the Russo-Georgian War, the Russian state appears to have a degree of justification and legitimacy in domestic, local and, albeit to a limited degree, international public opinion for its involvement in Ukraine as a result, in part, of its media activity and information operations.³⁹

In large part, this difference in interpretation over the two conflicts is a result of the government introducing significant changes to and taking measures in the state-controlled media environment post-2008 in response to perceived failures over the country’s wartime communication strategy. The country’s political and media elites concluded that Russia failed to effectively communicate its position, narratives and justifications at the time in the international media environment, which they consider to be dominated by the West’s internationally oriented, ‘Anglo-Saxon’ (i.e., English-language) mass media.⁴⁰ The substantial shift in the country’s communication strategy by the time of the Ukraine crisis indicates that a process of learning and adaptation had taken place in Russia’s political and media domains following the war with Georgia. A key factor in this shift in communication strategy was the perception amongst some of these elites that there was, and still is, an ‘information war’ being conducted against Russia by the West.⁴¹

Despite much scholarly literature in the West concerning Russia’s alleged engagement in ‘hybrid warfare’ and ‘information warfare’, no literature at present explores in-depth the relationship between ‘soft power’, ‘hybrid warfare’ and ‘information warfare’ during the two aforementioned military conflicts with regard to Russian cultural organisations.⁴² Therefore, this thesis investigates the extent to which Russia’s main

³⁹ Toal and O’Loughlin (2017); O’Loughlin and Toal (2019).
⁴² van Herpen (2015a) explores Russia’s outward-facing cultural organisations abroad in the context of the country’s foreign policy. This book, however, is not an academic text
cultural organisations acted with their own agency at a time of Russia’s alleged engagement in ‘hybrid warfare’ and ‘information warfare’. In order to effectively investigate the issues that have been raised thus far, the following research questions are to be addressed:

1. To what extent and how were the Russo-Georgian War and the Ukraine crisis covered by the media outlets of Russia’s two main cultural organisations – the ROC and FRM? How does the media coverage from these cultural organisations compare to the official political narratives around the two conflicts (as disseminated, for example, by the main state-aligned broadcaster Pervyi Kanal)?

2. What are the specificities of the organisations’ media activity during these conflicts? What do media outlet and case-study comparisons reveal about the nature and activity of Russia’s cultural organisations over time?

3. Are the crisis-related media representations from the ROC and FRM aimed at furthering their own organisational image, objectives and interests, or are they geared more towards supporting and promoting the wartime geopolitical foreign policy agenda of the Russian government?

and it contains no thorough comparative analyses of either cultural organisations or case studies of Russian military intervention.
Methodology

This study proposes to investigate the Russian Orthodox Church and Fond ‘Russkii Mir’ in the context of two case studies of Russian military intervention in the ‘near abroad’ – the Russo-Georgian War (2008) and the Ukraine crisis (2013–present day). Taking into account their significant regional presence and activity, these major cultural organisations should be included in any exhaustive account of these military conflicts. The ROC and FRM, as Russia’s biggest cultural organisations operating across the post-Soviet space, are considered in the country’s official discourse to be the two most important resources of ‘soft power’ for Russia. The origins and objectives of these organisations, however, are significantly different.

The prominence of Orthodox Christianity in the ‘near abroad’, coupled with the post-Soviet politicisation of Russian Orthodoxy, necessitates the inclusion of the ROC in this research project. Orthodox Christianity is a highly influential institution in many areas of the post-Soviet space; the dominant religion in Georgia, Ukraine and Russia is Orthodox Christianity, which forms a major part of these countries’ respective national identities. The autocephalous Georgian Orthodox Church continues to maintain a historically close relationship with the ROC, whilst the ROC’s self-governing Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) is the dominant Orthodox denomination in Ukraine in terms of parishes and property. The ROC constitutes the largest and, arguably, most influential religious organisation within Eastern Orthodoxy.

43 For a detailed analysis of Orthodoxy in Abkhazia and South Ossetia post-1991, see: Conroy (2015). The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) (UOC-MP) has frequently come into sharp disagreement with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kiev Patriarchate) (UOC-KP) over various long-running issues that have been exacerbated by the Ukraine crisis, such as church property and ‘canonical territory’. The crisis appears to have negatively impacted on the popularity of the former in Ukraine to the benefit of the latter, as evidenced by notable changes in Orthodox affiliation within the population post-
Under Putin’s third presidential term in particular, the elevation of Orthodox Christianity in political discourse and government policy in Russia post-1991 – as part of the country’s national identity formation – has resulted in the ROC gaining a notably privileged position within Russian society. Moreover, the Church has controversially involved itself in the recent military conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine. In an attempt to affect the outcome of events by wielding its regional influence, the ROC has commented on the conflicts through the mass media.44

FRM is another important actor in this investigation. In theory, the fulfilment of this cultural organisation’s mission statement – i.e., the promotion of the Russian language abroad (through cultural diplomacy) – meets the requirements outlined by Nye for the production of ‘soft power’. Like Rossotrudnichestvo, FRM is active across the post-Soviet space in the fulfilment of its objectives.45 As is the case with the ROC, FRM has also produced commentaries through its own media outlet on the aforementioned military conflicts. Due to its close links to and working relationships with both the Russian government and the ROC, FRM has also been positively affected by the strengthened church-state relationship, enjoying a more prominent profile and greater public exposure.
Thus, the ROC and FRM have apparent soft-power credentials, numerous and significant links to the Russian government and an apparent willingness to become involved in contentious and highly political issues of national importance. The status, influence and activity of the ROC and FRM in the post-Soviet space are clear indicators of the organisations’ regional significance. As countries in the region share significant political, social, cultural and historical ties, the activity of these cultural organisations is, therefore, likely to have more of an impact in Russia’s ‘near abroad’ than its ‘far abroad’.

The ‘near abroad’ continues to be of considerable geopolitical, economic and cultural value to Russia’s current political administration, as (re-)establishing and reinforcing a geopolitical sphere of “privileged interests” across Eurasia (largely based on the country’s imperial- and Soviet-era territory) has been the state’s primary foreign policy objective under both Putin and Medvedev. In large part, this affirmation of the importance of the ‘near abroad’ to Russia by successive governments is a combined result of many of the country’s elites: 1) feeling aggrieved at the dissolution of the USSR, following which Russia, they argue, ended up with an unfavourable deal; and 2) being concerned by the gradual post-Cold War encroachment of the West towards Russia’s borders (through organisations like the EU, NATO and Western NGOs).

It is this geopolitical context that influenced the Putin and Medvedev administrations to pursue the formation of an integrationist regional economic bloc, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The EEU performs the geopolitical function of opposing the West’s expansion eastwards by providing an economic alternative to the EU for

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46 van Herpen (2015a).
47 Prezident Rossii (2008). This particular phrase was repeatedly used throughout the remainder of 2008 by (then) President Medvedev and other high-profile political figures in Russia. For more on Russia and the ‘near abroad’, see: Toal (2017).
48 Putin, for example, said in 2005 that the break-up of the USSR was the “greatest geopolitical disaster of the last century”. Putin, V. (2005), quoted in and translated by: Allen (2005).
countries in the ‘near abroad’. In doing so, the EEU would help to keep post-Soviet countries in Russia’s orbit, both politically and economically. For countries such as Georgia and (post-Yanukovich) Ukraine, however, greater political, economic and institutional alignment with the West – not Russia – was their primary geopolitical aim at the time of their respective military conflicts. This preference in developmental model for the two countries’ governments was a key factor behind the Russo-Georgian War and the Ukraine crisis.

In order to fulfil the proposed objectives of this thesis, an interdisciplinary approach is essential. This research project explores a number of analytical frameworks from the fields of political science, military science and media studies. With reference to the ROC and FRM, Nye’s concept of ‘soft power’, as an analytical tool for assessing Russia’s influence abroad, is critically assessed in this thesis. Furthermore, conceptual alternatives to ‘soft power’ as tools of analysis – such as ‘hybrid warfare’ and ‘information warfare’ – in measuring the activity and influence of these cultural organisations are considered. These three concepts, which have featured prominently in many analyses of Russian influence and activity abroad, could shed light on the autonomy and agency of Russia’s main cultural organisations and, consequently, provide insights into the nature and mechanics of the Russian state.

The narratives that were disseminated by the ROC and FRM to their target audiences during these military conflicts are subjected to detailed analysis. The crisis-related news reports produced by the main online media outlets of the ROC and FRM – ‘The Russian Orthodox Church: Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate’ (OSMP) and ‘Russkii Mir’ (RM), respectively – constitute the primary-source material for analysis
in this thesis.⁴⁹ These news outlets are assets of and managed by the organisations themselves, and so should, in theory, represent their own official positions and narratives. In addition to output on OSMP and RM, the news programmes of the state-aligned (and partly state-owned) television channel Pervyi Kanal are to be examined: Novosti – short news bulletins throughout the day; Vremya – the main daily news programme, aired in the evening from Monday to Saturday and lasting for thirty minutes; and Voskresnoe Vremya – the main news programme that is aired on Sundays, featuring longer, magazine-style news reports on the previous week’s main news stories. Amongst Russia’s mass media outlets, Pervyi Kanal commands the numerically largest and geographically most dispersed audience, as it also broadcasts beyond RF borders into the post-Soviet space. This major television channel, therefore, should be regarded as a source of ‘soft power’ in and of itself. In comparison with the country’s other television outlets, this state-controlled channel toes the Kremlin line particularly closely.

By also looking at Pervyi Kanal’s coverage of the aforementioned military conflicts, it is possible to measure the ROC and FRM by comparatively analysing their outlets’ crisis-related content.⁵⁰ Pervyi Kanal serves as a yardstick for evaluating Russian cultural organisations in this investigation. As Pervyi Kanal is state-controlled and its output is government-aligned (especially during times of national emergency), wartime narratives produced by this federal channel can be interpreted as closely reflecting the positions of the Russian government, meaning that OSMP and/or RM divergence in output from Pervyi Kanal suggests ROC and/or FRM divergence from the Kremlin line.

⁴⁹ OSMP – <http://www.patriarchia.ru/>; RM – <http://russkiymir.ru/> . The output of these media outlets is archived on their respective websites.
⁵⁰ Pervyi Kanal – <https://www.1tv.ru/> . The channel’s news reports are archived on its website.
Therefore, a comparative analysis of the output of these three media outlets assists this research project in evaluating the agency of the ROC and *FRM*.

There are, however, difficulties in definitively establishing divergence from the government without ‘hard’, incontrovertible evidence. For example, these difficulties concern the extent to which divergence is genuine (i.e., sincere and intentional) and coerced (i.e., autonomous). An organisation’s divergence from the government narrative over a particular issue does not necessarily mean divergence from the government’s broad aims and objectives, and, conversely, non-divergence from the government narrative does not necessarily point to an organisation’s lack of autonomy or agency as a result of external pressure. It is usually around a tension or contradiction over a particularly sensitive issue – sometimes also at an important period of time for the country – that genuine divergence appears. Despite these problems in interpreting the motivations and intentions behind the positions and activity of Russia’s cultural organisations, mixed-methods original research and contextual secondary information informs and guides judgement in this thesis on divergence and organisational agency.

A mixture of text-based and video news reports, the crisis-related output produced by *OSMP, RM* and *Pervyi Kanal* on the two case studies constitutes the primary-source material of this research project. In order to produce the original, in-depth data that serves as the underpinning of this research, three analytical tools are systematically employed: content analysis, thematic analysis and frame analysis.

The first analytical tool that is used is content analysis. This method converts texts and their contents into quantitative data by coding information and then conducting frequency counts of those codes.51 In this thesis, content analysis is used to code news reports as ‘crisis-related’ and to then measure across time and objectively analyse the

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frequency of these texts and their main themes, thus revealing the extent to which the conflicts were reported and monitoring the prevalence of the texts’ key variables. This content analysis establishes how often crisis-related output was discussed. Additionally, by measuring the frequencies of crisis-related news reports and their key variables over time, developments, patterns and changes in conflict coverage are revealed. The use of content analysis in this thesis to measure the prevalence of crisis-related news reports requires an understanding of the media theory known as ‘agenda-setting’. In relation to news coverage, ‘agenda-setting’ is the first-stage manipulation of information, as proprietors, editors-in-chief and other media elites of news outlets set the news agenda by choosing the topics to be reported and then deciding their salience.52 Furthermore, it is argued that ‘the process of the mass media presenting certain issues frequently and prominently […] [means] that large segments of the public come to perceive those issues as more important than others.’53 In short, agenda-setting is concerned with the selecting of topics to be reported and the impact of this decision-making process on audience perceptions. The (high) frequencies of crisis-related news reports indicate ‘agenda-setting’.

The second analytical tool that is employed is thematic analysis – a qualitative method that enables the researcher to identify, code and analyse common themes and/or issues amongst a group of texts. The thematic analysis establishes the themes that feature (i.e., what is being discussed) and the content analysis records the frequencies of these different themes over time (i.e., how often these themes are being discussed). As this method is applied to all of the news reports in the dataset, the main general topic that is

being discussed in each report is coded and examined, which advances the analysis beyond quantitative frequency counts.

As the media outlets and case studies have different characteristics and contexts, there are minor differences in the keywords chosen for the searches and in the theme-categories established to code the news reports. Those words that relate most to the conflicts and, in some cases, to the cultural organisations in question were selected as the keywords for use in the searches on the outlets. The theme-categories detailed in the research chapters of this thesis relate to general topics. As a result, each theme-category used in the coding of the outlets’ news reports covers a variety of issues that are closely related to its broader general theme.54

The third tool of analysis that is utilised in this thesis is frame analysis. This qualitative method uncovers the outlets’ portrayals of major issues.55 This thesis adopts Robert Entman’s general definition of ‘framing’, which posits that the process ‘select[s] some aspects of a perceived reality and make[s] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation’.56 Owing to media elites presenting events and/or topics in a preferred way and, as a result, attempting to influence how information is understood and acted upon by audiences, ‘framing’ is the second-stage manipulation of information with regard to media output. In short, framing is concerned with the presenting of information on (selected) issues and the impact this process has on audience interpretations. This method, which requires the researcher to explore language-

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54 The method of identifying and coding themes follows the one employed by Hutchings and Tolz (2015).
55 Additionally, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used in Appendices II and III to demonstrate how the research methods used in the main body of this thesis can be enhanced. For more on this analytical tool, see: van Dijk (1993); Fairclough (1995a).
use (e.g., identifying key word clusters) in order to argue that a particular frame is being used, establishes each news report’s overarching, fundamental idea that is being transmitted to the audience, thus giving an indication of the positions adopted by the media outlets.\textsuperscript{57} This frame analysis establishes how the main topic being discussed is presented. Furthermore, interviews conducted by the author in September 2018 and June-July 2019 for this research project with figures from the ROC are analysed and positioned within the study as supporting evidence.\textsuperscript{58}

Finally, the concept of ‘strategic narratives’ is then introduced in order to help position the findings from the data analysis within a broader discursive context.\textsuperscript{59} Explored in greater detail in Chapter II, ‘strategic narratives’ examines how political actors form and project narratives on issues they perceive as being key to the country’s domestic and foreign policies and the effect these narratives have on audiences.\textsuperscript{60} This concept enables one to observe through comparative analysis the degree to which those frames that appear in the crisis-related news reports of the ROC and FRM align with the core messages that are advanced by the Russian government.\textsuperscript{61} By adopting ‘strategic narratives’, this thesis

\textsuperscript{58} The following figures in the ROC were interviewed for this research project: Vakhtang Kipshidze, Deputy Chairman of the Department for Church Relations with Society and the Mass Media, interviewed on 24th June 2019; Hierodeacon Yaroslav (Ochkanov), employee at the Secretariat of the Department for External Church Relations on Affairs Concerning the Far Abroad, interviewed on 12th September 2018; Archpriest Balashov, Deputy Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations, interviewed on 25th July 2019.
\textsuperscript{59} An analysis of the relationship between ‘framing’ and ‘strategic narratives’ and the utility of these concepts for political communication scholars can be found in: Livingston and Nassetta (2018).
\textsuperscript{60} Miskimmon, et al. (2013).
\textsuperscript{61} A government’s strategic narratives can be identified from an analysis of a country’s official political discourse. As several examples of academic research on strategic narratives in the context of Russia have argued, during the two aforementioned military conflicts, the Russian government’s key strategic narratives were reflected in the output of the country’s state-owned and state-controlled media outlets, such as Pervyi Kanal. This scholarly literature, listed below, forms the basis of the discussion in this thesis on the
does not propose that the concept supersedes and makes redundant those of ‘soft power’, ‘hybrid warfare’ and ‘information warfare’ as aspects of these three concepts are valid and potentially useful for scholarly research. Owing to significant links between them, these concepts could, in theory, be used in combination with one another in a variety of ways for the purpose of fulfilling different analytical objectives. However, as Chapter II explains in detail, ‘strategic narratives’ is best suited to address the research questions posed in this thesis than the other aforementioned concepts.

For each case study, the overall time-frame is broken down into pre-, during- and post-conflict periods, into which crisis-related news reports are divided. These shorter, distinct time-periods facilitate: 1) an assessment of each outlet’s news reporting during the three main stages of conflict and tracking the development of each outlet’s output across each military conflict as a whole (for example, trajectories, patterns, (re-)orientations); and 2) comparatively analysing the different outlets’ crisis-related output within and between the case studies. As a result, the subsequent data analysis is more detailed, more informative and more reliable.

The Russo-Georgian War is divided into the following: the pre-conflict period is from 1st January to 7th August 2008; the during-conflict period is from 8th to 12th August 2008; the post-conflict period is from 13th August to 12th November 2008. In contrast to the Russo-Georgian War, the ‘unconventional’ nature of the crisis in Ukraine means that the phases of the conflict were not as clearly demarcated: the pre-conflict period is from

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21st November 2013 to 26th February 2014 (i.e., from the beginning of the Euromaidan street protests in central Kiev to the eve of Russia’s military annexation of Crimea, when the issue was, generally, one of internal civic unrest); the during-conflict period is from 27th February 2014 to 23rd February 2015 (i.e., from the first appearance of Russia’s ‘little green men’ in Crimea to the week following the signing of the Minsk II peace agreement, encompassing most of the military activity in southern and eastern Ukraine); the post-conflict period is from 24th February to 31st December 2015 (i.e., from the military activity de-escalating following the Minsk II peace treaty largely being observed to the point at which the crisis generally came to be regarded as a ‘frozen conflict’).

In Chapter III, different methodological approaches are taken in analysing news output produced by Pervyi Kanal on the Russo-Georgian War and the Ukraine crisis. Whilst the investigation into the channel’s coverage of the Russo-Georgian War involves creating and analysing data using the methodology outlined above, a detailed review of scholarly literature on the channel’s coverage of the Ukraine crisis is undertaken for the second case study. The reason for this difference in approach is that it would be too labour intensive and time-consuming to study the considerably larger volume of news reports that Pervyi Kanal produced on the Ukraine crisis. Thus, a literature review triangulates the problem of collating and analysing such a large quantity of primary sources.

This thesis investigates and evaluates the ways in which the ROC and FRM attempted to exercise influence in the ‘near abroad’ by engaging in organisational activity

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62 The Ukraine crisis is now widely regarded as a ‘frozen conflict’. Albeit not to the same scale and intensity as in 2014-15, military activity has continued to take place along the frontline in eastern Ukraine, with exchanges of gunfire and casualties still being recorded on a sporadic basis. The label ‘post-conflict period’ is, nevertheless, used in this thesis, owing to this time-period not witnessing large-scale military conflict as a result the ceasefire largely holding. Furthermore, use of this term will enable easier and clearer media-outlet and case-study comparative analyses throughout this thesis.
‘on the ground’ and projecting preferred narratives through their respective media outlets. As outlined above, ‘agenda-setting’ and ‘framing’ concern the ways in which information is delivered (i.e., (not) made available, accessible and salient) and packaged (i.e., presented and ‘framed’) by media figures in order to imbue the audience with a desired perception of the (selected) topic at hand and, consequently, influence its response. These theories assist in evaluating the media outlets’ news reports. By adopting a mixed-methods approach to this investigation, it is possible to establish what is being said, how often and how. The data produced by these methods allows for the researcher to come to evidence-based conclusions on: 1) the agency of Russia’s main cultural organisations – the ROC and FRM; and 2) the extent to which the Russian government, during times of military conflict, utilised these cultural organisations of alleged ‘soft power’ that have influence and interests in the ‘near abroad’. Thus, adopting this systematic methodological approach enables detailed and reliable findings on the media activity of the ROC and FRM.

Thesis Structure

This thesis consists of five chapters, most of which explore media representations of the Russo-Georgian War (2008) and the Ukraine crisis (2013–present day). Examining the crisis-related news output of Pervyi Kanal, OSMP and RM (respectively), Chapters III, IV and V contain original research.

The research context for this investigation is laid out in Chapter I, which provides important contextual information on the Russian Orthodox Church and Fond ‘Russkii Mir’

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63 This thesis, however, does not explore in any systematic way how those narratives disseminated by OSMP and RM were consumed and internalised by audiences in the ‘near abroad’. Therefore, addressing this issue, which lies beyond the scope of this research project, is a notable area of further research.
with regard to their formation, status, objectives and activity. In investigating these two major cultural organisations, this chapter critically examines several specific concepts that are used by and about the ROC (i.e., ‘symphonia’, ‘spiritual security’ and ‘Holy Rus’) and FRM (i.e., the ‘Russian World’). As they also relate to the organisations’ relationships with the Russian government and various state structures, these concepts, which feature prominently in the discourses of the aforementioned cultural organisations, provide an indication of the autonomy of the ROC and FRM from the Russian state. This chapter provides the essential contextual basis for the original research found later in this thesis.

In Chapter II, critical analyses are conducted of some of the main concepts that are discussed in relation to the ROC, FRM and Pervyi Kanal. These contested and controversial concepts, which are central to this research project, are ‘soft power’, ‘hybrid warfare’ and ‘information warfare’. The origins, development and uses of these concepts in both Russia and the West are detailed in this chapter. The debates over these concepts, both inside and outside of academia, are also outlined and analysed. Consequently, an assessment as to the concepts’ validity and applicability to this research project is made. From this review, the concept of ‘strategic narratives’ is then assessed as to whether it is better suited to assist in evaluating the (media) activity of Russia’s cultural organisations.

To assess the agency of the ROC and FRM, this thesis first examines Pervyi Kanal (Chapter III). As this federal television channel is state-controlled and Kremlin-aligned in its output, the narratives expressed in its coverage of the military conflicts can be interpreted as reflecting those of the government. Therefore, an analysis of Pervyi Kanal provides an important benchmark for conducting comparative analyses with the media outlets of the ROC and FRM. These comparative analyses in the following chapters serve to gauge the cultural organisations’ alignment with the government in times of national
emergency and, consequently, evaluate the agency of these organisations to act in accordance with their own agendas and interests.

Chapter IV explores the media activity of the ROC on the organisation’s main online media outlet, OSMP. The extent to which this organic cultural organisation represented the military conflicts, and, consequently, itself in relation to the two conflicts is investigated. There are notable similarities and differences in the crisis-related coverage on OSMP with that on Pervyi Kanal, which shed light on the nature of the former’s media strategies and, more broadly, on the relationship between the ROC and the Russian government. In both case studies, the actions of and media strategy adopted by the ROC indicate that, on a number of occasions, the Church exercised significant agency in pursuing its own agendas, despite the conflicts’ highly restrictive war-footing (media) environments. Furthermore, the differences in coverage on OSMP between the two conflicts reveal a learning process within the ROC which resulted in the outlet adapting and evolving. The research in this chapter is supplemented by a detailed qualitative analysis of selected OSMP news reports in Appendix II which reveal some of the main framing techniques employed by the outlet.

Chapter V investigates the media activity of FRM with regard to conflict representations published on the organisation’s main online media outlet, Russkii Mir. This manufactured cultural organisation was active ‘on the ground’ across Ukraine before and during the crisis in the country and reported on its activity through RM. Therefore, FRM, like the ROC, was already an important diplomatic actor for the Russian state prior to the Ukraine crisis. The organisation’s significant ties to the Russian government appear to have influenced media coverage on RM, as the outlet’s alignment with Pervyi Kanal in terms of crisis-related coverage was notable. Similar to Chapter IV on OSMP, the research in this chapter is supplemented by a detailed qualitative analysis of selected RM news
reports in Appendix III which reveal some of the main framing techniques employed by the outlet.
Chapter I. Research Context: Main Cultural Organisations, Central Concepts and Key Actors

1.1 Introduction

Laying the foundation for this thesis, this chapter provides important contextual information that will assist in evaluating the extent to which Russia’s biggest and most important cultural organisations – the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and *Fond ‘Russki Mir’ (FRM)* – relate to the country’s post-Soviet power projection in its so-called ‘near abroad’. In order to gauge their levels of autonomy and agency, these cultural organisations are investigated with regard to their ties to the government and, more broadly, the state. This chapter, keeping questions of autonomy and agency in mind, positions the thesis within scholarly debates surrounding the nature and activity of both organisations. The following questions are addressed in this chapter:

1) What are the main concepts, discourses and debates associated with the ROC and *FRM*, particularly with regard to the activity of these cultural organisations in Russia’s ‘near abroad’?

2) How do scholars interpret the purported links between these cultural organisations and Russia’s government and state structures, and what do they judge the extent of government influence over the ROC and *FRM* to be?
1.2 The Russian Orthodox Church: Status and State Ties

In all societies, politics and culture interact. In the context of Russia, this interaction has historically been complex and variable. A significant amount of academic literature has been dedicated to the relationship between politics and culture within Russia and, more broadly, across the post-Soviet space. The Russian Orthodox Church is the oldest, largest and most prominent of Russia’s cultural organisations. This section critically assesses the conceptual apparatus employed by state actors with regard to the ROC.

1.2.1 Domestic Concepts on the Church-State Relationship: ‘Symphonia’ and ‘Spiritual Security’

Historically, the ROC has (generally) held an important position in Russia. The high status of the Church within Russian culture, society and politics in the past has resulted in the Church contributing significantly to the formation of Russian national identity. Orthodox Christianity was considered by many rulers of the Russian Empire to be one of the foundational pillars of the Russian state – an idea which manifested in the imperial doctrine of ‘Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality’ during the reign of Nicholas I (1825-1855). This doctrine was created by Count Sergei Uvarov as a means of uniting the Russian Empire. The Church’s prominence and privileged status within the Russian Empire was followed by significant marginalisation and repression during the time of the USSR (particularly between 1917 and 1943), the leadership of which aggressively pursued the policy of ‘scientific atheism’. During the Soviet period, some Orthodox priests

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1 For example, on language, see: Ryazanova-Clarke, ed. (2014); on religion, see: Mitrofanova (2005); on national identity, see: Kolstø and Blaakisrud, eds. (2016).
collaborated with the regime. In post-Soviet Russia, particularly under the presidential terms of Vladimir Putin, a special relationship between the ROC and the government has developed, which has resulted in increased prominence for the ROC, both socially and politically. An indication of the increased political importance of Orthodoxy and the ROC in the post-Yeltsin era, Russia was described by Putin in 2005 as the ‘largest Orthodox power’ in the world.

In Orthodox theology, a relationship in which the church and the state stand on an equal footing, complement each other ideologically and openly co-operate with one another is known as a ‘symphonia’. Russia has experienced, to varying degrees, aspects of such a diarchic church-state relationship in its imperial and post-Soviet eras. It has been claimed by many members of the political and cultural elite in post-Soviet Russia that in order for the state to survive and project its power, influence and messages in the world, the country ‘needs an instrument that will serve as the unifying cultural factor in its self-identity […]’ The ROC has taken up this role with considerable government support under the presidencies of Putin and Medvedev, thus filling the ideological void left

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3 Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, circumstantial evidence has surfaced from national archives that strongly suggests both Patriarch Aleksii II and Patriarch Kirill were KGB agents. The allegations that both figures have a history of collusion with the security services – allegations which are strongly denied by the Church – undermine claims from the ROC that the Church is independent and politically neutral. For translations and analyses of these documents, see: Corley (2018a and 2018b).

4 Richters (2013).


7 For example, ‘symphonia’ features heavily in the Book of One Hundred Chapters – an important religious text from 16th-century Russia which had a significant impact on politics and society. For more information on the role of the ROC during the Russian Empire, see: Hosking (1997); Tolz (2001), pp. 257-259.

by the state when Marxism-Leninism was abandoned following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

As a result, discussion of ‘symphonia’ has arisen in contemporary Russia. In an interview with the Russian daily newspaper Izvestiya in 2009, Patriarch Kirill asserted that “we now have the opportunity to get as close as possible to […] [‘symphonia’]. Despite all the present difficulties, the Church today retains, on the one hand, independence, and on the other – friendly relations with the state. And we should utilise this potential in a wide range of areas.” The Church, as is evident from such commentaries, was openly aiming to build and nurture a church-state relationship akin to that of ‘symphonia’, which is reflected in the way its key figures have spoken of and supported Putin.

In 2000, the ROC first gave its blessing to Putin by publicly endorsing his (first) presidential candidacy. Since 2000, Patriarch Aleksii II and Patriarch Kirill have openly praised the work of Putin as leader of Russia. On multiple occasions, such praise has been reciprocated: Putin has spoken of the Church’s historical importance (e.g., “Orthodoxy had played a special role in Russian history […] and largely determined the character of Russian civilization”), of its contemporary and future relevance (e.g., “[the ROC] will contribute to the spiritual and moral rebirth of the Fatherland”), and of the government’s support for the organisation (e.g., “[the government will] continue to provide all possible support to the Church in its works”). Additionally, various other high-profile politicians have given similar positive assessments of the Church.

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9 A number of scholars also consider the church-state relationship in Russia to be one of ‘symphonia’. For example, see: Petro (2015); Petro, N., ‘The Russian Orthodox Church’, in: Tsygankov (2018), pp. 217-232; Antonov (2020).
11 For example, see: The Telegraph (2008); Reuters (2012).
On the church-state relationship, Putin reiterated the separation of the Church and the state during a speech in 2004, likely expressed in order to counter (potential) criticism over early signs of a strengthening of church-state ties. Putin notably caveated this statement by adding “but in the people’s soul, they’re together.” Putin, however, introduced a major policy drive on Russian national identity formation in 2012, which included the government embracing Eastern Orthodoxy (through the ROC) as the country’s unifying cultural factor. This policy further strengthened the country’s church-state relationship and, in doing so, returned the Church to the foreground of public consciousness as the favoured religious organisation in Russia. As a result, the notion of church-state separation in Russia has been undermined. This relationship, according to some commentators, benefits the government and broader state more than it does the Church, with the ‘primary effect […] [being] the strengthening of Russian influence in Ukraine and Belarus’.

In 2012, the ROC’s Holy Synod also granted its clergy permission to enter politics, albeit subject to a number of conditions. Therefore, the Church’s increased presence and involvement in the country’s political domain indicates that it is willing and able to engage in activity that could not only undermine its (self-proclaimed) independence and political neutrality, but also violate the country’s legal separation of church and state that is set out in the Constitution of the Russian Federation.

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14 For example, see: Agadjanian (2017); Burgess (2017).
15 Ratified in July 2020, amendments made to the Constitution of the Russian Federation include a reference to God. Gosudarstvennaya Duma (2020).
17 RT (2012).
The concept of ‘symphonia’ – first formulated in the days of the Byzantine Empire – has been adjusted to the conditions and context of the 21st century under Putin. In the early 2000s, leading ROC clerics developed the concept of ‘spiritual security’ (dukhovnaya bezopasnost’) in Russian discourse. In short, the securitisation of spirituality was presented as a necessary means of protecting and preserving the traditional religious values that are claimed to constitute the foundations of Russia’s national and cultural identity (for example, in relation to family, gender and sexual orientation/relations). The securitisation of public discourse on religion and, more broadly, culture/cultural identity is not a policy that is unique to Russia, but, rather, is a global trend that has developed over recent years.

Featuring some ROC clerics as members and producing a book on the concept, the Council for Spiritual Security at the Office of the President of the Russian Federation was already in existence by 2005. At this point, the Western academic Julie Elkner introduced the Anglophone term ‘spiritual security’ in the West as a scholarly tool of analysis. In her inquiry into how political and cultural figures in Russia used ‘spiritual security’ as a term of practice, Elkner noted that the concept is vague in its definition, has a broad scope and is used ‘by a range of political actors in a range of contexts’. These issues, consequently, make ‘spiritual security’ open to interpretation, subjective implementation and instrumentalisation.

The concept of ‘spiritual security’ has been used by post-Soviet patriarchs of the ROC. The concept, in large part, serves as a justification for the leadership of the ROC for close church-state collaboration. In the words of Patriarch Kirill in 2017, for example, ‘[…] it is necessary to provide spiritual security. This requires very serious co-operation

18 Arkhipiskop Ioann (Popov), et al. (2005). For an analysis of this trend in Russia, see Elkner (2005). For more information on the securitisation of religion in different national contexts, see: Seiple, et al., eds. (2013).
between the Church, the state and public organisations.’

Furthermore, references to ‘spirituality’ (dukhovnost’) have also appeared in many of Russia’s major official policy documents since the mid-2000s, with political figures also discussing the topic. Therefore, the concept of ‘spiritual security’ has influenced Russia’s key state figures to the extent that it is reflected in government policy.

In part, the securitisation of religion appeared in response to the influx of representatives of ‘Western’ Christian denominations into Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The evangelical missionary activity of Protestant groups since the 1990s has been perceived by both the Church and successive Russian governments as a serious threat to the main religious communities and organisations already active in Russia, especially the ROC. Likewise, the (perceived) growth in popularity at the time of the so-called ‘new religions’ was considered by the ROC to be a serious threat to Russia.

Throughout the 1990s, a number of high-profile political, religious and social commentators from the ‘anti-cult movement’, behind which the ROC was and still is the main driving force, advocated ‘concerted actions aimed at combating the current threats posed to Russia’s ‘spiritual security’, as the Patriarch [Aleksii II] put it.’

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21 These policy documents include ‘The National Security Concept of the Russian Federation’ of 2009 (Prezident Rossii, 2009a), ‘The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation’ of 2008 and 2016 (Ministerstvo Inostrannykh Del Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 2016) and ‘The Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation’ of 2016 (Ofitsial’nyi Internet-Portal Pravovoi Informatsii, 2016). Whilst the exact term ‘spiritual security’ is not explicitly used in all state documents, the notion of ‘spirituality’ is discussed prominently in reference to national security. The following terms, amongst others, are often used alongside the qualifier ‘spiritual(-moral)’: ‘life’, ‘values’, ‘heritage’, ‘unity’ and ‘renewal’.
patriarch argued on several occasions that such threats included the ‘spread of totalitarian 
sects [i.e., minority religious groups] in Russia’.24

   The loaded pejorative term ‘totalitarian sects’ – used regularly in the media 
throughout the 1990s by prominent political and religious figures – gained popularity 
amongst those openly opposed to the (perceived) challenge from the religious ‘newcomers’ 
to the ROC’s dominant spiritual position in Russian society. In 1999, (the then) 
Metropolitan Kirill warned of the apparent dangers that were facing the ROC, the fabric of 
Russian society and individual citizens from proselytism that was being brought in by the 
‘hordes’ of ‘spiritual colonizers who […] try to tear the people away from their church’.25 
The Church, benefiting from government support and media resources, has portrayed these 
‘totalitarian sects’ as posing a pressing existential threat not only to the ROC but to ‘the 
security of Russian society and culture as a whole’.26

   Through this issue, the Church has tied religion to national security, with the use of 
the word ‘totalitarian’ to describe these minority religious groups underlining the supposed 
security threat. In turn, ‘spiritual security’ is rationalised. To combat this alleged threat and 
marginalise these ‘totalitarian sects’, the ROC requires assistance from the government and 
the state apparatus, so, in its attempts to achieve these objectives, it has been actively 
engaging with groups and figures connected to politics and the security services since the 
1990s.27 Consequently, according to Zoe Knox, the development of intolerant, hostile 
attitudes in Russian society towards religious pluralism has been shaped and influenced by 
the ROC.28

25 Metropolitan Kirill, ‘Gospel and Culture’, in: Witte, Jr., and Bourdeaux (1999), pp. 66- 
76. The term ‘proselytism’ describes the act of advancing the conversion of others to a 
(different) religion.
26 Elkner (2005).
27 Shterin and Richardson (2000).
Despite the 1993 Russian Constitution declaring that the Russian Federation (RF) is a secular state that sees all religious organisations equal before the law, subsequent legislation has elevated the ROC to a privileged position above the country’s other religious associations. As a result of the ROC’s long-term lobbying, a legal differentiation between religious groups operating in Russia was introduced: legislation brought in under Boris Yeltsin in 1997 differentiated what became known as ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ religions in Russia, which limited the status, operational and missionary activity, and legal rights of the latter. By creating a ‘hierarchy of religions based on their historical links with the Russian nation’, this legal distinction, in effect, established preferential treatment for a small number of ‘traditional’ religious organisations.

In particular, Russia is strongly linked to Christianity, and Christianity is equated to (Russian) Orthodoxy: the law ‘recognises the special role of Orthodoxy in the history of Russia and in the establishment and development of its spirituality and culture’. This legislation suggests that the ROC had a significant amount of influence over the Russian government of the time; the Church possessed enough political lobbying power and societal influence to encourage legislative change by effectively and successfully mobilising religious, civic and political opposition to these ‘non-traditional’ religious groups. The foundations of the current church-state relationship, therefore, originate from the latter period of Yeltsin’s presidency.

In March 2002, a ceremony took place in Moscow for the consecration of an Orthodox church on the premises of the Lubyanka headquarters of the FSB. The policy of

\[29\] Ofitsial’nyi Internet-Portal Pravovoi Informatsii (1997). The terms that are used in this legislative document for differentiating between a ‘traditional’ religion and a ‘non-traditional’ religion are ‘religious organisation’ and ‘religious group’, respectively.


\[31\] Ofitsial’nyi Internet-Portal Pravovoi Informatsii (1997).

\[32\] Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2002a).

*FSB (Federal’naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti)* – Federal Security Service (formerly the KGB).
establishing an overt and symbolically powerful link between the Church and the internal security services was reportedly the initiative of Putin in his previous position as head of the FSB (1998-9), of which the erection of this church was an eventual product. This event, according to Elkner, was a significant milestone in the church-state relationship. The Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Internal Affairs also built their own departmental churches.

In addition to strengthening relations with internal state security organs, the Church has also substantially increased its association and co-operation with the country’s armed forces in the post-Soviet period, to the extent that the ROC has a department that specifically manages its relations with the military and state security organs – the ‘Synod Department of the Moscow Patriarchate for Relations with the Armed Forces and the Law Enforcement Agencies’. Meanwhile, the link between religion (particularly Orthodoxy) and security has become increasingly prominent in political discourse under Putin. In 2007, for example, Putin likened the “traditional confessions” to the country’s nuclear shield, asserting that both “strengthen Russian statehood and create necessary prerequisites for providing the country’s internal and external security.”

The scholar Dmitry Adamsky, in exploring the relationship between the ROC and Russia’s nuclear military-industrial complex, argued that the nuclear wing of the country’s armed forces has undergone the most ‘clericalisation’ – ideologically, military-strategically and pastorally. According to

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33 Elkner (2005). Putin is a practicing Orthodox Christian. It is widely claimed that Putin’s personal confessor is Metropolitan Tikhon (Shevkunov). For more on the link between Metropolitan Tikhon and Putin, see: Clover (2013).
34 On the ROC’s connections to the Russian military under Patriarch Aleksii II and/or Patriarch Kirill, see: Garrard and Garrard (2008), pp. 207-241; Richters (2013), pp. 57-74; Blitt (2010). Amongst others, examples of such ties include: regiments having their own chaplain for ministering to servicemen, soldiers being taught about the role of Orthodoxy in Russian culture, and clergy blessing troops, military hardware, and army initiatives.
36 Adamsky (2019b).
Adamsky, a nuclear-religious culture has emerged within parts of the military as a result, which, consequently, reinforces the concept of ‘spiritual security’.

The concept of ‘spiritual security’ has been discussed by members of the elite of both the metropolitan centres and the provincial regions. Particularly in the provinces, the clergy and parishioners of certain religious minorities have reportedly experienced monitoring, surveillance and persecution, which has been carried out primarily by the state’s security services.\(^37\) The Church and the law enforcement agencies appear to have established a mutually beneficial relationship. The ROC lends moral authority and legitimacy to the structures, policies and practices of the military and state security services through association and public support. In exchange, the security services implement government policies ‘on the ground’ that maintain the Church’s privileged position within Russian society. The basis of this relationship is ‘spiritual security’ – a concept, in the development of which ROC clergy played a key role, that provides justification for the securitisation of religion. In this respect, the concept of ‘spiritual security’ has benefitted both the ROC and the security services of the Russian state.

Since 2012, the political leadership under Putin – supported by certain sections of the Russian intelligentsia – has been actively promoting a socio-political agenda of ‘conservative values’, which relate to issues regarding, for example, the family, gender and sexual orientation/relations. Putin introduced his ‘conservative values’ agenda after Patriarch Kirill: 1) endorsed his 2012 presidential candidacy by calling previous years of Putin’s rule “a miracle of God” and criticising his political opponents;\(^38\) and 2) made an extraordinary intervention during the 2012 anti-government demonstrations in Moscow at a politically vulnerable moment for the president by urging people not to participate in the

\(^37\) Elkner (2005); Knox (2005).
opposition protests. The (social) conservatism of the government’s agenda, moreover, is extremely close to content found in *The Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church* – a major ROC document from 2000 that details the Church’s official positions on and recommendations for a number of prominent contemporary social issues. Therefore, the ROC has played a significant role in first formulating and then supporting and disseminating this government agenda. Does this shared foundation of ‘conservative values’, however, translate into political influence for the ROC, and what does any political influence (or lack of) reveal about the autonomy and agency of the Church with regard to the government?

There is disagreement within the academic community concerning the extent to which the ROC is autonomous from the government. For several scholars, the ROC has significant autonomy, which, they argue, is evident from the influence the ROC has exerted over the government in the post-Soviet period to achieve its organisational objectives. According to John Garrard and Carol Garrard in 2008, for example, (Russian) Orthodoxy was the ‘hidden mainstream coloring Russian domestic behavior and shaping Russian policies abroad’ at a time of post-Soviet religious revival, during which the ROC was resurrected as the country’s most prominent religious organisation. As well as exploring the Church in relation to culture and national identity, Garrard and Garrard looked at the ROC under the leadership of Patriarch Aleksii II (1989–2007) through a political lens. The authors detailed how, under the former patriarch, the religious

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organisation: impacted on historic political events; significantly influenced political groups and figures; and co-operated with and supported different state structures. The authors argue that the ROC’s post-Soviet resurgence, in large part, stemmed from the diplomatic and strategic skills of Patriarch Aleksii II.

Although Patriarch Aleksii II managed to advance the ROC’s interests and influence whilst navigating the Church through a turbulent and challenging period post-1991, it is the political skills of his successor, the politically oriented and media-savvy Patriarch Kirill, that a number of scholars argue have greatly increased the political influence and social status of the ROC. Irina Papkova and Dmitry Gorenburg, for example, described Patriarch Kirill as a ‘master politician’ who had ‘[managed] to move church-state relations […] in directions that were only imagined under Aleksii II.’

In 2010 and 2011, Robert Blitt wrote of the Church’s increased presence in and influence over domestic Russian politics under (then) President Medvedev, arguing that ‘the Church increasingly is wielding its influence […] to successfully advance its legislative and policy vision.’ Blitt points to several major successes for the Church under Patriarch Kirill, such as achieving significantly increased access to the education system and the armed forces, and the return of former property that was confiscated during the Soviet era. Blitt also claims that a substantial amount of evidence shows that the Church

was (indirectly) receiving significant amounts of government funding.\footnote{For data on the income of the ROC, see: Reiter, et al. (2016). The ROC receives government funding for non-religious activities (Interfax-Religion, 2010). As a result, the Church is able to ‘redirect its own internal funds towards religious activities’. Blitt (2010), p. 1350. Additionally, substantial amounts of state money have been allocated to the ROC for the restoration of the Church’s old properties (Chapnin, 2015) and the construction of new churches (Chapnin, 2015; Reiter, 2015b; Reiter, et al. 2016). The Church had also previously undertaken commercial ventures which were facilitated by the government. For example, see: Zolotov (1997).} Blitt’s articles, notably, were published before the further intensification in church-state relations after Putin returned to the presidency in 2012.

Whilst Blitt’s assessment largely examined the domestic environment, Alicja Curanović, in 2012, explored the impact of Russian Orthodoxy on the foreign policy of Russia, concluding that the ROC was exercising notable influence in this area.\footnote{Curanović (2012).} Curanović’s fundamental argument is that the ROC has significantly impacted on political figures’ perceptions of national identity in Russia, which, in turn, has influenced their politics. Therefore, according to Curanović, the cultural and ideological underpinnings of Russia’s foreign policy are coloured by the ROC. Furthermore, the author notes that the ROC is a diplomatic actor in its own right, as Church figures, with the blessing of the government, act as ambassadors for the state in meeting with representatives of foreign governments and states.\footnote{Additionally, see: Adamsky (2019a).} Garrard and Garrard, Papkova and Gorenburg, Blitt, and Curanović all suggest that the ROC is an autonomous actor, arguing that the Church, by wielding its influence, is able to affect the government’s domestic and foreign policy in order to advance its own organisational interests.

The analyses of these Western scholars echo those assessments that have been made by some Russian academics who are critical of Putin. In 2007, an open letter was published by a number of prominent Russian academics, who were expressing concern
over the changing nature and extent of the church-state relationship. These scholars claimed that the church-state relationship was leading to the ‘increasing […] [and] active clericalisation of the country’. The ‘Academicians’ Letter’, as it became known, warned against the creeping activity of the ROC in the education system following the introduction of the ‘Foundations of Orthodox Culture’ course into the school curriculum. In response, a Church representative said that the ‘Church does not desire to become a part of the state machine, because such a status will not bring good to anyone – neither to the Church nor the state.’ On numerous occasions, prominent Church figures have approvingly discussed the separation of church and state.

(The then) Metropolitan Kirill, for example, publicly supported church-state separation on the grounds that the ROC’s own historical experience – which involved ‘dependence upon […] [and] subjugation […] to […] the state’ – shows that ‘separation of church and state […] is unquestionably favourable to the Church’. After his election as head of the ROC in 2009 and, moreover, in the context of the church-state relationship notably strengthening during Putin’s third presidential term, Patriarch Kirill again reiterated this position. For example, on his weekly television programme, *Slovo Pasyrya*, which is broadcast on the federal channel *Pervyi Kanal*, the patriarch said that the “fusion of the Church with the state […] on the canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church is a myth.”

In interviews conducted with representatives of the Church for this research project, Vakhtang Kipshidze, Deputy Chairman of the Department for Church Relations with Society and the Mass Media, stated that the ROC considers its relationship with the

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47 Skepsis (2007). For more on the activity of the ROC in relation to the country’s state education system, see: Lisovskaya and Karpov (2010).
government to be one of “partnership”, whilst Hierodeacon Yaroslav (Ochkanov), at the Secretariat of the Department for External Church Relations on Affairs Concerning the Far Abroad, referred to the church-state relationship as being one of “beneficial co-operation” with a “well-disposed state” and described their joint activity as “successful”.51 As such statements show, the ROC has publicly insisted over recent years that it is an autonomous actor.

These public commentaries on the autonomy of the Church which were made by major figures within the ROC are significant because, conversely, many Western scholars and commentators believe that the ROC’s independence and political neutrality have been severely compromised by the nature of the present church-state relationship. Indeed, owing to the ROC’s apparent historical links to the security services, the independence and political neutrality of the Church was already uncertain and debateable. Effectively casting doubts over the leadership’s insistence that the ROC is an autonomous actor, a small number of high-profile ROC figures have openly criticised the present church-state relationship in the mass media.

In 2015, the former editor of the ROC’s Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate magazine, Sergei Chapnin (from the liberal wing of the Church), criticised what he described as the ROC leadership’s imperialist mindset, of which adopting the concept of the ‘Russian World’ was a manifestation.52 According to Chapnin, the church-state relationship, which involves the ROC occupying a significant role in the government’s foreign policy, has encouraged the adoption of this imperialist mindset. Deacon Andrei Kuraev, also of the Church’s liberal wing, expressed concern over this relationship, its

52 Chapnin (2015). Chapnin was an important figure within the Church, but he was not a member of the clergy.
manifestations and negative consequences in 2019, warning against the Moscow Patriarchate ‘trying to expand the sphere of its own influence […] through secret agreements with the authorities’.  

Moreover, even the once-prominent conservative Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin (one-time head of the former Synod Department for Relations between the Church and Society) expressed similar concern, stating in 2015 that “already for many years now, I have been trying to tell the patriarch that the tone towards the state, which the Church is adopting more and more, is wrong: we need to be coming out critically in relation to the immoral and unfair activities of the authorities more.” As well as speaking out against what he perceives as the subservient nature of the present church-state relationship, Chaplin also publicly criticised both the Church and the Russian government with regard to the country’s military interventions in Syria and Ukraine. It is significant that the leadership of the ROC received public criticism from opposing wings of the Church on the issue of the church-state relationship. Notably, all three of these dissenting voices from within the ROC have subsequently been, in effect, punished and marginalised by the leadership of the Moscow Patriarchate, which has included demotions and sackings, relocation to the provinces and loss of ministerial rights.

Katya Richters, holding a more cautious interpretation of the church-state relationship, argues that the flow of influence travels in both directions – ‘[the ROC]

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55 On Syria (in which Russia’s military involvement was controversially referred to by Chaplin as ‘sacred’), see: Interfaks (2015b). On Ukraine (in which Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in the east of the country was publicly supported by Chaplin, in opposition to the official position of the ROC), see: Reiter (2015a); Protoierei Chaplin (2018).
56 On Chaplin and Kuraev, see (respectively): Interfaks (2015a); BBC Russkaya Sluzhba (2020).
shapes and is shaped by Russian political culture’. Whilst the ROC is an important actor in contemporary Russian politics which is able to influence government policy, the Church’s positions, owing to the government’s ‘conservative values’ agenda, ‘often [simply] concur with those of the Kremlin’. According to Richters, the ROC, however, can and does act independently from the Russian government, rather than following the Kremlin’s lead unquestioningly.

Adopting a similarly nuanced position, Zoe Knox investigates the impact of the Russian Orthodox Church on the development of civil society in post-Soviet Russia (to 2005). Knox describes the ROC as a ‘pseudo-state church’: ‘the impression [is given] that Orthodoxy is the state religion’ as a result of being ‘granted a privileged position by virtue of its strong links to the government.’ Whilst arguing that ‘the Church is not independent [from the government]’, not least because of the direct and indirect financial support it receives from the state and government-linked figures, Knox portrays key members of the Church leadership as skilled political movers, who use their influence in pursuit of the ROC’s own objectives.

The argument made by some scholars in the West that the Church possesses significant influence over the country’s government and state structures has also been challenged. In 2007, Papkova analysed the electoral manifestos of the main political parties in Russia between 1995 and 2005, concluding that the parties had not based their programmes on religious (i.e., Orthodox) ideology. According to Papkova, the religious terms used, such as ‘Orthodoxy’ (pravoslavie) and ‘spirituality’ (dukhovnost’), expressed a

58 Ibid.
60 Papkova (2007).
more cultural, rather than religious, sentiment.\textsuperscript{61} Moreover, no party proposed establishing a symphonic or close relationship with the ROC. The ‘inclusion of pro-religious language into political platforms’ was, according to Papkova, merely a self-interested means of gaining votes based on a perceived political reality at the time – the existence of an Orthodox constituency.\textsuperscript{62} As Papkova argued further in her 2011 book \textit{The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics}, the Church’s perceived political influence is high, but the real level is negligible.\textsuperscript{63} In support of this position, Papkova pointed to the Church’s limited lobbying success over certain key social issues and referred to the Church’s lack of success in neutralising the perceived threat posed by ‘non-traditional’ religious groups, especially from the so-called ‘totalitarian sects’.\textsuperscript{64}

Papkova’s analyses, however, were published before (the then) Metropolitan Kirill’s election as head of the ROC in 2008 and/or Putin’s 2012 policy drive of ROC-centred national identity formation. In response to these new developments in the church-state relationship, Papkova later revised her position, arguing that ‘[following the accession of Metropolitan Kirill to Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus’] the situation began to change dramatically in favour of the Church’s rising political influence […] [as the ROC is]

\textsuperscript{61} The word ‘dukhovnost’ has been used since the 1\textsuperscript{st} century in a broad manner to express interest in cultural and intellectual matters, as opposed to materialism. Therefore, the term ‘dukhovnost’ does not always describe ‘spirituality’ in the Russian language.

\textsuperscript{62} Geoffrey Evans and Ksenia Northmore-Ball (2012) measured a modest increase in active identification with Orthodoxy in post-Soviet Russia.

\textsuperscript{63} Papkova (2011).

\textsuperscript{64} It appears, however, that the ROC was influential in later bringing about the 2017 court ruling that prohibits Jehovah’s Witnesses from operating in Russia on the grounds of religious extremism; the ROC has consistently pursued legal restrictions on Jehovah’s Witnesses, with the court ruling and its subsequent implementation by state security services, at the very least, being a desired outcome for the ROC based on its past rhetoric and activity. This particular court ruling was nationwide, but a number of regional legal restrictions against this religious organisation have been brought in since 2004. If involvement from the ROC were to be the case, these rulings would suggest Church influence over the regional state. On these court rulings, see: Human Rights Watch (2017 and 2020).
increasingly becoming an effective force in Russian political life.  

Furthermore, Papkova notes that there are times when Patriarch Kirill ‘functions almost explicitly as a political, rather than religious, authority figure.’ 

This shift in position by Papkova reflects the significant degree to which the church-state relationship has intensified under Putin.

John Anderson argues, similarly to Richters, that the church-state relationship is based on the convergence of positions on several issues. Anderson, however, concludes that if the government and the Church do not agree on a particular issue, then the ROC exerts little-to-no influence. Anderson argues that there has been ‘a tendency […] to overestimate the political influence of Orthodoxy’, as the ROC’s support is only ‘reinforcing, not determining’ policy. 

Therefore, Anderson considers the nature of the church-state relationship to be an ‘asymmetric symphonia’ that is not indicative of autonomy or political influence. Anderson considers the church-state relationship to be merely a convenient instrument for the Russian government, meaning that the ROC has only superficial influence over government policy. As is evident from this overview of selected literature on the ROC, there is disagreement amongst Western scholars over the degree to which the Church influences the Russian government and is, therefore, autonomous.

In order to bring about favourable domestic legislative outcomes, the Church ultimately relies on agreement with and co-operation from the government. There are certain issues on which the Church’s positions have not aligned with those of the government, however. Even if the Church’s autonomy is curtailed because of the close

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66 Ibid., p. 6.
church-state relationship, such areas of disagreement suggest that the organisation does have a significant degree of agency. Richters (2013), for example, identifies two major areas in *The Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, one of the Church’s main documents published in 2000, that reveal areas of disagreement with or opposition to the government: 1) the ROC prefers monarchical governance; and 2) the ROC supports civil disobedience in certain circumstances. As Richters explores in detail, friction has arisen between the ROC and the Russian government over these positions adopted by the Church.

Occasionally, such tensions surface more publicly. The government’s pre-2010 character rehabilitation of Joseph Stalin and the whitewashing of Stalin’s terror in the national education curriculum and in the state-affiliated mass media, for example, provoked Patriarch Kirill to lobby for a revision in the government’s approach. It was argued by the scholar Alexei Miller that changes in the federal government’s pronouncements about Stalin, which featured more explicit criticism in 2010, came about, to a significant degree, from the patriarch’s influence. 68 In showing a willingness to come out against a position held by the government, the ROC expressed agency by pursuing its own agenda. 69 The ROC taking this stand could, furthermore, be seen as an indication of a degree of autonomy from the state.

The overhanging question remains, however, regarding the extent to which the ROC’s apparent influence over the Russian government can be attributed to other factors, such as, as some scholars argue, mere convergences of positions and opinions. The

69 For other examples of disagreement and tension between the ROC and the Russian government, see: Richters (2013); Freeze (2017b).
The aforementioned political outcomes could have been influenced, for example, by the ROC being able to affect and shape public discourse – i.e., the Church indirectly influencing policy, with the government reacting to discourses advanced by the ROC and to ROC-influenced public opinion. One of the purposes of this thesis is to examine this question in light of new data.

This section explored two of the main concepts that are used in relation to the Church domestically – ‘symphonia’ and ‘spiritual security’ – and how they relate to the ROC’s influence within Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church, however, is also active in expanding its influence beyond the borders of the Russian Federation.

1.2.2 Influence and Interests in the ‘Near’ and ‘Far’ Abroad

The ROC’s non-domestic influence is mostly in the ‘near abroad’.\(^{70}\) In part, this influence stems from the number of Orthodox-identifying people in post-Soviet societies, over most of which the ROC claims exclusive canonical jurisdiction.\(^{71}\) The Church regards

\(^{70}\) The ROC does also have a presence and influence in the ‘far abroad’ (for example, through the ROCOR and the Diocese of Surozh).

\(^{71}\) According to Popescu and Wilson (2009), approximately ‘80% of Belarusians belong to the Belarusian Orthodox Church, 37% of Ukrainians to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), and in Moldova 75% to the Moldovan Orthodox Church’, all of which are branches of the ROC. Popescu, N. & Wilson, A., ‘The Limits of Enlargement-Lite: European and Russian Power in the Troubled Neighbourhood’, Policy Report (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2009), p. 29. In January 2019, Patriarch Bartholomew I offered a tomos for the creation of a local autocephalous church in Ukraine that would operate under the patronage of his Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Ukraine has been under the canonical jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate since 1686, so the granting of autocephaly to a local church in the country is considered to be a major blow to the influence and prestige of the Moscow Patriarchate. This act has caused a major rift within Orthodox Christianity. For more on the formation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and its consequences, see: Mykhaleyko (2020). Two metropolitans were defrocked by the UOC-MP for participating in the ‘unification council’ of the UOC-KP and UAOC, which was considered to be a prerequisite for the receipt of autocephaly and the creation of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. For more information on this case, see: RIA Novosti (2018a).
a large part of the ‘near abroad’ to be ‘Holy Rus’ *(Svyataya Rus’*, largely consisting of Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine and Russia) – the allegedly culturally aligned and historically legitimated indivisible spiritual-territorial space of Russian Orthodoxy. As part of the Church’s official discourse, use of this religious concept has gained prominence under Patriarch Kirill.72

On the basis of all those of the Orthodox faith across most of the post-Soviet space falling under the concept of ‘Holy Rus’, the application of the concept of ‘spiritual security’ beyond Russia’s borders is justified by the Church and state. The concept of ‘Holy Rus’, as a result, functions as an indirect justification for the claim made by the Russian government that the state has a responsibility for the well-being of Russian speakers in non-RF states of the former USSR, the so-called ‘compatriots living abroad’ (CLA).73 The concept of the ‘CLA’ has featured in several of the country’s major foreign-policy documents, with government legislation also providing it with a legal status.74

In the context of ‘spiritual security’, the ROC has been playing a major role in the policies and practices of the Russian state with regard to Russian-speaking diasporas.75 The significant church-state collaboration over issues relating to the ‘compatriots’ has been

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72 For an in-depth analysis of this concept, see: Suslov (2014). Patriarch Kirill also remarked: “…Holy Rus’ – this notion is not ethnic, not political, not linguistic; it is a spiritual understanding.” Patriarch Kirill (2010), quoted in: Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2010b).
73 First appearing under Yeltsin (Prezident Rossii, 1999), the ‘CLA’, according to Feklyunina (2016), is ‘variously defined as either all those born in the Soviet Union and their descendants (with the exception of titular nations of the now-independent states), or those with cultural ties with Russia’. Feklyunina, V., ‘Soft Power and Identity: Russia, Ukraine and the ‘Russian world(s)’, *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 22, № 4 (2016), pp. 782. Attesting to the vagueness surrounding this concept, Putin, in a 2001 speech, notably stated that ‘[t]he compatriot is […] far from just a legal category […] but also a matter of self-identification.’ Putin, V. (2001). Additionally, see: Cheskin and Kachuyevski, eds. (2020).
74 Prezident Rossii (1999). For an example of the term’s appearance in major policy documents, see: Ministerstvo Inostrannykh Del Rossiiiskoi Federatsii (2016).
75 A discussion of ‘spiritual security’ in relation to the ‘CLA’ can be found in: Payne (2010).
acknowledged by Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), with the Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov proclaiming in 2010 that the MFA and the ROC were jointly “standing up for the rights and liberties of Russian citizens and our compatriots living abroad.” The ROC, in addition, declared that it is to continue to support the Russian diasporas and advocate for further legislation concerning compatriots policies. The ROC, working with the government, has also recently increased its activity beyond the ‘near abroad’.

According to Payne, the MFA and the ROC co-operate to consolidate and strengthen (Russian) national and cultural identity outside of Russia, which, in turn, increases state influence. For example, the Church is openly supported by the MFA in pursuing its long-standing objective of persuading those Orthodox Churches that it considers to be of the ‘Russian tradition’ to (re-)enter under its jurisdiction. In 2007, for example, the ROC secured reunification with the US-based Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR). Putin’s participation in the official ceremony ratifying this reunification points to the significant degree to which the ROC enjoys government support.

The ROC has also been active in the attempted reacquisition of its pre-revolutionary property abroad, in the pursuit of which the ROC works in close partnership with the Russian government. The ROC argues that, technically, such properties belong to the Russian government, rather than the Church. As a result, this matter is presented as a state issue, rather than just a Church issue. On this issue, the ROC, including Patriarch Kirill personally, has acted as a diplomatic actor, seemingly as a representative of the

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76 Lavrov, S., quoted in: Payne (2010), p. 717. According to some figures within the ROC, ensuring the spiritual nourishment of Russia’s ‘CLA’ is the most important task for the Church with regard to the ‘near abroad’ (Hierodeacon Yaroslav (Ochkanov) (2018), interviewed on 12th September 2018). In carrying out this task, the ROC is supported by the Russian government (Archpriest Balashov (2019), interviewed on 25th July 2019). 77 Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2004). The ROC closely ties discussion of ‘compatriots living abroad’ to religion by also describing the ‘CLA’ as the Church’s clergy and believers. For example, see: Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2009b and 2018).
Russian government. On behalf of the state, the ROC has communicated, liaised and negotiated with foreign governments to try and secure, sometimes successfully, the return of former assets abroad.

In recent years, the ROC, with support from the MFA, has expanded its canonical territory by claiming canonical jurisdiction over parts of the world that are not commonly associated with Orthodoxy (for example, the Far East – China and Japan). Furthermore, new ROC churches and spiritual-cultural centres have been built in both the ‘near’ and ‘far’ abroad. These centres – arguably acting as outposts for the Russian state – also serve as sites of political and/or public diplomacy between the Russian government and the host nation. On numerous occasions, the ROC has functioned as a seemingly political actor in diplomatic communication. These new developments outside of Russia for the Church ‘signify the intimate relationship between the church and the state in its [i.e., the government’s] diplomatic mission.’

Whilst it is difficult to definitively establish the motivations of those key figures involved in the church-state relationship and the sincerity of their actions, it is clear, however, that the church-state relationship is, to a certain extent, mutually beneficial for both the Russian government and the Russian Orthodox Church. The Church benefits from a prominent and privileged position domestically and internationally, as the government has bestowed it with increased political and social influence, legal and state protection (through ‘spiritual security’) and media representation. In return, the policy of ‘spiritual security’ and the church-state relationship more broadly are beneficial for the government in pursuit of its goals. As well as the moral authority and legitimacy of the government and

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78 Opened in 2016, the ROC’s high-profile four-building complex in central Paris, for example, contains a ‘spiritual and cultural’ centre. Krechetnikov (2016).
state organs being strengthened by its ‘blessing’, the Church plays a significant role in helping the government to engage with Russian-speaking diasporas beyond the borders of the RF.

The concept of ‘spiritual security’ remains a key part of the state’s political and security agenda, as evidenced by its continued presence in high-level political discourse and by the significant co-operation between the Church and state security organs. In addition to actively co-operating with the government and state structures, the ROC has collaborated with another organisation in pursuit and fulfilment of its organisational objectives – Fond ‘Russkii Mir’.

1.3 Fond ‘Russkii Mir’: State Influence Abroad

The concept of the ‘Russian World’ was first used in an official context by Putin in 2001 during his speech at the ‘World Congress of Compatriots Living Abroad’. The way in which the concept of the ‘Russian World’ has since been defined and adopted by various actors from different influential spheres of society is investigated in this section. As one of the main proponents of this concept, the cultural organisation Fond ‘Russkii Mir’ is also explored, with a particular focus on its formation, activity and relationships with the ROC, the Russian government and the country’s state structures.

1.3.1 Defining the ‘Russian World’ Concept

According to Marlene Laruelle (2015), the term ‘Russian World’ has a long history, having been used historically to describe the territorial-civilisational space of ancient Rus’. It was only in the 1990s, however, that the term gradually developed into a more detailed
identity concept through the work of theorists who also had connections to the marketing industry. The concept had been utilised by political, cultural and academic figures in Russia prior to 2014, but it gained global attention in the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea when it was invoked as justification for military intervention by Putin, who discussed “the aspiration of the Russian world, of historical Russia, to restore unity.” In response, scholars and policy analysts in the West scrambled to determine the concept’s precise meaning and establish its geopolitical and security implications.

The ‘Russian World’ concept, as understood by some politicians and intellectuals in Russia, appears to align closely with the notion of the ‘clash of civilisations’. In his seminal work *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1997), Samuel Huntington argued that the world can be divided into civilisational territories. In these civilisational territories, major polities have ‘natural’ spheres of influence and geopolitical interests, owing to similar cultural and religious identities. In alignment with these territories, according to Huntington, culture and religion will increasingly become the primary identity markers of the post-Cold War world. (Ukraine, notably, straddles the alleged frontier between ‘Western’ and ‘Orthodox’ civilisations, making it a ‘cleft state’.) Huntington’s thesis was picked up by Russia’s political elites and, consequently, has had a significant impact on political thought in Russia, with scholars arguing that this civilisational angle has gained prominence in Russia’s official foreign policy discourse under Putin. The (re)appearance of the ‘Russian World’ is a result of the country’s

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81 Laruelle (2015). The main theorists to develop the notion of the ‘Russian World’ were Petr Shchedrovitskii and Gleb Pavlovskii.
83 For example, see: Russkii Mir (2010).
85 For more on the impact of this idea in Russia, see: Oldberg (2014); Tsygankov (2016).
politicians adopting this civilisational outlook. Additionally, Russia has been fashioning itself as a civilisation state domestically.86

The ‘Russian World’ is presented by its proponents as a civilisational identity that unites the multi-national, multi-ethnic peoples of the common historical territory of the post-Soviet space, who are allegedly linguistically, culturally, religiously and historically connected (to Russia). There is, however, a vagueness and fluidity to the concept. Putin, for example, broadened the scope of the ‘Russian World’ to include “all who feel spiritually connected with Russia” – wherever in the world they may be – by “perceiving the Russian language, culture, Russian history to be native to them.”87 In spite of (or, maybe, because of) this broad definition, many high-profile government and state actors have adopted this concept. As is the case with most concepts, vague definitions enhance the possibility of instrumental usage for achieving specific objectives.

The ‘Russian World’, particularly in relation to its two cornerstones – the Russian language and (ROC-led) Orthodox Christianity, is closely associated with another concept in the country’s official discourse on national identity – ‘compatriots living abroad’.88 The scholar Andis Kudors concluded that a strong convergence of these two concepts has taken place under Putin.89 Indeed, certain notable characteristics are already shared between the two in that both concepts are vague, subjectively interpreted and unconventional (inasmuch as they do not conform to the internationally accepted notion that objective national citizenship is a person’s primary identity-category).

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86 For an in-depth discussion on Russia as a civilisational state, see: Coker (2019). Putin first referred to Russia as a ‘state-civilisation’ in his speech at the Valdai Discussion Club in September 2013, a full transcript of which can be found at: President of Russia (2013).
The ascribed civilisational identity of the ‘Russian World’ provides an ideological basis for the Russian government to justify, with perceived legitimacy, the adoption of self-appointed responsibilities regarding the welfare and development of members of the ‘Russian World’, but particularly Russia’s ‘CLA’ in the ‘near abroad’. Thus, FRM primarily appeals to the ‘CLA’ by disseminating certain narratives that promote selective and favoured aspects of the country’s culture, (national) identity and alleged ‘worldview’ in order to strengthen their affinity and loyalty to Russia. The ‘Russian World’ concept, consequently, both supports and is supported by the government’s policies on the ‘CLA’.

Owing to the perception that the historically dominant force during the region’s imperial and Soviet eras is advancing the involuntary inclusion of nations and nationalities of the ‘near abroad’ into a Russia-centric identity, some scholars in the West argue that the ‘Russian World’ concept has not just nationalist, but also strong imperialist connotations.

By definition, imperialism and nationalism are opposing concepts. In some former imperial countries, however, aspects of an imperial past are sometimes used in the formation of present-day national identity.

The ‘Russian World’ concept has been discussed by many of Russia’s high-profile politicians, particularly those involved in foreign affairs. In refuting accusations of Russian imperialism surrounding the crisis in Ukraine, foreign minister Lavrov insisted in 2015 that cultural attributes are the essence of this concept – ‘[t]he Russian World is about culture, language, values, and religious orientations’. Above all else, Lavrov foregrounds the role...

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91 Laruelle (2015) interprets the government’s underlying motivation behind the ‘Russian World’ concept being the creation of a more advantageous ‘compatriots’ policy.
92 For example, see: Kuzio (2020).
93 For more on the relationship between imperialism and national identity in the context of post-Soviet Russia, see: Trenin (2010); Pain, E., ‘The Imperial Syndrome and Its Influence on Russian Nationalism’, in: Kolstø and Blaakisdur, eds. (2016), pp. 46-74.
of the ROC in the ‘Russian World’, regarding the activity of the Church to be essential in disseminating and strengthening the concept – “[the ROC incorporating the ROCOR into its canonical jurisdiction is] a new stage in our efforts to consolidate the Russian World.”

However, Laruelle argues that ‘Lavrov’s definition does not fully overlap with the concept as advanced by Putin and [press secretary for the president Dmitrii] Peskov’, who both use it primarily in connection with the ‘CLA’. Similarly, Konstantin Kosachev, one of Russia’s prominent government figures as Chairman of the Federation Council Committee on Foreign Affairs, also views the concept from a (national) security perspective through the ‘CLA’.

In the post-Soviet region, the concept has been met with a largely negative response from political leaders. The president of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko, for example, stated on separate occasions that he did not know what was actually meant by the ‘Russian World’, that it was not applicable to Belarus and that it is ‘propagandistic stupidity’. Additionally, Kazakhstan’s (then) long-serving president Nursultan Nazarbaev publicly distanced his country from the ‘Russian World’ concept, referring to its lack of relevance for young Kazaks. These rejections from key political figures in the region are highly significant because the concept’s adherents consider both countries (but particularly Belarus) to be important members of the ‘Russian World’ as a result of their close political, linguistic, spiritual and historical ties to Russia. The impact of the concept in these countries is likely to be severely limited by such political resistance, as the countries’ leaders and political elites possess the power to facilitate or, conversely, obstruct its

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97 Izotov and Galanina (2017). Kosachev was also head of Rossotrudnichestvo from March 2012 to December 2014.
dissemination. The Russian leadership adopting and persisting with this supranational concept in the face of political resistance in the region severely undermines both the concept and the regime’s ideological foundations.

As a result of ‘colour revolutions’ and the subsequent election of pro-Western, pro-EU political administrations, Georgia and Ukraine have been undergoing periods of ‘Westernisation’ over approximately the past twenty years. Georgia’s pivot westwards stalled somewhat following the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, the resultant territorial loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the coming to an end of the staunchly pro-Western, pro-EU presidential administration of Mikheil Saakashvili in 2013. Ukraine’s turn to the West intensified greatly following the country’s regime change in 2014. Ukraine continues to pursue a path of Western integration by actively aspiring to membership of NATO and the EU, already having abandoned membership of the Confederation of Independent States (CIS) and refusing to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). The Ukrainian government’s (sociocultural) policy of ‘decommunisation’ from 2015 onwards also, to a certain extent, clashed with the ‘Russian World’ concept by directly and indirectly contesting certain narratives pertaining to culture, history and memory that are espoused by the political establishment in Russia.

Since the concept’s re-emergence in the political domain, various interpretations of the ‘Russian World’ have been proposed by different actors. As Laruelle reflects, ‘like any successful concept, the Russian World has developed a life of its own outside the framework of the state administration.’ The main non-political actor in Russia to

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100 Georgia is also not a member of the CIS and EEU. The EEU, which is dominated and mainly advanced by Russia, could be regarded as the political-economic accompaniment to the culture-based ‘Russian World’ concept.

101 A similar law was introduced earlier in Georgia in 2011. For example, see: Makedonov (2011).

actively promote the notion of the ‘Russian World’ is the ROC, with the Church publicly approving of and disseminating the concept, particularly since 2008.\textsuperscript{103} The ROC, however, adopted a particular interpretation of the ‘Russian World’, one in which religious spirituality (i.e., ROC-led Orthodoxy) occupies a central role. As a result, the concept is often used alongside and interspersed with religious language when it is adopted by ROC clergy – for example, ‘spirituality’ \textit{(dukhovnost')}, ‘[the] Russian soul’ \textit{(russkaya dusha)}, ‘Orthodox fraternity’ \textit{(pravoslavnoe bratstvo)}, ‘of one-faith’ \textit{(odnoi very)}.

The late Patriarch Aleksii II, although very rarely using the term (for reasons, most likely, of religious diplomacy), did create early links between the Church and the ‘Russian World’ concept, saying in 2007, for example, that it was “very important to gather together the Russian World, which is scattered and which feels, through the Church and through Orthodox parishes, its own living connection with one’s own people.”\textsuperscript{104} By contrast, Patriarch Kirill quickly and enthusiastically embraced the idea of the ‘Russian World’, using the term at numerous public appearances, including those organised by \textit{FRM}.

Patriarch Kirill, like Putin, applied a vague and broad scope to the ‘Russian World’ concept. In 2014, the patriarch extended the concept beyond Russian-speakers – “to speak or understand Russian is not the single condition for belonging to the Russian World” – and argued that “people who are not related to the Slavic world at all can belong to this ‘[Russian] World’, having internalised its cultural and spiritual components as their own.”\textsuperscript{105} Moreover, the patriarch, mirroring the externally ascribed fixed approach to identity formation of the Soviet era, asserted that “[i]f someone denies this [Russian

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\textsuperscript{103} Bremer (2015). The concept of the ‘Russian World’ had been discussed by the Church in the years prior, particularly by (the then) Metropolitan Kirill, but this early discourse was much less prominent.


World, it changes nothing. This World exists: it is an objective reality.”

The concept of the ‘Russian World’ also overlaps significantly with the Church’s own concept of ‘Holy Rus’, as it aligns with the Church’s religio-cultural civilisational view of (Russian)
identity, its significant spiritual interests in parts of the ‘near abroad’ and its transnational, expansionist religious mission to strengthen its presence and influence across the post-
Soviet space and beyond. The ‘Russian World’ concept, therefore, is complementary to the Church’s ideology, interests and objectives.

In defining and evaluating the concept, other national elites in Russia have focused on secular aspects of culture. For the Russian academic Efim Pivovar, for example, language should lie at the crux of the concept: Pivovar argues that the government can best improve the national image and promote its messages abroad, particularly across the post-
Soviet space, by instrumentalising the Russian language. Pivovar proposed that, in order to maximise the concept’s potential and effectiveness, it is essential that the ‘Russian World’ avoids ethnic exclusivity and embraces cultural inclusivity by also encompassing and appealing to those people ‘with an interest in Russian culture, history and language’.

As examples above show, this broader, inclusive approach had been discussed by key state figures.

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107 Metropolitan Hilarion, head of the high-profile Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, remarked that “[t]oday one of the main tasks of our Church is what the Patriarch [i.e., Kirill] calls ‘the gathering of the Holy Rus’.” Metropolitan Hilarion (2012), quoted in and translated by: Haran, O. & Zdioruk, S., Russkii Mir and the Future of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo № 234 (PONARS Eurasia, 2012), p. 3. Patriarch Kirill has also appeared to broaden the scope of ‘Holy Rus’ to include Muslim-majority Kazakhstan by linking the concept to the Cossacks. Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2010a).
In addition to the notion of the ‘Russian World’ prompting criticism in the ‘near abroad’, attempts by the state to instrumentalise the Russian language specifically have also provoked a negative response amongst political elites in post-Soviet states. In 2017, for example, Kazakhstan legislated to commence the gradual transition of its alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin script.\textsuperscript{110} This legislation will negatively impact upon the presence and status of the Russian language in Kazakhstan, likely making the ‘Russian World’ concept seem more unrelatable and ‘irrelevant’ for Kazakh citizens in the future. Undermining the concept long before its (re)appearance, the resurgence of titular languages following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the popularity of the English language in communications technology-enabled globalisation have also contributed to the status of the Russian language in the ‘near abroad’ gradually diminishing.

Alongside a general increase in nationalist sympathies and nationalistic government rhetoric and activity, the language, religious and education policies of the Ukrainian government surrounding cultural and identity issues since February 2014 also undermine Pivovar’s language-based vision for the ‘Russian World’ concept. For example, a number of language-related bills have been passed by the Verkhovna Rada since 2014 in order to move Ukraine away from using the Russian language.\textsuperscript{111} Additionally, Georgia has introduced measures to restrict and impede consumption of the Russian language through the mass media on its territory by preventing the (re-)transmission of television channels from Russia.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{110} Altynsarina (2018).
\textsuperscript{111} Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2019). On 23\textsuperscript{rd} February 2014, the first post-Yanukovich parliament of Ukraine repealed the law that granted Russian the status of regional language.
\textsuperscript{112} Ministerstvo Tsifrovogo Razvitiya, Svyazi i Massovykh Kommunikatsii Rossiiskoi Federatsii (2009).
As even Russian-allied leaders of post-Soviet countries have reacted negatively towards the concept and the Western-facing political administrations of Georgia and Ukraine reject it outright, the concept’s effectiveness in maintaining and expanding Russia’s influence in the region is severely called into question; Russia’s political establishment is struggling to keep a number of major post-Soviet countries simply generally aligned to, let alone on the path to political and economic integration with, Russia, rather than the West. Furthermore, the Russo-Georgian War and the Ukraine crisis are likely to have significantly negatively impacted on: 1) how the ‘Russian World’ is perceived by target audiences in the ‘near abroad’; and 2) the ways in which these audiences respond to it.\textsuperscript{113} Thus, the ‘Russian World’ is a contested concept in the non-RF post-Soviet space. The concept, in conjunction with the government’s ‘compatriots’ policies is instrumentalised by the Russian government for (geo)political ends, used to justify the foreign policy of Russia’s political administration.

\textbf{1.3.2 FRM – Formation, Remit and State Ties}

In 2007, \textit{FRM} was established by presidential decree under Putin with ‘the goals of popularising the Russian language […] and supporting study of the Russian language overseas’ – a reason for being that is clearly, ostensibly, based on the external promotion of the Russian language.\textsuperscript{114} \textit{FRM} was created at a time of much government discourse on the perceived need for Russia to generate ‘soft power’ (\textit{myagkaya sila}), however. Indeed, the organisation’s own website also states that one of \textit{FRM}’s goals is the ‘formation of favourable public opinion […] about the country’.\textsuperscript{115} Therefore, the link between \textit{FRM} and

\textsuperscript{113} For example, see: Kuzio (2021).
\textsuperscript{114} Prezidentskaya Biblioteka imeni B. N. El’tsina (2007).
\textsuperscript{115} Russkii Mir, \textit{Fond “Russkii Mir”} (n.d.).
the concept of ‘soft power’ is clear. The concept of the ‘Russian World’ (*russkii mir*) is the ideological basis of this cultural organisation. The ideological implications of this concept, however, have made it inevitable that the organisation’s purpose and activity extend beyond the mere popularisation of the Russian language.

In large part modelled on similar government-funded ‘national’ cultural organisations (such as the UK’s ‘British Council’ and Germany’s ‘Goethe-Institut’), *FRM* is political in its formation, structure, funding and operations. As with other such manufactured cultural organisations that allegedly generate ‘soft power’, *FRM* has links to its ‘home’ state and government. The government links with *FRM*, however, appear to be much stronger than is the case with Western cultural organisations; in this respect, *FRM* is similar to China’s ‘Confucius Institute’. The British Council, for example, does not experience government interference (owing to protections in its charter) and does not have political figures in managerial and editorial positions, whereas *FRM* and the Confucius Institute do. Indeed, government involvement in these organisations is such that, according to Milos Popovic, et al. (2020), ‘the Chinese and Russian governments have directly interfered with the instruction, hiring and cultural activities of [the Confucius Institute and *FRM*].’\(^\text{116}\) Whilst all of these state-sponsored cultural organisations are oriented towards generating interest in and attraction towards their respective national cultures abroad through cultural diplomacy, *FRM*, unlike analogous Western organisations, has also involved itself in several contentious geopolitical issues.

*FRM* is only operational outside of the Russian Federation.\(^\text{117}\) According to Laruelle, the state-owned, MFA-managed humanitarian and cultural organisation *Rossotrudnichestvo* is primarily oriented towards the ‘near abroad’, with *FRM* directed

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\(^{117}\) *FRM*’s annual conferences, however, are held in Russia.
more towards the ‘far abroad’.\footnote{Laruelle (2015), p. 14.} FRM, however, is also very much active in the post-Soviet space: the organisation opened up numerous cultural centres abroad (both in the ‘near’ and ‘far’), and established links with Russia-oriented cultural, religious, educational, media and business groups in foreign countries.\footnote{For a detailed list of FRM’s centres, see: <http://russkiymir.ru/rucenter/>; for a detailed list by country of those organisations associated with FRM, see: <https://russkiymir.ru/catalogue/>.} These centres not only function as venues for cultural diplomacy, with their events publicised through the organisation’s news service, but also as locations for public diplomacy.\footnote{It was alleged in a report by Christopher Steele that, in the run-up to the 2016 US presidential election, premises belonging to Rossotrudnichestvo in Prague may have been used to host a secret liaison between Donald Trump’s attorney, Michael Cohen, and representatives of the Kremlin. For more information on this report, see: Bensinger, et al. (2017), pp. 18-19.}

FRM’s media portfolio and information output have grown since the organisation’s formation. FRM has a notable online media presence: a magazine, a radio station, a television channel and a text-based news service. Although the amount of government funding FRM receives is not made public, this notable media-related growth indicates that a sizeable amount of the likely substantial financial resources allocated to the organisation have been spent on improving its communication. FRM also supports other media outlets that are located in the ‘near abroad, providing funding to ‘assist with the activity of foreign Russian-speaking mass media’.\footnote{Russkii Mir, Granty Fonda “Russkii mir” (n.d.).}

Since its creation, Fond ‘Russkii Mir’ has worked with the ROC, with close co-operation between the two to fulfil common goals formalised early on by way of an official agreement.\footnote{For example, see: Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2009a); Russkii Mir (2009).} The organisation and its representatives, subsequently, have frequently appeared alongside the ROC and its high-profile clergy.\footnote{For example, see: Russkii Mir (2016b).} At the heart of FRM’s
linguistic-cultural mission is the ‘Russian World’ concept, and, as with the ROC, the
organisation has been active in the promotion and dissemination of the concept. Therefore,
both organisations have convergent ideas, objectives and interests, of which their shared
subscription to the ‘Russian World’ concept is a manifestation. FRM also openly
collaborates with numerous government departments (particularly the MFA), state
structures, Russian (GO)NGOs and private enterprises in organising and contributing to
events.

The main figure at FRM is the chairman Vyacheslav Nikonov – a high-profile
politician and public intellectual who is one of the organisation’s strongest links to the
current political administration. Furthermore, some members of the organisation’s
management team and board of trustees also hold prominent positions in various
government departments, which include Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, (now former)
Culture Minister Vladimir Medinskii and Chairman of the Committee of the Federation
Council on International Affairs Konstantin Kosachev. Thus, links between FRM and
the Russian government are numerous, high-level and public. As FRM’s most prominent
figure, Nikonov has delivered speeches at the organisation’s flagship annual conferences
and has discussed the organisation’s work in the Russian media.

As the ‘Russian World’ has been discussed by political, cultural and academic
elites in many countries across the world, dissemination of the concept appears to have
been effective. As shown earlier, however, dissemination of the concept through (public

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124 Nikonov, who has numerous links to the government, is also a deputy in the State Duma
for the Putin-linked governing party ‘United Russia’.
125 Russkii Mir, Uказ Президента Россиiskой Федератсii о sozdании fonda «Russkii mir»
(n.d.). The Chairman, Management Board and Board of Trustees are all appointed by
Putin.
126 Nikonov has appeared as an interviewee in news reports on the country’s main
television channels, as well as featuring as a permanent panellist on Pervyi Kanal’s
flagship political talk-show Bol’shaya Igra.
and cultural) diplomacy and public discourse does not necessarily result in acceptance of the concept amongst target audiences. In fact, military conflict in the ‘near abroad’ has led to the work of FRM being restricted in some countries and the ideology that the organisation espouses facing significant resistance.\textsuperscript{127} The work of FRM in Ukraine, in particular, dramatically decreased in 2014, owing to legislation and state measures that were introduced in the wake of Russia’s military intervention and involvement in the country.\textsuperscript{128}

At a time of increasingly conflictual relations between Russia and the West, FRM attracted attention from some sections of the Western media regarding its financing of affiliated centres that are located in academic institutions in Western countries and, consequently, the extent and nature of its influence over the activity of such centres. An investigation conducted by \textit{The Times} in 2017 into the University of Edinburgh’s Princess Dashkova Centre, for example, reported that a substantial financial donation was made to this centre by FRM. This donation allegedly ‘attached several non-negotiable clauses to its funding contracts’, which were deemed suspicious by some commentators.\textsuperscript{129} Additionally, questions have also been raised regarding the organisation’s funding and sponsoring of events at Durham and Oxford Universities.\textsuperscript{130}

Owing to its overt and strong ties to the government, it is possible to dismiss the notion of FRM acting as an autonomous organisation of (national-)cultural promotion. FRM has not only functioned as a resource for the government to allegedly generate ‘soft power’ through language-promotion, but, as Chapter V later reveals, it has also instrumentally served as a vehicle for disseminating large amounts of selective, highly

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\textsuperscript{127} RIA Novosti (2018b).
\textsuperscript{128} FRM activity continues to take place at the organisation’s centres in Crimea and rebel-held eastern Ukraine.
\textsuperscript{129} For example, see: Macaskill (2017); Hutcheon (2018).
\textsuperscript{130} Smith (2017).
politicised and contentious government-aligned narratives on both contemporary and historical issues relating to politics, society and culture.\textsuperscript{131}

\textit{FRM} is the product of the convergence of certain ideas on cultural identity and of transnational cultural-historical factors. Utilising the past, \textit{FRM} serves to fulfil contemporary (geo)political objectives. The concept of the ‘Russian World’ forms the ideological basis of this cultural organisation. \textit{FRM} can be closely linked to both the ROC and the Russian government, as all three subscribe to and advance the ‘Russian World’ concept. Through the use of this concept, the aim of \textit{FRM} is to deploy identitarian narratives for: 1) domestic purposes – i.e., consolidating society at home and legitimising the current political regime; and 2) foreign purposes – i.e., projecting a favourable image of Russia and strengthening the country’s influence across the post-Soviet space and beyond.

\textbf{1.4 Conclusion}

This chapter analysed a number of key concepts, issues and debates surrounding the Russian Orthodox Church and \textit{Fond ‘Russkii Mir’}. In doing so, this chapter explored each organisation’s: (relevant) ideological foundations; relations with the Russian government and the country’s main state organs; and presence in the ‘near abroad’.

The ROC – an \textit{organic} cultural organisation – is a major domestic and foreign state actor for Russia. The intensification of the church-state relationship in post-Soviet Russia, particularly under Putin from 2012 onwards, has resulted in the organisation enjoying a

\textsuperscript{131} \textit{FRM} functioning as a means of disseminating government-aligned messages has been the case, particularly, since 2014. \textit{FRM}, operating differently under the presidency of Medvedev (2008-12), was initially widely considered across the world to be closer to a ‘soft power’ organisation.
more prominent role in state affairs. This closer relationship has given rise to discussion of ‘symphonia’, some form of which prominent Church figures have set as an objective for the ROC to achieve and maintain. Despite high-positioned government and Church figures downplaying these strengthened ties and stressing adherence to the constitutional separation of church and state, this relationship has led to many scholars and commentators further questioning the autonomy of the ROC in relation to the Russian government. Even prominent figures within the Church have spoken out against the nature and perceived negative consequences of this post-2012 church-state relationship.

Whilst the church-state relationship has been strengthened ideologically, financially and operationally, several cases of tension between the ROC and the Russian government have surfaced regarding certain sensitive issues. These clear, public examples of tension with the government indicate that the Church exercised agency to pursue its organisational agenda. Indeed, several scholars conclude that it is the ROC that has notable influence over the government and regional state, rather than the other way around, claiming that the Church’s influence has manifested itself through state legislation and structural practices. Therefore, such scholars suggest that the Church not only has agency, but also autonomy from the state. The notion of the ROC as an autonomous actor is contested within the academic community, however. Owing to unresolved tensions between the Russian government and the ROC over certain policy issues, it can be concluded, however, that the current church-state relationship is not one of ‘symphonia’.

The concept of ‘spiritual security’ appeared in the Russia’s official political discourse at the time the church-state relationship was beginning to intensify post-2000. This concept – a reflection of the global trend of the securitisation of culture and identity – is reflected in: several major national documents; government legislation and policies; and the practices of state security services. As a result, the ROC – featuring in the country’s
official discourse as a key pillar of the Russian state – has been securitised by the Russian government. Additionally, ‘spiritual security’ is not just a domestic issue, as it is also strongly linked to the ‘near abroad’ through the concepts of ‘Holy Rus’ and the ‘compatriots living abroad’.

Unlike the ROC, FRM is a manufactured cultural organisation, as it was recently established by presidential decree under Putin and, consequently, has more direct and deeper links than the ROC to the country’s government and state structures. The ideological basis of FRM is the concept of the ‘Russian World’. Also promoted by both the Russian government and the ROC, the ‘Russian World’ advances a Russia-centric, cross-border, civilisational identity. In foregrounding (Russian) culture as an individual’s and society’s foremost identity category through the notion of the ‘Russian World’, the ROC and FRM share significant common ground. Thus, the ROC, FRM and the Russian government are all strongly linked by this concept.

The ‘Russian World’ is understood in different ways by different political, cultural and academic elites: whilst some actors foreground specific areas of culture (for example, FRM promoting the Russian language and the ROC stressing Russian Orthodoxy), others emphasise national identity (for example, the Russian government directing the concept at the ‘CLA’). These varying interpretations are symptomatic of the concept’s vagueness and flexibility – characteristics that have enabled the concept to be employed selectively, strategically and instrumentally to achieve different objectives.

As a result, the ‘Russian World’ concept has become contested and politicised. It is likely that the concept only enjoys success in strengthening and consolidating the country’s pro-Russian support base amongst Russophone diaspora communities in certain

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132 Patriarch Kirill, for example, expressed concern over what he sees as the West politicising the meaning of the ‘Russian World’ following Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Russkii Mir (2015a).
areas of the post-Soviet space, rather than persuading the region’s non-Russian peoples. In the context of Russian military intervention in Georgia and Ukraine, this (ascribed) civilisational concept being promoted by the ROC and FRM – both of which communicate to and engage with local populations in the ‘near abroad’ – has raised concerns as to roles and objectives of these cultural organisations in the region.

As FRM, in contrast to the ROC, has exhibited no (public) disagreement or tension with the government, it can be concluded from this opening analysis that the autonomy of FRM is limited, whereas that of the ROC is nuanced and less clear. Chapters IV and V investigate these differences between the cultural organisations in greater detail, with the use of extensive and original empirical data. The concept of the ‘Russian World’ provides the ideological basis for the presence and activity of FRM in the post-Soviet space, as do the concepts of ‘Holy Rus’ and the ‘Russian World’ for the ROC; the concepts of ‘spiritual security’ and ‘CLA’ are used as the political and, to a degree, legal basis for the Russian state’s involvement in the region. These political and cultural concepts are interconnected and mutually supportive, the use of which links the ROC, FRM and the Russian government. In analysing the activity of these cultural organisations in the post-Soviet space, scholars, analysts and commentators have used a number of other concepts, to which this thesis now turns.
Chapter II. ‘Soft Power’ or ‘Hybrid Warfare’? Defining and Assessing the Conceptual Framework

2.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter I, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and Fond ‘Russkii Mir’ (FRM) engage in activity that is widely regarded amongst elites in Russia as traditional (public or) cultural diplomacy conducted on behalf of the state. This activity is seen by prominent figures and commentators in Russia as simply generating ‘soft power’ for the country. Outside of Russia, however, many scholars, politicians and commentators interpret the presence and activity of these cultural organisations in Russia’s ‘near abroad’ differently. As a result of their strong ties to the government and various state structures, Russia’s cultural organisations are often viewed in the West as constituting part of the state arsenal in Russia’s alleged political, hybrid and/or informational warfare against neighbouring countries and the West.¹ In this chapter, the concepts of ‘soft power’, ‘hybrid warfare’ and ‘information warfare’ are examined as both tools for analysis by scholars and tools of practice by political, military and media figures in Russia and the West. In doing so, their utility to the conceptual framework of this thesis is also evaluated.

These three concepts have been discussed in relation to the ROC and FRM by high-profile national figures in both Russia and the West, particularly in response to cases of Russian military intervention in the post-Soviet space – i.e., the Russo-Georgian War (2008) and the Ukraine crisis (2013–present day). As these two cultural organisations are central to this investigation, this chapter assesses the validity of these concepts as tools of

¹ For example, see: Galeotti (2019); van Herpen (2015a and 2019); Orenstein (2019).
scholarly analysis and, furthermore, the applicability of these concepts to achieve the goals of this thesis.

This chapter establishes how (and why) the aforementioned concepts were originally defined, and how they are understood and used in practice by different actors. Through an in-depth analysis of their definitions, interpretations and implementation, it is possible to judge the extent to which these concepts are: 1) valid analytical tools; 2) adequate descriptors of the activity of Russia’s cultural organisations in and around times of military conflict; and 3) applicable for use in this research project as tools of analysis. To better understand these concepts and their utility to this thesis, the following questions are addressed:

1. Are there divergences between Russia and the West with regard to definitions, acceptance (i.e., as valid and applicable analytical frameworks) and/or the implementation of ‘soft power’, ‘hybrid warfare’ and ‘information warfare’?

2. In what ways are these concepts understood and used differently by scholars compared to political, military, think tank and media figures?

3. To what extent are these concepts useful as tools of scholarly analysis for investigating the activity of and evaluating the agency of Russia’s cultural organisations in the ‘near abroad’ during periods of military conflict?

The concepts of ‘soft power’, ‘hybrid warfare’ and ‘information warfare’ are not directly comparable in terms of their reception and usage, as they are viewed quite differently within the academic community, particularly in the West. In general, scholars
are more accepting of ‘soft power’ as a valid analytical framework, whereas they are more cautious towards and reluctant to adopt the concept of ‘hybrid warfare’. As are explored in this chapter, the roots of these concepts explain this difference: ‘soft power’ originated from within academia, whereas ‘hybrid warfare’ and ‘information warfare’ emerged from the military and military-industrial complex, respectively. Owing to the highly politicised nature of armed forces and their activities, few academics would accept and embrace a military concept such as ‘hybrid warfare’. Conversely, free from such negative associations with the military, ‘soft power’ is embraced by many scholars.

2.2 ‘Soft Power’

Rooted in the academic field of political science, the concept of ‘soft power’ was introduced by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. in 1990, and its popularity dramatically increased following the publication of his most influential work in 2004, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Across the world, this concept has had a significant impact on different spheres of society, particularly in politics and academia. The popularisation of ‘soft power’ was fast and far-reaching, with the concept being widely accepted as valid and applicable by many national elites of major powers, including Russia.

In international relations theory, ‘realism’ is a long-standing and prominent perspective for understanding power. According to the realist perspective, the military is considered to be the ultimate source of a nation-state’s power, guaranteeing sovereignty, preserving national security and generating (coercive) influence over other states in the international arena.\(^2\) Nye (2011), however, argues that realism offers too narrow and

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\(^2\) For a definition of ‘realism’ in the context of international relations, see: Footnote 33 (Introduction).
incomplete a picture of power. Thus, ‘soft power’ is a response to what Nye regards as the current overreliance on realist theory in world politics.

Nye describes power on the international stage as being able to ‘change the behavior of states’ in order to ‘control the political environment and get other countries to do what […] [one] wants’, on the basis of which Nye defines ‘soft power’ as ‘the ability to get others to want [emphasis added] the outcomes that you want’. A government’s ability to favourably influence the behaviour of another state through ‘soft power’, according to Nye, arises from a positive impression of and attraction towards one’s own country which stem from three specific areas:

1) values and ideology (or ‘worldview’);

2) culture (e.g., language and religion);

3) foreign policy (when it is seen as legitimate and having moral authority).

In theory, a country will find itself less likely resorting to the exercise of ‘hard command power’ (for example, military activity, coercion, economic and/or financial pressure and incentives) in the international arena if it possesses and utilises ‘soft co-optive power’. A country with significant ‘soft power’ is more able to ‘set the agenda and structure the situations in world politics’ for other states to willingly follow. Therefore, ‘soft power’ stresses the importance of attraction in achieving results, rather than the use of

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force. As a result, ‘soft power’ is considered to have legitimacy, as it relies on the voluntary engagement and agency of others.

As for conscious political engagement in ‘soft power’, Nye argues that public diplomacy is an important tool for governments, as it is a ‘means of promoting a country’s soft power’. In short, public diplomacy is government(-sponsored) communication that is targeted directly at the citizens of a foreign country, rather than at the country’s government. Essentially, public diplomacy relates to how a government acts to promote itself abroad by “getting […] [its] message out”. Engagement in public diplomacy consists of: daily communication (i.e., explaining domestic and foreign policies to the world’s media); strategic communications (e.g., organising events and campaigns that are usually focused on a simple, central message to advance government policy); and cultivating and maintaining long-lasting relationships with important individuals or groups (for example, through exchanges and scholarships).

According to Nye, ‘soft power’ can be generated by promoting one’s own soft-power resources through public diplomacy. Nye observes that private or sub-state actors can, in some cases, have a greater reach and appeal beyond nation-state borders than can governments. The increased ties and co-operation between the ROC and the Russian government in the country’s foreign affairs post-Yeltsin (see Chapter I), for example, is perceived by some figures and commentators to benefit the latter geopolitically because of the former’s significant influence in the ‘near abroad’.

In Russia, ‘soft power’ (myagkaya sila) has featured in the country’s political discourse since the early 2000s. The concept has impacted upon Russian politicians to the

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7 Nye, Jr. (2008).
8 For example, see: Chapnin (2015).
extent that it has even appeared in major national policy documents, described in one such
text as ‘an essential part of contemporary international politics’. Consequently, successive
governments have diverted significant financial and human resources towards the
development of Russian ‘soft power’.

By presidential decree in 2007, the Russian government created the cultural
organisation *FRM* in order to, in effect, generate ‘soft power’ for Russia by promoting the
Russian language abroad. Therefore, *FRM* is a *manufactured* cultural organisation. The
ROC is Russia’s main *organic* cultural organisation, as it is the country’s oldest, largest
and most prominent cultural body. The Church reportedly generates significant national
attraction amongst foreign publics, particularly in the post-Soviet space, as it has
historically had a significant impact on culture and society in both Russia and the broader
Eurasian region. Owing to the Church’s significant cross-border presence and influence,
many commentators consider the ROC to be a significant component (if not the main
source) of Russia’s ‘soft power’. As established in Chapter I, the ROC also has close ties
to the government and broader state, the nature of which has given rise to criticism of the
Church, both internally and externally. A number of Western scholars consider the present
church-state relationship in Russia to be counterproductive for both parties in maintaining
and expanding their power and influence.

In relation to the concept of ‘soft power’, two issues raise questions concerning the
(diplomatic) activity of the ROC and *FRM*: 1) the organisations’ close and extensive

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10 Rossotrudnichestvo is Russia’s other main *manufactured* cultural organisation. For a
look at *Rossotrudnichestvo* through the lens of ‘soft power’, see: Studneva (2012).
11 For a detailed historical analysis of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, see: Ware (2015). For
a look at the development of the ROC, see: Knox, Z. & Mitrofanova, A., ‘The Russian
12 For example, see: Lukyanov (2009a); Hudson (2013); Petro (2015); Savin (2015).
Additionally, see: Gusev and Gutkin (2015).
relationships with the government and important state structures; and 2) the controversial activity in which the organisations have engaged in contested areas of the post-Soviet space. As Nye asserts that it is necessary for governments to both recognise the importance of and strive for credibility to support their public diplomacy efforts, the close nature of the church-state relationship in Russia is considered by some scholars and commentators to be negatively affecting the ROC’s status, influence and credibility as an independent actor in certain areas of the post-Soviet space following controversial (geo)political and military events. \(^{13}\) *FRM*’s close links to the Russian government have led some scholars and analysts to interpret the cultural organisation as a mere tool wielded by the government, with some even arguing that it is an instrument of Russian ‘hybrid warfare’. \(^{14}\) It appears, therefore, that there are significant advantages for cultural organisations in having greater distance from the government.

Russia – a neo-authoritarian state with an aggressive foreign policy – raises major conceptual and practical issues around ‘soft power’ as formulated by Nye. The country’s alleged resources of ‘soft-power’, for example, appear to possess a ‘hard’ element, particularly in and around periods of Russian military intervention in the ‘near abroad’. \(^{15}\) It is one of the aims of this thesis to examine and evaluate this apparent ‘hardening’ of Russian cultural organisations in times of war and crisis for the country. Before such an analysis can be conducted, it is essential to establish how key political figures in Russia understand and engage with the concept of ‘soft power’.

\(^{13}\) For example, see: Kuzio (2018c).
\(^{14}\) For example, see: van Herpen (2015a).
\(^{15}\) On the use of ‘soft power’ to preserve authoritarian regimes, for example, see: Lankina, T. & Niemczyk, K., ‘Russia’s Foreign Policy and Soft Power’, in: Cadier and Light (2015), pp. 97-113.
In Russia, many members of the national elite understand and engage with ‘soft power’ differently to their counterparts in the West, seeing in it a ‘harder’ sense. James Sherr (2013) argues that policymakers in Russia tend to confuse the terms ‘attraction’ and ‘pressure’. As a result, Sherr proposes that Russia’s ‘soft power’ in the post-Soviet space would be better described as ‘soft coercion’ – i.e., ‘influence that is indirectly coercive, resting on covert methods […] and on new forms of power […] which are difficult to define as hard or soft’.

Whilst the country’s political elite embrace ‘soft power’, they also engage with the concept from a defensive and securitised angle. For example, Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in 2012 that “without the skilful use of ‘soft power’ it is not possible to defend one’s country’s interests”. Similarly, one of Russia’s major policy documents stated that ‘soft power’ can help combat efforts to ‘contain’ Russia. The concept is also perceived in Russia as a form of zero-sum competitive confrontation with the West in the post-Soviet space, according to Nicu Popescu and Andrew Wilson (2009). Indeed, a number of the country’s high-profile political figures having spoken out against the West’s alleged nefarious use of the methods of ‘soft power’ against Russia. Putin, for example, claimed that these ‘methods [such as ‘colour revolutions’] are often used to encourage and provoke extremism, separatism, nationalism, manipulation of public sentiment, and outright interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states’. Fundamentally, political

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16 On the undesired consequences on audience reception in Ukraine of Russia’s (mis)understanding of ‘soft power’, see: Hudson (2015a).
17 Sherr (2013).
20 Ministerstvo Inostrannykh Del (2010).
21 Putin (2012).
figures in Russia regard the ‘soft power’ of Western countries as being government-led, instrumentalised and harmful to Russia.

As the country’s political elite interpret ‘soft power’ differently to their Western counterparts, the Russian government applies the concept in a much more instrumentalised manner. In the 2000s, the Russian government has been notably involved in areas that relate to ‘soft power’: culture (for example, through FRM and Rossotrudnichestvo); religion (i.e., the ROC); history; the mass media (in the ‘near abroad’ and globally); GONGOs (i.e., Government-Organised Non-Governmental Organisations, such as Rossotrudnichestvo); and business activity (particularly concerning energy resources). It has been argued that the objective driving government activity in these areas is to produce Russian ‘soft power’ that can be used for narrow political purposes targeting specific audiences.

Just (2016) discusses the ways in which Russia uses public diplomacy and ‘soft power’ to appeal primarily to Russian diaspora communities in the ‘near abroad’. Just argues that these diaspora communities are likely to already be receptive to Russia and sympathetic to its foreign-policy aims. Therefore, according to Just, the government’s intentions behind its activity surrounding ‘soft power’ are less about persuading sceptical non-Russians in the former Soviet republics, but, rather, more defensively preserving Russia’s support base in the Russian diasporas (i.e., the ‘CLA’). Indeed, the primary justification given by the Russian government for the country’s military intervention in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) was that Russia was protecting their ‘compatriots

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22 For example, see: Popovic, et al. (2020).
23 Rotaru (2018). For an overview of Russia’s power projection in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova from 2016 onwards with regard to ‘soft power’ and foreign policy, see: Matveeva (2018).
24 Additionally, see: Ćwiek-Karpowicz (2012).
living abroad’ and, particularly in the latter case, defending the rights and identity of the ‘CLA’ with regard to their language and culture.

One of the main criticisms of the concept of ‘soft power’ relates to the issue of quantifiability: how is ‘soft power’ quantitatively measured and evaluated? Nye recommended that ‘soft power’ be measured by conducting polls, focus groups and interviews to establish levels of and detect changes in public opinion. David Kearn, however, maintained that there are ‘difficulties […] with measuring the impact of an ideational (and often subjectively employed) concept.’

For example, the concept is sometimes seemingly reified – the treatment of an immaterial entity as if it has material properties. Edward Lock (2009) also cautions that if ‘soft power’ is discussed in terms of material possessions (as he argues is the case with Nye), then the concept will validate and perpetuate the habit of seeking out attributes and resources of ‘soft power’, rather than measuring impact.

As Nye’s analysis of ‘soft power’ specifically centred on the USA, his concept has been criticised for being too US-centric. Geraldo Zahran and Leonardo Ramos (2010), for example, argued that Nye’s work is weighted more towards issues concerning US foreign policy than describing a universal concept of power. Nye defended his foregrounding of US foreign affairs by explaining that his work was intended to appeal primarily to US policymakers. Recommending moving away from what he sees as an over-reliance on the realist perspective with regard to power in international relations, Nye sought to encourage US policymakers to adapt their foreign-policy approach to the changing post-Cold War

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26 A manifestation of this reification can be seen with the grading and national league tables of ‘soft power’ by ‘Soft Power 30’, ‘Institute for Government’ and ‘Monocle’.
global political landscape to which he claims ‘soft power’ is better suited.\textsuperscript{28} Nye’s concept—a product of a Western-democratic environment—fails to adequately explore regional and cultural differences over the relationship between power and national attraction in international relations. The concept of ‘soft power’ is grounded in a liberal outlook, to which Nye subscribes, that does not allow for the possibility of a conservative-oriented understanding of ‘soft power’.\textsuperscript{29}

David Kearn argues that the concept is only really relevant for major economic powers because a government-sponsored programme of generating ‘soft power’ requires significant financial resources. In most cases, expensive strategic marketing campaigns and costly engagement in public diplomacy accompany countries’ activity relating to ‘soft power’. Since Russia’s political administration began to engage with the concept in the mid-2000s, the country’s cultural organisations have directly and indirectly received substantial amounts of government funding (see Chapter I). The financial resources invested since 2007 into creating, organising and running FRM, for example, appear to have been significant. The ROC has also been the beneficiary of large amounts of government funds for various projects and as part of various initiatives, some of which are expansionist for the Church (for example, building new churches and reclaiming old, pre-revolutionary churches). Across the world, other national governments have similarly dedicated substantial resources to organisations that are claimed to generate ‘soft power’, such as government funding for the British Council and the BBC’s World Service in the UK.

\textsuperscript{29} For example, see: Nye, Jr. (2013). On the notion of conservative-oriented ‘soft power’, see: Keating and Kaczmarska (2019); Laruelle and Luo (2020).
Kearn also discusses the ‘fuzzy nature of soft power’, referring to the blurred boundaries between ‘hard’ and ‘soft power’. To address this problem, Steven Rothman (2011) suggests modifying the concept, proposing that power be considered as a continuum and not rigidly dichotomous. Thus, Rothman recommends abandoning Nye’s binary of ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ in order to more appropriately define the nature of particular sources of power. Additionally, some scholars argue that blurring has occurred between ‘soft power’ and other related concepts. According to Ang, et al., a knot of ‘deep entanglement’ has developed and tightly bound public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy and ‘soft power’, leading to misunderstandings and confusion. Owing to the ways in which these different terms have been loosely used, confusion has arisen over the boundaries of ‘soft power’, which makes adopting the concept problematic.

In both a national and global context, the concept is still widely referenced by members of national elites, particularly in politics and academia. In Russia, for example, prominent politicians continue to use the term. Although Nye makes several valid and persuasive arguments for the relevance of ‘soft power’, the ways in which the concept has been understood differently and adopted instrumentally by political elites (and, indeed, itself politicised) raises significant conceptual and practical problems. Despite its broad appeal and prominence, the concept is not used in this thesis, as it is affectively loaded, contested and politicised. These issues, amongst others, are major barriers in adopting ‘soft power’ as a tool of scholarly analysis.

2.3 ‘Hybrid Warfare’

Since 2014, comparisons have been made by numerous commentators between the concepts of ‘soft power’ and ‘hybrid warfare’ (HW) in relation to Russia. After Russia’s annexation of Crimea in February-March 2014, HW rose to prominence as a means of analysing the country’s military and non-military activity in the ‘near abroad’. According to some commentators in the West, Russia’s cultural organisations of ‘soft power’ lack autonomy. This argument is made on the grounds that, allegedly, such organisations are used instrumentally by the government as part of a military programme of HW.\(^{32}\) As the following analysis shows, authors who have written about HW – whether in terms of ‘war(fare)’, ‘threats’ and/or ‘tactics’ – are grouped, first of all, according to their professional sphere. The authors are then grouped according to whether they approach the concept as an object for analysis (i.e., to be critically assessed in and of itself) or, conversely, as an object of analysis (i.e., as a conceptually valid tool for application).

2.3.1 HW: Non-Academic Literature

The term ‘hybrid warfare’ was first coined by Major William J. Nemeth in 2002, in his dissertation for the Naval Postgraduate School of the US Armed Forces. Nemeth used the term to describe the activity of the separatist insurgency in Chechnya (North Caucasus, Russia) in the 1990s. The term then featured in a 2005 article by Lieutenant General James Mattis and Lieutenant Colonel Frank Hoffman in the US Naval Institute’s magazine to describe the activity of insurgencies and non-state actors. Mattis and Hoffman argue that irregular challengers adopting irregular methods will become the greatest threat to US

\(^{32}\) van Herpen (2015a and 2015b).
interests abroad in the future, as they expect ‘future enemies to […] select a combination of
techniques or tactics appealing to them […] [resulting in] the combination of novel
approaches – a merger of different means of war [i.e., HW]’. 33 The authors argue that an
HW approach could involve, amongst other methods, an ‘ethnically motivated paramilitary
force, […] forms of economic war or crippling forms of computer network attacks against
military or financial targets’. 34 As the concept was developed within the US Armed Forces
as a means of describing the ‘new’ militarised threats posed by insurgency movements to
the conventional armed forces of developed nation-states, HW is a military concept. 35

In response to the conflict in Ukraine, discussion of HW spread quickly, featuring
claims that a combination of various tactics – which correspond with the above-mentioned
attributes of HW outlined by Mattis and Hoffman (2005) – had been adopted by Russia
against some of its neighbours in the post-Soviet space. A series of cyberattacks against
Estonia in 2007 surrounding the removal of the Soviet-era ‘Bronze Soldier of Tallinn’
monument is one such allegation, as has been the mobilisation of and support for an
ethnically motivated paramilitary force in eastern Ukraine since 2014.

In particular, the notion of ‘hybridity’ has been embraced by NATO, appearing in a
number of the military-security organisation’s official documents, declarations and
publications. 36 NATO claims that the West and its allies are being subjected to a
continuous campaign of ‘Russian hybrid warfare’. NATO Secretary General Jens
Stoltenberg, however, acknowledged NATO’s engagement in activity that not only mirrors
but predates Russia’s alleged HW programme: “Hybrid is the dark reflection of our

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34 Ibid.
35 Additionally, other authors from the US military to have written about HW include:
Hoffman (2007); McCuen (2008); Fleming (2011); McCulloh and Johnson (2013).
36 One of the most important examples of such publications was in September 2014 during
the Ukraine crisis, for which, see: North Atlantic Treaty Organization (2014).
comprehensive approach. We use a combination of military and non-military means to stabilize countries. Others use it to destabilize them.” Stoltenberg’s comparison suggests that the essence of HW concerns motivations, rather than strategy or tactics.

A notable contribution to discourse on HW has come from NATO countries in central and eastern Europe that experienced military occupation at the hands of the Russian Empire and/or Soviet Union and feel threatened by the military activity of a resurgent Russia. For such countries’ military figures, HW is a military strategy that is being carried out by Russia in eastern Europe. For example, Colonel Mirosław Banasik (2015, 2016a and 2016b), (formerly) of the Polish Armed Forces, analysed Russia’s alleged HW, whilst Poland’s internal security services claimed to have successfully been “neutralising […] [Russia’s] hybrid warfare networks” on Polish territory. At the same time, NATO has increased its presence and activity along its eastern frontier. For example, the ‘NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence’ was established in Tallinn, Estonia, in 2008 in response to the aforementioned cyberattacks against the country’s government and state infrastructure, the military alliance set up the ‘NATO-Ukraine Platform on Countering Hybrid Warfare’ in 2017 in response to the events of the Ukraine crisis.

NATO’s application of HW as an analytical tool is notably different to the definitions proposed by the concept’s early theorists in the US Armed Forces. The concept of HW is applied by NATO not to separatist insurgencies that are fighting against conventional armed forces, but to major military powers that have allegedly adopted this subversive strategy against other nation-states. Consequently, the concept has now come to include a range of activities that insurgencies would not have had the financial,

infrastructural and technological means to conduct. Furthermore, HW is seemingly employed to describe almost any non-military activity in which Russia is engaged (such as public and cultural diplomacy, which can involve the ROC and FRM). As a result of HW being broadened and liberally applied as an analytical tool in a highly politicised environment, the utility of the concept as a tool of analysis is greatly diminished.

The term ‘hybrid war(fare)’ has featured in Western political discourse since 2014, but the concept’s usage varies from country to country. In the United Kingdom, the term has been rarely used by the country’s politicians. Bob Seely, a member of the parliament’s influential Foreign Affairs Select Committee, has, in the 2010s, repeatedly raised the issue of Russia’s military and non-military activity abroad. In a joint publication with The Henry Jackson Society, Seely (2018) implicitly acknowledged that the use of HW as an analytical tool has become a problem because the concept lacks both a clear definition and well-defined operational boundaries. Seely argues that the term, which is based on vague and sometimes conflicting definitions, is being liberally used to describe too broad a scope of Russian actions. In the United States, however, several major political figures holding ministerial office used the term or, at least, associated themselves with the concept, such as: the (then) Secretary of Defence, James Mattis; Mattis’s successor, Dr Mark T. Esper; the (then) Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson; and Tillerson’s successor, Mike Pompeo.

Additionally, several political figures of those EU and NATO member-states that are situated close to Russia’s western borders, such as Poland and the Baltic states, have contributed to the discussion of Russia’s alleged engagement in HW. Whilst such

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39 In Poland, for example, some high-profile politicians have expressed concerns over Russian business activity in Europe which they deem to constitute a “new hybrid weapon”. Associated Press (2018).
40 For example, see: Jonsson and Seely (2015); Seely (2017).
41 The Henry Jackson Society is a right-leaning foreign policy-oriented UK think tank.
42 For some examples, see: Al Jazeera (n.d.).
eastern-European countries are members of these key Western organisations, they also have a closer (if not shared) history with Russia that is contentious and, in certain respects, adversarial. The negative interpretations of these historical relations with Russia, which are often seen in eastern Europe through the lens of ‘oppressor versus oppressed’, likely underpin such countries’ threat perception of Russia. Consequently, these member states contribute to shaping how the West’s main political and military alliances understand and engage with Russia. Although several governments have been active in discussing alleged Russian HW (e.g., the Baltic states), political administrations in some other Western countries have been less willing to use the concept. Hungary and the Czech Republic, for example, avoid using the term. The governments of these countries avoiding using the term likely comes down to geopolitical and/or diplomatic considerations, owing to them usually containing senior figures that have ties to the Russian leadership.43

In response to the crisis in Ukraine, numerous publications on HW were produced by analysts at major Western research institutes that specialise in defence, security and foreign policy.44 The USA’s RAND Corporation and the EU’s European Council on Foreign Relations, in particular, have produced material on HW. The majority of these publications argue that the activity which HW describes is, fundamentally, not new. For example, Keir Giles, writing for the UK’s Chatham House think tank, remarked that a lack of historical, comparative analysis has led to a conceptual misunderstanding. Giles argues that, as a result, HW is given ‘an entirely misplaced impression of novelty’, which makes it an ‘unhelpful and misleading’ term.45

43 On ties between the Kremlin and politicians from central and eastern Europe, see: Conley, et al. (2016 and 2019).
44 For example, see: van Herpen (2015a). The author of several texts on Russian (geo)politics and security, van Herpen is the director of the Cicero Foundation – a Dutch pro-EU, pro-Atlantic think tank.
45 Giles, K., Russia’s ‘New’ Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow’s Exercise of Power, Russia and Eurasia Programme, Research Paper (London:
Furthermore, some policy analysts argue that the discussion of Russia’s alleged HW programme by many high-positioned political and military figures in the West actually increases risk levels by stoking fear and panic, which could lead to impaired judgement and rash decision-making. Despite such reservations, several high-profile think tanks tend to accept the concept and, subsequently, treat it as a phenomenon, with only a small number of policy analysts rejecting it outright.46

Moreover, the concept of HW was adopted more willingly and less critically by journalists in the Western mass media, with Anglophone journalists also producing material on HW through Western think tanks.47 The UK’s Legatum Institute and the USA’s Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), both publishing independently and collaborating with one another, are the sources of a significant amount of journalist-driven material on HW. The journalists Edward Lucas and Peter Pomerantsev, for example, have produced texts for both of these think tanks.48 In covering the events of the Ukraine crisis, the concept has also been accepted, embraced and disseminated by journalists in the employ of various Anglophone mass media outlets, such as the BBC, Sky News and Financial Times.49

The direct translation of ‘hybrid war(fare)’ into Russian is gibridnaya voina, which appeared in public discourse in Russia from 2014 in response to widespread use of the

The Royal Institute for International Affairs (Chatham House), 2016b), p. 5. For another analysis of Russia’s activity during the Ukraine crisis by Chatham House, see: Giles, et al. (2015).
46 For example, see: Charap (2015); Giles (2016b).
47 A comprehensive list of texts on ‘hybrid war(fare)’ can be found at: NATO Multimedia Library (n.d.).
48 For example, see: Lucas and Pomerantsev (2016). For more publications on IW by Pomerantsev, see: Legatum Institute (2015b); Pomerantsev (2015a and 2015b).
49 For example, see: Kendall (2014).
term in the West.⁵⁰ Ofer Fridman, writing about the origins of the concept in Russia, points out that ‘Russia’s interest in the theory of ‘hybrid warfare’ began with an observation of the West’.⁵¹ Therefore, Fridman says that adoption of the concept by many of the country’s elites was responsive and imitative, rather than pro-active and original.

In the political domain, the term has been used by numerous high-profile government officials during Putin’s third presidency.⁵² A denial of Russia’s engagement in HW against the West is almost always made by such political actors, accompanied by a counter-accusation that the opposite is the case – the West has (long) been engaging in HW against Russia. Therefore, these figures argue that Russia is the victim and not the perpetrator. Lavrov, for example, said in 2014 that:

“[HW] is an interesting term, but I would apply it above all to the United States and its war strategy […] It is using financial and economic pressure, information attacks, using others on the perimeter of a corresponding state as proxies and of course information and ideological pressure through externally financed non-governmental organisations. Is it not a hybrid process and not what we call war?”⁵³

Other examples of prominent political figures in Russia denying and countering Western accusations of HW include: Glazev (2015); Medinskii (2016); Naryshkin (Interfaks, 2017); Volodin (RBK, 2017); Shoigu (Gazeta.ru, 2018); and Kosachev (2020). Evidently, political elites in Russia respond by ‘mirroring’ such accusations from the

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⁵⁰ The term gibridnaya voina was translated directly from English because Russia had no conceptual equivalent.
⁵² Putin has never used the term gibridnaya voina, just as most political leaders in the West have never used the term ‘hybrid war(fare)’.
⁵³ Lavrov (2014).
West. Russia’s mirroring of positions was acknowledged by the administration’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Ryabkov in 2019: “We mirror this completely. […] The more NATO says that it has no intentions of [such] a plan, the less we believe […] [it].”

As is the case in the West, HW is not a neutral term in Russia, as it is loaded with negative connotations, is highly politicised and is seemingly only conceptually valid if turned against the claimant. The tactic of mirroring is employed, at least in part, to create confusion, above all, amongst domestic, but also some foreign, audiences.

As some scholars have observed, high-positioned figures within the country’s armed forces largely do not use the term *gibridnaya voina* to describe their military and non-military activity abroad, preferring other terms instead. The 2014 Military Doctrine of the RF, for example, only mentions ‘indirect and asymmetric methods’. In 2013, Valerii Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation Armed Forces, outlined an approach to war that is considered by some commentators to be the conceptual basis for Russia’s alleged HW programme – referred to by some commentators as the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’. (Gerasimov, notably, did not mention *gibridnaya voina* in his article. It was only in 2016 that Gerasimov first used this term, which was used to describe the non-military activity of the West in the post-Soviet space.) Gerasimov argued that the non-kinetic (i.e., contactless) approach being discussed was successfully developed by the USA through irregular methods (such as ‘colour revolutions’ for the purpose of regime

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54 On use of the ‘mirroring’ technique in Russian media coverage of Aleksandr Litvinenko’s assassination, see: Hutchings and Miazhevich (2009).
57 Ministerstvo Oborony Rossiiskoi Federatsii (Minoborony Rossii) (2016).
59 Gerasimov (2016); Nagornykh (2016).
change). Charles Bartles (2016) argues that Gerasimov’s article, therefore, is a reactive, 
defensive-minded, descriptive analysis of a foreign approach to war, and not, as is the 
perception amongst many in the West, an offensive-minded prescriptive doctrine for HW.

HW has featured in the work of several of Russia’s foremost think tanks that 
specialise in foreign policy, international relations and (inter)national security. The vast 
majority of these think tanks have numerous and significant ties to the country’s political 
leadership. Owing to such strong political connections, many of these high-profile think-
tanks are widely regarded by scholars and analysts in the West as GONGOs that lack 
autonomy from the government.60 The domestic-oriented Russian International Affairs 
Council (RIAC) and the more outward-facing Carnegie Moscow Center, in particular, have 
produced material on HW.61 The authors of early work on HW at Russian think tanks 
were, in general, sceptical of the concept when it was first being applied to Russia, 
contesting whether HW even existed as a phenomenon. In more recent publications, 
however, think tanks tend to treat the concept as a phenomenon. Those working for think 
tanks in Russia also engage with domestic (and, sometimes, foreign) mass media in sharing 
their work.

On the topic of HW, numerous reports have been published on Russia’s main 
media outlets.62 During the most intense periods of the crisis in Ukraine (i.e., 2014–15), 
Russia’s national newspapers – Rossiiskaya Gazeta, Pravda, Vedomosti, for example – 
used the term in their articles. Furthermore, television broadcasters have also discussed the 
concept, often treating it as a tool of analysis. Through the ‘search’ function on the

60 For analyses of Russian think tanks, see: Pallin and Oxenstierna (2017); Barbashin and 
Graef (2019).
61 Carnegie Moscow Center has a section on its website entitled ‘Hybrid War: Russia vs. 
the West’. Moskovskii Tsentr Karnegi (n.d.). Dmitri Trenin, the director of this think tank, 
has acknowledged the existence of ‘hybrid war(fare)’. For example, see: Trenin (2018).
62 For a list of some of the most prominent examples, see: Sovet po Vneshnei i Oboronnoi 
Politiki (n.d.).
websites of Russia’s main television channels, it was possible to calculate the extent of the channels’ engagement. Rossiya 1, which is fully owned by the state, mentioned the term in 193 individual news reports (videos and text-based articles) from 5th September 2014 (i.e., the term’s earliest appearance) to 6th March 2020. The concept was also mentioned on Dmitrii Kiselev’s widely watched news programme Vesti Nedeli. Kiselev, known for his anti-Western stance and controversial commentaries, is a famous television host with strong links to the Kremlin. By contrast, the country’s main television channel, Pervyi Kanal, has rarely mentioned HW.

2.3.2 HW: Academic Literature

Even though ‘[h]ybrid war has become […] the accepted term for Russia’s current approach’, Mark Galeotti observes that ‘Western scholars and practitioners […] have struggled to find some agreed and useful definition for Russia’s style of conflict in Ukraine’. According to some critics, the concept of HW is inadequately defined, flexibly instrumentalised and, consequently, highly contested. As a result, the concept has found itself the subject of several scholarly critiques in the West, particularly at the hands of those academics specialising in the fields of military strategy and military history.

One such scholar is Sir Lawrence Freedman – the author of several major publications on military strategy. Freedman explores how understandings of the nature, capabilities and limitations of HW, as proposed by the concept’s early military theorists in the US Armed Forces, have evolved. Freedman states that ‘[a]s with many similar concepts, […] once adopted as a term of art it has tended towards a wider definition’,

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63 Vesti.ru (2020).
coming to encompass and represent much more. As a result, he argues that HW has lost its conceptual clarity and focus.

Despite critiquing the concept, Freedman accepts and adopts HW as a tool of analysis; Freedman argues that HW is unsuitable as a strategy for Russia concerning the Ukraine crisis, rather than flawed as a concept in and of itself. In doubting the perceived success of Russia’s approach in Ukraine, for example, Freedman says that ‘the advantages of hybrid warfare have been less evident than often claimed’ because ‘Russia had achieved limited gains [‘yet to achieve its main objectives’], but at high cost.’ Arguing that the state’s operation was impulsive, improvised, open-ended and aimless, Freedman regards Russia’s ‘hybrid’ activity in Ukraine from 2014 onwards as neither planned nor new.

Bettina Renz (2016) is also of the opinion – as are van Puyvelde (2015), Bartles (2016) and Galeotti (2019) – that the activity that was described as HW was not a new phenomenon. Renz argues that favourable circumstances enabled the Russian military to achieve its objectives effectively in the annexation of Crimea, rather than a ‘new war-winning formula’ in the form of HW. As such favourable circumstances are irreproducible, Renz maintains that any attempt by Russia to carry out similar ‘hybrid’ actions in any other of its neighbouring territories would be far less likely to yield such successful results. Thus, Renz and Hanna Smith, seeing the concept as fundamentally flawed, consider HW ‘not useful either for scholarly analysis or policy making’ on the grounds that it is just ‘a very general analogy’.

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According to Fridman (2018), the confusion and contestation surrounding the concept originates, in large part, from the politicisation of the term during the Ukraine crisis. By being used loosely and liberally, the term is now applied in the West to almost all foreign-oriented activity in which Russia engages. Fridman – as well as other Western scholars, such as Kofman and Rojansky (2015), Monaghan (2016), Jonsson (2019) – challenges the nature and applicability of the concept.

There are, however, some scholars in the West that have offered a cautious and conditional acceptance of the term. For Galeotti (2019), Russia’s government and armed forces have a fundamentally different understanding of military conflict to the West, as they do not see warfare as dichotomous (i.e., ‘on’ or ‘off’, ‘hot’ or ‘cold’) and actions as always leading to direct conflict and/or war. The way in which HW has been adopted as a means to describe Russia’s approach and activity, however, inflates and misrepresents the country’s capabilities, intentions, ambitions and threat level to the West. Thus, Galeotti (2016a and 2019) argues that the utility of HW as a concept of scholarly analysis is greatly diminished. Galeotti (2019) – expanding on the work of RAND Corporation’s Christopher Chivvis (2017) – argues that a conflation of two separate, but sometimes overlapping, phenomena is taking place in Western discourse on HW:

1) ‘hybrid warfare’ – military and non-military activity that is preparing a battlefield for military conflict and/or territorial incursion. Therefore, activity surrounding the conflicts in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014 onwards) would constitute ‘hybrid warfare’.

2) ‘political warfare’ (or ‘non-linear warfare’) – open-ended, non-military activity that is not intended to lead to military conflict, but, rather, aims to destabilise and
demoralise the opponent in order to achieve favourable political outcomes, such as changes in a government’s policy. Therefore, alleged Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election would constitute ‘political warfare’, not ‘hybrid warfare’.

In order to appropriately define Russia’s activity abroad, the presence of conflict or territorial incursion is the key distinguishing factor for Galeotti between these two types of phenomena. Only on the basis of maintaining this clear distinction does he propose adopting the term ‘hybrid warfare’. Consequently, Galeotti argues that most of Russia’s (non-diplomatic) activity abroad is, in fact, political warfare.69

Despite such conceptual problems and criticisms, a small number of Western scholars do adopt HW as a valid and applicable conceptual tool of analysis. Bachmann and Gunneriusson (2015) and Orenstein (2019), for example, uncritically adopt the concept in describing Russia’s activity in the international arena, without addressing any of the aforementioned scholarly criticisms. Additionally, Maria Snegovaya argues that Russia has applied this military strategy in the post-Soviet space: ‘Russia has been using an advanced form of hybrid warfare in Ukraine since early 2014’.70

Snegovaya cautions, however, that, in this ‘era of hybrid war’, Russia’s recent activity does not ‘herald a new era of theoretical or doctrinal advances’ that is spearheading a revolutionary ‘new way of war’; rather, according to the scholar, such ‘hybrid’ activity is firmly grounded in Soviet-era military thought.71 Unlike Snegovaya, Rod Thornton argues that Russia’s (alleged) HW in Ukraine is the product of a ‘completely

69 Additionally, see: Robinson, et al. (2018).
71 Ibid.
new doctrinal approach’ – the integration of various ‘state levers of power […] [lies] at the heart of hybrid warfare’. The country’s political and military elites, according to Thornton, do not consider their approach an original creation, but, rather, as reverse-engineered from ‘hybrid-warfare measures that the Kremlin saw as being used against [Russia]’.72

A significant amount of scholarly literature has been published on gibridnaya voina in the Russian language. It was from 2014 onwards that Russian-language scholarly texts on the concept began to appear. As the concept’s rapid dissemination occurred during the height of the Ukraine crisis, scholarly debate on HW quickly became politicised in Russia. The majority of Russian scholars writing on this topic stress that gibridnaya voina is a term and concept that is imported from the West where it is used to describe Russia’s (alleged) military and non-military activity abroad. As with the country’s political figures, most of these scholars defend Russia and attack the West by portraying Russia as a victim of HW, rather than a perpetrator. Mirroring the West’s accusations, they often propose defensive policy responses that would protect the country from perceived US-led ‘hybrid’ acts of aggression (Tsygankov, 2015a; Tsygankov, 2015b; Markov, 2015; Panarin, 2016). As in the country’s political domain, ‘mirroring’ of the West in Russia’s scholarly literature on HW is pronounced.

The texts on the topic of HW by Igor Panarin, a prominent and controversial political scientist and public intellectual in Russia, align with the position held by Lavrov. According to Panarin, the concept is a military strategy that was created and implemented by a US-led West for the purpose of bringing about regime change in countries that are

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considered to be non-compliant with the interests of the US, with the main target of the West’s HW being Russia.\textsuperscript{73} Panarin adopts highly politicised, pro-government positions that are defensive in content and sensationalist in rhetoric. Despite his academic status, Panarin’s scholarly credentials are called into question, as the author: 1) advances outlandish anti-Western geopolitical conclusions; 2) is a former KGB operative; and 3) currently works at a government-owned and MFA-run higher education establishment.

In contrast to Russian scholars, who investigate the West’s alleged HW against Russia, Ukrainian scholars examine Russia’s alleged HW against Ukraine. For example, Georgii Pocheptsov – a Soviet-born Ukrainian, who publishes works in the Russian language – places Russia’s activity in a discussion of ‘cognitive attacks’ – i.e., information battles for favourably shaping public opinion.\textsuperscript{74} Additionally, Evgenii Magda (2015) wrote a book on \textit{gibridnaya voina}, arguing that Russia has been engaged in HW against Ukraine since 2014 in order to achieve its geopolitical and foreign-policy objectives. Therefore, the stances adopted by Russian and Ukrainian scholars align with the foreign policy positions of their respective countries’ governments.

To the point of losing clarity and focus, the military concept of ‘hybrid warfare’, since 2014, has been used to analyse and explain a far broader scope of activity than was originally proposed by its early theorists. Indeed, the concept is often even applied to forms of widely accepted state activity, such as traditional public and cultural diplomacy. The way in which the concept is perceived differently and discussed in a confrontational manner between Russia and the West is also significant (i.e., positions over who is engaging in HW against whom are ‘mirrored’). Despite certain aspects of ‘hybrid warfare’ being of some specific analytical utility (particularly when adopting a distinction between

\textsuperscript{73} For more information on Panarin, see: Laruelle (2012).
\textsuperscript{74} Pocheptsov (2018).
‘warfare’ that is ‘hybrid’ and ‘political’), this concept is not employed in this thesis on the basis that, owing to its liberal and unrestrained usage, it has become highly politicised, vague and, consequently, devalued. Furthermore, HW is limited in explaining the aforementioned cultural organisations’ media activity, which is central to this thesis.

2.4 ‘Information Warfare’

It is argued by some scholars, analysts and commentators that at the heart of ‘hybrid warfare’ lies ‘information warfare’ (IW) (Snegovaya, 2014; Thornton, 2015; Orenstein, 2019). IW is generally considered by its proponents to be the use and management of information and communication to influence, manipulate and control the information space for the purpose of achieving (geo)political objectives. IW is roughly comprised of two parts: 1) the non-human (infrastructural) element – relating to, for example, communications infrastructure, software systems and cyberwarfare; and 2) the human (cognitive) element – relating to, for example, psychological operations, the targeting of media communications and their impact upon audiences. IW is also said to include the battle over the formation and manipulation of international public opinion, which involves the targeted dissemination of government-aligned narratives, particularly through the mass media.

As with HW, the concept of ‘information warfare’ gained significant traction and prominence as a result of the crisis in Ukraine. It has been discussed by many scholars, analysts and commentators that Russia and the West are presently engaged in an ‘information war’ over the Ukraine crisis (2013–present day). Prior to the crisis in Ukraine, an ‘information war’ between Russia and the West was also alleged to have broken out in
relation to the Russo-Georgian War (2008). Is the concept of ‘information warfare’, therefore, more applicable in describing Russia’s activity in the ‘near abroad’ during these crisis periods than ‘soft power’ and ‘hybrid warfare’?

2.4.1 IW: Non-Academic Literature

The term ‘information warfare’ was first used in 1976 by Thomas P. Rona in a report on the future of warfare for the US’s Boeing Aerospace Company. Thus, IW was coined twenty-six years before HW. In Rona’s report, it was predicted that future advancements in the information sciences and their associated technologies will be crucial to military outcomes. Rona posited that influencing and controlling information flows through information and communications hardware and infrastructure will assist greatly in the successful achievement of strategic objectives. Owing to its origins in the US’s military-industrial sector and being discussed in relation to armed forces, military technology and warfare, IW, as with HW, is a military concept. IW has since been further theorised within the US military and, more recently, by NATO.

In 2014, NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, General Philip Breedlove declared that Russia had been waging “the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare”. Adopting the concept, NATO figures argue that the West is losing the ‘information war’ against Russia

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76 Rona (1976). The concept, arguably, has its foundations in the work of the Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu, who advocated the foregrounding of psychological, informational and non-military activity in military affairs.
77 For notable publications on IW by NATO, see: Giles (2016a and 2016c); Iancu, et al., eds. (2016).
(and others, such as China and Iran). A call for quick, strong and decisive action against Russia often accompanies such warnings. In response, significant investment has been made in the militaries of major Western powers with regard to the information domain. For example, the British Armed Forces formed the 77th Brigade and the 1st Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Brigade, the National Cyber Force was established by the UK’s Ministry of Defence and GCHQ in 2020, and the US Air Force merged its Information Warfare Squadrons.

The reason for this perception that the West is losing the ‘information war’ against Russia is, for some commentators, that there is no longer common understanding between Russia and the West as to the definition, rules and methods of combat. In the words of NATO’s strategic communications chief Mark Laity, Russian elites’ understanding of war is “not how we see it […] and certainly not how we do it”, as “[t]hey regard information confrontation as something that is happening in peace, in war […] and from the point at which we don’t think war is.”

Rod Thornton argued in 2015 that ‘[t]here has been a major change in the way the Russian military regards the conduct of its regular warfare campaigns’, with many elites now thinking that ‘information warfare enables wars to be won without a shot being fired’. Timothy Thomas (1996a and 1996b), an army veteran and military analyst, raised the issue of Russia’s alleged orientation towards IW as early as 1996, however. As is also the case with Snegovaya (2014), Thomas does not regard Russia’s information operations

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79 For example, see: Ridgwell (2016).
80 For example, see: BBC News (2015); Bond (2018); Bultman (2019). GCHQ is a government intelligence agency in the UK.
81 Legatum Institute (2015a).
to be part of a new phenomenon, but, rather, an evolutionary continuation of Soviet-era methods, such as ‘reflexive control’ and ‘asymmetric methods’. Thomas argues that the setting and technology are novel, but the underlying principles are the same.

In the West, the concept of IW has been explored in the work of prominent foreign policy-oriented think tanks. At these think tanks, most analysts argue that IW itself is not new, just that IW is being implemented in a one-sided manner (i.e., Russia engaging against the West) with new methods in a new media environment. The Legatum Institute has worked collaboratively with CEPA on a number of occasions to produce joint reports and to both organise and participate in discussion panels on the topic of IW.\(^\text{84}\) The majority of the IW publications by the two organisations appear to be one-sided and politicised. As is the case with HW, CEPA and Legatum Institute have been at the forefront of discussion on combatting Russia’s alleged IW. The journalists Anne Applebaum, Edward Lucas and Peter Pomerantsev have authored a number of reports on IW for the two think tanks, in addition to discussing the concept through the English-language mass media.\(^\text{85}\)

A number of English language news outlets – including, amongst others, the BBC and The Washington Post – have published material discussing IW.\(^\text{86}\) It is often portrayed in such examples that an ‘information war’ is being carried out by Russia against the West, with the news reports often featuring a discussion on the necessity for counter-measures to be taken in order to combat Russia’s nefarious information operations. The focus of this journalistic work is on Russia’s information operations, not on those of the West. Indeed, only very few examples of Western journalism explore – through the lens of IW – the

\(^\text{84}\) For example, see: Lucas and Nimmo (2015); Lucas and Pomerantsev (2016). CEPA has a website on ‘information war’ – <http://infowar.cepa.org/index/>.

\(^\text{85}\) For a more recent example of non-academic publications on IW, see: Jankowicz (2020). A US-based political campaigner, Nina Jankowicz argues that the West is losing the ‘information war’ to Russia.

\(^\text{86}\) For example, see: Ennis (2015b); Branford (2017).
West’s activity that could be perceived as information operations. Mary Dejevsky, for example, accused the West of engaging in IW in 2017 over its media coverage of Russia’s long-planned, large-scale Zapad military exercises in Belarus.\(^\text{87}\)

Western media output on IW has also been published in Russian. IW has been discussed in news output produced by Russian-language Western media outlets, such as the US government-established and -funded news broadcasters *Nastoyashchee Vremya* (‘Current Time’) and *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL).*\(^\text{88}\) RFE/RL functioned as an information instrument for the USA during the Cold War, and it remained active, albeit downscaled, even after the end of the Cold War. The outlet is perceived by many state-affiliated figures in Russia to be a government instrument of geopolitical significance that is hostile towards Russia.

According to Stephen Blank (2013), elites in Russia understand IW more broadly than their counterparts in the USA/West: in the West, IW is only undertaken during periods of open military conflict and mainly concerns physical communications infrastructure and other IT hardware/software, whereas the Russian approach to IW greater incorporates information-psychological operations that, notably, are not strictly confined to periods of open military conflict. There are similarities and differences in how elites in Russia, in comparison with their counterparts in the West, have responded to and engaged with the concept.

Owing to significant government influence from state ownership, the Russian mass media are widely considered to lack autonomy in relation to the Russian government (see Chapter III). In a 2012 interview with the newspaper *Kommersant*, chief editor of Russia’s

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\(^\text{87}\) Dejevsky (2017).

\(^\text{88}\) For example, see: Nastoyashchee Vremya (2014).
main state-funded international broadcaster RT (formerly Russia Today), Margarita Simonyan, described the role and activity of her news outlet in the information space in highly defensive and militarised terms. Simonyan acknowledged that RT “carried out an information war [during the Russo-Georgian War] against all the Western world”, on the grounds that “[information is] [...] a weapon like any other” and “[t]he weapon of information [...] is used in critical moments, and war is always a critical moment.” This key media figure later added that RT has advanced so much since the Russo-Georgian War that “if 2008 were to happen now, the picture around the world would be different.”

On Russia’s domestic television channels, discussion of IW exceeds that of HW, which is evident from searches conducted on the channels’ websites. The term informationsnaya voina appeared on at least 108 separate occasions on Pervyi Kanal from 6th September 1999 (i.e., the term’s earliest appearance) to 6th March 2020. During this period, the term was used on the channel in relation to numerous cases, including the Second Chechen War (2000), Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014-16). A large number of these examples claimed that the West was engaged in IW against Russia. The term appeared much more frequently within a much shorter time-frame on state-owned Rossiya 1, featuring in 606 separate news reports from 21st November 2013 to 6th March 2020. In 2014, Kiselev said that “right now an information war is taking place” and that “information war is now the main type of war [...] preparing the way for military action.”

In terms of their content on IW, Russian television media outlets fundamentally align with statements made by the country’s leading politicians.

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Since the Euromaidan street protests of 2013-14, IW has been periodically discussed in Russia by high-profile political figures, including Vladimir Putin. This lies in contrast to the West, as political figures in major Western countries have avoided using the concept. Putin insisted that, contrary to accusations emanating from the West, the ‘information war’ is currently being conducted against Russia, which compels the authorities to react defensively and proportionately to the information operations of its ‘opponents’.92 Furthermore, Lavrov claimed that Russia is “not interested” in engaging in information warfare, but that, at the same time, the “large-scale information war” over Ukraine that is being carried out against Russia by a US-led West necessitates a response.93

Additionally, other prominent figures within the political administration to have discussed IW include government spokespersons Maria Zakharova and Dmitrii Peskov, who adopt a harder, more controversial line than the administration’s key political figures. In a post on her personal account on social media, Zakharova – spokeswoman for the Foreign Ministry – referred to prominent members of the former US President Barack Obama’s administration, John Kerry and Jennifer Psaki, as ‘soldiers of the information war’.94 Peskov – spokesman for the Russian Presidential Administration – strongly asserted on numerous occasions that the West is conducting IW against Russia in an attempt to supress the country’s sovereignty domestically and its voice and influence internationally, with the spearhead of its IW allegedly being the “Anglo-Saxon mainstream media”.95 As is evident above, such high-positioned government figures are aligned in their fundamental position on IW – Russia is the victim of the West’s IW, not the perpetrator of

IW against the West. As with HW, the mirroring of positions and accusations between Russia and the West regarding IW is pronounced.

The concept of IW has been discussed in the country’s military domain. In 2016, Russia’s Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, declared that a ‘harsh and uncompromising information war [is being carried out] against Russia’.96 In Gerasimov’s aforementioned journal article, the author stresses the importance of information activities in modern warfare. Although not using the term ‘information war(fare)’, Gerasimov repeatedly refers to ‘information technologies’, ‘information measures’ and ‘information resources’. Other high-positioned military figures, however, have explicitly adopted the concept of IW. In Russia, members of the country’s military elite regard information operations as important to their planning and activity, with information seen as an instrument that can be effectively used in order to achieve strategic (geopolitical) goals.97

The increased attention paid to the information domain by high-ranking figures within the military and security forces has been particularly noticeable since Russia’s post-war appraisals of the country’s performance in this area during the Russo-Georgian War. In parallel to recent measures taken by the UK and US militaries in the information domain, information-related measures concerning the country’s defence and security apparatus have recently been introduced by the Russian government. In 2017, for example, a new regiment of the Russian Army was created to accommodate a new force of information operations troops.98 Furthermore, politicians broadened the remit and powers of the internal security services’ Rosgvardiya and Federal Guard Service of the RF in 2016

97 For example, see: Chekinov and Bogdanov (2010).
98 Isachenkov (2017).
and 2018, respectively, to engage in ‘information security’. Therefore, the country’s military and internal security services are also being geared towards the information domain. Furthermore, some information operations have been outsourced to government-affiliated non-state actors. For example, Kremlin-linked Evgenii Prigozhin is widely thought to finance and direct the Internet Research Agency, which has been active in targeting the West with information campaigns.

2.4.2 IW: Academic Literature

Since 2014, a number of Western scholars have offered commentaries and produced texts on IW. These scholarly texts explore the concept’s context, aspects, methods and consequences. The vast majority of these examples start from the basis that IW is an actual phenomenon that is being conducted by the Russian state against the West. The historian Timothy Snyder, for example, argues that, having adopted various tactics and methods, Russia is ‘winning the information war’ against the West. Snyder highlights examples of information and communications being used manipulatively by Russia during Ukraine’s major political and military events of 2014-15, with such information activity impacting on Western perceptions of and reactions to those events to the benefit of the Russian government. Andrei Tsygankov (2014), a political scientist based in the USA, also considers Russia to be engaging in an ‘information war’ against the West, particularly against the United States. Tsygankov, in contrast to Snyder, argues that such information activity is limited in scope, scale and effectiveness. The author argues that the state’s

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100 Bellingcat (2020).  
information operations in certain specific areas have proven successful only because the state had modest objectives in favourable circumstances.

Renz (2016), conversely, cautioned against using the term ‘war’ with regard to information on the grounds that the language of conflict in this context militarises communication, which makes dialogue and diplomacy confrontational, suspicion-laden and, consequently, difficult. Renz, concluding from her analysis of Crimea, is one of the most sceptical commentators on the nature, scale and effectiveness of Russia’s alleged IW. According to Renz, the perception that Russia has a ‘highly developed information warfare arsenal’ that has been effectively deployed in Ukraine does not stand up to scrutiny, not least because of a lack of hard evidence of impact on Western and Ukrainian audiences.

Similar to Renz, Szostek (2018 and 2020) has questioned the perceived effectiveness of Russia’s information operations in Ukraine. Szostek (2020), in greater depth, detailed reasons for not engaging with the concept of ‘information warfare’. The issues raised by the author concern: 1) the inability to target the public and ensure audience consumption of information – effectively targeting information at particular groups of people is difficult in the current complex, pluralistic and competitive media environment, which makes it hard to know whether targeted audiences have received and consumed the government’s desired information; and 2) audience ‘vulnerability’ and reception – if the above-mentioned initial difficulties are overcome, it is far from certain how (and why) audiences engage with and respond to such information, as, according to a number of surveys, only a small proportion of those Russian-speakers in Ukraine that consume news information from Russian television media outlets accept the channels’ narratives uncritically.
In comparison to their counterparts in the West, scholars in Russia have explored and theorised the concept of ‘information warfare’ more extensively.102 As is the case with HW, however, no single definition of IW has been settled upon within the academic community in Russia.

In addition to his work on HW, Fridman (2017 and 2019) outlined Russia’s understanding of IW by charting its conceptual roots and evolution over time, making a link between Evgenii Messner’s ‘subversion-war’ (*myatezhvoina*), Aleksandr Dugin’s ‘net-centric warfare’ and Panarin’s ‘information warfare’. Fridman says that the authors, although using different terminology, are largely talking about the same phenomenon. As a result, the theory behind IW is well-developed in Russia. Furthermore, Fridman argues that these figures’ writings have influenced the country’s political figures and establishment.

Andrei Manoilo – a professor at Moscow State University and a former FSB agent – is one of Russia’s most active authors on IW (Manoilo, 2000 and 2018; Veprintsev, et al., 2015). Manoilo is of the opinion that IW is a military programme that is being conducted by the West against Russia, evidence of which he claims is apparent from the coverage of particular events in the Western media (e.g., the Skripal poisonings of 2018).103 Furthermore, Manoilo is the author and convenor of university courses on IW. A similar university course is offered at Georgetown University in the USA entitled ‘Russian Hybrid War’, which Manoilo claims to be plagiarism of his university courses.104 As is

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102 The term ‘information confrontation’ (IC) and ‘information war’ appear in discourse on information operations in Russia, with some commentators maintaining a distinction between the two and some using the terms interchangeably.
103 For example, see: Manoilo (2019). This opinion is commonly held amongst academics in Russia. For more on this position in the Russian academic community, see: Berzina (2018).
104 For more information on Manoilo’s university courses on IW and accusations of academic plagiarism, see: Lichnyi Kabinet Studenta i Prepodavatelya MGU imeni M. V. Lomonosova (n.d.); Sevastopol’skii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet (2019); RIA Novosti (2019b).
reflected in these university courses, the positions on HW and IW adopted by the academic communities of Russia and the West are largely mirrored.

Two other authors have published in Russian on IW – Panarin and Pocheptsov.\textsuperscript{105} Panarin has written extensively on IW.\textsuperscript{106} Panarin claims that IWs are significant and ever-present factors in geopolitics. Citing the concept’s origins and development in the US military and its alleged initial implementation by the US Armed Forces during the First Gulf War (1990-1), Panarin argues that IW is a US phenomenon and practice. Similar to Manoilo, Panarin claims that there is ‘active engagement in IW against our Fatherland’ by the West, with Russia only reacting to provocation from Western information operations and not instigating IW. As a result, Panarin stresses the gravity of IW and the need to protect Russia from IW as it is ‘a global threat to the national security of Russia’. Thus, Russia’s main scholar on IW is highly politicised and anti-Western.

The concept of ‘information warfare’ is used in Russia by many of the country’s important state figures as a means of explaining relations and interactions between Russia and the West. Inasmuch as it concerns (media) communication, this concept is, to a certain degree, relevant to the methodology adopted in this thesis. IW has some significant conceptual weaknesses, however. Fundamentally, the concept is simplistic, failing to take into account the diversity in and unpredictability of media communication. Furthermore, it has become highly politicised as a result of misuse in political discourse. These factors complicate the concept’s utility as an analytical tool for scholarly research and, as a result, undermine its applicability in describing Russia’s activity in the ‘near abroad’.

Consequently, this concept is not used in this thesis.

\textsuperscript{105} For example, see: Pocheptsov (2015).
\textsuperscript{106} For example, see: Panarin (2010). On his website, Panarin has a section entitled ‘information wars’ – <http://panarin.com/info_voina/>.
2.5 ‘Strategic Narratives’

Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle (2013, 2014 and 2017) proposed a new approach to looking at Nye’s original question of how power is changing in the modern world. According to the authors, the concept of ‘soft power’ has ‘largely resulted in [the] sophisticated counting of tools and resources’ rather than measuring national attraction abroad and assessing the impact of a state’s attempts to influence international public opinion by means of national attraction. Miskimmon, et al. (2013 and 2015), argue that their alternative of ‘strategic narratives’ offers a more appropriate and more reliable tool of analysis for achieving this objective.

According to these authors, stories – which are comprised of narratives – are told in order for audiences to make sense of the world. Narratives relate to systems (‘International System Narratives’), countries (‘National Narratives’) and issues (‘Issue Narratives’), which offer explanations for and interpretations of international relations, national identities and various policy issues, respectively. Miskimmon, et al., argue that such narratives shape public perceptions and influence responses. Moreover, political actors can strategically advance a particular agenda by using narratives to influence audience behaviour and responses proactively. Therefore, with regard to the two aforementioned case studies, exploring narratives that were disseminated by the Russian Orthodox Church and Fond ‘Russkii Mir’ can help in determining how the two military conflicts were explained by the Russian state and, in doing so, reveal how preferred interpretations of topics and events were advanced by state actors for audience consumption.

107 These three narrative groups, however, can be tied to one another, as individual narratives often contain a degree of crossover between the groups and linkage with other narratives.
Furthermore, Miskimmon, et al., argue that ‘soft power’ actually falls within the scope of their concept, as resources of ‘soft power’ can appear attractive to a target audience by being linked to a particular narrative or set of narratives. As with ‘soft power’, ‘strategic narratives’ is aimed at uncovering how and why certain phenomena – in this case, narratives – appeal to and are persuasive for target audiences. Nye himself, quoting Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1999), acknowledged the importance of narratives by stating that ‘[p]olitics in an information age “may ultimately be about whose story wins”’.\textsuperscript{108} Thus, a conceptual link can be made between ‘soft power’ and ‘strategic narratives’.

Owing to the media-based, narrative-driven primary data forming the basis of this research, the concept of ‘strategic narratives’ is a more applicable and useful analytical tool for this thesis. Moreover, ‘soft power’ has positive connotations and HW and IW have negative connotations: in scholarly research, it is problematic to employ concepts that are laden with particular affective attributes. The concept, furthermore, is much less politicised by state elites as a result. Owing to its conceptual neutrality and applicability, ‘strategic narratives’ is to be used in this research over the aforementioned concepts. Owing to the international dimension of the military conflicts and cross-border activity of the cultural organisations in question, Russia’s strategic narratives of the international system are explored in this thesis, relating to ‘how the world is structured, who the main players are, and how the system should function’\textsuperscript{109}


2.6 Conclusion

The concepts of ‘soft power’, ‘hybrid warfare’ and ‘information warfare’ have been much discussed in relation to Russia, especially with regard to the country’s military and non-military activity in the post-Soviet space. The Ukraine crisis, in particular, has generated many analyses through the conceptual prisms of HW and IW on the nature of Russia’s influence abroad. There are significant differences, however, in how these three concepts are understood and adopted by national elites in both Russia and the West.

The concept of ‘soft power’, originating from within academia in the USA, has been embraced by political figures across the world since the early 2000s. As Nye maintains that the independence of a country’s major organisations is an essential condition for the successful generation of ‘soft power’, such a government-involved approach to this concept as that taken in Russia appears to negatively impact on the credibility of the country’s cultural organisations. The way in which the Russian government relates to and appears to instrumentalise Russia’s main (cultural) organisations does not align with how the concept of ‘soft power’ is understood in the West. Owing to these differences, the applicability of ‘soft power’ for use in this thesis becomes more limited. Furthermore, Russia’s political and military figures view the concept through a defensive and securitised lens, accusing the West of using ‘soft power’ as a weapon to be wielded against Russia to undermine its interests abroad, particularly in the post-Soviet space. Therefore, the concept is both politicised and securitised, which complicates adopting it for use in this thesis.

Unlike the scholarly concept of ‘soft power’, ‘hybrid war(fare)’ is a military concept, having originated within the US Armed Forces. Use of the concept spread dramatically beyond the military domain after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in February-
March 2014. Originally, the concept was used to describe the activity of separatist insurgencies against the conventional military forces of developed nation-states, but it has evolved following the annexation of Crimea to the extent that it is now broad, vague and highly politicised. The mirroring of positions between key political and military figures in Russia and the West on the topic of HW is pronounced: Western elites accuse Russia of engaging in HW against the West and its allies, whilst Russian elites, in response, accuse the West of engaging in HW against Russia and its allies.

It would be difficult to adopt such a politicised military concept for scholarly research, particularly during a prolonged period of tense relations between Russia and the West, without inadvertently associating with and carrying across these broader, subjectively interpretive and negatively affective impressions. Thus, HW tends to be avoided by Western scholars, unlike ‘soft power’. Despite there being some utility to the concept in certain (limited) areas, the concept of ‘hybrid warfare’ is not used in this thesis as a tool of analysis, owing to it becoming highly politicised. Whilst refraining from adopting HW as an analytical tool, however, this thesis acknowledges that the Russian state, the ROC and FRM enjoy close relations that are accompanied by a range of activities that appear ‘hybrid’ in nature. Of these activities, some are respectable (for example, engagement in traditional cultural diplomacy), whilst others are contentious (for example, engagement in clandestine and potentially subversive activity in disputed territories and conflict regions).

Although HW had more of a sudden and widespread impact on public discourse on the Ukraine crisis, ‘information war(fare)’, by contrast, is more broadly accepted by scholars, commentators and analysts as an actual phenomenon that is being ‘fought’ between Russia and the West. It has been claimed by some commentators that, compared to those in the West, there is a difference in how elites in Russia perceive the nature, role
and application of information and communications during and outside of military conflict: alongside the physical, infrastructural aspects, Russia appears to be investing significantly more resources than previously into asymmetric and psychological information operations. The mirroring of accusations between Russia and the West of engagement in IW, like with HW, is clear and pronounced. As is the case with HW, the politicisation of the concept makes it problematic for use in scholarly research.

Furthermore, Renz (2016) and Szostek (2020) challenge the utility of this concept as a means of evaluating the nature and impact of Russia’s strategic communications, highlighting its potential to negatively impact on inter-state diplomacy and pointing to its apparent lack of efficacy in bringing about desired results. Szostek, for example, calls into question the extent to which governments are able to effectively target audiences in such a direct way that ‘information warfare’ implies, and doubts the perceived susceptibility of audiences with regard to information ‘attacks’ from Russia. Therefore, the concept is relevant only inasmuch as it is the framework with which many members of the Russian elite interpret the geopolitical situation between Russia and the West, rather than it being relevant as an analytically useful scholarly tool for addressing the objectives of this thesis.

In sharp contrast to ‘soft power’, ‘hybrid warfare’ and ‘information warfare’, the concept of ‘strategic narratives’ is neither politicised nor affectively loaded. The concept, furthermore, is applicable to the discursive strategies employed by governments and political figures, regardless of the country’s political system. The media-based nature of the primary data in this research project also makes this particular analytical framework useful. Thus, the scholarly concept of ‘strategic narratives’ is best suited for use in this research as a means of assessing the agency of Russian cultural organisations, and so it is applied, where appropriate, in this thesis as an analytical tool.
Chapter III. Conflict Coverage on Russian Television: State-Controlled Pervyi Kanal as the Kremlin’s Mouthpiece

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explored a number of key concepts relating to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and Fond ‘Russkii Mir’ (FRM), establishing how such concepts are understood and utilised by different elites in Russia and the West. The chapter laid the basis for assessing the extent to which these concepts are able to evaluate the autonomy and agency of Russia’s main cultural organisations in relation to the state during periods of military conflict. In order to further assess the autonomy and agency of these cultural organisations, an in-depth analysis of Pervyi Kanal is required to serve as the yardstick against which ROC and FRM alignment with the Russian government is to be measured.

In this chapter, the news coverage of Russia’s largest and most prominent mass media outlet, Pervyi Kanal, is examined in relation to the two conflicts in the post-Soviet space involving Russian military intervention – the Russo-Georgian War (2008) and the Ukraine crisis (2013–present day). An investigation of Pervyi Kanal’s conflict-related news output provides an insight into the television channel’s broadcasting activity, communication strategy and reporting tactics during times of national emergency.

The Russian mass media’s reporting on the crisis in Ukraine has been the topic of much academic research, whereas their reporting on the Russo-Georgian War, however, received much less scholarly attention. By providing an original in-depth empirical analysis of Pervyi Kanal’s news output on the Russo-Georgian War, this chapter addresses this gap in academic research. As a result, it is then possible to comparatively analyse the channel’s reporting on both of the military conflicts in order to draw conclusions as to the
nature and development of its wartime communication strategy over time. Therefore, this chapter addresses the following interrelated research questions: to what extent and how did partially government-owned Pervyi Kanal report on the two military conflicts, and what are the main similarities and differences between the channel’s coverage of these different cases?

In relation to the crisis in Ukraine, a consensus emerged amongst scholars that Russia’s television media occupied a ‘key position in advancing the strategic narratives of the government, presenting stories about the cause, nature and resolution of the conflict to domestic and international audiences.’\footnote{Khaldarova, I. & Pantti, M., ‘Fake News: The Narrative Battle over the Ukrainian Conflict’, \textit{Journalism Practice}, vol. 10, No 7 (2016), p. 891.} Owing to the channel’s significant ties to the Russian government, Pervyi Kanal toes the Kremlin line closer than other state-controlled broadcast media outlets. An investigation into the news output of Pervyi Kanal, therefore, also sheds light on the positions and strategic objectives of the Russian government.

Whilst Pervyi Kanal is a notably different communication medium to the other media outlets that are investigated in this thesis, an analysis of the channel’s crisis-related output is included in this research project as a means of contextualising the corresponding news coverage of Russia’s biggest cultural organisations – the Russian Orthodox Church and Fond ‘Russkii Mir’. As Pervyi Kanal has close ties to the government, similar patterns in crisis-related coverage on the cultural organisations’ respective primary media outlets would suggest a degree of co-ordination of government-aligned output. Conversely, divergence from Pervyi Kanal in crisis-related coverage would suggest a degree of organisational agency, particularly in the context of a restrictive (media) environment in times of national emergency. As a result, a comparative analysis in subsequent chapters of
corresponding news output produced by the ROC and FRM sheds light on the cultural organisations’ agency.

A thorough investigation into Pervyi Kanal’s news output during these major military conflicts assists in addressing the thesis aim of evaluating the extent to which Russia uses culture in its power projection in the country’s ‘near abroad’. Across these two case studies, significant strategic and tactical changes occurred with regard to Pervyi Kanal’s crisis-related coverage, which indicate that the channel adopted notably different communication approaches to the two conflicts.

3.1.1 State of the Media: Television in Russia

The nature and role of the mass media in Russia during the twenty-first century have been discussed and debated by both scholars and non-academic commentators. The impact of the media on societies across the world has been significant, as outlets can play an important role in constructing identities and realities by ‘transmitting values, problem definitions and images of people in society […] for people […] [to think] about their lives and their relations to government, politics and society’. For Jonathan Becker, ‘the state poses the greatest threat to freedom of expression […] [as it] retains the greatest potential to encroach upon media autonomy, limit pluralism, unleash violence, and turn the media into a tool of political manipulation.’ Becker’s concern about state influence over national

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media are relevant to Russia post-2000, as the deterioration in media pluralism and press freedom in Russia over time has been a major human rights issue.\(^4\) 

In Russia, the media landscape has changed significantly since the late 1980s. During its turbulent political and economic transition to a democratic, capitalist state in the 1990s, post-Soviet Russia initially experienced unprecedented levels of press freedom following the collapse of the USSR. The media environment was relatively free, liberal, diverse and pluralistic.\(^5\) Under Vladimir Putin, Russia’s media landscape shifted significantly: the government largely (re)gained control over the country’s mass media, particularly television broadcasting. Consequently, the vast majority of domestic mainstream media outlets in Russia today are directly or indirectly state-owned or state-controlled.\(^6\)

The independent media in post-Soviet Russia have been accused by many state-affiliated commentators of being ‘agents of a fifth column’ – i.e., domestic actors that are undermining and threatening the political establishment, national security, spirituality and traditional conservative values of Russia from within to the benefit of a foreign power.\(^7\) It is through tight control over the media, these commentators argue, that this threat to the security of the state is diminished. The prominent and controversial Russian philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, for example, adopted such a position in advocating for the defence and preservation of the country’s ‘spirituality’, which, he claims, is under attack from the

\(^4\) In indexes on international press freedom, Russia was: rated as having a media landscape that was ‘not free’ in 2017 by Freedom House (Freedom House, 2017); and ranked at No. 149 by Reporters without Borders in 2020 (RSF. Reporters without Borders, 2020a and 2020b). Additionally, see: Willems and Puddington (2013).


\(^7\) For a discussion of ‘agents’ of a ‘fifth column’ in Russia, see: Yablokov (2018).
media. According to Dugin, ‘[i]t is necessary to subordinate all air-time and information space to spiritual security. [...] Information channels are very much directed against our spiritual identity’. As a result, ‘spiritual security’ is seen as ‘a shield against this fifth column’. As explored in detail in Chapter I, religion is treated as an area of national security in Russia by many of the country’s elites. As the above commentaries show, media outlets are seen by some members of the country’s elite as instruments – of both an offensive and defensive nature (i.e., as both ‘sword’ and ‘shield’, respectively) – in the securitisation of religion, (secular) culture and identity in Russia.

In recent years, scholars have explored Russia’s present-day broad media ecology. A media ecology concerns the structure and/or networks of different communication platforms, media organisations, media figures and audiences. The distinction between Russia’s domestic and international broadcasting is blurred by the country’s top three federal television channels, owing to Pervyi Kanal, Rossiya 1 (RTR Planeta) and NTV (NTV Mir) also having a significant presence across the non-RF post-Soviet space. As its output across the post-Soviet space largely follows its domestic programming schedule, Pervyi Kanal is required to take into consideration its non-RF audiences, which adds a ‘crucial foreign policy dimension to its remit’.

According to surveys conducted by Levada Centre, television remains the most consumed media platform in Russia. Over the past ten years, however, television audience figures have notably fallen: 72% of respondents answered that television was their most-used source of news information in 2019, down from to 94% in 2009. The dominance of

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8 Dugin (2004).
9 Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2002b).
10 For a closer look at Russia’s media ecology, see: Hoskins and Shchelin (2018).
12 Levada-Tsentr (2019b).
television is being challenged by the Internet (i.e., online publications and social networks), which is becoming an increasingly popular platform for Russian citizens to access and consume news information. The older generations in Russia regard television as their primary source of news information significantly more than younger generations (for example, 65+ years at 93%, compared to 18-24 years at 42%). Furthermore, the overall level of trust in the television media has declined substantially in the space of a decade: 80% of survey respondents trusted television in 2009, which dropped to 55% in 2019.\footnote{Levada-Tsentr (2019a).} This sharp fall in trust towards the television media, particularly over news about foreign affairs, has been linked to outlets’ biased coverage of the crisis in Ukraine. In part, biased coverage over Ukraine on Russia’s federal television channels could explain Russia’s ongoing overall shift away from the medium as a primary source of information.

Despite the overall decline in the population both using and trusting television, considerable resources continue to be channelled into the medium by the government. The internationally oriented state-owned channel \textit{RT} (formerly \textit{Russia Today}), for example, has been funded directly from the state budget since it was launched in 2005 and has since gradually expanded as a result of significant financial investment.\footnote{For a look at the activity and impact of RT, see: Mickiewicz (2017); Orttung and Nelson (2019).} In 2020, funding for Russia’s fully and partially state-owned mass media outlets from the federal budget is planned to increase by a third, the biggest beneficiary of which will be \textit{RT} with an injection of 23 billion roubles.\footnote{Interfaks (2019a).} (\textit{Pervyi Kanal}’s budget allocation for the production, acquisition and broadcasting of programmes in 2020 is 6.5 billion roubles, which is almost double from the previous year’s subsidy.)
RT provides television services in four ‘world’ languages – English, French, Spanish and Arabic. In addition, the outward-facing web-based news agency Sputnik (formerly Voice of Russia) was launched in 2014.\(^\text{16}\) A number of controversies have arisen regarding the output of RT and Sputnik, particularly in connection with the ongoing crisis in Ukraine. For example, the outlets’ dissemination of conspiracy theories and use of disinformation (including falsifications and fabrications) have attracted much negative attention in the West.\(^\text{17}\) As a result, some commentators have argued that both RT and Sputnik, rather than being professional international broadcasters, are mere tools for the government to wield in an ‘information war’ with the West.\(^\text{18}\)

The main television channel in Russia is Pervyi Kanal, which has the largest nationwide audience share and the greatest projection for broadcasting (covering more territory than its competitors, including non-RF areas of the post-Soviet space).\(^\text{19}\) Over recent years, however, a longitudinal survey by Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) on public attitudes in Russia towards the country’s mass media have found that trust in Pervyi Kanal’s news broadcasts notably decreased from 53% in May 2015 to 33% in August 2019.\(^\text{20}\) Once again, this significant development coincides with the controversial news coverage of the crisis in Ukraine on the country’s mass media outlets.

In connection with this decline in trust towards the channel’s news output and, more broadly, the country’s television media, Pervyi Kanal has been experiencing serious
financial difficulties, recording significant annual losses in revenue since 2015 (6.8 billion roubles in 2018, quadrupling from the previous year’s figures) and regularly not being able to pay its partners and creditors on time. In large part, sharply declining revenues at Pervyi Kanal explain the government substantially increasing its funding for the channel over consecutive years, which, in turn, indicates the importance of Pervyi Kanal to the country’s political leadership.

Pervyi Kanal is an example of direct government involvement in the country’s media environment through state ownership. Ostensibly, this federal channel is an independent media outlet. However, the Russian government is the channel’s largest shareholder through Rosimushchestvo (i.e., a state department which manages state assets), with a stake of 38.9%. The second largest shareholder is the private media organisation National Media Group (29%). Yurii Kovalchuk, who is reported to have close links to Putin, is a major shareholder in National Media Group and Alina Kabaeva, who is alleged to be Putin’s wife, chairs the organisation’s board of directors. The Russian government’s links to the channel – through significant share ownership – are both clear and substantial.

As Hutchings and Tolz (2015) observed, Pervyi Kanal is government-aligned in terms of its news output, meaning that the channel often adopts positions and disseminates narratives that are favourable to the government. Furthermore, temniki (‘theme-lists’) meetings between government officials and high-positioned media figures have reportedly been attended by Pervyi Kanal’s General Director, Konstantin Ernst. It was revealed by insider sources that top-down government instructions are given at these meetings as to

21 Istomina (2019).
22 Ibid. This information was correct as of 27th October 2019.
which issues should (not) appear in the media’s news programming (i.e., ‘agenda-setting’) and how such issues should (not) be handled (i.e., ‘framing’).²⁴

According to Sarah Oates (2014), the current media environment in Russia is best described as ‘neo-Soviet’, as its roots lie in the Soviet past, from which there is allegedly a traceable and substantial legacy. Whilst acknowledging that authoritarian developments in the country’s media sphere under Putin do not signal a return to the ‘Soviet model’, Oates does, however, place a strong emphasis on the connection with and continuation from the media environment of the Soviet era. By foregrounding the legacy of the Soviet Union to such an extent, Oates fails to adequately acknowledge and reflect that Russia’s post-Soviet media environment is considerably different to that of the former USSR. Becker, however, prefers the label ‘neo-authoritarian’ to ‘neo-Soviet’ on the grounds that the country’s current media system closer resembles that of other non-democratic authoritarian states than that of the Soviet period, as post-Soviet Russia’s media are now ‘significantly different in terms of breadth, depth, and mechanisms of control, and the role of ideology.’²⁵ Therefore, the term ‘neo-authoritarian’ is suitably distanced from the loaded associations with and historical particularities of the Soviet experience.

By contrast, Vera Tolz and Yuri Teper (2018) offer a different interpretation of post-Soviet Russia’s media environment to those proposed by Oates and Becker. Tolz and Teper challenge the view that the post-Yeltsin era has been a homogenous period for the country’s mass media by arguing that notable changes in media coverage have taken place since 2000. In particular, the authors identify an important shift that occurred in 2012, which followed anti-government street protests in Moscow around the start of Putin’s third presidential term. Tolz and Teper named the new format for delivering politics-related

²⁴ Rothrock (2014); Kizirov (2017).
content ‘agitainment’. This format is characterised by increased (ideological) political content through ‘soft news’ (for example, political talk shows, such as Vremya Pokazhet on Pervyi Kanal) that has accompanied the ‘tabloidisation’ of political content. This ‘tabloidisation’ creates ‘emotional tags’ for the audience (i.e., content that makes the viewers ‘remember how they felt about what they heard and saw’). The purpose of these ‘emotional tags’ is to effectively impart desired perceptions of events and issues by appealing to emotions.

Tolz and Teper also argue that, since 2012, leading journalists at federal television channels have been granted ‘additional agency […] to forge political messages’. According to Elisabeth Schimpfossl and Ilya Yablokov (2014), journalists are able to exercise a notable level of agency within the country’s current media environment. For such journalists, agency is expressed through the notion of adekvatnost’ (‘appropriateness’): one journalist at Pervyi Kanal described adekvatnost’ as “the ability to react appropriately to the conditions in which you find yourself.” The notion of adekvatnost’ describes a journalist instinctively understanding the expectations from, limitations, and moral and ethical boundaries of one’s own journalism in order to choose news assignments accordingly.

With regard to issues that the Russian government considers to be of high importance to the state (such as the Ukraine crisis), however, journalists’ room for manoeuvre in exercising agency over what issues to cover and how narrows significantly, including at Pervyi Kanal. Tolz and Teper (2018) argue that outlet and journalistic agency

is also restricted during government media campaigns. In the course of these campaigns, state-controlled media outlets, with major input from the Kremlin, produce saturated and highly coordinated coverage of a particular issue. These campaigns are evident in the way that the Russian media has covered particular domestic issues and issues in the country’s ‘near abroad’. It was during specific media campaigns relating to the Ukraine crisis that the tight co-ordination of media outlets was the most notable.  

3.1.2 Russian Media in the ‘Near Abroad’

In relation to defence and foreign affairs, particularly with regard to the ‘near abroad’, information and communications are important areas for Russia’s political and military leadership. The securitisation of information and communications in Russia has manifested in various national policy documents relating to foreign policy. According to Joanna Szostek and Stephen Hutchings, the leadership treats mass communication as an important ‘arena of global politics’, in which national interests are advanced by projecting ‘one’s own’ narratives internationally and managing the dissemination of ‘foreign’ (i.e., alternative) narratives domestically. The country’s mass media, including Pervyi Kanal, are assigned a central role in this foreign-oriented communications activity. Therefore, state-controlled Pervyi Kanal is highly relevant for analysis in this thesis.

During the region’s imperial and Soviet past, Russian was the dominant language politically, as it was the common language for communication between the numerous

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28 For more on journalistic agency within Russia’s present media environment, see: Tolz, et al. (2020).
29 For example, see: Ministerstvo Inostrannykh Del Rossiiskoi Federatsii (2013 and 2016).
nationalities. As a legacy of this shared past, the Russian language continues, in certain respects, to both occupy, a privileged status in the ‘near abroad’ and act as a common language within and between post-Soviet countries (although this role is gradually diminishing). This phenomenon has continued, in part, because of the presence of Russian-speaking diasporas across the post-Soviet space. As a result, several major Russian-language media outlets, a large number of which are based in Russia, have a presence in (non-RF) post-Soviet countries.

*Pervyi Kanal* – still Russia’s leading news source – has the broadest geographical reach of the country’s federal television channels, as the media outlet broadcasts analogue transmissions to large areas of the non-RF post-Soviet space. As well as through analogue and cable transmission, *Pervyi Kanal* disseminates its output to the ‘near abroad’ through satellite and online broadcasts. Additionally, *Pervyi Kanal* has sister channels in a number of post-Soviet countries, which mostly relay the channel’s domestic programming but with some localised content: ‘Primul în Moldova’ has aired in Moldova since November 2019, ‘Pervyi Baltiiskii Kanal’ is transmitted across the Baltic states and ‘ONT’ broadcasts to Belarus.32

It is members of Russophone populations – particularly Russian diaspora communities – that consume Russia’s broadcast media in the post-Soviet space, including in (eastern) Ukraine.33 In such (cross-border) communities, Russian television channels,

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31 In addition, poor knowledge of titular languages in (certain areas of) post-Soviet countries – for example, in Belarus, Kazakhstan, parts of Ukraine – also contributes to the continued presence of the Russian language across the post-Soviet space. For more information on the Russian language beyond the borders of Russia, see: Ryazanova-Clarke, L., ed. (2014).


33 For an in-depth look at the mass media in the post-Soviet space, see: Rollberg and Laruelle, eds. (2018).
like Pervyi Kanal, are popular.\textsuperscript{34} Thus, Pervyi Kanal could itself be considered a resource for generating ‘soft power’, as this broadcaster acts as a vehicle for public diplomacy by communicating government messages to foreign publics.\textsuperscript{35}

According to Nye, engagement in public diplomacy increases a country’s attractiveness if conducted ‘properly’ (i.e., in line with the concept of ‘soft power’). In theory, national attraction increases a country’s influence in the international arena, which facilitates achieving geopolitical objectives. Nye formulated the concept of ‘soft power’, however, in the context of the USA, in which the majority of the mass media are independent from the government. Editorial independence from the government, which is even claimed by outlets that are funded by the US government, such as Voice of America or Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, is essential for a media outlet to be widely considered as a useful tool in public diplomacy and, as proponents of the concept argue, be effective in generating ‘soft power’.

However, many researchers consider Pervyi Kanal not to be an independent vehicle for public diplomacy and, consequently, is not an effective producer of ‘soft power’ for Russia. Instead, particularly in relation to the crisis in Ukraine, many commentators suggest that the Russian media, including Pervyi Kanal, are instruments of ‘hybrid warfare’ or ‘information warfare’, rather than resources of ‘soft power’.\textsuperscript{36} Furthermore, subscribing to the same view, several governments of post-Soviet states have adopted measures to reduce the ability of the Russian mass media to reach their citizens by restricting the broadcasting capability and journalistic activity of certain Russian media networks. For example, such restrictive measures, all of which applied to Pervyi Kanal,

\textsuperscript{34} Kužel (2017); Chapman and Gerber (2019).
\textsuperscript{35} It is not the aim of this chapter, however, to investigate Pervyi Kanal in terms of ‘soft power’. The channel’s news output in and of itself is examined, rather than its impact on audiences.
\textsuperscript{36} For example, see: van Herpen (2015a and 2019); Orenstein (2019).
included: Georgia temporarily blocking Russian television broadcasts during the Russo-Georgian War and later introducing long-term post-war restrictions on Russian media outlets;\(^{37}\) the suspension of broadcasting licences and a ban on national cable-network access for five prominent Russian television channels being introduced in Ukraine in 2014.\(^{38}\) Furthermore, a 2017 presidential decree in Ukraine laid the foundation for a punitive measure that ‘restricts or suspends’ access for numerous Russian media outlets (including Pervyi Kanal) to Ukrainian telecommunications for three years and freezes their assets in the country.\(^{39}\)

3.2 *Pervyi Kanal*’s News Coverage of the Russo-Georgian War

It was reported by various commentators within the Western media that the Russo-Georgian War was a ‘public relations (PR) war’, a ‘propaganda war’, a ‘media war’ and an ‘information war’, with “[t]he majority of independent media experts […] [arriving] at the conclusion that, on the information front, Russia lost that war.”\(^{40}\) Significantly, many members of Russia’s political and media elite also held this opinion. After the war had officially ended, *Pervyi Kanal* broadcast a number of news reports that featured discontent over the West’s media coverage of the conflict.\(^{41}\) These news reports reflected the extent to which many of Russia’s political elites considered the war to have been unfavourably represented by the West, with Russia’s fundamental position and justifications being misrepresented or ignored.

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\(^{37}\) For an example of such long-term restrictions, see: Ministerstvo Tsifrovogo Razvitiya, Svyazi i Massovykh Kommunikatsii Rossiiskoi Federatsii (2009).

\(^{38}\) delo.ua (2014). In the same year, legal restrictions were imposed on many Russian television channels in all three Baltic states for similar reasons.

\(^{39}\) Committee to Protect Journalists (2017).

\(^{40}\) Nastoyashchee Vremya (2018b). Additionally, see: Nastoyashchee Vremya (2018a).

\(^{41}\) For example, see: Pervyi Kanal (2008b).
The prominence of this war’s media dimension and a perceived defeat for Russia in the alleged ‘information war’ acted as a catalyst for the government to improve the state’s information operations. Russia’s internationally oriented news services Russia Today, for example, was rebranded, revamped and expanded within a year of the conflict ending. In 2013, Margarita Simonyan, chief editor of Russia Today (now RT), acknowledged these post-war changes in Russia’s media environment, claiming that RT had advanced so much since the Russo-Georgian War that “if 2008 were to happen now, the picture around the world would be different.” Furthermore, the war appears to have contributed to the state adopting the tactic, as highlighted by Tolz and Teper (2018), of conducting coordinated information campaigns across different media platforms to advance the Kremlin’s preferred message(s) on issues of central importance to the government.

A number of scholarly texts have been published on media coverage of the Russo-Georgian War. Whilst several of these publications analysed newspaper coverage of the conflict, only two examined Russia’s television output (Akhvlediani, 2009; Fawn and Nalbandov, 2012). These two academic studies did not explore Pervyi Kanal’s coverage of the war in any great detail, however. Collectively, these academic texts have explored domestic media output on the war in different national contexts (for example, Georgia, Russia, the West). At the time of the war, however, Russian television media were also accessible in Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. An indication as to the presence of these television channels in the region and the consumption of their output can be gained from examining survey data.

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43 Additionally, several non-academic (fiction and non-fiction) texts on media coverage of the war have been produced. For example, two documentary films discussed the falsification and manipulation of war coverage in the Russian mass media – Uroki Russkogo (2009) by Olga Konskaya and Andrei Nekrasov and Lobotomy (2011) by Journeyman Pictures, which appear to show how Pervyi Kanal manipulated conflict footage to present a picture of Georgian aggression.
According to research conducted by the National Democratic Institute in 2016, 20% of television viewers in Georgia (i.e., excluding Abkhazia and south Ossetia) watch the news and current affairs programming of foreign television media outlets, with the figure being much higher in the country’s ‘minority settlements’ (53%). By cable, satellite and the Internet, these viewers tune in to Russian television channels for their news consumption much more than other foreign media outlets, with their main sources being Pervyi Kanal, RTR Planeta and Rossiya 1 at 38%, 30% and 18%, respectively.

The first half of this chapter analyses Pervyi Kanal’s representations of the political and military tensions relating to Georgia before, during and after the Russo-Georgian War, which is Russia’s first and only (open) military conflict against another republic from the former USSR. Comprising the primary data for this case study, Pervyi Kanal’s crisis-related reports on the news programmes Novosti, Vremya and Voskresnoe Vremya were accessed on the channel’s website, on which they are archived. After having set the specified time-frame, the key words ‘Gruziya’ (‘Georgia’), ‘Yuzhnaya Osetiya’ (‘South Ossetia’) and ‘Abkhaziya’ (‘Abkhazia’) were separately run through the ‘search’ function to bring forward the channel’s news output on the region, with only those news reports overtly relating to the conflict being included in the data. In total, 452 news reports relating to the Russo-Georgian War that were broadcast between 8th May and 12th November 2008

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44 National Democratic Institute (2015). The National Democratic Institute is a US NGO that aims to promote liberal-democratic values abroad. This organisation has strong links to US politics (particularly to the Democratic Party).

45 Ibid.
constitute the dataset for this study. Each report was assigned to either a pre-, during- or post-conflict period and then coded according to one of the following theme-categories:

- **TENSIONS** – reports relating to either pre- or post-war tensions, regional armed skirmishes, security issues and terrorism;
- **RELATIONS** – reports discussing political, diplomatic, military and/or economic relations between (mostly) Georgia, Russia and the West;
- **WAR** – reports overtly exploring the military aspects of the crisis;
- **(GEO)POLITICAL COMMENTARY** – reports about commentaries made by politicians, military figures, ‘experts’ and (GO)NGOs on the geopolitical situation;
- **CO-OPERATION** – reports concerning peace talks and communication, joint-commission (peacekeeping) activity and prisoner exchanges;
- **HUMANITARIANISM** – reports on Russia’s humanitarian response;
- **VICTIMISATION** – reports focusing on the alleged persecution of and war crimes committed against South Ossetians;
- **WEST (NATO/EU/US)** – reports regarding the political, diplomatic and military activity of the West in response to the war;
- **OTHER** – reports that did not fit in to any of the above categories.

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46 Owing to the large amount of news output produced by the television channel, the pre-conflict period for the Russo-Georgian War is shorter for this chapter than the later chapters. The beginning of the pre-conflict period is three months prior to the war for *Pervyi Kanal*, and over seven months prior to the war for *OSMP* and *RM*.

47 A proportion of news reports touched on multiple themes. Therefore, a decision was made by the author of this research as to main theme that was being discussed in such cases. The coding of the data in this thesis was based on the author’s own classifications and judgement, and, as a result, is consistent.
The starting point for coding the primary data into theme-categories was to establish the most basic and common aspects of military conflict as represented in public discourse through the media. These fundamental aspects were identified and labelled as ‘WAR’, ‘(GEO)POLITICAL COMMENTARY’ and ‘CO-OPERATION’. Upon extracting the primary data from the website, this category-list was expanded in order to adequately cover the broader range of conflict-related issues that were being represented on the channel. These additional theme-categories included ‘TENSIONS’, ‘RELATIONS’, ‘HUMANITARIANISM’, ‘VICTIMISATION’ and ‘WEST (NATO/EU/US)’. Those news reports that did not correspond to any of the channel’s main themes were coded as ‘OTHER’. A content analysis and frame analysis of the primary data were then conducted in order to evaluate how the television channel approached the military conflict.

3.2.1 Pre-Conflict Period: 8th May – 7th August 2008

In the three-month pre-conflict period, Georgia featured fairly regularly in the news output of Pervyi Kanal (Table 3.1). Owing to the channel’s strong links to the government, this coverage suggests that (geo)political issues relating to Georgia were already of major importance to Russia’s political leadership. To apply the theory of agenda-setting, the channel’s selection, salience and repetition of issues relating to Georgia in this pre-war period helped shape audience impressions by increasing public awareness of and generating interest in the topic.
Table 3.1: Frequency of Pervyi Kanal’s News Reports on the Russo-Georgian War

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEME</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PRE-CONFLICT PERIOD 08/05/08 – 07/08/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TENSIONS</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELATIONS</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAR</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(GEO)POLITICAL COMMENTARY</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO-OPERATION</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HUMANITARIANISM</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VICTIMISATION</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEST (NATO/EU/US)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of pre-conflict crisis-related news reports on Pervyi Kanal reported on the build-up of political and military tensions in the region (‘TENSIONS’) – over 70% (75). Furthermore, such reports mostly related to either ‘Russia–Georgia’ or ‘Georgia–Abkhazia’ for most of the time-period. It was only in pre-war August 2008 that political and military tensions between Georgia and South Ossetia came to prominence on the channel’s news programming. As can be seen in Figure 3.1, news reports that were coded as ‘TENSIONS’ were generally weighted towards ‘Georgia–Abkhazia’ up until late June and only concerned ‘Georgia–South Ossetia’ in pre-war August. These different emphases at particular times suggest that, prior to August 2008, political and military elites in Russia
anticipated that any military campaign from Georgia would likely be directed against Abkhazia (for example, in May or mid-June to mid-July 2008).48

**Figure 3.1**: Breakdown of *Pervyi Kanal’s* News Reports on the Russo-Georgian War

Coded as ‘TENSIONS’49

The news reports coded as ‘TENSIONS’ mostly covered serious military incidents that took place in and around the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Amongst several others, notable examples of such incidents reported on *Pervyi Kanal*

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48 For a closer look at the shift from Abkhazia to South Ossetia, see: Popjanevski, J., ‘From Sukhumi to Tskhinvali: The Path to War in Georgia’, in: Cornell and Starr (2009), pp. 143-161.
49 The key to horizontal axis is as follows: (1) signifies 1st-15th of the month; (2) signifies 16th-30th/31st of the month.
include: Georgian security forces having detained Russian peacekeeping troops close to Georgia’s border with Abkhazia and seizing most of their arms;\textsuperscript{50} a number of deadly bomb explosions having taken place in Abkhaz towns, which the local authorities blamed on Georgia;\textsuperscript{51} several Georgian military drones having been shot down on separate occasions over Abkhazia.\textsuperscript{52} In regard to these cases, the Georgian authorities accused Russia of inciting separatism and actively supporting separatist movements in Georgia under the cover of so-called peacekeeping operations.\textsuperscript{53} On each occasion, such accusations were denied by Russian government and military figures. The output on the channel became markedly more war-oriented from 5\textsuperscript{th} August 2008, owing to the occasional tensions and skirmishes intensifying into larger-scale, frequent clashes.

The frame that is most common in ‘TENSIONS’ is ‘CLA – threatened’. The term ‘compatriots living abroad’ (‘CLA’) refers to those people – primarily Russian-speakers residing in non-RF post-Soviet countries – who consider themselves to be Russian in terms of national identity, ethnicity and/or culture.\textsuperscript{54} With many Russian-speakers finding themselves living beyond the national borders of the Russian Federation following the break-up of the USSR, many representatives of the Russian elite considered the separation settlement between the post-Soviet states to have been an unfair deal for Russia. The category of ‘CLA’ was created as a means of accommodating for the fact that the end of

\textsuperscript{50} For example, see: Pervyi Kanal (2008a).
\textsuperscript{51} For example, see: Pervyi Kanal (2008e).
\textsuperscript{52} For example, see: Pervyi Kanal (2008d).
\textsuperscript{53} Following the war of 1992-3 between Georgia and Abkhazia, Russia, as part of a peace agreement that it brokered, was tasked with carrying out a joint peacekeeping mission with Georgia in Abkhazia.
\textsuperscript{54} The term ‘compatriots’ (sootechestvenniki) was used heavily before, during and after the war. Across this case study, ‘compatriots’ mostly refers to South Ossetians, but, in some cases, it also refers to Russian peacekeepers in the region that were caught up in the tensions and conflict. For an analysis of the use of the term in Russian political and media discourse during the Russo-Georgian War, see: Henrikson (2016).
the USSR immediately created sizeable Russian-speaking diasporas across the non-RF post-Soviet space (although mostly concentrated in particular areas).\textsuperscript{55}

In Russia, the concept is used by state representatives as a means of nation-building (for example, in conjunction with the ‘Russian World’ concept, as explored in Chapter I).\textsuperscript{56} The vaguely defined concept of the ‘CLA’ is adopted instrumentally to advance particular geopolitical objectives in the post-Soviet space.\textsuperscript{57} Moreover, a number of the ‘compatriots’ across the post-Soviet space, including in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, are Russian citizens.\textsuperscript{58} This legal status attaches an additional security dimension to the concept for the Russian government.

The overarching fundamental idea – i.e., the ‘frame’ – in most news reports coded as ‘TENSIONS’ was ‘CLA – threatened’, which portrayed the ‘CLA’ as facing a growing existential threat from an increasingly militarised and militarily active Georgian state. In a broader discursive context, Russia’s ‘CLA’ are generally depicted in the country’s state-controlled mass media (including on Pervyi Kanal) as not having the same rights – in both a civic and cultural sense – as titular nationalities in post-Soviet countries, and are sometimes even portrayed as being under threat of ethnic cleansing, expulsion or forced assimilation. The ‘CLA – threatened’ frame strongly supports Russia’s strategic narrative of the international system which asserts that Russia has the unique and historical role of being the guarantor of peace and stability for all peoples in the post-Soviet space

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{55} The Russian diasporas tend to be concentrated in certain areas of the non-RF post-Soviet space, rather than spread out uniformly.
  \item \textsuperscript{56} Shevel (2011).
  \item \textsuperscript{57} Henrikson (2016); Shevel (2009).
  \item \textsuperscript{58} Amongst the ‘CLA’, some have RF passports and some do not. In the months leading up to the war, Russian passports were issued to South Ossetians and Abkhazians, with few requirements from the applicant and few barriers to successful application. For more on the pre-war issuing of RF passports in these territories, see: Littlefield (2009); Nagashima (2017); Souleimanov, et al. (2018).
\end{itemize}
(including for its ‘compatriots’). Thus, it is implied that only a paternal and, ultimately, militarily interventionist Russian state is able to protect the country’s ‘CLA’.

Evidently, Pervyi Kanal dedicated significant coverage to pre-conflict political and military developments in Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The outbreak of military conflict in the region, therefore, was likely to have been not as unexpected for television audiences in Russia (and the country’s general public more broadly) as it was for those in the West. It is possible that regular exposure to separatist-related incidents and issues in Georgia through the channel’s news programming could have constituted a government policy of psychologically preparing the general public for the likelihood of military conflict in the region, with the leadership aiming to proactively shape public opinion.

In media theory, this preparatory tactic is known as ‘priming’. The anecdotal account of fifty (embedded) journalists from Russia’s various state-controlled mainstream media outlets appearing in South Ossetia’s capital, Tskhinvali, days prior to the war supports, in part, the suspicion that some level of media priming was being conducted. In ‘preparing the groundwork’ through ‘priming’, public opinion is manipulatively influenced in the present to facilitate support for desired measures in the future, which, in this case, included military intervention. A pre-conflict communication tactic such as this would be relatively easy to implement in a country in which the mass media are greatly influenced by the government, as in the case of Russia.

3.2.2 During-Conflict Period: 8th – 12th August 2008

During the Five-Day War of August 2008, a sharp increase occurred in the frequency of crisis-related news reports on Pervyi Kanal compared to the pre-conflict

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period, with a greater number of reports on the war being broadcast on the channel over a much shorter time-frame. Furthermore, some of the channel’s journalists were embedded in the Russian Army during the conflict (most notably, in the ‘58th Army’ that spearheaded the army’s advance into South Ossetia), resulting in the government’s official account of events and interpretation of the conflict being prioritised and disseminated. This tactic resulted in *Pervyi Kanal* showing frontline footage, broadcasting first-hand accounts from Russian servicemen and local pro-Russian civilians, and imparting information from military figures directly to the public through media appearances. Given the increased level of government influence over domestic media output during times of national emergency, embedded journalism is conducted under restrictive conditions. In the highly restrictive media environment of a neo-authoritarian state during wartime, embedded journalists can be expected to follow the government line particularly closely.

In this period, most crisis-related news reports had a strong emphasis on either the conflict’s military aspects or Russian elites’ geopolitical commentary, as reflected in the high frequency of ‘WAR’ and ‘(GEO)POLITICAL COMMENTARY’, respectively (Figure 3.2). These two themes featured most commonly in *Pervyi Kanal*’s during-conflict coverage. As the military conflict was largely a ‘conventional’ war (i.e., involving the openly acknowledged armed forces of clearly demarcated national actors), the prevalence of ‘WAR’ and ‘(GEO)POLITICAL COMMENTARY’ was expected. The most common and most prominent frame within news reports that were coded as ‘WAR’ is ‘Russia – great power’. This frame is based on the idea that Russia, as the region’s (non-imperialist)

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60 The 58th Army was central to Russia’s military operation in Georgia, spearheading Russia’s attack into South Ossetia through the Roki Tunnel.
61 Donovan (2009).
62 Robinson (2002).
‘great power’, is (defensively) deploying its military to protect its ‘CLA’ and national interests.63

The ‘Russia – great power’ frame supports Russia’s strategic narrative of the international system which claims that, owing to Russia being the region’s sole major power and to the historic and continued presence of Russians across the region, the post-Soviet space is Russia’s sphere of interest. Furthermore, Russia is portrayed as duty- and honour-bound to fulfil this paternal function, out of a sense of spiritual-moral obligation. This strategic narrative aligned with the government’s discourse on the war.64 The notion of Russia as a ‘great power’ was not only prevalent in the during-conflict period, but also carried on on into the post-conflict period.

63 Henrikson (2016).
64 Lavrov argued that Russia had strengthened its credibility ‘as an effective guarantor of peace and humanitarian security’ through its ‘resolute action’ in the South Caucasus in August 2008. Lavrov, S. (2009), quoted in and translated by: Allison (2013). Lavrov’s comments reflected official Russian discourse; Medvedev’s main during-conflict commentary on the war featured the assertion that “Russia, historically, was and remains the guarantor of security of the peoples of the Caucasus.” Medvedev, D. (2008), in: Pervyi Kanal (2008g).
A significant number of during-conflict reports (mostly ‘(GEO)POLITICAL COMMENTARY’) referred to the alleged ‘genocide’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’ of Ossetians – many of whom, the audience was often reminded, required ‘protection’ as citizens of the Russian Federation (i.e., ‘our compatriots’) – resulting from Georgia’s ‘aggressive activity’, ‘terror’ and ‘war crimes’. Despite the repetition of this narrative, few news reports were either solely or mainly dedicated to reporting this alleged ethnic-based persecution. Therefore, the ‘CLA – victim’ frame, which often accompanied the ‘VICTIMISATION’ theme, was not prominent during this period because of the channel’s emphasis on the conflict’s political and military aspects.

As ‘genocide’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’ are highly emotive and loaded concepts, the notion of victimhood was greatly intensified by using such terms. As a result, the moral and, to a certain extent, legal justification for Russian military intervention is strengthened.
and supported. Although discussion of ‘genocide’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’ was repeated on different occasions, this narrative was much less prominent on the channel with regard to the Russo-Georgian War than was the case in relation to the Ukraine crisis. The controversial usage of these terms by key Russian politicians, instances of which were disseminated on Pervyi Kanal, tied in with their law-based discourse.

Pervyi Kanal also engaged in discourse that foregrounded the war as a legal issue, often using language that related to law and legal norms. As well as Pervyi Kanal stressing Russia’s treaty-bound peacekeeping obligations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia under international law as a justification for military intervention, Dmitrii Medvedev’s background as a lawyer was mentioned as an attempted means of lending further weight to and, consequently, gaining legitimacy for the Russian government’s decision to go to war in the South Caucasus.

3.2.3 Post-Conflict Period: 13th August – 12th November 2008

In the three-month period after the war had officially ended, crisis-related news reports were still being produced by Pervyi Kanal (Figure 3.3), a significant number of which appeared in post-war August (89). The television channel continued to attach importance to Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia throughout this post-war time-period by keeping issues relating to these territories (relatively high) on its news agenda.

In the first thirty days after the war, ‘(GEO)POLITICAL COMMENTARY’ was the most common theme. Whilst no single overarching frame is strongly associated with this theme-category, the main crisis-related narratives espoused by the government are often found within such news reports. From around mid-September onwards, no single theme dominated the channel’s output. Those news reports coded as ‘CO-OPERATION’
also featured (relatively) prominently in this period, owing to the channel covering peace negotiations and diplomatic activity at the time.

As part of the peace agreement brokered by the (then) president of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, Russian troops gradually withdrew from Georgia proper to the separatist territories between 22nd August and 8th October 2008). Throughout the negotiation and implementation phases, political and military elites in Russia reverted back to emphasising the peacekeeping nature of their forces’ presence in the South Caucasus: the government line changed from the loaded ‘forcing Georgia to peace’ (prinuzhdenie Gruzii k miru) in the during-conflict period to the less loaded ‘peacekeeping (operations)’ (mirotvorcheskie operatsii) in the post-conflict period.\(^{65}\)

The broader attempts at creating an image of Russia as non-aggressive and benevolently paternal, in contrast to the portrayed ‘irresponsibility and petulance’ of Georgia (as expressed with ‘forcing Georgia to peace’), were supported by Pervyi Kanal in this period. The channel’s news reports coded as ‘CO-OPERATION’, for example, positively portrayed Russia’s co-operation with EU conflict monitors as (mutually) respectful and, consequently, fruitful.

\(^{65}\) For example, see: Pervyi Kanal (2008h).
**Figure 3.3**: Frequency of *Pervyi Kanal’s* News Reports on the Russo-Georgian War by Theme

This graph does not show data from the following theme-categories: ‘HUMANITARIANISM’, ‘RELATIONS’, ‘VICTIMISATION’, ‘WEST (NATO/EU/US)’ and ‘OTHER’.
In the first few weeks after the war, references to and discussion of the alleged ‘ethnic cleansing’ and ‘genocide’ conducted by Georgian troops against Ossetian civilians continued on the channel. The channel’s emphasis on this narrative post-war could have been in response to the perception amongst many of the country’s elites that, owing to the adoption of non-emotive, detached legalistic language, Russia was losing the battle for ‘hearts and minds’ in the ‘information war’. Thus, it seems that raising the emotional stakes of the conflict served as an attempted means of generating domestic and international support for Russia’s military intervention in Georgia.

At the same time, historical references to the Great Patriotic War of 1941-5 (GPW) and comparisons of the (then) Georgian government with Nazi Germany began to appear on the channel. In one report, for example, (then) President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia was directly compared to Adolf Hitler. As was the case with the concepts of ‘genocide’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’, these historical references and comparisons were much less utilised in relation to the Russo-Georgian War than during the Ukraine crisis.

It is evident from an overview of this case study’s crisis-related news coverage that each time-period is associated with a particular theme(s): 1) in the pre-conflict period, the most common theme was ‘TENSIONS’, which was mostly accompanied by the ‘CLA – threatened’ frame; 2) the most common themes in the during-conflict period were ‘WAR’, which is strongly linked to the ‘Russia – great power’ frame, and ‘(GEO)POLITICAL COMMENTARY’; and 3) in the post-conflict period, the most common theme was ‘(GEO)POLITICAL COMMENTARY’ (to around mid-September). In all of the time-periods, Pervyi Kanal largely focused on the conventional ‘hard’ aspects of the war: the build-up of political and military tensions, military activity ‘on the ground’, political commentary. In wartime news output, such an emphasis is common and, therefore, was

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expected. Additionally, the channel utilised law-based language – reflecting Russia’s political discourse at the time – in many of its news reports on the war.

*Pervyi Kanal* closely toed the Kremlin line throughout the conflict by advancing government narratives, including key strategic narratives that portrayed Russia as: 1) a ‘great power’; 2) fulfilling its benevolent paternal role as peacekeeper in the region; and 3) rightfully insisting on the post-Soviet space as its natural ‘sphere of influence’. As Piers Robinson explored in his analysis of *CNN*’s coverage of the Gulf War (1990-1), government influence over the national media in times of war is common, as journalists face considerable pressure from the state to support the national effort of their ‘own side’, which means abandoning the practices of balance and impartiality.68

Robinson shows that, whilst *CNN*’s coverage of the Gulf War was closely aligned with the positions of the US government and was manipulative, critics of the war were not absent from the channel’s output. In contrast to Robinson’s findings on *CNN*, *Pervyi Kanal*’s coverage of the Russo-Georgian War notably did not feature a single example of either the Russian government or the Russian military being questioned or criticised. Additionally, *Pervyi Kanal* never featured any sort of ‘voice’ from Georgia’s political and military representatives. Instead, unflattering video footage and negative characterisations of such figures, particularly Saakashvili, appeared relatively frequently.

### 3.3 *Pervyi Kanal*’s News Coverage of the Ukraine Crisis

As a result of government and media figures judging the country’s communication strategy during the Russo-Georgian War to be a failure, a different approach was

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developed that was implemented in Ukraine. As was the case during the Russo-Georgian War, the television media was the Russian government’s primary tool for disseminating its narratives on the Ukraine crisis. An analysis of survey data on television news consumption in Ukraine offers an explanation as to why television was the Russian government’s preferred medium for communication.

3.3.1 Russian Television in Ukraine: Availability, Audience Engagement and Public Trust

According to a survey conducted by the International Republican Institute in March 2014 with regard to Ukraine, 91% of respondents reported using television – more than any other information source – to consume political information. A nationwide survey of Ukraine from the Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) in October 2014 found that 21% of respondents received news information about the situation in Ukraine from Russian television. During Russia’s military annexation of Crimea, television masts were seized by unmarked troops from the Russian Armed Forces, who replaced the peninsula’s transmission of Ukraine’s national television channels with broadcasts of Russia’s state-controlled federal television channels. As this tactic was an early move in the annexation process, media communication was, evidently, of great importance to the Russian government during this operation. Furthermore, similar actions were taken shortly

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69 As discussed in one lengthy news report, elites at the channel (and in the broader Russian mass media) interpreted media coverage of the military conflict as constituting a central part of an ‘information war’. Pervyi Kanal (2008c). Additionally, see: Pervyi Kanal (2008b); Gabuev (2012); Azar (2013).

70 International Republican Institute (2014). The International Republican Institute is a US NGO that aims to promote freedom and democracy across the world. This organisation has strong links to US politics (particularly to the Republican Party).

71 Kievskii Mezhdunarodnyi Institut Sotsiologii (2014).
after in eastern Ukraine, as pro-Russian rebels captured and recalibrated television masts and other communications hardware to transmit only Russian television media.\textsuperscript{72}

In a 2011 survey jointly conducted by Ukraine’s Broadcasting Board of Governors and InterMedia, \textit{Pervyi Kanal}, \textit{RTR Planeta}, and \textit{NTV Mir} were ‘viewed weekly by 32.8\%, 24.9\%, and 19.8\% of the Ukrainian population, respectively.\textsuperscript{73} Therefore, viewership of Russian media outlets in Ukraine in the early 2010s – albeit particularly concentrated in the east of the country – was significant. It is important to acknowledge, however, the type of programmes on Russian television channels that were being watched by Ukrainians. According to Szostek in 2014, ‘entertainment programs on the Russian channels seem to attract more viewers than news and current affairs’, with ‘Russian news bulletins hav[ing] a minority following in Ukraine’.\textsuperscript{74} Furthermore, in a 2016 survey by KIIS for Detector Media, it was found that only around 8\% of Ukrainians consumed news information from Russia’s television outlets, compared to 87\% from Ukraine’s national television channels.

During the Ukraine crisis, Russia’s three biggest television channels were freely accessible to inhabitants of southern and eastern Ukraine – \textit{Pervyi Kanal} (the most important in terms of reach, coverage and popularity), \textit{Rossiya 24} (and/or \textit{RTR Planeta}) and \textit{NTV} (and/or \textit{NTV Mir}). According to survey data from 2016, however, only 13.2\% of households in government-held territory (i.e., excluding Crimea and rebel-held territory in eastern Ukraine) could receive \textit{Pervyi Kanal}, which was the highest figure amongst all options for Russian media outlets. Of those respondents able to access Russian television in Ukraine, 78.7\% accessed via satellite, 7.8\% via the Internet, 6.4\% via cable television.

\textsuperscript{72} Interfax-Ukraine (2019).
\textsuperscript{73} Broadcasting Board of Governors & InterMedia (2011), in: Szostek (2014b).
and 5.8% via analogue antenna, which was concentrated in eastern Ukraine (Figure 3.4). A cautious comparison of these various surveys suggests that viewership of Russian media outlets in Ukraine markedly decreased during the 2010s.

**Figure 3.4:** Percentage of Ukrainians Receiving Russian TV Channels through Analogue Antenna in 2016

![Map showing percentage of Ukrainians receiving Russian TV channels through analogue antenna in 2016.](image)


In retaliation to the aforementioned seizure and realignment of television masts in Crimea, the Ukrainian government banned Russia’s main state-controlled television

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75 MediaSapiens (2017). If the survey included data from Crimea and the rebel-held areas of eastern Ukraine, the percentage of those respondents who watch Russian television would be higher. To this author’s knowledge, detailed up-to-date information about access to and engagement with Russian (broadcast) media in eastern Ukraine is not available.
channels, amongst others, from the country’s cable networks in 2014.\textsuperscript{76} It appears from the above-mentioned most recent media survey (MediaSapiens, 2017) that this punitive measure was not completely effective.\textsuperscript{77} In April 2018, it was reported in the Ukrainian media that the then President Petro Poroshenko was taking steps to also block analogue television transmissions being broadcast into Ukraine from Russian and rebel-held territory.\textsuperscript{78} Yet, at the time of writing, these analogue signals are still being received in Ukraine, although there is too little recent and detailed data on this issue in the public domain to determine the current reach and quality of these television signals.

The diagram in Figure 3.5, based on research conducted in 2018, offers an approximation as to the current availability and strength of Russia’s analogue television signals. The impact that the receipt of Russian television signals in Ukraine has on the population and how, in turn, the country’s politics are affected has been a matter of concern for post-Yanukovich Ukrainian governments. Leonid Peisakhin and Arturas Rozenas (2018) reported on a positive correlation between access to Russian television channels in north-eastern Ukraine via analogue signals and the (relative) success of pro-Russian candidates in the country’s (then) most recent presidential and parliamentary elections.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{76} Ennis (2014). This ban applied to, amongst others, Pervyi Kanal. As it was not able to be enforced in Crimea and in eastern Ukraine, the ban was operational only in those areas under government control.
\textsuperscript{77} Furthermore, most of Russia’s mainstream television channels are still available in Ukraine through satellite and the Internet.
\textsuperscript{78} UNIAN (2018).
\textsuperscript{79} Peisakhin and Rozenas (2018).
According to many scholars in the West, the methods adopted by the Russian government to exert influence over the country’s media outlets have expanded from the outset of the Ukraine crisis, resulting in Russia’s media environment becoming even more restricted in terms of content. Maria Lipman, for example, noted that, in Russia, state control over the media intensified in 2012 and even further in 2014, with the latter consolidation making the ‘TV networks […] into raw propaganda machines’. Becker also

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80 In these three regions, around 8% of precincts have a very high quality of signal for Russian television, whilst around 60% of the precincts have a signal that is viewable, but of a lower quality and reliability. Therefore, for 68% of the precincts in question, Russian television is viewable to, at the very least, an acceptable level.

observed that, since late 2013, the political administration’s constraint over the country’s mass media appears to have been further tightened – ‘aggressive message control may extend over […] critical issues as […] the closer any issue may rest to the heart of the political leadership, the greater the assertion of control.’

The content of Russian television coverage on Ukraine notably changed: the crisis in Ukraine became the dominant topic of media outlets’ political programming; (geo)politics-based content increased; news programmes (both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ news) were longer than normal; and crisis-related coverage closer followed the government line than previously (i.e., more uniformity and less divergence). Furthermore, Russian journalists disclosed to Nygren, et al., specific requirements from above to ‘adapt to the policy of government’ (i.e., demanding self-censorship).

In a 2014 survey by KIIS on Ukraine’s attitudes towards the mass media, 48.5% of respondents reported that they ‘completely distrust’ Russia’s television media. The survey found, however, that there is significant regional variation in these levels of trust: a significantly higher percentage of respondents in eastern Ukraine either ‘fully’ or ‘partly’ trusts Russian television media in comparison with the corresponding figure for the west of the country (Figure 3.6). (This tendency is inverted when asked about trust for Ukraine’s television media.) Inhabitants of Crimea are not included in its data, however. It would be expected that attitudes on the peninsula towards Russian television channels would be more positive and more trusting than those in the different regions of Ukraine, which would alter the data if included.

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83 For example, see: Ennis (2015a).
85 Kievskii Mezhdunarodnyi Institut Sotsiologii (2014). 26% reported that they ‘partly trust’ Russia’s television media, whilst only 5% ‘fully trust’.
Figure 3.6: Level of Trust in Russian Television in Ukraine (%)

Source: Kievskii Mezhdunarodnyi Institut Sotsiologii (2014).

Pervyi Kanal reported extensively on the crisis events in Ukraine of 2014-15, allocating the crisis a consistently prominent position in its news schedule and dedicating a substantial amount of airtime to the topic.\(^{86}\) The channel’s extensive coverage of the crisis is evident from Figure 3.7, which shows that Ukraine was being discussed on Pervyi Kanal significantly more at that time than over the previous five years. In fact, Roman Horbyk (2015) observed that these crisis events were reported on so intensely by Russia’s mass media that their output on Ukraine often outweighed and overshadowed domestic news.

\(^{86}\) Furthermore, journalists from Pervyi Kanal were reporting across the country, some of whom had access to the pro-Russian rebels on the frontline. In effect, such journalists were embedded with the pro-Russian rebels.
The annexation of Crimea by Russia and the outbreak of armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, in particular, appear to have prompted a substantial amount of Ukraine-related output on Pervyi Kanal.

**Figure 3.7**: Frequency of News Coverage of Ukraine on Pervyi Kanal

![Frequency of News Coverage of Ukraine on Pervyi Kanal](image)

Source: Peisakhin and Rozenas (2018).

### 3.3.2 An Analysis of Scholarly Literature on Pervyi Kanal’s Coverage of the Ukraine Crisis

A substantial amount of both scholarly and non-academic literature has been published on the crisis in Ukraine, and Russia’s communication strategies around this crisis. Owing to the extremely large number of crisis-related news reports that were produced by Pervyi Kanal, the following case-study analysis is based on those scholarly texts that have investigated such news output. These scholarly texts explored the channel’s narratives, frames and framing techniques and disinformation.
The main narratives that were produced by the Russian media during the crisis in Ukraine can be divided into two main groups: 1) narratives concerning the West (the USA and/or the EU); and 2) narratives relating to Russian nationhood. Narratives in the former category, which are anti-Western and overwhelmingly negative, relate to geopolitics; narratives in the latter category, which are emotive and positive (with regard to Russia), relate to national/civilisational, cultural and, even, ethnic identity.

In relation to narratives concerning the West, there was a strong tendency for the channel to portray the Ukraine crisis as a product of geopolitical competition between Russia and a US-led West. From this geopolitics-oriented perspective, three of the leadership’s main goal-oriented plotlines were used to try and help achieve the government’s foreign-policy objectives: 1) the West causes instability around the world through self-serving ‘interference’; 2) the West (particularly the USA) seeks global dominance and, in doing so, acts unilaterally without consideration of others; and 3) Russia will continue to co-operate with Europe, regardless of US attempts to impede and prevent this co-operation. The main goal of these narratives was to reduce the appeal of the West as a potential partner and developmental model (politically and economically) for Ukraine. These frequent negative depictions of the West relate to and support the Kremlin’s strategic narrative of the international system which argues that Russia is the leader of the opposition to the US-led West’s unipolar world.

In the narratives concerning Russian national identity, this geopolitical and economic struggle between Russia and the West is linked to a broader civilisational struggle between the two – a zero-sum competition in Ukraine between the culture, values

88 Ibid. For an investigation into the dissemination of the Russian media’s narratives and frames beyond the ‘Slavic world’, see: Watanabe (2017).
and worldview of Russia, which is encapsulated by the civilisational identity of the ‘Russian World’ and the religious concept of ‘Holy Rus’, and those of the West. In this identitarian struggle, Russia is portrayed as a Slavic, Orthodox, conservative-oriented civilisation that is assertively resurgent in opposition to a decadent, militantly secular and fragmenting Europe and West that is in retreat. As reflected in the channel’s output, at the heart of Russia’s civilisational argument surrounding the crisis is that Russia and Ukraine have a shared culture and history, with ROC-led Eastern Orthodoxy as the primary unifying aspect. Additionally, the ‘Russian World’ and ‘Holy Rus’ concepts unite Eastern Slavs, implying that Russians and Ukrainians are ‘one people’, as explicitly stated by Russian political and cultural figures during the crisis. Therefore, according to proponents of this civilisational outlook, Russia knows and cares for Ukraine better than the West does and ever will.

The Russian media framing of the current conflict draws heavily upon war mythology from the Soviet era. Over the past two decades in Russian political and media discourses, as well as in the national education curriculum, representations of the Great Patriotic War (GPW) have been highly ideologised. As a result, the use of GPW memory as ‘a frame of reference makes it very easy to build up tension and inspire nationalistic feelings in a person who has been raised with and is permanently fed this highly emotional and nationalist version of history.’ Therefore, for many ordinary Russians and some Russian-speakers in eastern Ukraine, narratives relating to historical memory of the GPW stimulate strong emotional responses.

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89 For an analysis of Russian television coverage of the annexation of Crimea, see: Teper (2016).
In Russia’s (mis)information campaign over Ukraine, various emotions relating to history were selectively called upon and manipulated in order to shape public opinion on developments at the time. These references to the Great Patriotic War were used on Russian television with ‘compatriots living abroad’ in mind, as they advanced the idea that ‘fascists’ and ‘Nazis’ (i.e., the Ukrainian nationalists who, allegedly, were orchestrating the violent street protests and seized power by ousting Yanukovich) posed a cultural and (genocidal) existential threat to the Russian-speaking section of Ukraine’s population.\footnote{NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence (2015).}

Thus, the Russian media’s GPW-related narratives, particularly in relation to fascism and Nazism, were intended to evoke strong feelings of fear, anger, hatred, revenge and pride (in Soviet victory).

As most assessments of Russia’s mass media at this time acknowledge, the linking of the Euromaidan to historic fascism and Nazism was evident in numerous news reports on \textit{Pervyi Kanal}.\footnote{For example, see: Nygren, et al. (2018). For an example of such historical linking in the channel’s news reports, see: Pervyi Kanal (2014a). For more on Russian threat narratives with regard to ‘fascism’ in Ukraine, see: Gaufman (2017), pp. 103-123.}

These comparisons not only served to draw historical parallels to the present environment, but also equate the post-Yanukovich Ukrainian governments, the Ukrainian military and contemporary Ukrainian nationalists with Nazi Germans.\footnote{The presence of Ukrainian nationalists on the Maidan was foregrounded and exaggerated by the Russian media. For example, see: Ishchenko (2016).} The Euromaidan was presented on \textit{Pervyi Kanal} as, essentially, a fascist-driven movement that was organised and advanced by far-right, anti-Russian Ukrainian nationalists. The use of such a highly politicised and evocative historical parallel ultimately presented the conflict in Ukraine as a small-scale version of the GPW (i.e., ‘Little Patriotic War’), with fighting against (non-Russified) Ukrainians in the Donbass equivalent to fighting Nazi Germans.
during World War II. This media strategy amounted to ‘othering’ particular aspects of Ukraine’s collective identity.

Before the crisis, significant tensions around different interpretations of the GPW were already present in Ukraine. The majority of the population in Crimea and eastern Ukraine subscribed to the general view of the GPW that was close to the official Russian version. The Russian communication strategy during the crisis reflected the desire to exploit and exacerbate these tensions in Ukraine over memory and interpretations of the GPW.

In contrast to the channel’s coverage of the Russo-Georgian War, the GPW featured in Pervyi Kanal’s key narratives on the Ukraine crisis. During the Ukraine crisis, historical memory of the GPW manifested itself through: 1) discussion of the legacy of Nazism and fascism in Ukraine through Ukrainian nationalism; and 2) comparisons of the activity of contemporary Ukrainian actors and groups with that of wartime Nazi Germany. In part, Pervyi Kanal frequently referencing the GPW was a reflection of the conscious change in Russia’s communication strategy post-2008. This change in communication strategy saw Russian political elites and media bosses undertaking much greater effort in ensuring the production of highly emotive coverage on the crisis in the hope that it would be more impactful and effective than the law-based discursive approach adopted during the Russo-Georgian War.

The comparison of contemporary Ukrainian nationalists to historical Nazis was easier to advance in the context of Ukraine than that of Georgia, owing to the large-scale collaboration of Ukrainian nationalists with occupying Nazi German forces during World

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94 Horbyk (2015).
War II. Therefore, there was a real historical issue in the context of Ukraine that could be used manipulatively by Russian political figures and the Russian media, whereas earlier references to ‘Nazi Germany’ and ‘Nazis’ with regard to Georgia were purely metaphorical. Additionally, some of the Ukrainian nationalists on the Maidan – i.e., from the right-wing group Pravyi Sektor and the political party Svoboda – drew direct links between their own organisations and those war-time Ukrainian nationalists, such as Stepan Bandera, who collaborated with Nazi Germany.

In Ukraine, the valorisation and celebration of war-time Ukrainian nationalists, such as Bandera, under the government of President Viktor Yushchenko (2005-2010) proved controversial, with most of the population in eastern Ukraine resenting Yushchenko’s ‘revisionist’ historical interpretation of the GPW. During the Ukraine crisis, the Russian media exploited these social tensions around interpretations of the GPW in Ukraine. The collaboration of Ukrainian nationalists with Nazi Germany in the 1940s and the use of discourse and symbols of these earlier Ukrainian nationalists by members of Pravyi Sektor and Svoboda during the Euromaidan street protests was foregrounded, exaggerated and applied manipulatively and misleadingly by Pervyi Kanal and other Russian state-controlled media outlets.

In addition to the manipulative exploitation of the memory and legacy of the war, the term ‘Russian Spring’ was used in the Russian media to encapsulate the positive and empowering message of hope and restoration of pride through a return to greatness and national ‘reunification’ (i.e., Russia ‘rising from its knees’) after years of shame, humiliation and Western denigration and disregard, heralding the ‘(re)awakening’ of

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99 For example, see: Rudling (2006 and 2017); Narvselius (2012); Katchanovski (2014 and 2015).
Russians and their cultural identity across the post-Soviet space. In effect, such narratives, broadcast on *Pervyi Kanal*, play on the hopes and insecurities of both citizens at home and ‘compatriots’ in the ‘near abroad’, especially of the latter as a perceived vulnerable minority. As Szostek argues, media coverage of the crisis in Ukraine (on those Russian television channels that were accessible in Ukraine) appeared to be ‘polarising more than persuasive’ in Ukraine as they appealed to pro-Russian ‘compatriots’.\(^{100}\)

In yet another example of using emotive, identity-related issues to communicate the government’s preferred messages to the public, the annexation of Crimea on *Pervyi Kanal* was depicted as the voluntary *reunification* of the Russian nation, which, according to Putin, is ‘one of the biggest, if not the biggest, divided nations in the world’ after the fall of the USSR in 1991.\(^{101}\) Putin compared Russia’s annexation of Crimea with the reunification of East and West Germany in 1990.\(^{102}\) This approach, reflected in *Pervyi Kanal*’s output, functioned to counter representations of the annexation as an act of revanchism and imperial expansionism, as the Russo-Georgian War was represented in the Western mass media.\(^{103}\)

The use of language in *Pervyi Kanal*’s news reports was of great significance in shaping audience perceptions, as word choices framed the crisis and its events, classified actors and established the focal point of the discussions. In the channel’s news reports, positive labels were systematically attached to the pro-Russian rebels (‘protestors’ – *protestuyushchie*, ‘supporters of federalisation’ – *stornniki federalizatsii*, ‘locals’ – *mestnye*, ‘people’s militia’ – *narodnoe opolchenie*) who were portrayed as righteously defending themselves against the ‘punitive operation’ of the Kiev authorities, who were

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\(^{100}\) Szostek (2014b), p. 483.

\(^{101}\) Prezident Rossii (2014a and 2014b). For example, see: Pervyi Kanal (2014c and 2014d).


\(^{103}\) Teper (2016).
described as ‘punishers’ (karateli), ‘users of force’ or ‘enforcers’ (siloviki) and fascists (fashisty).

A new, and highly significant, label for the former group of actors was adopted by the channel about a month into the conflict in eastern Ukraine – ‘home guard’ (opolchenie), which appeared in the largest number of Russian reports.\(^{104}\) This term, reappearing since 2005, has historic roots in what is treated by Russia’s government under Putin as a major foundational event for the Russian state – the expulsion of the Polish forces from Moscow in 1612. As it is steeped in national history and has emotional, patriotic and nationalistic resonance, the term is used to describe grassroots, democratic, freedom-fighting, liberation-seeking Russians. Therefore, the juxtaposition of opolchentsy in the Donbass and fashisty in (western) Ukraine highlights the stark contrast in the framing of the two sides in the channel’s coverage.\(^{105}\)

As for the frames that support the narratives, the Russian media projected narratives of the Euromaidan protests and subsequent revolution as chaos and disorder (the ‘disorder’ frame’). The likely goal of this frame was to advance the idea of the federalisation of Ukraine or the (non-military) separation of southern and/or eastern Ukraine. According to Tomila Lankina and Kohei Watanabe (2017), the channel quickly abandoned the ‘disorder’ frame by the end of April 2014 when violence in the Donbass, which the Kremlin could not fully control, intensified. It was allegedly around this time that the regime realised that neither of their aforementioned preferred end-states would be achieved. Thus, the authors conclude that the ‘narratives of media producers suspiciously follow the ebbs and flows of the Kremlin’s shifting tactics in Ukraine’.\(^{106}\)

\(^{104}\) Roman, et al. (2017).
\(^{105}\) For more on the opolchentsy narrative, see: Krechetnikov (2014); Hutchings and Tolz (2015).
\(^{106}\) Lankina and Watanabe (2017), pp. 1551-1552.
The use of disinformation, which included direct fabrications, was extensive in the channel’s reporting on the crisis. According to de Cock Buning, et al., disinformation is ‘false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit’.\(^\text{107}\) As highlighted by Irina Khaldarova and Mervi Pantti (2016), the production and dissemination of disinformation by the Russian state featured a number of extremely controversial news reports that appeared on *Pervyi Kanal*: the fabricated ‘witness’ account of the three-year-old son of a home-guardsman (*opolchenets*) being crucified by Ukrainian forces in Slavyansk, eastern Ukraine, after which his onlooking mother was repeatedly dragged around the large town square by a tank;\(^\text{108}\) the falsified photograph purporting to show a Ukrainian fighter jet shooting down the civilian aircraft Malaysian Airlines MH17 over eastern Ukraine;\(^\text{109}\) the claim that Ukrainian fighters were promised a parcel of land and two (ethnic Russian) slaves in eastern Ukraine.\(^\text{110}\) By comparison, such evocative and grotesque fabrications did not feature on *Pervyi Kanal*’s coverage of the Russo-Georgian War.\(^\text{111}\) This difference indicates that, between the two conflicts, changes took place in the strategy and accompanying tactics adopted by the Russian government for periods of war or crisis.


\(^\text{108}\) *Pervyi Kanal* (2014b).

\(^\text{109}\) *Pervyi Kanal* (2014e). According to Gerard Toal and John O’Loughlin (2017), blame attribution over the downing of flight MH17 was ‘driven more by television viewing habits than by any other factor’ amongst inhabitants of certain disputed territories in the post-Soviet space.


\(^\text{111}\) Additionally, much investigative work has been undertaken by the Ukrainian fact-checking organisation *Stopfake.org* in exposing numerous other cases of disinformation on *Pervyi Kanal* (and other Russian television channels). At the time of writing (i.e., 8th October 2020), Stopfake.org had identified over 350 individual examples of disinformation on the channel relating to Ukraine. EUvsDisinfo (n.d.).
Pervyi Kanal played a central role in disseminating key themes and narratives on the crisis in Ukraine to domestic and foreign audiences in the ‘near abroad’. The crisis was represented on the channel through two prisms: 1) geopolitics (i.e., the crisis as a geopolitical and economic struggle for Ukraine between Russia and the West); and 2) culture (i.e., the crisis as a cultural, ideological and, to some degree, ethnic struggle for Ukraine between Russia and the West). The narratives relating to these primary themes of geopolitics and culture were often mutually supportive and promoted the notion – prevalent throughout the crisis – of a confrontation between Russia and the West in the sense of Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilisations’. These narratives on Pervyi Kanal fed into the key strategic narratives that were being advanced by the Russian government: Russia as the leading opposition to destructive US unipolarity; and Russia, not the West, as the natural ally for countries in the post-Soviet space because of (civilisational) cultural similarities and historical relations.

3.4 Conclusion

An analysis of Pervyi Kanal’s coverage of the Russo-Georgian War (2008) and the Ukraine crisis (2013–present day) has revealed a number of significant differences in the media strategies adopted by the channel in reporting on the two military conflicts. These differences are products of an important shift in Russia’s political communication strategy post-2008. Owing to its cross-border reach and popularity, Pervyi Kanal has a significant foreign policy dimension to its remit, which is taken into consideration when the channel produces its narratives.

Featuring heavily in *Pervyi Kanal* conflict-related output at the time, the notion of Russia as a ‘great power’ was prominent in official Russian discourse during and after the Russo-Georgian War. This ‘Russia – great power’ frame supported the government’s primary strategic narrative on the international system that Russia is the only ‘great power’ in the region – politically, economically and militarily – and, as such, can rightfully and, if necessary, forcefully insist on having a sphere of ‘privileged interests’ across the post-Soviet space.

After the war had ended, Russian political elites concluded that the country’s military intervention in Georgia was widely perceived negatively outside of Russia; the strategic narrative of Russia as a ‘great power’, which was advanced by the Kremlin and the state-controlled media, was interpreted in the West as an act of imperialist expansionism and/or revanchism, as Russia was seen as reasserting its control over smaller post-Soviet states and, in effect, reinstating itself as an empire. It appears that figures in the Kremlin and at state-controlled media outlets did not anticipate that Russia’s actions would be interpreted in this way. This interpretation damaged Russia’s image internationally and negatively impacted on its strategic interests in both regional and world politics.

The use of legal discourse in the political domain and in the mass media, including at *Pervyi Kanal*, also proved ineffective. It was acknowledged by key figures in the Kremlin and by influential media executives that references to international law failed to convince international political communities as to the justifications for Russian military intervention. The perception amongst many of these political and media figures that the country’s communication strategy adopted for the war with Georgia in 2008 was a failure – thus, losing the ‘information war’ against Georgia and the West – triggered a set of post-war changes to media communication(s) in Russia.
In the inter-conflict period, these media changes and trends intensified to an unprecedented degree, as seen, for example, with the government increasing its control over broadcasting, particularly following the anti-Putin mass demonstrations of 2012. In late 2013, a substantially different communication strategy was implemented for the Ukraine crisis. As was evident from the news output of Pervyi Kanal, this strategy involved the use of different discourse and frames to 2008, which were expected to be more effective in generating support and legitimacy. The objective of this strategy was to manipulate audiences \textit{emotionally}, with issues pertaining to identity and culture, which tend to engage ordinary citizens more than issues of legality, being foregrounded in Pervyi Kanal’s coverage of events in Ukraine. One notable reporting tactic that was employed for this end was the (substantially increased) use of direct, evocative and highly controversial disinformation. As much more output was produced by the channel on the Ukraine crisis than on the Russo-Georgian War, viewers’ exposure to these official Russian narratives was much greater in the context of the former than the latter. Was, however, the new strategy more effective than the previous strategy, and how should the activity of Russia’s state-affiliated media actors be conceptualised?

The coverage of the two military conflicts on the channel closely aligned with the stances held by the Russian government to the extent that the concept of ‘soft power’, which presupposes that actors engaging in public diplomacy, such as Pervyi Kanal, have significant autonomy and agency, appears to be inappropriate for both case studies. The concepts of ‘hybrid warfare’ and, in particular, ‘information warfare’ seem to reflect the intent and perceptions of the Russian political leadership and media bosses during both sets of events. Indeed, many prominent figures in Russia used the concepts of ‘hybrid warfare’ and ‘information warfare’ to explain the military and communications strategies of the West, Georgia and Ukraine during the military conflicts. As overarching explanatory
frameworks for interpreting crisis-related coverage on Pervyi Kanal, however, the utility of these concepts is limited.

By engaging with the concept of ‘information warfare’, actors in Russia and the West implied that a media message works in the same way as an armed weapon: a group of people is targeted, a medium is used, the message is despatched, and the damage is inflicted as intended. The workings of a media message are different, however. As media messages are not necessarily consumed by audiences as intended, this simplistic conceptualisation of targeted media communication presented a major problem for Pervyi Kanal and other state-controlled Russian media outlets, as outcomes have not matched expectations from the concept.

The new strategy did appear, however, to enjoy some limited localised success: emotive narratives around cultural identity and national (re)unification evoked in the Russian media’s coverage of the annexation of Crimea resonated with audiences both in Russia and Crimea, and some audiences in the Donbass appear to have embraced the official Russian narratives around the Ukraine crisis. These groups, however, were already predisposed to sympathising with official Russian positions at the time of the crisis.

If, however, the aim was also to sway public opinion in the international arena in favour of Russia’s (military) actions concerning Ukraine, the new strategy failed, as opinion polls in Ukraine have indicated that the country, as a whole, has rejected the Kremlin-preferred narratives on the crisis. Additionally, in the Western media, the overtly pro-government Kremlin-aligned narratives and controversial reporting methods that were adopted by the state-controlled Russian mass media only led to the image of Russia and its policies becoming more negative. Therefore, there is little evidence to support the view that the different media communication strategy adopted by the channel for the Ukraine
crisis was more effective in persuading international audiences than that used by the channel in covering the Russo-Georgian War.
Chapter IV. Conflict Representations by an Organic Cultural Organisation: The Russian Orthodox Church

4.1 Introduction

In the current mediatised world, public diplomacy can be expected to play an increased role during inter-state (military) conflicts. In such contexts, cultural organisations also serve as important actors in the dissemination of conflict-related messages across national borders. In order to have legitimacy in the eyes of the population of a ‘target’ country, an organisation needs to be regarded as having a notable degree of autonomy from the government, rather than being viewed merely as a tool of the state for the purpose of power projection. In the case of state-affiliated cultural organisations in times of conflict, a tension between exercising agency by pursuing and asserting their own agendas and responding to the sponsoring government’s needs is seemingly inevitable. This tension with the government is likely to be particularly difficult to resolve for cultural organisations associated with authoritarian states, such as Russia. This chapter explores such tension in the case of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The ROC is active beyond the borders of the Russian Federation, as it has a significant presence, influence and interests in the ‘near abroad’. In terms of geopolitics, the ‘near abroad’ is also an area of considerable importance to the Russian government, with (re)asserting state influence over the region following the collapse of the USSR being a major foreign policy objective for successive administrations. Under Putin, the Russian government has significantly strengthened its ties with the ROC. As a result, church-state co-operation takes place even with regard to the government’s foreign policy, particularly in relation to the post-Soviet space.
This chapter explores the (media) activity of the Church surrounding two major military conflicts in the ‘near abroad’ that involved Russian military intervention – the Russo-Georgian War (2008) and the Ukraine crisis (2013–present day). By exploring the Russian-language output of the Church’s own media outlet, ‘Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate’ (OSMP), this chapter establishes how the ROC reported on the aforementioned conflicts, detailing when crisis-related reporting occurred, to what extent such output was produced (i.e., the frequency and intensity of relevant news reports) and how the conflicts were covered (i.e., in terms of content and framing techniques). As a result, a picture emerges as to the media strategy and reporting tactics adopted by OSMP both during and between the two case studies. A comparison of OSMP output with that of Pervyi Kanal suggests the extent to which the ROC operated with agency to conduct its own affairs and, conversely, was utilised instrumentally by the Russian government to achieve geopolitical foreign policy objectives.

The level of agency of the ROC is to be evaluated by comparing crisis-related coverage on OSMP with that of the state-controlled and Kremlin-aligned television channel Pervyi Kanal (Chapter III).¹ As the previous chapter showed, Pervyi Kanal replicated the positions and narratives of the Russian government during both military conflicts. Therefore, divergence on OSMP from Pervyi Kanal’s government-aligned positions and narratives during these military conflicts would constitute an example of the ROC expressing agency. Furthermore, such examples would be much more significant and revealing than divergence surrounding issues that are not of central importance to the Russian government in times of peace.

¹ According to Vakhtang Kipshidze of the Department for Church Relations with Society and the Mass Media, the ROC “has communication […] with the federal mass media”. Kipshidze, V. (2019), interviewed on 24th June 2019. For more on communication between the ROC and the Russian mass media, see: Zhosul, E., in: Haft (2017).
OSMP, as the central source for reports on news and issues across the Church’s numerous departments, is the ROC’s primary online media outlet. (In addition to OSMP, several other ROC websites exist, which were created by the Church post-2000 to report more extensively on news relating to specific departments and eparchies.) In 2016, the ROC acquired the prominently positioned, Orthodox-oriented television channel ‘SPAS’.² (SPAS was founded and financed by private individuals, many of whom remain unknown because ownership details were not publicly disclosed in full.³ The channel has, however, received support from the ROC since its creation in 2005, with the Church already being the channel’s majority shareholder by the time it gained full control of the outlet in 2016.⁴) Unlike SPAS, OSMP has always been owned and operated by the ROC, including during the two aforementioned case studies. Thus, OSMP, during both conflicts, represented Church positions and narratives.

In terms of its output, OSMP produces material on news and issues relating to Orthodox Christianity, primarily appealing to those who identify as pravoslavnye (i.e., Orthodox). The media outlet also reports on some non-religious current affairs concerning the post-Soviet space, although from a religious angle. A vast territory in which the Church has significant influence and interests, the post-Soviet space is of considerable importance to the ROC. OSMP appeals to those of the Orthodox faith, which includes ‘compatriots living abroad’ (‘CLA’) located in the ‘near abroad’. Notably, some of those areas in which the ROC is a prominent actor are made up of communities that, to a degree, are divided along lines of culture and (national) identity. In such areas, identity-related issues are sometimes the cause of tension and conflict.

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² Afanaseva (2016). The channel is also accessible across the post-Soviet space by satellite.
³ Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2005).
⁴ Varshavchik (2005).
For the most part a text-based website, OSMP offers news services in five languages: Russian, Ukrainian, Moldovan, Greek and English. Therefore, as well as being aimed at a domestic (i.e., Russian) audience, the site is also directed at Moldova and Ukraine. Moldova and Ukraine are of considerable importance to the ROC, owing to these countries: 1) forming a significant part of the ROC’s canonical territory, which is based on the Church’s major concept of ‘Holy Rus’ (see Chapter I); and 2) having competing claims within their respective national borders over Orthodox authority, which challenge the ROC’s status and primacy in the two states.

To obtain the primary data for the case studies in question, Russian-language crisis-related news reports were extracted from the outlet’s website, upon which they are archived. The ‘search’ function was used, within the set time-frame of each of the case studies, to retrieve all news reports featuring any of the following key words: ‘Gruziya’ (‘Georgia’), ‘Yuzhnaya Osetiya’ (‘South Ossetia’) or ‘Abkhaziya’ (‘Abkhazia’) for the Russo-Georgian War; and ‘Ukraina’ (‘Ukraine’), ‘Krym’ (‘Crimea’), ‘Donetsk’ (Donetsk), ‘Lugansk’ (Lugansk) and ‘UPTs-MP’ (‘UOC-MP’) for the Ukraine crisis. The search results were analysed individually, with only those both clearly and predominantly relating to the case studies’ political, military, social and/or cultural tensions extracted for inclusion in the respective datasets.

The total number of OSMP news reports collated and analysed on the Russo-Georgian War was 121 (between 1\textsuperscript{st} January 2008 and 12\textsuperscript{th} November 2008), whilst the total number on the crisis in Ukraine was 322 (between 21\textsuperscript{st} November 2013 and 31\textsuperscript{st} December 2015). A content analysis and frame analysis of all the primary data was then

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\(^5\) There are differences in content between the outlet’s different language services, but, due to a lack of relevant language skills, it is beyond the capabilities of this researcher to adequately analyse and assess OSMP news reports that are not in Russian or English. This website does not provide a news service in the Georgian language, as the ROC’s presence, influence and interests in Georgia, unlike in Moldova and Ukraine, are limited.
undertaken in order to examine the content of the outlet’s crisis-related news reports in depth. To uncover the specific framing techniques that were employed by OSMP, at least three news reports on each military conflict were subject to Critical Discourse Analysis, full details of which are found in Appendix II.

4.2 **OSMP’s News Coverage of the Russo-Georgian War**

The nation-states and national identities of Georgia and Russia are strongly associated with the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and the ROC, respectively. In the South Caucasus, the alignment of church territory with political boundaries (i.e., which autocephalous church officially ministers the Orthodox faith over which territorial space) took place during World War II under Joseph Stalin. Under pressure from Stalin, autocephaly was granted to the GOC by the ROC in 1943, with the former’s jurisdiction assigned according to the political borders of the Georgian SSR.\(^6\)

Following the collapse of the USSR, a religious concept arose within Eastern Orthodoxy known as ‘canonical territory’: ‘canonical territory’ is the concept within the Orthodox community for determining the territories in which autocephalous churches operate, designating sole jurisdiction to preside over a particular geographical space in

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\(^6\) As was the extent of his influence over religious organisations in the USSR, ‘the ultimate decision concerning the Georgian Church was again in the hands of Stalin’; the granting of autocephaly to the GOC by, in effect, Stalin in 1943 was ‘justified by an updated interpretation of Canon XVII of the Fourth Ecumenical Council, according to which church boundaries should follow state boundaries’. Kalkandjieva, D., *The Russian Orthodox Church, 1917-1948: From Decline to Resurrection* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 186. It was this decision that ‘imposed a territorialized conception of church jurisdiction onto a (now) ethnocentric church’; Stalin, disregarding canon law, continued ‘shaping churches according to political boundaries.’ Conroy, K. M., ‘Semi-Recognized States and Ambiguous Churches: The Orthodox Church in South Ossetia and Abkhazia’, *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 57, № 4 (2015), p. 626. As a result, this alignment further reinforced the well-established notion of the GOC as an important vehicle for Georgian national identity.
agreement with the principle of ‘one city, one bishop, one church’. There is debate within Orthodox Christianity, however, with regard to the applicability and interpretation of the Canons: (certain) Canons are treated by many high-positioned clergy more as guidelines rather than laws, which has encouraged their reinterpretation, contestation and, even, rejection. As a consequence, debate and tension have arisen over the concept of ‘canonical territory’. Furthermore, churches, including the ROC, often violate ‘canonical territory’ in serving diaspora communities that are located beyond their operational boundaries, which undermines the concept. In the ‘near abroad’, there are territories, over which the Moscow Patriarchate claims sole ministerial rights, that are the subjects of competing claims for canonical jurisdiction from different sources of religious authority. For example, such disputes are present in Estonia, Moldova and, of greater importance to the ROC, Ukraine.

Officially, the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia remain the canonical territory of the GOC, with the GOC supposed to provide pastoral care to the breakaway republics’ Orthodox populations. The GOC’s claim of canonical jurisdiction in these territories has been repeatedly supported by senior members of the ROC, including by Patriarch Kirill. This jurisdiction, however, is only nominal because political and security realities prevent the GOC from operating in the breakaway republics. A rejection of the authority and jurisdiction of the GOC in these territories led to the creation of the Diocese of Alania (in

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7 Episkop Ilarion (2006). Bishop Hilarion – now Metropolitan Hilarion (head of the influential Department for External Church Relations, which is considered to be the ROC’s ‘foreign office’) – has discussed ‘canonical territory’ extensively and publicly from April 2005 onwards. Amongst other high-profile Church figures, Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, one-time deputy head of the same department, had also discussed this concept. For example, see: Protoierei Chaplin (2007).

8 For a closer look at the background of the ROC’s relationships with other churches in the Orthodox community, see: Curanović (2007).

South Ossetia) in 2005, the Abkhazian Orthodox Church (AOC) in 2009 and the Holy
Metropolis of Abkhazia (HMA) in 2011. As of yet, all three of these entities are
unrecognised by the wider Orthodox community, including by the ROC.

As the ROC carries out many of the pastoral responsibilities in those territories
where the GOC is unable to fulfil its duties, the Church has faced criticism from political
and religious figures in Georgia for violating canon law by allegedly continuing to ‘funnel
its people and money in the two republics’. These alleged violations by the ROC have
included, amongst others, ‘training priests and funding programs through the Abkhaz and
South Ossetian churches since they declared autonomy’. For example, as the CDA in
Appendix II explores, one OSMP news report from January 2008 quoted the (then)
President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, claiming that the “ancient and unique Georgian
shrines [i.e., the churches of Abkhazia] […] are managed by representatives of the Russian
Patriarchate without any authorisation”.

Indeed, the ROC does have (spiritual) interests in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.
Owing to the complex relationship between power, territory and religion resulting from the
region’s imperial and Soviet past, both the GOC and ROC could make competing claims
over Abkhazia and South Ossetia with regard to canonical territory: the breakaway
republics were ‘Christianized under a mix of ROC and […] [GOC] influence’, as they fell
under the canonical jurisdiction of both Churches at different times. Furthermore, both

10 Stratfor Worldview (2011). Additionally, see: Lenta.ru (2005); Russkaya Pravoslavnaya
Tserkov’ (2008f).
11 Stratfor Worldview (2011). The territories’ priests, with the blessing of the local
authorities, receive their theological training from the ROC at the Moscow Theological
Academy.
12 Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2008f). This quote is taken from a Russian-language
source, but it is likely that Saakashvili’s speech – given its location and audience – was
delivered in his mother tongue of Georgian.
Nations and Peoples Organization, 2015), 50.8% of the population is ethnic Abkhazian. A
split emerged within Abkhazian Orthodoxy following the Russo-Georgian War, which has
the Diocese of Alania and the AOC, as well as the territories’ politicians, ‘have expressed a desire to join the ROC’.  

A period of at least six months before the war and three months after the war was chosen for the scope of this case study. In applying this time-frame, it was easier to track and contextualise OSMP news output during each major stage of the military conflict – the pre-, during- and post-conflict periods. Furthermore, dividing the case study into these distinct three periods made a comparative analysis with the other outlets that are investigated in this thesis more informative and reliable than otherwise would have been the case. Each OSMP crisis related news report was coded according to one of the following seven theme-categories:

- **ABKHAZIA** – reports on tensions between Georgia and Abkhazia;
- **GEORGIA** – reports pertaining to news and/or commentary relating to Georgia (proper), politically (i.e., from the government, political parties, political figures) and/or religiously (i.e., from the GOC);

resulted in the presence of two Orthodox churches in the territory – the AOC and the HMA. This split relates to identity: the HMA, which claims it has the support of the local population, wants rites to be conducted in the Abkhaz language, whereas the AOC, which has the tacit support of the ROC, advocates for the continued use of Old Church Slavonic in Orthodox services. The Novyi Afon Monastery lies at the centre of this split, with the Novyi Afon-based HMA reported to be ‘leading a movement to emancipate local Orthodoxy from Russian influence’ (von Twickel, 2011). According to the 2015 census of South Ossetia, almost 90% of the territory’s population is ethnic Ossetian (Sputnik, 2016). Old Church Slavonic is used in Orthodox churches in South Ossetia, but there has been some effort in recent years to include the Ossetian language into Orthodox religious services in the territory. For example, see: Regnum (2013); Roshchin (2017).

• PEACEKEEPING – reports that emphasise the peacekeeping roles and efforts (including religious services and prayers) of the ROC, GOC and/or the broader Orthodox community;
• GOC-ROC – reports on attempts to improve relations between the two countries through shared faith (i.e., Orthodoxy), involving the ROC and/or the GOC;
• HERITAGE – reports about cultural, historical and/or religious heritage;
• HUMANITARIANISM – detailing the humanitarian role and efforts of the Church (the organisation and parishioners) in helping those in South Ossetia that were affected by the war;
• OTHER – reports that do not correspond to the above-mentioned main themes.\textsuperscript{15}

These theme-category classifications were arrived at by, first, establishing the main issues that were expected to appear in the data – i.e., news reports on pre-war tensions (‘ABKHAZIA’ and ‘GEORGIA’) and the Church’s during- and post-war peacekeeping efforts (‘PEACEKEEPING’). As the crisis-related texts were analysed, this list was gradually expanded to cover other prominent themes in the outlet’s coverage, including ‘GOC-ROC’, ‘HERITAGE’ and ‘HUMANITARIANISM’. A (relatively) small number of news reports did not correspond to any of the aforementioned main themes, so were coded as ‘OTHER’. In several reports, multiple topics were discussed. In such cases, the report was coded according to its \textit{main} theme.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} The coding of the data in this thesis was based on the author’s own classifications and judgement.
\textsuperscript{16} A concise overview of OSMP’s coverage of the Russo-Georgian War is available in Appendix I (Table A1).
4.2.1 Pre-Conflict Period: 1st January – 7th August 2008

In the six months leading up to the war, only a small number of news reports that mentioned Abkhazia, South Ossetia and/or Georgia appeared on OSMP (fifteen), despite several serious political, military and religious incidents taking place in the South Caucasus which contributed to the severe deterioration in Russo-Georgian relations at the time.\textsuperscript{17} The number of crisis-related news reports as a percentage of the outlet’s total news output in this period was 0.3%. The joint most common theme for crisis-related news reports during this period was ‘GEORGIA’ (Table 4.1): such reports featured discussion of the country’s internal (separatist-related) tensions from the perspective of the GOC and/or Georgian politics, usually featuring Catholicos-Patriarch Iliya II and (then) President Mikheil Saakashvili respectively. The majority of reports from the other joint most common theme, ‘PEACEKEEPING’, concerned the diplomatic activity and overt peacekeeping efforts of Catholicos-Patriarch Iliya II. Therefore, most of the output on OSMP in this period concerned the activity of senior representatives of Georgia’s government and church.

\textsuperscript{17} For a timeline of events during the Russo-Georgian War, see: CNN (2020).
Table 4.1: Frequency of OSMP’s News Reports on the Russo-Georgian War

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEME</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PRE-CONFLICT PERIOD 01/01/08 – 07/08/08</td>
<td>DURING-CONFLICT PERIOD 08/08/08 – 12/08/08</td>
<td>POST-CONFLICT PERIOD 13/08/08 – 12/11/09</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABKHAZIA</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEORGIA</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOC-ROC</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HERITAGE</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HUMANITARIANISM</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEACEKEEPING</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>121</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From a comparative analysis of OSMP and Pervyi Kanal with regard to the frequency of their crisis-related output, differences in coverage are visible (Figure 4.1). From mid-July to the start of the war, OSMP did not report at all on the issue of increasing tensions and heightened military activity in the region, which lay in contrast to Pervyi Kanal’s corresponding coverage, particularly in pre-war August (i.e., 1st to 7th). Whilst the peak of crisis-related reporting on Pervyi Kanal took place during the war, the peak in OSMP’s crisis-related reporting occurred in post-war August. Therefore, the outlets’ times of most intense media activity notably do not match, which suggests at this stage that the ROC had its own agenda at the time of the conflict and was able to exercise some degree of agency in pursuing this agenda.
**Figure 4.1**: Frequency of News Reports on the Russo-Georgian War on OSMP and Pervyi Kanal

The key to horizontal axis is as follows: (1) signifies 1st-15th of the month; (2) signifies 16th-30th/31st of the month. The data for Pervyi Kanal is taken from Chapter III.
In this initial six-month period, extremely few direct representations of the ROC were produced in relation to the intensifying crisis – 13.3% (two). The ROC’s unwillingness to offer direct commentary on the deteriorating situation in Georgia continued even during serious diplomatic incidents that overtly related to religious issues. The notable lack of direct commentary from the ROC in the pre-conflict period was likely a conscious decision as part of a media, and broader diplomatic, strategy: the Church was engaging in religious diplomacy by adopting a publicly neutral and distanced position in order to not to spoil its close and beneficial relationship with its ally, the GOC. This strategy could be termed ‘minimal interference’.

Additionally, reporting in this period was fairly balanced, as the reports often granted ‘voice’ to representatives of the Georgian state to air to air the country’s (official) positions and perspectives. The CDA in Appendix II analyses a significant example of balanced reporting on the site from this period, which included directly quoting Georgia’s (then) President Mikheil Saakashvili criticising the ROC over its presence and activity in Abkhazia. In the later periods, however, OSMP abandoned practicing ‘balance’ in its conflict-related coverage.

On 20th March 2008, a follow-up news report on the substantial repair works that were being carried out at Abkhazia’s Novyi Afon Monastery was uploaded to the website. Founded by Russian monks in the 19th century during the time of the Russian Empire, Novyi Afon Monastery is considered to be Abkhazia’s most precious site of cultural-historical heritage. Transferred over from the Abkhaz government in 2011, the monastery currently belongs to the AOC. Novyi Afon Monastery, in effect, was under the

19 Throughout this thesis, ‘direct representation’ refers to a high-profile member or specific department of the ROC being a news report’s main commentator (i.e., representatives of the ROC commenting on the news, rather than the outlet just reporting the news).
20 Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2008n).
ownership of the ROC prior to 2011. After the War in Abkhazia (1992-3), the monastery was, in practice, operating under the ROC (i.e., with regard to its clergy, management and whence it received financial investment), but was not officially under the canonical jurisdiction of the ROC, as all churches in Abkhazia officially remained within the canonical territory of the GOC. This religious site, therefore, has spiritual, historical-cultural and, at the time of the Russo-Georgian War, material value for the ROC.

Since September 2007, the monastery had undergone large-scale, long-term repair and restoration work ‘on account of Russian investments’, which was carried out by a Russian company. Investments in Orthodox heritage monuments often come directly from the ROC and/or indirectly from ROC sponsors (for example, national/local government and government-affiliated private donors). In the news report, no mention is made of the ROC’s pre-2011 stewardship of the monastery or involvement in the repair and restoration works. Therefore, the ROC, whilst not having canonical jurisdiction over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, has been actively involved in the breakaway republics through the territories’ local churches, even during this pre-conflict period.

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21 Treiman (2013).
22 RIA Novosti (2019a). Earlier repair works at the monastery in 2006 were reported to have been financed by the Abkhaz government (Regnum, 2006), but it is unclear who financed the later, bigger restoration works at Novyi Afon Monastery.
23 For example, part of Moscow City Hall’s budget from 2012 to 2015 was donated to the ROC specifically for the restoration of objects that serve religious purposes. For more information on the financing of the ROC, see: Reiter, et al. (2016).
24 In all three interviews with representatives of the ROC conducted for this research, it was denied that the ROC has had any sort of interests in Georgia. Hierodeacon Yaroslav (Ochkanov) (2018), interviewed on 12th September 2018; Kipshidze, V. (2019), interviewed on 24th June 2019; Archpriest Balashov (2019), interviewed on 25th July 2019.
4.2.2 During-Conflict Period: 8th – 12th August 2008

In the during-conflict period, the number of crisis-related news reports as a percentage of OSMP’s total news output increased to 14%. ‘PEACEKEEPING’ was the most common theme – 68.4% (thirteen) (Table 4.1). The frame (i.e., the overarching sentiment) behind the ‘PEACEKEEPING’ theme is ‘peace and/or commonality’, as the ROC was portrayed as trying to bring about peace between two spiritually and culturally fraternal peoples. It was the outbreak of the war that triggered the first shift in OSMP content – from output oriented towards Georgia in the pre-conflict period (‘GEORGIA’ and ‘PEACEKEEPING’) to output centred on Russia in the during-conflict period (‘PEACEKEEPING’).

The first example of direct ROC commentary on the war appeared on 8th August 2008, reporting on a highly critical and emotionally charged intervention by the (then) Archbishop of Stavropol and Vladikavkaz Feofan, who is a prominent figure within the Church. In large part, the prominence of Feofan in relation to the Russo-Georgian War was a consequence of his eparchial ‘seat’ bordering South Ossetia.25 (The (then) eparchy of Stavropol and Vladikavkaz encompassed neighbouring North Ossetia). Furthermore, the conflict involved ethnic Ossetians; a proportion of Feofan’s parishioners were ethnic Ossetians – 65.1% of the population of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania is Ossetian by ethnicity, 60% of which identify as Orthodox Christian.26

Patriarch Aleksii II’s official statement on the military conflict published on the same day, by comparison, did not overtly take sides or apportion guilt – it was diplomatically ambiguous on causality and blame for the outbreak of war. The patriarch

25 ‘eparchy’ – an administrative territory within the Church, akin to a diocese.
26 Vserossiiskaya Perepis’ Naseleniya 2010 (2010).
also used positive abstract and emotive language that was non-confrontational, such as ‘to live in fraternity and love’ and ‘[the exercising of] wisdom and courage’. Patriarch Aleksii II, by adopting a neutral official position as head of the ROC, avoided jeopardising the Church’s delicate balance of influence and interests within the Orthodox community by not aligning the ROC to a stance that could, by taking sides, potentially exacerbate the situation. The media role of Archbishop Feofan, however, was clearly of a different nature, as the Church expressed its more hawkish elements through his public appearances and commentaries.

As the CDA in Appendix II illustrates, instead of the leadership of the Church expressing direct, forthright and/or controversial criticism of Georgia’s actions, the ROC largely delegated such discursive roles to third parties and non-leadership clergy (for example, a non-clergy church elder and Archbishop Feofan, respectively). The strategy of different figures within organisations having delegated media roles, especially during times of national emergency (such as war or crisis), is common in the country’s political and public sphere: the leader of a government or organisation adopts a neutral or moderate stance on a particular issue, whereas those further down the hierarchy adopt a tougher, more hardline position.

After 8th August, direct representations of the ROC almost completely ceased for the remainder of the war, with almost all other news reports featuring (one-sided) content that was highly critical of and biased against Georgia’s government and armed forces. Amongst several other examples, (negatively) emotive, confrontational and targeted language-use on OSMP in this period included: the ‘barbaric activity of the Georgian

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28 Tolz and Teper (2018). For more on the communication roles of important figures within the ROC, see Appendix I.
armed forces’ directed against ‘women, the elderly and children’, resulting from the ‘brazen aggression […] [of] “little Hitler” [i.e., Saakashvili] against the people of South Ossetia.’ As he was not part of the Church leadership, Feofan employed such forthright language in his intervention.

In addition to Feofan’s hardline commentaries, the ROC was able to vicariously express controversial opinions by selectively interviewing and quoting individuals in its news reports. An example of such ‘distancing’ is found in this case study’s CDA in Appendix II, with the case of the (non-clergy) elder of the Ossetian church in Moscow strongly criticising the Georgian authorities. This tactic seemingly afforded the Church enough distance from the ‘speaker’ whilst, at the same time, surreptitiously promoting and, seemingly, endorsing the speaker’s view(s) by virtue of providing an unchallenged airing.

In contrast to Pervyi Kanal’s corresponding coverage, no dominant ‘Russia – great power’ frame was present on OSMP in this period: the Church was not engaging in discourse that explicitly referred to Russia as a ‘great power’. The discursive approach of portraying Russia as a ‘great power’ was likely too controversial for the Church to adopt, as the ROC has vulnerable interests in post-Soviet states (particularly in Ukraine) which are sensitive to sentiments that could be perceived by certain populations as controversial and imperialist. The Church did, however, promote other wartime narratives that the government advanced, but this mostly happened in the post-conflict period.

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29 Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2008o).
30 Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2008i). This claim was also made by (then) President Medvedev (Pervyi Kanal, 2008g).
31 Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2008h).
32 A closer inspection of Archbishop Feofan’s manipulative use of language concerning the war can be found in Appendix II.
4.2.3 Post-Conflict Period: 13th August – 12th November 2008

The number of crisis-related news reports increased in the post-conflict period, although the density of these reports was not uniform, as many were concentrated at certain times. In particular, 13th August to 3rd September was a period of (relatively) prolonged crisis-related media activity on the site. The day after the war officially ended, such reporting increased dramatically (Figure 4.2). This comparatively high level of coverage continued for three days, during which time more than half of all crisis-related news reports featured direct representations of the ROC updating, commenting and passing judgement on the conflict (Figure 4.2). The number of crisis-related news reports as a percentage of OSMP’s total news output on 13th, 14th and 15th August were 48.4%, 30% and 22.2%, respectively. These daily percentage rates of the outlet’s total news output were notably high. Collectively, these three days constituted the most productive and most concentrated period of crisis-related output on the site.

33 It must be noted that military activity on the side of the separatist (i.e., South Ossetian) and Russian forces continued beyond the war’s official end date. This continued military activity included the destruction and disabling of Georgian military hardware of both offensive and defensive capabilities – the ‘demilitarization of the Georgian armed forces’. Barabanov, M., ‘The August War between Russia and Georgia’, Moscow Defense Brief, vol. 13, № 3 (2008b), p. 11.
Figure 4.2: Frequency of OSMP’s News Reports on the Russo-Georgian War (August 2008)

In the three days immediately after the war, the website published a large number of news reports, the majority of which were of the ‘PEACEKEEPING’ theme.

Additionally, much of this output featured different ROC clergy members: Bishop Aleksandr (quoting Patriarch Aleksii II), Archpriest Chaplin, Metropolitan Kliment, Archbishop Feofan, Archimandrite Aleksii, Bishop Aristarkh and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, for example, all commented within just two days of the war ending (i.e., on 13th and 14th August alone). In comparison to the Church’s conspicuously muted approach prior to this point, this dramatic spike in direct representations of the ROC indicates that a concerted effort was undertaken by the Church to be more visible and vocal with regard to the conflict.
The markedly increased public and media activity of the ROC at this time was a consequence of the Church being mobilised. This mobilisation was likely in response to the perception at the time amongst many members of Russia’s political elite that international public opinion was unfairly judging the country over the war as a result of English-language international media outlets challenging Russia’s official position and justifications for military intervention. If so, this mobilisation suggests that the ROC shared the view held by many political elites about an ‘information war’ taking place over this military conflict.

Indeed, the high-profile (then) Metropolitan Kirill raised the concept in discussing the Russo-Georgian War.34 In stronger terms, Feofan criticised the West’s politicians and mass media, commenting that “such manipulation of public consciousness [by the West’s internationally oriented mass media] is completely unacceptable, since it is depriving civil society in Europe and America of truthful information.”35 Therefore, despite its conceptual limitations (Szostek, 2020) and politicised usage, ‘information war’ is a term that was used by figures within the Church about this military conflict.

It is evident from Figure 4.3 that a post-war shift in crisis-related content occurred. The ROC’s operation for the provision of humanitarian relief for South Ossetia commenced on 15th August. Around this date, the website’s crisis-related output shifted sharply from ‘PEACEKEEPING’ to ‘HUMANITARIANISM’. A shift in the outlet’s most prevalent frame accompanied this change – i.e., from ‘peace and/or commonality’ to ‘ROC benevolence’. Through to mid-September, ‘HUMANITARIANISM’ was the most common theme on OSMP.

34 Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2008p). The concept was also raised within the Church with regard to the Ukraine crisis: For example, see: Metropolitan Onufrii (2014), in: Gordiichuk and Goroshkova (2014); Mitropolit Kievskii i vseya Ukrainy Onufrii (2015).
It was on the basis of providing humanitarian relief to South Ossetia that the ROC explained and justified its increased involvement in the separatist republic. In doing so, the ROC acted as a major authority in legitimising Russia’s (perceived) paternalistic role in the post-Soviet space. Trips to the (South) Caucasus by Church representatives were covered on OSMP, showing that the ROC was openly active on the territory of South Ossetia in the aftermath of the conflict. From 13th August to 3rd September alone, ten ‘on the ground’
crisis-related news reports were published, most coded as ‘HUMANITARIANISM’: Russia (North Ossetia) – three; Russia (other) – three; South Ossetia – four.\(^{36}\)

On 25\(^{th}\) August, Hegumen Serafim paved the way for the ROC’s first delivery of humanitarian aid by visiting South Ossetia to discuss the issue with the territory’s politicians. Serafim’s visit was notably only reported three days later (28\(^{th}\) August) – i.e., \textit{after} Russia formally recognised Abkhazian and South Ossetian self-declared independence from Georgia on 26\(^{th}\) August.\(^{37}\) It appears that such an uncharacteristic – yet, in this case, timely – delay in reporting an important event as this on OSMP by three days was a result of the ROC engaging in religious diplomacy. This delay suggests that the Church tried to avoid (further) straining its relations with the GOC – as such visits would be regarded as controversial and provocative by many of Georgia’s political and cultural figures – by deciding against publicly broadcasting its appearance ‘on the ground’ in South Ossetia prior to the Russian government acknowledging the separatist states’ declarations of independence. Further substantial aid deliveries followed in September, October and November, accompanied by several high-profile aid-related visits to the region by senior ROC clergy.

An analysis of post-conflict news reports finds that most of Archbishop Feofan’s commentaries at the time were hawkish and Kremlin-aligned, as the CDA in Appendix II highlights in detail.\(^{38}\) In several news reports, this prominent figure within the ROC defended what he portrayed as the sacrificial actions of Russia’s military in fulfilling the

\(^{36}\) Those news reports detailing the Church’s activity ‘on the ground’ in North Ossetia are also of relevance and significance, as they contain important information and (direct ROC) commentary on the war.

\(^{37}\) Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2008j).

\(^{38}\) In connection with Erving Goffman’s discussion of the role of the ‘speaker’ in communication (Goffman, 1974), it is not possible to establish that Archbishop Feofan is the ‘author’ of these utterances and not just simply the ‘animator’ (i.e., the vehicle for vocalising a sentiment), as the priest could be expressing such controversial sentiments on behalf of others as part of an orchestrated collection of voices.
state’s obligation towards the country’s ‘compatriots’, openly praising the ‘efforts of our peacekeepers and Russia’s firm position’. 39 In justifying the actions of the government and military more so than any other Church representative, Feofan’s opinions and language-use align considerably with the positions and discourse of the Russian government. For example, Feofan said in one report that “our peacekeepers have one goal and task – to protect the citizens of Russia and South Ossetia from destruction [emphasis added] and expulsion to exile”, with ‘the Moscow Patriarchate greatly appreciate[ing] the actions of Russian peacekeepers in defending the inhabitants of South Ossetia.’ 40

On one occasion in the State Duma, Feofan even alleged the ‘genocide’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’ of the South Ossetian people by the Georgian military, which he later (incorrectly) claimed ‘took away thousands of lives of women, the elderly and children’. 41 Feofan’s choice of language here closely mirrored the language used at the time by many high-positioned government figures. Feofan discussed ‘genocide’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’ only on this one occasion, however; this discourse was not repeated by any other Church figure afterwards, likely because it was highly emotive, controversial, factually incorrect and, therefore, potentially damaging to the ROC.

As evidenced by him visiting what he calls ‘peacekeeping soldiers’ close to Russia’s border with South Ossetia, reporting testimonies to the State Duma’s Civic Chamber and meeting with Russian and South Ossetian politicians, Feofan was, by far, the most politicised figure in the Church in relation to the war. 42 Feofan’s approach, sentiment

42 Feofan is one of the most politically active members of the ROC. Previously, he was at the centre of a spat between the ROC and the GOC for having attended South Ossetia’s presidential inauguration in 2006.
and rhetoric were not officially supported, publicly defended or replicated by other high-positioned members of the clergy, but the fact that his activity and commentaries were well-covered on the ROC’s main website indicates that there was an apparent desire within the Church administration for such opinions to be expressed and disseminated.

A different approach was adopted by other high-profile figures within the Church: the leadership exercised more caution and diplomacy in its public statements in order to avoid negatively impacting on relations between the two churches. Instead, such figures (for example, Patriarch Aleksii II and Archpriest Chaplin) emphasised spiritual, cultural and emotional commonality between Georgia and Russia. Unlike Feofan, senior members of the ROC clergy aligned themselves with the less controversial and inflammatory elements of the official narrative.

Metropolitan Kliment, for example, said that ‘Russia has always stood for peace [in the Caucasus] and for centuries was the guarantor of stability’.43 This sentiment, also expressed by other Church figures in this period, echoed the government’s key strategic narrative of Russia fulfilling a historical and contemporary paternal role over the ‘near abroad’, providing peace and security for those smaller countries and minority populations (including the ‘CLA’) under its guardianship. As Chapter III has shown, state-controlled, Kremlin-aligned Pervyi Kanal also promoted this strategic narrative during this case study.

As highlighted by this example, amongst others, clear narrative alignment on the war was present between the ROC and the Russian government.

One significant post-conflict event was the visit of Catholicos-Patriarch Iliya II to Gori – a Georgian city just outside of South Ossetia which was occupied by Russian forces until 22nd August. On 15th August, the head of the GOC requested assistance from the ROC, asking for the Church, as an important diplomatic actor, to utilise its own political

channels to pass on a personal message to (then) President Medvedev and (then) Prime Minister Putin. The message requested permission to access Gori to ‘meet with the [majority ethnic-Georgian] people and bring them humanitarian aid’. The ROC assisted and, after the Church intervened on the GOC’s behalf, permission was granted by the government. The impression in the corresponding OSMP news report on this request is that it was only through the Church’s political connections that communication with the Kremlin was established. The report also states that it was only as a direct result of the ‘verbal appeal from the Russian Orthodox Church to the Russian authorities’ – signifying that a member of the ROC personally spoke with a senior member of the government who was able to authorise such a major request – that ‘consent was obtained immediately’ to enable the visit to take place. Thus, the ROC clearly gives the impression in this report that it is not only a major (political-)diplomatic actor, but that it also has a significant degree of influence over the Kremlin.

Towards the end of the August 2008, Archpriest Chaplin discussed the topic of ‘canonical territory’, clarifying that – in the wake of Russia recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states earlier that day – “political decisions do not determine the issues of church jurisdiction and spheres of pastoral responsibility.” Echoing Chaplin’s words, Feofan said the following day that “the whole of Orthodoxy is managed not by political norms, but by church canons.” Thus, Chaplin and Feofan reiterated the Church’s official position – unchanged from before the war – that Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain the canonical territory of the GOC.

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44 Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2008l).
45 Ibid.
Yet these Church statements came at a time when calls were publicly being made for Abkhazia and South Ossetia to be incorporated into the ROC’s ‘canonical territory’ to accompany the Russian government incorporating the two territories into Russia’s geopolitical ‘sphere of influence’ by officially recognising their self-proclaimed independence. On 18th August 2008, for example, Aleksandr Batanov, the (then) general director of SPAS, advocated for this course of action to be taken by the ROC. It was also reported that politicians in both Russia and South Ossetia expected such a move. This Orthodox unification did not materialise, reportedly to the consternation of Russian politicians.

The Church resisting such calls in the immediate aftermath of the war by reinforcing its position on canonical jurisdiction over the territories was in defiance of the wishes of the Russian government and the region’s politicians. Deacon Andrei Kuraev, from the liberal wing of the Church, confirmed this tension: the position of the ROC, according to Deacon Kuraev, “diverted from that of the Kremlin” on this issue because, according to one report, ‘it is not beneficial for the ROC to quarrel with the Georgian church.’ As an important example of tension between the Church and the Russian government, this issue indicates Church agency. Despite the Church’s official position, however, a long-planned and much-delayed new ROC church has since been completed in Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, in 2018. The ROC has actively engaged with

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48 Krug (2008); Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2008m).
49 Zherebyatev (2008). The presidential administration of South Ossetia had called for this unification in 2005, with other appeals in the territory occurring as far back as the early 1990s. Portal–Credo.Ru (2008a); Res (2018). The (then) president of South Ossetia, Eduard Kokoity, also expressed a desire for the local church (i.e., the Diocese of Alania) to be incorporated into the ROC after the Russo-Georgian War. Neskuchnyi Sad (2011). For post-war calls in Abkhazia for the ROC to expand its canonical territory to incorporate the break-away republic, see: Portal–Credo.Ru (2008b); Gazeta.ru (2009).
this church by, for example, dispatching clergy and icons and encouraging pilgrimage to the church.\textsuperscript{52}

\textbf{4.3 OSMP’s News Coverage of the Ukraine Crisis}

As well as in the Caucasus region, the ROC has influence and interests in Ukraine. Owing to spiritual, cultural and material ties that are much broader and stronger, Ukraine is of more importance and value to the ROC than Georgia. This difference in importance attached to the two countries by the Church was reflected in the coverage of the Russo-Georgian War and Ukraine crisis on \textit{OSMP}: the outlet reported on the latter conflict significantly more than it did on the former.

Even more so than with the outlet’s coverage of the Russo-Georgian War, the issue of canonical jurisdiction features heavily in \textit{OSMP}’s crisis-reporting on Ukraine. The ROC had canonical jurisdiction over the Ukrainian SSR during the Soviet period, as was also the case over the same territory during the preceding imperial era.\textsuperscript{53} However, in response to the USSR’s political fragmentation during a time of significant \textit{national} re-awakening (and, potentially, in anticipation of the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union), the ROC adopted the policy of ‘several states – one patriarchate’ on 22\textsuperscript{nd} October 1991. This policy gave more autonomy to Church clergy in certain Soviet republics, although this increased autonomy was only granted on the condition that clergy in these republics remained within the broader structure of the ROC. By adopting this approach, the ROC attempted to prevent the unwanted formation across the post-Soviet space of schismatic ‘national’...
Orthodox churches that could operate beyond its influence, thus establishing ‘its priority as maintaining the unity of its canonical territory.’

As part of this restructuring of the ROC, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) was created on 28th October 1990, which operated within the political boundaries of the Ukrainian SSR (and, following formal independence in December 1991, of Ukraine). In 1992, a schism occurred within the UOC-MP over the issue of autocephaly, which led to the creation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kiev Patriarchate (UOC-KP). In the years following, the UOC-MP was granted further autonomy over administrative and operational issues, but, to this day, it still remains a part of the ROC. As a substantial number of the Church’s parishes, parishioners and properties are located in Ukraine, the ROC losing its dominant position in the country would negatively impact on its status and influence within the Orthodox community, as it would no longer be able to lay claim to being the largest and, therefore, the most influential Orthodox church. The UOC-MP faces competition from other religious organisations in Ukraine – primarily from the UOC-KP, but also from the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church (UGCC) and various other Christian denominations.

In part because of the crisis, religion has increasingly been associated with national identity in Ukraine: religious affiliation is also strongly linked to other (seemingly polarised and conflicting) key identity markers, such as ethnicity, culture and political orientation. Indeed, different religious groups in Ukraine appear to indirectly, and

55 One of the key figures behind this movement for Ukrainian autocephaly was Metropolitan Filaret (Denysenko), who later became Patriarch Filaret of the UOC-KP.
56 In this case study, ‘the Church’ describes the ROC and UOC-MP collectively. The ROC/Moscow Patriarchate and UOC-MP are stated explicitly when discussed separately.
57 Kozelsky (2014); Alder, et al. (2020).
sometimes directly, endorse and promote particular visions of cultural, social and, by association, national development that are often mutually exclusive.58 According to post-2013 polling data, significantly more Ukrainian citizens identify with the UOC-KP than the UOC-MP, rather than the other way round as was previously the case.59 It appears, therefore, that the crisis had a negative impact on the UOC-MP, seemingly accelerating the pre-existing trend of the Church’s declining influence in Ukraine.60

The crisis in Ukraine only further exacerbated ethno-cultural identity tensions in the country, of which the increased politicisation of religious affiliation was a prominent feature. A consequence of this apparent socio-cultural polarisation was the emergence of renewed and reinvigorated calls for Ukraine to receive full autocephaly based on the principle of ‘independent country, independent church’. These calls were fuelled by the perception that the ROC is too closely associated with the Russian government (and, by extension, with the country’s military activity in Ukraine) because of their altar-and-throne church-state relationship.61

The same religious issue as that regarding post-war Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 arose following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March 2014 – which church has canonical jurisdiction over a contested territory that has undergone a change in political status as a result of military activity? It was reported that the ROC was taking steps to incorporate Crimea into its canonical territory following the political annexation of the peninsula.62 The ROC – as in the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 – publicly

58 Krawchuk and Bremer, eds. (2016); Clark and Vovk (2019).
59 For example, see: Razumkov Centre (2018). According to this survey, 28.7% of Ukrainians reported that they belong to the UOC-KP, whereas only 12.8% claimed affiliation with the UOC-MP.
60 Karpyak (2014); Verstyuk (2016); Shandra (2018).
62 For example, see: Religious Information Service of Ukraine (RISU) (2015); Gorevoi (2019). In official documents that were amended post-annexation, the wording is ambiguous as to who exactly legally owns Church property in Crimea.
declared that canonical jurisdiction over Crimea will not change. Therefore, Crimea remains under the canonical jurisdiction of the UOC-MP. It has been reported that this major decision made by the leadership of the ROC went against the Russian government’s wishes to the contrary, resulting in discord between the Church and the government.

Additionally, the state ceremony that officially marked Crimea’s accession into the Russian Federation on 18<sup>th</sup> February 2014 was not attended by Patriarch Kirill. It is highly significant that the patriarch chose not to attend this high-profile ceremony, as this event was perceived by many national elites and ordinary Russians as a solemn and historic occasion for the country, making the presence of all major state figures expected. This decision taken by the head of the ROC, who was conspicuous in his absence, is an example of the Church expressing agency by following its own agenda to protect its interests in Ukraine.

Accepting that Crimea no longer constitutes part of Ukraine, the UOC-MP is in the unique position of having three of its eparchies located in the Russian Federation. The UOC-MP retaining jurisdiction over Crimea is a strategic move from the ROC, as the policy does not violate canonical law. It is through adherence to canonical law that the ROC justifies its presence in Ukraine (through the UOC-MP) and throughout ‘Holy Rus’ more broadly. For the ROC, adherence to ‘canonical territory’ also invalidates its Orthodox competitors in the region. If the ROC were to take over the UOC-MP’s jurisdiction of Crimea, the argument for Ukrainian autocephaly would be strengthened on the grounds

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<sup>63</sup> Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2014e and 2014f).
<sup>64</sup> For example, see: Seddon (2019); Vedomosti (2019).
<sup>65</sup> Maltsev (2014).
<sup>66</sup> Jarzyńska (2014).
that such a move only confirms their argument that canonical boundaries should correspond to national borders.⁶⁷

Each overtly crisis-related news report that was uploaded on OSMP between 21⁴th November 2013 and 31⁴th December 2015 was coded according to one of the following main theme-categories:

- **PEACEKEEPING** – reports that: pertain to the peacekeeping and/or mediating role of the Church; offer spiritual and/or moral guidance; denounce the conflict and its consequences;
- **HUMANITARIANISM** – reports that refer to the humanitarian role and aid-related activity of the Church;
- **ORTHODOXY** – reports that discuss ecclesiastical matters of Orthodox ideology, status and structure (especially in relation to Ukraine), and relate to the wider Orthodox community (regional and international);
- **PERSECUTION** – reports that: concern the (alleged) harassment, victimisation and persecution of UOC-MP clergy and/or parishioners; detail the targeting and damaging of UOC-MP property; express offence caused to Church positions and sensibilities;
- **OTHER** – reports that do not fit into any of the four main categories outlined above.

⁶⁷ On 19⁴th November 1943, in relation to the formation of the GOC, the Synod of the ROC adopted the position that ‘canonical boundaries should follow political boundaries, according to Church rules’. Pravoslavnaya Entsiklopediya pod redaktsiei Patriarkha Moskovskogo i vseya Rusi Kirilla (2017). This interpretation of canon law, which the ROC adopted under substantial pressure from Joseph Stalin, is used as the basis for those arguing for autocephaly in Ukraine. The ROC denies the validity of such arguments.
The classifications for these theme-categories were arrived at by establishing, firstly, the content most likely to appear on the outlet based on the investigation of OSMP coverage of the Russo-Georgian War – ‘PEACEKEEPING’ and ‘HUMANITARIANISM’. Upon analysing the data, this list was expanded to include ‘ORTHODOXY’ and ‘PERSECUTION’, as these were major themes that were also being advanced on the outlet. A (relatively) small number of news reports that did not correspond to any of the aforementioned main themes were coded as ‘OTHER’.68

4.3.1 Pre-Conflict Period: 21st November 2013 – 26th February 2014

As Ukraine is of such strategic importance to the ROC, the Moscow Patriarchate would have been following the country’s political and social unrest closely and with great concern. It was expected, therefore, that the ROC’s leading figures would offer significant commentary on the dramatic events that were unfolding in Kiev during the winter of 2013-14. On OSMP, there was – given the nature, scale and gravity of the social unrest – relatively little reporting on the pre-conflict events (Table 4.2): crisis-related news reports were fairly uncommon and often of little substance in terms of meaningful commentary and/or analysis. The number of crisis-related news reports as a percentage of OSMP’s total output for this period was only 2.9%.

68 A concise overview of patterns and shifts in OSMP coverage of the Ukraine crisis is available in Appendix I (Table A2). Table A3 in Appendix I outlines the strong links that are present between the key variables in the crisis-related news reports from this case study.
Table 4.2: Frequency of OSMP’s News Reports on the Ukraine Crisis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEME</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HUMANITARIANISM</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORTHODOXY</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEACEKEEPING</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERSECUTION</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>37</td>
<td></td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>73</td>
<td></td>
<td>322</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As evident in Figure 4.4, a sharp increase in the outlet’s crisis-related pre-conflict reporting occurred towards the end of February 2014: the median news report for this period falls on 20th February 2014, which highlights the uneven distribution and, consequently, dense concentration of such output. (In particular, OSMP was most productive on 21st, 23rd and 26th February, which were after many other important developments had already passed.) In the second half of February, the amount of crisis-related news reports as a proportion of the site’s total output rose sharply from 0.9% in the first half of February to 12%.
Figure 4.4: Frequency of OSMP’s News Reports on the Ukraine Crisis
Despite the considerable global media attention on Ukraine, OSMP adopted a muted approach to the crisis. A significant amount of time elapsed before major direct representations of the ROC were offered by the Church’s high-positioned clergy on the crisis. Excluding an unverified anomaly of Patriarch Kirill being quoted on 2nd December 2013 in a brief and general statement made by a less-prominent clergy member, no commentaries were made by the patriarch until 21st February 2014 – three whole months into the crisis.69

A strong parallel can be drawn between the two case studies in terms of the outlet’s approach, as OSMP’s notable lack of pre-conflict crisis-related reporting on Ukraine mirrored its corresponding coverage of the Russo-Georgian War. In both cases, the ROC was following a (media) strategy of ‘minimal interference’. In the case of Ukraine, this approach was most likely employed by the ROC in order to avoid becoming subject to damaging accusations of interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state.70 As a consequence, the UOC-MP appeared more than any other commentator in this initial period, offering direct commentary through various prominent representatives on its positions and responses.71 The tactic of the UOC-MP fronting the Church’s public response to the developments in Ukraine, accompanied by the ROC’s strategy of ‘minimal

69 Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2013). This researcher was not able to find any evidence to corroborate the statement made in this news report that Patriarch Kirill gave this commentary.
70 During the second presidential term of Viktor Yanukovich (2010–2014), the government showed favouritism towards the UOC-MP at the expense of the UOC-KP, UAOC and UGCC. For example, the UOC-MP experienced greater public prominence in appearing alongside high-profile government figures on numerous occasions and enjoyed privileged access to the Kievo-Pecherskaya Lavra. The UOC-MP, as a result, was increasingly associated with (then) President Yanukovich and one political group in the years leading up to the crisis.
71 The majority of these reports featuring the UOC-MP involved either of its two most prominent clergy members: Metropolitans Vladimir (the head of the UOC-MP at the time) and Antonii (Affairs Administrator of the UOC-MP).
interference’, supported the notion that the UOC-MP, as an autonomous actor within the broader Church, was responding to issues independently within its own area of operation.

In contrast to the Russo-Georgian War, however, the crisis in Ukraine prompted the ROC to undertake a major public intervention in an attempt to influence events in Ukraine in the days leading up to the military annexation of Crimea. This public intervention by the ROC, led by Patriarch Kirill, received significant domestic media coverage, including on OSMP. The resultant increased output on OSMP aligned with the increased output on state-controlled Pervyi Kanal at the same time, as seen in Figure 3.7 in Chapter III. This sudden and significant surge in pre-annexation crisis-related output on both outlets suggests a degree of co-ordination. By adopting narratives that were aligned with or supported those that were being advanced by the Kremlin, the Church moved closer to government positions at this key period in the crisis.

In terms of content, 86% (24) of crisis-related news reports were coded as ‘PEACEKEEPING’, which had a strong positive affective attribute, despite the negative circumstances for the Church. This positive affective attribute was the Church primarily portraying itself as an entity that could bridge the barricades as the only viable honest broker for reconciling not only the protestors and the government, but also, more broadly, Ukraine’s social groups that are divided along key identity markers. In the case of Ukraine, the ‘PEACEKEEPING’ theme appeared more frequently and more prominently in the pre-conflict period than in the case of Georgia.

The frame that is strongly associated with the ‘PEACEKEEPING’ theme is ‘unity’, which was expressed with regard to religion, culture and ethnicity: the religious aspect was raised often through the assertion that the UOC-MP is the only canonically legitimate authority to minister Orthodoxy for the citizens of Ukraine, and by repeatedly stressing that (canonical) Orthodoxy is the primary, if not the only, aspect of shared identity for the
whole country;\textsuperscript{72} the cultural aspect was expressed by emphasising the alleged shared language, traditions/customs, history and worldview of Russia and Ukraine; the ethnic element was brought up by discussing extensive kindred (i.e., ‘blood’) relations.\textsuperscript{73} Whilst the Church does not explicitly state that Ukraine is not a separate country and its citizens a separate people, a considerable effort was made by the Church to ‘narrow the gap’ between Russia and Ukraine in public perceptions by foregrounding these spiritual, cultural and ethnic ties, as the pre-conflict CDA in Appendix II illustrates.\textsuperscript{74}

\textbf{4.3.2 During-Conflict Period: 27\textsuperscript{th} February 2014 – 23\textsuperscript{rd} February 2015}

A larger amount of crisis-related material was published on \textit{OSMP} in the during-conflict period, especially between mid-June and late August 2014 (Figure 4.4). Given that the full-scale (para)military conflict in the east of the country materialised, intensified and peaked within this particular time-frame, a significant increase in the quantity of crisis-related output was expected. The distribution of such crisis-related news reports was not uniform in this period, however, as such output was notably more concentrated at certain times. It is the prevalence of certain themes and their uneven distribution of news reports,\textsuperscript{72} Vladimir Legoida, chairman of the (former) Synod Information Department, later argued in one report that ‘it is extremely difficult to unite Ukrainian society on any foundation other than a spiritual-moral basis’, with the UOC-MP being ‘that non-state force, that core of the Ukrainian people, which can reunite those people standing on different sides of the barricades.’ Legoida, V. (2014), quoted in: Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2014e).

\textsuperscript{73} Patriarch Kirill, for example, said: “[w]e are one family, we are of one blood – Orthodox blood.” Patriarch Kirill (2015), quoted in: Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2015b).

\textsuperscript{74} It was reported that, in 2018, Patriarch Kirill privately convinced the Constantinople Patriarch Bartholomew I that Russia and Ukraine are ‘one people’. Melnikov (2019). In 2014, Metropolitan Hilarion said that “[i]ts core is the three fraternal peoples that once constituted one people – Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian.” Metropolitan Hilarion (2014), quoted in: Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2014d).
particularly ‘PEACEKEEPING’ and ‘HUMANITARIANISM’, that reveals important information about the Church’s media strategy during this period.

Immediately following the appearance of Russia’s ‘little green men’ in Crimea on 27th February 2014 – an event which started the process of the peninsula’s annexation into the Russian Federation – the frequency of crisis-related news reports on OSMP dropped sharply (Figure 4.4). A comparison with the corresponding media coverage from Fond ‘Russkii Mir’ in the following chapter suggests that this significant fall in reportage was the ROC expressing agency by attempting to protect its organisational interests at this uncertain time for the Church in Ukraine. In May 2014 and mid-to-late June 2014, there were sudden increases in the production of news reports coded as ‘PEACEKEEPING’, which, respectively, occurred in response to: 1) the murder of pro-Russian activists in Odessa in the context of escalating civil unrest in the south and east of Ukraine, and the run-up to the country’s presidential election; and 2) the increasing (para)military activity in the east of the country.

From 18th June 2014 onwards, the number of news reports on the ‘HUMANITARIANISM’ theme increased rapidly in response to the announcement that Russia would be providing humanitarian aid to (rebel-held) areas of eastern Ukraine. The humanitarian operation, to which the ROC notably and publicly contributed, involved delivering the aid by lorry convoy in August 2014.75 From initial mobilisation through to post-delivery return, the provision of aid using large convoys received saturated media coverage in Russia. This period of ‘HUMANITARIANISM’ dominating the outlet’s news

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75 It was revealed at the time that the Russian military was involved in this aid operation, which was said to be Russia’s major exercise in ‘soft power’. For example, see: Goncharova (2014). It was also reported that a number of the lorries were far from full, raising suspicions that they were also transporting weapons, ammunition and supplies to the pro-Russian fighters in Ukraine. For example, see: Olevskii (2014). Since August 2014, numerous other high-profile humanitarian aid deliveries by lorry convoy from Russia to eastern Ukraine have been conducted.
agenda lasted from mid-June to around 9th September 2014. The overarching frame of ‘HUMANITARIANISM’ was ‘ROC benevolence’: the Moscow Patriarchate portrayed the Church – particularly the ROC – as primarily a humanitarian organisation whose only role was to alleviate suffering in the Donbass by selflessly taking on a leading role in the country’s aid effort at great financial cost.

Figure 4.5: Frequency of OSMP’s News Reports on the Ukraine Crisis

(‘PEACEKEEPING’ and ‘HUMANITARIANISM’)

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76 Three large-scale, state-sponsored deliveries of humanitarian aid to eastern Ukraine were carried out in the during-conflict period – August 2014, September 2014 and January 2015. These deliveries received substantial domestic and global media coverage.
In terms of frequency, the ‘PEACEKEEPING’ theme decreasing sharply and the ‘HUMANITARIANISM’ theme increasing dramatically at the same time strongly suggests that the Church changed its media strategy. The clear crossover in frequency between the two themes over mid-to-late June constituted OSMP’s first major thematic shift in output – from ‘PEACEKEEPING’ to ‘HUMANITARIANISM’ (Figure 4.5). A change in the most common frame on the outlet accompanied this thematic shift – from ‘(spiritual/cultural/ethnic) unity’ to ‘ROC benevolence’. In the second half of June 2014, crisis-related output was 15.1% of the outlet’s total output, and 16.4% in the first half of August 2014. These percentage levels were the outlet’s highest across this case study.

As ‘HUMANITARIANISM’ news reports often reiterated that it organised and co-ordinated a substantial part the state-led humanitarian relief, the ROC likely wanted to publicise its contribution to the country’s aid effort for the benefit of its regional interests. In doing so, the humanitarian aspect was strongly foregrounded over the religious aspect. Thus, the Church portrayed itself in a positive light as the humanitarian actor in Ukraine – selfless, honest and loyal. In this regard, similarities are evident with the framing of the humanitarian mission undertaken by the ROC during the Russo-Georgian War, but, in the case of Ukraine, the issue was mobilised and publicised to an extent that was much greater and more co-ordinated.

4.3.3 Post-Conflict Period: 24th February 2015 – 31st December 2015

In comparison with the during-period, a decline in crisis-related coverage took place in the post-conflict period (Figure 4.4), with large decreases in the frequency of news reports coded as ‘PEACEKEEPING’ and ‘HUMANITARIANISM’ (Figure 4.6). The
'PERSECUTION' theme, however, saw only a minimal reduction in frequency, which was not in proportion to the general trend. As a result, ‘PERSECUTION’ became the most common theme for news reports on Ukraine in the post-conflict period (51%, 37).

**Figure 4.6:** Frequency of OSMP’s News Reports on the Ukraine Crisis by Theme and Time-Period

The distribution of this post-conflict thematic output is also revealing. Overall, ‘HUMANITARIANISM’ was more concentrated in the first half of this post-conflict period.

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77 This graph does not show data from the following theme-categories: ‘ORTHODOXY’ and ‘OTHER’.
period, whereas ‘PERSECUTION’ was more prevalent in the second half. This uneven
distribution of ‘HUMANITARIANISM’ and ‘PERSECUTION’ indicates a second major
thematic shift on OSMP, which occurred between mid-June and mid-July 2015 (Figure
4.7). The accompanying shift in frame was from ‘ROC benevolence’ to ‘CLA – victim’.
The ‘CLA – victim’ frame, which was central to reports coded as ‘PERSECUTION’,
contains the fundamental idea that the ‘CLA’, owing to their religious affiliation with the
ROC-aligned UOC-MP, were being subjected to discrimination by state-enabled Ukrainian
nationalists. OSMP almost always portrayed the UOC-MP (i.e., the organisation, its clergy
and/or its parishioners) as being subject to harassment, victimisation and persecution. This
narrative was advanced by prominent members of the Church. For example, Archpriest
Balashov, Deputy Chairman of the Department for External Church Relations, stated that
‘a campaign of hounding and persecution has been launched [in Ukraine] against the self-
governing Ukrainian Orthodox Church, including at the level of legislation.’78 According
to the ROC, this alleged persecution of the UOC-MP was taking place at the hands of
Ukraine’s government and state organs, nationalist organisations and different Christian
denominations operating in the country.

As the CDA in Appendix II shows, these three groups were directly or indirectly
juxtaposed against, compared to and associated with one another, which creates and
reinforces for the audience cognitive associations between, as was portrayed, the
illegitimate (post-Yanukovich) Ukrainian government(s), persecutory Ukrainian narrow
nationalism, and socially and culturally destructive Ukrainian religions. Those
‘compatriots’ affiliated with the UOC-MP were presented on OSMP as being the target of
such groups. Thus, ‘victimhood’ was mobilised as a tool to help achieve the Church’s

objective of defending its interests in Ukraine, as the status of ‘victim’ functions to signal moral righteousness and generate political and legal support for the UOC-MP and ROC.

**Figure 4.7:** Frequency of *OSMP*’s News Reports on the Ukraine Crisis

(‘HUMANITARIANISM’ and ‘PERSECUTION’)

In contrast to *OSMP* distinctly foregrounding ‘PERSECUTION’ during the Ukraine crisis, ‘CLA – victim’ was infrequently employed as a primary frame in the outlet’s coverage of the Russo-Georgian War. As seen with *Pervyi Kanal*’s corresponding coverage, news output on the crisis was oriented towards (negative) emotions, heavily referencing culture, identity and history. *OSMP* shifting its crisis-related output to ‘PERSECUTION’ was the outlet, similar to *Pervyi Kanal*, engaging in provoking a strong,
negative emotional response amongst its audience by portraying ‘one’s own’ under threat because of their religious identity.

This post-conflict shift in ‘PERSECUTION’ is evidence of the Church ‘othering’ (particular aspects of) Ukraine: in addition to Ukraine being portrayed, in many respects, as Russia’s political and cultural enemy in the Russian mass media, particular institutions, organisations, communities and figures in Ukraine were portrayed as religious enemies of Russia on OSMP – the UOC-KP, UAOC and UGCC, and their supporters. As a result, the outlet’s coverage added a different aspect to the Russian mass media’s reporting on Ukraine – a religious dimension.

4.4 Conclusion

As detailed in Tables A1 and A2 in Appendix I, the significant developments, patterns and shifts in crisis-related output on OSMP indicate that a media strategy was adopted by the Russian Orthodox Church for both the Russo-Georgian War and the Ukraine crisis. Whilst the close nature of the church-state relationship and examples of alignment between the output of OSMP and state-controlled, Kremlin-aligned Pervyi Kanal might suggest an overall lack of autonomy for the Church, the key findings in this chapter strongly indicate that the ROC, even if not entirely autonomous in relation to the Russian government during these two conflicts, had a significant degree of agency which allowed it to act according to its organisational objectives. The ROC exercised agency on a number of occasions, which was reflected in its media output.

For the most part of each case study’s pre-conflict period, major crisis-related events were significantly underreported, with extremely few examples of the ROC offering direct commentary. OSMP’s relatively muted and restrained response to both sets of crisis
events in these initial periods was notably different to that of *Pervyi Kanal*, whose coverage was extensive. *OSMP* divergence from *Pervyi Kanal* suggests that the ROC exercised agency by adopting a notably different approach to the government in covering the pre-conflict tensions and, in the context of Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea. This cautiously distanced and relatively neutral approach of ‘minimal interference’ at times of significant media mobilisation and co-ordination in Russia was likely a product of the ROC engaging in ‘religious diplomacy’ in order to protect its broader strategic interests in the post-Soviet space.

Immediately after the Russo-Georgian War had officially ended, the ROC made significant efforts to overtly and publicly support the Russian government and military. The ROC overtly and prominently replicated the government’s key strategic narratives regarding the international system, such as the assertion that the Russian state historically has a paternal role in the post-Soviet space to protect the region’s (minority) populations, as the guarantor of peace and stability. During the Ukraine crisis, however, the Church, whilst mobilised earlier (i.e., shortly prior to Russian military intervention), more extensively and in a more co-ordinated manner than in the context of the Russo-Georgian War, never publicly supported the Russian government’s annexation of Crimea or broader activity in Ukraine.

Unlike it was in the wake of the war in Georgia, public support for the government and state was not expressed by the Church over its actions in Ukraine. The Church did, however, *indirectly* support the Russian government, with many commentaries made by key representatives of the ROC aligning with the Russian government’s main strategic narratives. For example, the Church supported the government position that Russia is the natural political and economic partner for post-Soviet countries, owing to strong religious, cultural, ethnic and historical ties.
The Church, particularly in the case of the Ukraine crisis, actively engaged with and selectively utilised those elements of the government’s narratives that were less damaging to its regional interests. Thus, such clear differences between the coverage of the two conflicts on OSMP suggest that the Church’s approach to the Ukraine crisis was significantly changed from that taken for the Russo-Georgian War. This different approach indicates a dynamic process of learning and adaptation at the ROC in response to perceived weaknesses and mistakes in its communication strategy that contributed to some reputational damage for the Church and to Russia’s ‘defeat’ in the information domain.

Despite the ROC’s broad alignment with the government, however, the Church defied pressure from the government and some social figures to adopt expansionist measures regarding canonical jurisdiction in the South Caucasus and Crimea. This defiance from the Church over the issue of canonical territory was even expressed through public statements, disseminated through OSMP, that were made by prominent Church figures. These decisions taken by the leadership indicate that, even in the context of a highly restrictive environment (i.e., one of national emergency) in Russia during the Russo-Georgian War and the Ukraine crisis, the ROC was still able to publicly exercise a significant degree of agency with regard to major issues of importance to the Church. The Church, even whilst broadly aligning with and not criticising the government when its own interests were severely threatened, is not blindly obedient to the Kremlin; rather, the Church has a degree of agency to act according to its own interests, even in times of restricted autonomy brought about by war or crisis.

Since August 2008, a number of prominent Church figures, including (then) Metropolitan Kirill, Metropolitan Onufrii and Archpriest Chaplin, have referenced and/or adopted the concept of ‘information war(fare)’, which was promoted by the Russian government and the country’s state media executives. It appears, however, that successive
patriarchs, for the most part, did not consider placing the Church at the forefront of an ‘information war’ to be in the best interests of the ROC. The main media outlet of the Church, therefore, largely remained at the peripheries of Russia’s media campaigns during both conflicts.

The fact that the ROC’s communication strategies during the two conflicts featured distinct specificities that related to the Church’s own organisational interests in Georgia and Ukraine undermines the utility of the ‘information war(fare)’ concept as a tool of academic analysis; as it is applied in the West to Russia, the concept of ‘information war(fare)’ does not account for the divergence amongst and agency of different state actors who, whilst being affiliated to or aligned with the state, are not part of a uniform state machine in Russia. Thus, different state actors, such as the ROC, use information in a different way to the Russian government and for different purposes.
Chapter V. Conflict Representations by a Manufactured Cultural Organisation: 

*Fond ‘Russkii Mir’*

5.1 Introduction

After having explored the activity of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) during times of Russian military intervention in post-Soviet states, this thesis now turns to another main cultural organisation – *Fond ‘Russkii Mir’* (*FRM*). *FRM* is of particular importance to this thesis because, as explored in Chapter I, its relationship to the state is notably different to that of the ROC. The ROC is an *organic* cultural organisation that long predated the concept of ‘soft power’. *FRM*, conversely, is a *manufactured* cultural organisation, as its origins are found in a 2007 presidential decree under Vladimir Putin at a time when the Russian government was paying a great deal of attention to the concept of ‘soft power’.¹ As a result, *FRM*’s structure, management and funding are strongly linked to the Kremlin.

In official Russian discourse, *FRM* is presented as Russia’s main state organisation of ‘soft power’, as it promotes the country’s language and culture to foreign audiences through cultural diplomacy to create a positive image of the country. It appears, however, that this outward-facing cultural organisation functions as more than what its official objectives suggest. An analysis of the organisation in times of national emergency for Russia highlights *FRM*’s additional role and purpose.

¹ Whilst the term ‘soft power’ was not used in the presidential decree, the organisation was created at a time of sustained high-level political discourse on the concept. In trying to achieve the ‘formation of favourable public opinion […] on the country’ (*Russkii Mir, Fond “Russkii Mir”*, n.d.), the organisation’s own objectives clearly echo discourse on ‘soft power’. In effect, *FRM* is presented in official Russian discourse as a vehicle for the generation of ‘soft power’ for Russia.
This chapter investigates FRM’s agency in relation to the Russian government. To do so, this chapter analyses and evaluates FRM’s representations of the Russo-Georgian War (2008) and the Ukraine crisis (2013–present day) on the organisation’s own media outlet Russkii Mir (RM). RM’s coverage of these two conflicts is then compared to that of Russia’s state-controlled, government-aligned federal television channel Pervyi Kanal, which, as established in Chapter III, closely reflected the positions and reproduced the narratives of the Kremlin regarding these military conflicts. As this chapter later shows, the agency of this government-sponsored cultural organisations is revealed particularly clearly during periods of national emergency.

As was the case with the ROC, FRM was engaged in significant culture-based activity in the post-Soviet space before, during and after the two case studies (particularly in Ukraine prior to 2014). Therefore, both the ROC and FRM actively bridged and, albeit to a lesser degree than previously and in different ways, continue to bridge Russia with other post-Soviet countries. It is by engaging in such activity that the two organisations are both considered in official Russian discourse to be generating ‘soft power’ for Russia. Furthermore, they share certain ideological underpinnings: the concept of the ‘Russian World’ – a prescriptive civilisational identity which primarily relates to those who originate from territories that belonged to the Russian Empire and the USSR – has been actively promoted by members of both FRM and the ROC.²

Whilst having certain aspects in common, these two cultural organisations have been shaped differently by their origins, structural specificities, objectives and interests. The extent to which these differences with the ROC affect the activity of FRM in times of national emergency is to be explored in this chapter.

² For an example of Patriarch Kirill promoting the ‘Russian World’ concept, see: Interfaks-Religiya (2009). A look at the relationship between the Church’s concept of ‘Holy Rus’ and the concept of the ‘Russian World’ can be found in Chapter I.
5.1.1 Sources and Method

*RМ* is comprised of several different outlets. In this chapter, only the text-based online news service is explored, as it is the organisation’s most active outlet and the most responsive to events. In 2008, the media arm of *FRM* was not well-established, which meant that little news output was being produced by *RM* at the time of the Russo-Georgian War. Therefore, owing to the limited amount of primary source material on the Russo-Georgian War, most of this chapter will be dedicated to the outlet’s coverage of the Ukraine crisis.

The archived output of *RM* news reports is accessible on the outlet’s website. In order to obtain the two datasets for this chapter, the ‘search’ function on the *RM* website was used to bring up the outlet’s Russian-language news reports on the aforementioned military conflicts within the scope of the respective case studies. The time-frame for the analysis of the Russo-Georgian War was from 1st January 2008 to 13th November 2008, and from 21st November 2013 to 31st December 2015 for the Ukraine crisis. A number of key words were entered separately to bring up the different crisis-related news reports: ‘Грузия’, ‘Южная Осетия’ and ‘Абхазия’ (‘Georgia’, ‘South Ossetia’ and ‘Abkhazia’, respectively) for the Russo-Georgian War; and ‘Украина’, ‘Донбасс’, ‘Донецк’, ‘Луганск’ and ‘УПЦ’ (‘Ukraine’, ‘Donbass’, ‘Donetsk’, ‘Lugansk’ and ‘UOC’, respectively) for the Ukraine crisis. The news reports that were relevant to the political, military, social and/or cultural tensions in the two countries were extracted for inclusion in the respective datasets.

In total, the number of individual *RM* news reports on the Russo-Georgian War is 5, whilst the number on the crisis in Ukraine comes to 1,837. Even when taking into
consideration the differences in context between the case studies, this stark disparity in coverage strongly suggests that a substantially different approach to reporting on the two conflicts was adopted by FRM. Indeed, an analysis of the content of the outlet’s conflict coverage across the two case studies also suggests that a different approach was adopted.

Using content analysis, the frequency of crisis-related news reports on RM was established across the three main time-periods of each case study – pre-, during- and post-conflict. A thematic analysis and frame analysis of this primary data was conducted in order to examine the content of this conflict coverage. To track the developments, patterns and shifts in content over time, a comparative frequency analysis of the main themes was undertaken. This quantitative and qualitative data was also compared to that produced on Pervyi Kanal and OSMP (from Chapters III and IV, respectively). Furthermore, a Critical Discourse Analysis was undertaken to reveal the specific framing techniques that were employed by the outlet in covering the conflicts (Appendix III).

Owing to the small amount of primary data on the Russo-Georgian War on RM, the following coding of news reports only applies to the outlet’s coverage of the Ukraine crisis. The Russian-language Ukraine-related news reports uploaded to RM included: text-based reports that were specifically created for RM; text-based reports republishing material that first appeared on other media outlets; and videos taken from Russian television programmes that featured representatives of FRM. To assess the thematic content of the media output, each relevant news report was coded according to one of the following categories: 3

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3 The coding of the data in this thesis was based on the author’s own classifications and judgement. The descriptions provided here are not exhaustive, but they do cover the main scope of each theme-category. As there was thematic overlap in many news reports, a judgement was made by this researcher as to the main theme in such texts.
• POLITICS – reports relating to the political and military aspects of the crisis (for example: political events and commentaries; civil unrest, (para)military activity and war; administrative, diplomatic, travel and legal issues between Russia and Ukraine; trade and economic relations);
• SOCIETY – reports pertaining to the social aspects of the crisis (for example: socio-political issues; pro-Russian ground support and anti-Maidan opposition; (alleged) discrimination, harassment and persecution towards ethnic Russians and Russian-language speakers in Ukraine);
• CULTURE – reports concerning the identity-related cultural aspects of the crisis, including coverage of FRM and non-FRM events that explored areas of Russian and/or Ukrainian language, culture and history;
• RELIGION – reports about religion and religious groups;
• HUMANITARIANISM – reports exploring Russia’s humanitarian-aid response to the military conflict in eastern Ukraine;
• MMST (i.e., monuments, memory, symbology, toponymy) – reports that look at the tensions and conflicts regarding attitudes towards and interpretations of history, symbols and words/place names, and towards the observance of certain cultural practices;
• MEDIA – reports relating to Russian media outlets operating in Ukraine and pro-Russian cultural figures, (for example: the banning or censoring of certain broadcast, print and digital media outlets and cultural output; the reporting of (Russian) journalist victims and casualties; the restriction of cultural figures’ movements for publicly supporting Russia);
• OTHER – all other reports that are not applicable to any of the above categories.
These theme-categories were compiled through a process that was both deductive and inductive. The most prominent aspects of military conflict that feature in global conflict-related media discourse were chosen as the starting point for coding the primary data – ‘POLITICS’, ‘SOCIETY’ and ‘HUMANITARIANISM’. As the primary data was collated and analysed, it became clear that more main themes had been covered by RM. Therefore, the list of the outlet’s primary theme-categories was expanded to include ‘CULTURE’, ‘RELIGION’, ‘MMST’ and ‘MEDIA’. A small number of crisis-related news reports did not fit into any of the aforementioned main categories and so were coded as ‘OTHER’.

5.2 RM’s News Coverage of the Russo-Georgian War

Apart from FRM’s monthly magazine Russkii Mir.ru, the organisation’s media services at the time of the Russo-Georgian War were either not yet established or not as developed as they would later be. An analysis of RM news output reveals that, at the time of the Russo-Georgian War, use of this outlet by the government as a tool for disseminating the preferred narratives of the Kremlin was limited. As discussed in previous chapters, the opinion that the country had failed to convincingly articulate its justification for military intervention and advance its strategic narratives during the war was commonly held amongst Russia’s political and media elite. It was this perceived ‘defeat’ to the West in the information domain that led to substantial changes in Russia’s approach to media communications for advancing its agenda in the international arena.

In this case study, only five news reports and articles specifically discussing relations between Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Georgia and Russia were uploaded to RM. Even though RM was still in its relative infancy as a functioning news outlet at the time,
this number is still low. Owing to this small amount of conflict-related material produced by *RM*, no significant developments and patterns in either the frequency or content of such output are observable in this case study. The first crisis-related news report that was published (August 2008) was the outlet’s most comprehensive. As the CDA of this text in Appendix III details, the author (i.e., the head of *FRM*, Vyacheslav Nikonov) systematically and faithfully reproduced the central strategic narratives advanced at the time by the Russian government and in the state-controlled mass media. This text, as a result, was highly critical of both Georgia and the West, to whom blame for the war was solely apportioned.⁴

Notably, this initial commentary was uploaded to the portal over a week after the war officially ended, meaning that all of these five news reports were published in the post-conflict period (i.e., between 13th August 2008 and 13th November 2008). The timing of this output is highly significant as it reveals that the online media services of state-funded *FRM* were not mobilised or utilised during the war. As well as revealing that *FRM*’s response to the military conflict was on an extremely small-scale, an overview of this output shows that the organisation’s media outlet was not instrumentalised pro-actively in the build-up to the war in the way that the Russian television media were.

The notable lack of coverage of the Russo-Georgian War on *RM* was not a result of the cultural organisation showing agency, but, rather, a consequence of the outlet not being developed enough at the time to serve as a vehicle for the large-scale dissemination of government-aligned narratives. Moreover, this lack of coverage is a result of *RM*, along with other Internet-based outlets, not featuring in government plans for media mobilisation and utilisation in times of national emergency. *FRM* began to significantly increase the

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⁴ Russkii Mir (2008). This report is an exact reproduction of Nikonov’s *Russkii Mir.ru* magazine article from August 2008.
output of its Russian-language news service in early January 2009. At this point, almost six months had passed since the (official) end of the war, by which time the military conflict had slipped down the news agendas of the country’s mass media outlets and ceased to be a major international news story.

5.3 RM’s News Coverage of the Ukraine Crisis

A perception prevailed in Russia’s political and media circles post-war that the country’s state-controlled media structure and its accompanying communication strategy failed to effectively advance the Kremlin’s strategic narratives and persuade audiences. Thus, many figures in these circles felt that, despite winning the military war, Russia had lost the ‘information war’. From this perceived ‘defeat’, a ‘realisation’ later emerged that there were potential (geo)political benefits for the state in orchestrating and mobilising a media (mis)information campaign across all state-affiliated news outlets, including Internet-based media resources. It appears that the notable scaling up of RM activity six months after the Russo-Georgian War was a product of this ‘realisation’. Additionally, the media portfolio of FRM was expanded and received significant investment following the war, which resulted in media services on RM producing comparatively much more news output at the time of the Ukraine crisis.5

The Euromaidan materialised in opposition to the country’s political, economic and social (re)orientation towards Russia under the regime of (then) President Viktor Yanukovich, with opponents to the president’s decision to bring Ukraine closer to Russia instead favouring an EU-/Western-aligned developmental path. These two options were

presented as being mutually exclusive – a choice between Russia or the West. Thus, the protests in Kiev were considered by many elites in Russia to be deeply anti-Russian in nature. This perception was reinforced by the fact that these demonstrations were also being attended by Ukrainian nationalists – mainly representing the political party Svoboda and (paramilitary) organisation Pravyi Sektor – who had previously expressed and were then expressing anti-Russian sentiments. RM’s coverage of the Ukraine crisis reflected this perception that the protests were fundamentally anti-Russian.

5.3.1 Pre-Conflict Period: 21st November 2013 – 26th February 2014

The time-frame that most closely aligns to a pre-conflict period covers the initial Euromaidan street protests on Kiev’s Independence Square up to the eve of Russia’s military annexation of Crimea. Similar to OSMP’s corresponding conflict coverage, a sharp increase in the amount of Ukraine-related news reports occurred on RM in late February 2014 (i.e., from 19th February), which was only days prior to the appearance of Russia’s unmarked armed troops in Crimea (Figure 5.1). These news reports amounted to 17.3% (91) of the total output on RM for the second half of February 2014, which had risen sharply from 4% (20) for the first half of February.
Figure 5.1: Frequency of News Reports on the Ukraine Crisis on RM and OSMP

The data for OSMP is taken from Chapter IV.
The most common theme-category in this time-period is ‘CULTURE’ (Table 5.1), which mostly featured reports about the organisation’s cultural activity at its centres across Ukraine. FRM’s centre-based reports were not (overtly) about the crisis; rather, these texts were reporting on educational and outreach events across the country which were about the language, culture and history of Russia or, as aspects of a shared (civilisational) identity, of both Russia and Ukraine. Given the organisation’s remit and objectives, the presence of such language-oriented, culture-based news reporting of this kind was expected.

The context, however, makes their frequent appearance unusual: FRM cultural events were continuing to take place across Ukraine at a time of increasing national crisis for the country, even during the uncertain and turbulent days and weeks prior to, during and after Russia’s annexation of Crimea (i.e., late February and March 2014). The foundation, therefore, placed a significant emphasis on culture-related issues and cultural activity that was taking place at its numerous centres across Ukraine, despite increasing social tensions. Owing to the context and timing of their appearance, the news reports coded as ‘CULTURE’ are indirectly related to the crisis, hence their inclusion in the data.

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7 FRM had centres right across Ukraine prior to the crisis – Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk, Gorlovko, Kharkov, Kherson, Kiev, Krivoi Rog, Lugansk, Nikolaev, Odessa, Rovno, Sevastopol, Simferopol and Zaporozhe. FRM still has functioning centres in Donetsk, Gorlovko, Lugansk, Sevastopol and Simferopol – all of which lie beyond the control of the Ukrainian authorities, as they are located in annexed and rebel-held territory.
Heavily implicit in such news reports is the notion that certain aspects of language, history and culture – which are presented as key *shared* components of both Russian and Ukrainian national identity – are a source of national unification for Ukraine. As explored in the CDA of *RM* reports in Appendix III, the festival commemorating the 200th anniversary of Taras Shevchenko’s birth is just one example of many significant efforts made by *FRM* to promote a sense of *shared* culture between Russia and Ukraine. Thus, the frame that is most common and most prominent within the ‘CULTURE’ theme-category is ‘(Russian-Ukrainian) unity and commonality’. The emphasis on this particular frame – likely aimed to dampen the flames of civil unrest on the Euromaidan – was a central aspect of *FRM*’s media strategy.

The differences between Russia and Ukraine in the perceptions of both Ukrainians and Russia’s ‘CLA’ were attempted to be minimised by promoting linguistic and cultural commonalities, as well as a shared civilisational (and developmental) model best suited to
Ukraine. As a result, this frame strongly aligned with and supported the government’s strategic narrative of Russia – not the West – being the natural ally of and partner for post-Soviet countries on the basis of shared culture, history and general worldview. This strategic narrative, with which RM output aligns, also feeds into and supports the civilisational approach to identity that is prominent in Russian political discourse and lies at the heart of FRM’s concept of the ‘Russian World’.

If ‘CULTURE’ is removed from the data on the grounds that not all of its news reports directly relate to the crisis, the outlet’s frequency pattern more closely follows that of OSMP. This alignment between the two outlets is clear at key stages of the crisis in the pre- and during-conflict periods, such as in February 2014 and from mid-April to mid-October 2014 (Figure 5.1). RM and OSMP, as their similar frequency patterns suggest, conducted their pre-conflict reporting in a similar fashion, particularly visible with their sudden and dramatic increase in crisis-related coverage in the final ten days of February 2014. Furthermore, the dominant frame of RM’s ‘CULTURE’ theme (i.e., ‘(Russian-Ukrainian) unity and commonality’) is very similar to that of OSMP’s ‘PEACEKEEPING’ theme (i.e., ‘spiritual/cultural/ethnic unity’) in the corresponding time-period. Additionally, most of the increased output on the two outlets in late February came from these two themes, respectively.

As is evident from a comparative analysis of the primary data, these two outlets both undertook significant efforts to create an impression of commonality and, even, unity between Russia and Ukraine by foregrounding shared culture and identity. Furthermore, such foregrounding on OSMP and RM is in agreement with Kremlin-aligned Pervyi Kanal’s increased emphasis on culture and identity in its coverage. Therefore, this comparison indicates that there was a certain level of alignment in the approaches taken by
RM and OSMP in reporting on the Ukraine crisis in the pre-conflict period, both in terms of frequency patterns and content.

5.3.2 During-Conflict Period: 27th February 2014 – 23rd February 2015

The time-frame that most closely aligns to a during-conflict period covers the beginning of Russia’s military annexation of Crimea to the broad observation of the Minsk II peace agreement. Owing to the large number of major events that took place in Ukraine in 2014, the highest frequency of crisis-related news reports on RM is found in the during-conflict period (61.9%). The developments, shifts and patterns in such output in this period offer a revealing insight into the organisation’s media strategy at the height of the political and military crisis in Ukraine.

A high level of Ukraine-related news reporting was maintained throughout the operation to annex Crimea (from late February to the end of March 2014) (Figure 5.1). From mid-June to late August 2014, the overall frequency of crisis-related news reports on RM increased once again. This increase in output coincided with the intense media attention in Russia surrounding what were described in the country’s political and (mass) media discourses as humanitarian interventions in eastern Ukraine.

Overall, in this period, the frequency pattern of RM’s crisis-related news coverage of Ukraine is notably similar to that of OSMP. Whilst the frequency levels are clearly different between the two outlets in terms of absolute numbers, the trajectories (i.e., the timing of peaks and troughs, and the relative extent and significance of changes in frequency) reflect one another particularly closely from mid-April to mid-October 2014. As these strikingly similar patterns occur across the most intense phase of (para)military activity in the during-conflict period, it appears that close co-ordination took place between
the two organisations over their media coverage of the crisis during this time of national emergency and geopolitical uncertainty for Russia.

The content of *RM*'s high-frequency reporting in the month following the military seizure of Crimea was overwhelmingly comprised of the ‘POLITICS’ and ‘CULTURE’ themes. At a time of considerably heightened diplomatic tension between Russia and Ukraine following the former’s military intervention in Crimea, the publication of an unexpectedly high number of ‘CULTURE’ reports continued throughout the annexation operation. In particular, an increased effort to publish culture-related news and publicise the activity of *FRM* centres in Ukraine was undertaken in the latter half of March 2014, which was around the time of the political annexation of Crimea.

Around the time of the annexation of Crimea in February-March 2014, references to culture and cultural issues – for example, regarding shared aspects of Russian and Ukrainian identity – increased significantly in speeches made by Vladimir Putin. By February 2014, ‘the cultural context […] [became] central in […] [Putin’s] nationalist rhetoric’. These public references to culture and identity within high-level political discourse in Russia reflect this chapter’s findings on *FRM*’s dramatically increased and concentrated culture- and identity-based media coverage at the same time.

In addition to the fact that the cultural organisation has numerous, strong links to the Kremlin, this clear discursive alignment suggests that the political leadership, to a notable degree, influenced the output of *RM*. It seems likely, therefore, that the outlet’s sudden and sustained high level of culture-oriented discourse and activity constituted part of a state-wide effort of damage limitation in trying to mitigate the (potential) negative response to Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Moreover, this culture-oriented output also

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8 Kasianenko (2020).
served to ‘sell’ the annexation of Crimea and, more broadly, justify Russia’s interference in the Ukraine crisis to the country’s domestic public and Russophone audiences in the ‘near abroad’ as national (re)unification, rather than imperialist expansionism.10 The discursive alignment between RM output and the country’s political figures during the annexation of Crimea indicates that the state-sponsored cultural organisation’s agency in relation to the Russian government was so limited as to be minimal.

RM’s extensive crisis-related coverage throughout the annexation operation lay in stark contrast to that of OSMP, on which the frequency of crisis-related news reports dropped sharply immediately after the military operation in Crimea began. The ROC had reverted to a more muted approach. OSMP’s output falling suddenly with this muted approach was likely down to the fact that this particular period was an extremely vulnerable time for the Church’s interests in Ukraine because the political and social consequences of the annexation for the Church were still unclear. Unlike the ROC, FRM did not have interests that were independent from the state. OSMP’s divergent approach to RM during the annexation – on the basis that, at that point in time, FRM was aligned to the government – could be interpreted as the Church expressing agency by pursuing its own agenda to protect its interests in response to challenging events.

From April to mid-May 2014, a sharp decline occurred in the frequency of news reports coded as ‘CULTURE’, which could be explained, in part, by numerous FRM centres abruptly ceasing their activities in western, southern and central Ukraine in light of the changing political and social realities in the country.11 ‘POLITICS’, which largely

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10 Teper (2016). During the Russo-Georgian War, Russia’s military operation was perceived and portrayed as imperialist expansionism in the West.
11 Those news reports discussing activity at FRM centres located in western, central and southern Ukraine (excluding Crimea) eventually ceased. The activity of FRM centres across the country was impacted by the discourse and policies of the post-Yanukovich government(s).
discussed the political, military-strategic and economic implications of the intensifying (para)military confrontation in eastern Ukraine, became the most common theme in the during-conflict period. Taking place roughly between mid-May and mid-June 2014 (Figure 5.2), this clear and pronounced switch from ‘CULTURE’ to ‘POLITICS’ was the most important development in this period. Thus, the pre-conflict period is defined by ‘CULTURE’ reports, whereas the during-conflict period is defined by ‘POLITICS’ reports.

The ‘POLITICS’ theme is not associated with any single particular frame, but many of the government’s positions and narratives on the crisis can be found within news reports coded as such. Moreover, with RM reporting extensively on the political situation in Ukraine as it developed, FRM strongly deviated from its official remit of just popularising the Russian language. By discussing sensitive and contested issues relating to political, cultural and ethnic identity in a biased manner, FRM itself became highly politicised.
Additionally, other themes to feature prominently in this time-period are ‘HUMANITARIANISM’, ‘MMST’ and ‘MEDIA’. The frames that are extremely prevalent within the ‘HUMANITARIANISM’ and ‘MMST’ + ‘MEDIA’ theme-categories are ‘(Russian) benevolence’ and ‘CLA – victim’, respectively.  

12 This graph does not show data from the following theme-categories: ‘HUMANITARIANISM’, ‘MEDIA’, ‘MMST’, ‘RELIGION’, ‘SOCIETY’ and ‘OTHER’.  
13 As ‘MMST’ and ‘MEDIA’ are strongly associated with the same ‘CLA – victim’ frame, the data for these two theme-categories have been combined in Figure 5.3. However, whilst ‘MMST’ and ‘MEDIA’ are largely based on the same fundamental notion of
August 2014, ‘HUMANITARIANISM’, which discussed Russia’s provision of humanitarian aid to the people of war-torn eastern Ukraine, appeared more often on the outlet alongside increased frequencies of ‘MMST’ + ‘MEDIA’ reports (Figure 5.3). *RM*, however, did not foreground the humanitarian aspect to the same extent as *OSMP*, meaning that the latter emphasised the ‘benevolence’ frame much more than the former.

*RM* made a serious effort in this during-conflict period to present ethnic Russians (i.e., ‘compatriots living abroad’ – the ‘CLA’), Russian-speaking Ukrainians, the Russian language and shared Russian-Ukrainian history, culture (especially religion) and identity as the victims of the Ukraine crisis. Through the ‘CLA – victim’ frame, these alleged victims were presented as experiencing harassment, victimisation and, even, persecution at the hands of Ukraine’s illegitimate and fascist (post-Yanukovich) political regime and its nationalist supporters. Collectively, *RM*’s ‘MMST’ + ‘MEDIA’ themes are similar to the ‘PERSECUTION’ theme that dominated *OSMP*’s post-conflict crisis-related coverage of Ukraine, as all three share the same frame of ‘CLA – victim’.

‘victimhood’, a slight nuance is observable between the two themes: Russian/Russo-Ukrainian/Soviet history, culture and identity are portrayed as the victims in ‘MMST’, whereas it is pro-Russian media-related individuals and media outlets that are portrayed as the victims in ‘MEDIA’.
Figure 5.3: Frequency of RM’s News Reports on the Ukraine Crisis

(‘HUMANITARIANISM’ and ‘MMST’ + ‘MEDIA’)

The similar trajectories of ‘HUMANITARIANISM’ and ‘MMST’ + ‘MEDIA’, particularly during the heightened (para)military activity in eastern Ukraine, indicate a conscious co-ordination and coupling of their respective frames – ‘(Russian) benevolence’ and ‘CLA – victim’. The coupling of these two frames became more pronounced and prominent from mid-May 2014 as news reports coded as ‘CULTURE’ appeared less frequently, which indicates a notable shift in framing from ‘(Russian-Ukrainian) unity and commonality’ to ‘(Russian) benevolence’ and ‘CLA – victim’ jointly. There was a great
emphasis on humanitarianism-related reporting at around the same time on *Pervyi Kanal*, as Russia’s humanitarian aid efforts were major media campaigns on the country’s state-controlled television channels.

This coupling, however, is weighted more towards ‘CLA – victim’. The fundamental idea forming this frame was that Russia’s ‘CLA’ in Ukraine are being subjected to discrimination based on their culture. This frame also featured significantly in *OSMP*'s corresponding coverage, although most prominently in the post-conflict period. As was also the case on both *OSMP* and *Pervyi Kanal*, ‘victimhood’ was mobilised as a tool on *RM*. By portraying Russia’s ‘CLA’ and their ethnic and cultural identity as the victims in this crisis, the outlet attempts to: 1) shift blame onto pro-Western Ukraine and the West; and 2) morally justify Russia’s annexation of Crimea and broader involvement in Ukraine. This discourse of (Russian) victimhood also fed into and supported one of the Russian government’s central strategic narratives at the time on the international system: the ill-intentioned and selfish geopolitical activity of the US-led West is destructive for countries, as it leads to internal chaos and armed conflict (for example, amongst many others, Georgia in 2008).

5.3.3 Post-Conflict Period: 24th February 2015 – 31st December 2015

The time-frame that closest aligns to a post-conflict period covers the broad observation of the Minsk II peace agreement in eastern Ukraine by conflicting parties to the end of the calendar year. It was within this time-frame that the crisis turned into a ‘frozen conflict’. Over the post-conflict period, crisis-related news output was produced fairly steadily on *RM*, although at a rate that was much reduced and, on the whole, gradually decreasing. The main development in this final period is a notable overall
decrease in the frequency of news reports coded as ‘POLITICS’ in comparison with the previous period. As a consequence of the crisis becoming a ‘frozen conflict’, fewer (overtly) politics-oriented events and discussions occurred, which resulted in the decrease in the frequency of the ‘POLITICS’ theme. Additionally, a general levelling off of the frequency levels of the different main theme-categories occurred simultaneously, meaning that, unlike in other periods, no single theme or frame dominated. The levelling off of thematic output only highlights the extent to which particular themes and frames were strongly emphasised previously.

5.4 Engagement from and Impact on Audiences at RM

As is clear from the CDA of news reports on *RM* in Appendix III, the outlet’s coverage of the Ukraine crisis was neither balanced nor objective. The sudden and pronounced changes in *RM* output strongly suggest the presence of a media strategy. In its conflict coverage of Ukraine, *RM* drew heavily on issues of identity, which related to culture, language, history and nationality. The pre-conflict period was dominated by news reports coded as ‘CULTURE’, which often featured the ‘(Russian-Ukrainian) unity and commonality’ frame. *RM*’s emphasis on ‘CULTURE’ intensified the week prior to Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Moreover, the outlet’s emphasis on culture was even more prominent and pronounced throughout the annexation operation, during which a concerted effort was undertaken to represent crisis-related issues through the ‘unity’ frame.

In the during-conflict period, however, a shift in emphasis took place on *RM* – the frequency of news reports coded as ‘CULTURE’ dropped sharply in Spring 2014, leaving the ‘POLITICS’ theme to dominate crisis-related output for the remainder of the period. Despite *FRM* being officially remitted in its founding presidential decree with only the
goal of popularising the Russian language, RM having a strong focus on political content at key points in the crisis means that FRM’s news coverage was not only political in content, but, as a result of such output often being heavily biased, the cultural organisation became highly politicised in nature. The pairing of the ‘CLA – victim’ and ‘ROC benevolence’ frames also started to become fairly prominent from around this point.

The ‘CLA – victim’ frame portrayed ethnic-Russians and Russian-speakers, due to their identity, as experiencing persecution at the hands of government-supported Ukrainian nationalists. As was the case on OSMP, ‘victimhood’ was mobilised as a political tool on RM in order to generate support, influence and moral justification for the pro-Russian rebels from the status of victim. Additionally, this frame served as an attempted means of gaining support for and justifying Russia’s (military) involvement in Ukraine on the pretext of humanitarian grounds. Taking into consideration the sudden and pronounced shifts in the frequency of certain themes, the specific framing techniques adopted by the outlet and the (geo)political, social, cultural and historical context in the background of such developments, a media strategy was present on Russkii Mir during the crisis in Ukraine.

A comparison of RM’s crisis-related output with Pervyi Kanal’s corresponding coverage clearly shows that the narratives that were promoted and disseminated by FRM clearly align with those that were advanced at the time by the Russian government. The media output on RM also supported the government’s broader strategic narratives on Ukraine, which included: 1) Russia is the primary opposition to the destructive, expansionist geopolitics of a US-led West; and 2) Russia – not the West – is the natural ally and partner for post-Soviet states owing to significant shared culture, history, ethnic ties and worldview. This close narrative alignment between the two outlets indicates that RM had been mobilised and utilised in a similar way to state-controlled Pervyi Kanal,
particularly in the case of Ukraine, to promote the same key messages to Russian-speaking audiences.

The potential impact of FRM’s media strategy is that the Russian government, in co-ordinating (the media resources of) various arms of the state that are under its influence for use in its information operations, was able to advance its strategic narratives during the crisis for consumption amongst domestic and foreign (Russophone) audiences. Amongst domestic and pro-Russian audiences, such media co-ordination could give rise to the perception of national coherence and unanimity on the topic at hand, which could encourage narrative acceptance and internalisation. An important aspect of assessing the impact of media output is audience engagement.

It is common for organisations, such as FRM, that are in receipt of significant amounts of financial support from national governments to be required to show impact on and engagement from audiences in order to justify the further receipt of such funds. To date, FRM has not published any statistics regarding its media outlet’s audience figures. However, an estimation of RM’s popularity can be made based on the, albeit limited, publicly available viewership data on the organisation’s YouTube television channel.\(^\text{14}\)

On 10\(^{\text{th}}\) January 2019, the channel only had 3,392 subscribers, with 405,101 combined views from 618 videos over the course of almost ten years – a very small audience with low engagement.\(^\text{15}\) If audience impact were a condition for the government’s support of FRM, such incredibly low figures for audience engagement would not justify the continued receipt of state funds. At the time of writing, however, 7,370 separate

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\(^{14}\) Russkii Mir, Russkii Mir, YouTube (n.d.). The television programmes on FRM’s internet portal are synced to the organisation’s YouTube channel. This link means that watching the outlet’s television programmes on the former also contributes to the view data on the latter. Therefore, this data indicates the level of audience engagement with RM’s television output on both platforms together.

\(^{15}\) The channel has uploaded content since 24\(^{\text{th}}\) November 2009, but only started to regularly produce television output after roughly three years.
accounts are now subscribed to the channel, which has a combined view total of 1,021,673 for 873 videos.¹⁶ A comparison of these two sets of figures shows that the channel’s numbers of subscribers and combined views more than doubled in the space of almost sixteen months after nearly ten years of low audience engagement. Whilst these more recent figures are still low when compared to the large size of the potential audience, this sudden increased activity around the channel is both noticeable and significant.

The video ‘Jubilee Concert of Marina Devyatova at the State Kremlin Palace “20 Years Together with You”’ from 22nd April 2019 – the channel’s most popular video with 238,841 views and 181 comments – is an example of this unusual and sudden attention.¹⁷ In comparison with the channel’s other uploads to the site, the figures for this video are inordinately high. This video of a fairly average concert of Russian folk music is not particularly exceptional, which means that there is no obvious reason for such sudden notable engagement. Moreover, this video also attracted reasonably significant engagement in the form of ‘discussion’ from user accounts that have many of the features that strongly suggest they are bots – accounts that often have no short username (i.e., just a full name), no picture, no uploaded videos and/or no subscriptions. In short, these accounts have little personal input to suggest that human beings are behind them.¹⁸ A significant number of accounts commenting on the channel’s other comments-enabled videos also appear to be trolls or bots.

¹⁶ This data, publicly available through YouTube, was correct as of 1st May 2020.
¹⁷ Russkii Mir (2019). This data was correct as of 1st May 2020.
¹⁸ There are two types of deceptive account: 1) a ‘bot’ is an automated account, often put into action as part of a team of bots (known as a ‘botnet’) in order to try and achieve a particular objective; and 2) a ‘troll’ is a human-operated account, with the operator hired to produce content in line with set objectives. For more on the rise of fake accounts on YouTube, see: Keller (2018). For more on ‘Russian troll farms’ and their impact, see: Chen (2015); Sobolev (2019); Linvill and Warren (2020).
Especially in the context of engagement on the channel from many user accounts that do not appear to be genuine, suspicions are raised as to the nature of and reasons behind the channel’s increased subscription and viewing figures. These figures could have been manipulated for the purpose of artificially inflating the data in order to give the impression that the channel enjoys significantly greater popularity than both previously and might be the case. It is difficult to definitively establish the reason(s) behind this suspected artificial inflation of the channel’s figures from the limited information available. Therefore, different explanations could be proposed as to why this appears to be the case. On the one hand, this suspected manipulation could be a tactic in ‘information warfare’; on the other hand, it could be a funding-related exercise.

The use of trolls and bots in the information space, especially on social media platforms, has been highlighted by many commentators in the West as being one of the major tactics in Russia’s ‘information warfare’ (see Chapter II). As the sponsoring of such nefarious online activity often involves significant support from the Russian government, this apparent manipulation of the data could be interpreted as an effort to encourage audience trust in the content, as well as to amplify the channel’s presence and its Kremlin-aligned output. However, as many of the channel’s videos do not overtly relate to geopolitical issues and do not support the government’s strategic narratives abroad in a significant way, this potential explanation of engagement in ‘information warfare’ seems unlikely.

Alternatively, this apparent artificial inflation of figures and engagement could have been a means of justifying the cultural organisation’s continued receipt of state funds. Given the organisation’s high-level political links, FRM’s low-level popularity could have been seen by the management as a problem that needed to be addressed. Furthermore, the relationship between higher audience engagement online and receiving (increased) funding
is not specific to Russia; rather, this relationship it is a reflection of a global model that ties a media outlet’s or journalist’s funding to pageviews and clicks. Thus, it seems more likely that this suspected artificial inflation of RM’s audience was a funding-related exercise.

Therefore, the primary role of RM might be performative, meaning that political figures expect FRM, as Russia’s main state organisation for engaging in ‘cultural diplomacy’ and generating ‘soft power’ for the country, to have its own media presence in promoting a positive image of Russia to foreign publics. A similar situation can be seen with the Russian broadcaster RT: in the West, the audiences for RT’s broadcast output are extremely low, but Russia’s political elite believe that a ‘great power’ like Russia is expected to have its own (English language) international broadcaster.19 The outlet playing a performative role might explain why FRM maintains this low-impact operation and, moreover, why there is the clear political will to persevere with this project, evident from the government’s repeated funding extensions for the organisation, despite low interest and little engagement from the public.

5.5 Conclusion

FRM’s media portfolio was not as large and the organisation’s media services were not as active during the Russo-Georgian War as they were by the time of the Ukraine crisis. Russkii Mir’s low frequency of news reports on the Russo-Georgian War did not allow for a meaningful comparative analysis with corresponding crisis-related output from Pervyi Kanal and OSMP. Despite this low frequency, however, some significant observations can be made in relation to this first case study.

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19 Orttung and Nelson (2019).
As explored in close detail in Appendix III, the outlet’s main report on the war clearly replicated the discursive approach and strategic narratives of the Russian government. For example, Nikonov advanced the strategic narrative of Russia as a ‘great power’ and the only real opposition to destructive US geopolitical hegemony. This news report also adopted the discourse of law and legal norms, which was used heavily at the time by key figures within the Russian government, such as Medvedev, Putin and Lavrov.

There was a strong impression within the Russian political establishment that the country’s communication(s) strategy in 2008 had failed in advancing Russia’s (strategic) narratives on the war. The perception amongst many of Russia’s political and media figures that Russia had suffered a ‘defeat’ against the West in the information domain led to post-war changes in the country’s communication(s) strategy. These alterations to the country’s communication strategy involved tactical changes in the use of language, narratives and discourses. Additionally, at the time of the Russo-Georgian War, the Russian government had not yet begun fully exploiting Internet-based media outlets and social media as vehicles for the dissemination of government narratives. Hence, whilst closely government-aligned output on the war was produced by RM, it was not of any significant quantity. After the war, however, the Kremlin turned its attention to how new media platforms and outlets, including online media (such as Russkii Mir), could be instrumentalised to help achieve (geo)political objectives.

Owing to these ‘innovations’ being applied to the country’s media by the time of the Ukraine crisis, all of Russia’s state-funded media resources (including RM) were more prepared for and co-ordinated in disseminating Kremlin-preferred narratives on events in Ukraine. As is evident from a comparative analysis of the findings of the research chapters in this thesis, this co-ordination was particularly pronounced at key stages of the crisis (i.e., from mid-February to late March 2014 and from mid-June to late August 2014).
The news outlet’s emphases, narratives and content shifts suggest that FRM was mobilised as a tool during the Ukraine crisis. This conclusion is supported by a comparison of Figure 5.1 with Figure 3.7 (Chapter III) that reveals the frequency trajectory of crisis-related coverage on FRM aligning closely with that on state-controlled, Kremlin-aligned Pervyi Kanal. This close alignment between the two outlets points to a significant degree of media co-ordination, particularly at key stages of the crisis which were of most importance for the Russian government. There was also a sharp increase in and concentration of identity-related output on RM from late February to the end of March 2014, which featured biased narratives on contested and sensitive topics that related to nationality, culture (both religious and secular) and history. FRM output at that time, heavily referencing culture and cultural issues, reflected the culture-oriented discourse that was used by Putin at the same time.

As indicated by the narratives that were promoted by RM reflecting those that were disseminated by Pervyi Kanal, FRM closely aligned with and, consequently, supported the Russian government. The Kremlin’s strategic narratives served to facilitate the government’s domestic and geopolitical objectives; by faithfully reproducing the Kremlin’s key strategic narratives on its media outlet, FRM also tried to facilitate these government objectives. The narrative alignment between RM and Pervyi Kanal was tighter than between RM and OSMP. This difference can be explained by the fact that FRM is more closely and directly linked to the Russian government than to the ROC. Therefore, FRM appears to be far less able to pursue its own agenda and exercise agency during periods of conflict and crisis than the ROC.

As explored in this chapter’s analysis of audience engagement with regard to FRM’s online television channel, the outlet’s relatively low impact on audiences might have been viewed as a problem by figures in the Russian government and at FRM; the
subscription and viewing figures for the channel hardly suggested Russia’s successes in the perceived ‘information war’ – a concept to which many members of the country’s elite subscribe. These low figures would have made it difficult to justify receiving further financial support from the state budget, particularly when the organisation’s funding was approaching renewal. As a result, FRM was pushed towards what appears to be an attempt to manipulate the data on its audience figures at some point after the Ukraine crisis became a ‘frozen conflict’. Despite the outlet’s small audience and low public engagement, FRM’s continued financial support from the Russian government – recently extended to 2025 – is, in part, likely down to the fact that Russkii Mir, as with partly state-funded Pervyi Kanal, is able to disseminate and advance the government’s strategic narratives on issues that the administration considers to be of (geo)political importance, particularly during times of national emergency. Therefore, it appears that the outlet currently plays a performative role in the Russian mass media.

By comparatively analysing RM output on the Ukraine crisis with that of Pervyi Kanal, this chapter reveals that FRM, which has strong organisational, financial and operational ties to the state, was closely aligned to the Russian government. As a result of its media outlet promoting (political, as well as cultural) narratives that were Kremlin-preferred and controversial, FRM appears to lack credibility in the eyes of foreign publics. According to proponents of the ‘soft power’ concept, credibility stems from organisational autonomy. FRM’s lack of credibility is reflected in the negative reception for the ‘Russian World’ concept amongst national elites in the post-Soviet space and the low-level audience engagement with RM in the region. Therefore, the concept of ‘soft power’ does not explain the activity of FRM during these conflicts.

The concept of ‘information warfare’ is also limited in analysing and evaluating the (media) activity of FRM. Effectively, ‘information warfare’ implies simplicity in the
communication of a (media) message – aim, discharge, ‘injure’. This simplistic representation, as a result, fails to account for the fact that media-based information can be interpreted differently and unpredictably by audiences. Thus, the concept does not reveal whether disseminated information in such a ‘war’ achieved its objective(s) on the targeted audience(s), providing that the targeted audiences even received the information in the first instance. Yet the concept is still used by many of Russia’s key state figures, and at FRM.20 Even if one were to apply it to FRM’s media activity during these military conflicts, the concept would be extremely limited as a tool of analysis owing to the outlet’s extremely small audience and seemingly performative function.

20 For an example of Nikonov continuing to use this concept in public discourse, see: Russkii Mir (2016a).
Conclusion

The Russo-Georgian War (2008) and the Ukraine crisis (2013–present day) provoked great concern in the West over Russia’s activity and influence abroad. It was claimed by many state representatives, scholars, analysts and commentators in the West that the Russian government was co-ordinating and utilising all of the state’s levers of influence – both military and non-military – to project the state’s power and reassert its dominance over the ‘near abroad’. According to many of these figures, this ‘new’ approach adopted by Russia amounted to engagement in ‘hybrid warfare’ against the West and its allies. In this ‘war’, Russian cultural organisations are often regarded as mere tools of the state, lacking both autonomy and agency. This thesis set out to investigate the extent to which the country’s main cultural organisations – the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and Fond ‘Russkii Mir’ (FRM), which are assigned in this research to the categories organic and manufactured, respectively – featured in Russia’s power projection in the ‘near abroad’ by aligning with the Russian government.

To address this thesis aim, empirical mixed-methods research was undertaken to examine the activity of the ROC and FRM during the aforementioned cases of Russian military intervention in the post-Soviet space. The conflict representations that were disseminated by the cultural organisations’ main media outlets – OSMP and Russkii Mir, respectively – constitute the primary data of this research project. The analytical tools used to collate and analyse this primary data were content analysis, thematic analysis and frame analysis.¹ The crisis-related output of these two outlets was compared to corresponding coverage on the state-controlled television channel Pervyi Kanal. Owing to this channel’s

¹ In order to establish the specific framing techniques that were adopted by OSMP and RM, Critical Discourse Analysis was utilised in Appendices II and III to examine language-use in several news reports produced by the two media outlets.
significant government ties and Kremlin-aligned output, the conflict-related narratives that were disseminated by Pervyi Kanal during these periods were treated as close reflections of positions that were held by the Russian government. Thus, a comparative analysis of crisis-related output revealed the extent to which the messages disseminated by the two cultural organisations aligned with the strategic narratives that were advanced at the time by the Kremlin.

Supplemented by secondary literature for supporting evidence, comparative analyses of the primary data reveal that significant agency was exercised by the ROC during both case studies. FRM, conversely, did not exercise any significant agency, as it did not go against government positions. The findings of this thesis have significant consequences for how the functioning of Russia’s political system is understood. Before the implications and limitations of this research are explored fully, the key similarities and differences in crisis-related coverage on Pervyi Kanal, OSMP and Russkii Mir are briefly outlined in the following two sections.

Summary: The Russo-Georgian War

Pervyi Kanal adopted discourse that was centred on law and legal norms. This law-based discourse was a key feature of those pronouncements on the war made by Russia’s leading politicians. The television channel also faithfully reproduced the following key strategic narratives that were repeatedly expressed at the time by high-positioned government figures: 1) Russia is a ‘great power’ with ‘privileged interests’ in the region; 2) Russia’s historical paternal role in the post-Soviet space ensures peace and stability across the entire region; and 3) the imperialistic foreign policy of the US-led West lies behind
many of the world’s problems, including the Russo-Georgian War. Pervyi Kanal repeatedly advanced government positions and narratives throughout the conflict.

OSMP adopted a significantly different approach to reporting on the war to that of Pervyi Kanal. OSMP’s output, by contrast, was notably muted both before and during the conflict. The Church was mobilised, however, immediately after the war had officially ended, from which point the substantially increased crisis-related output of OSMP strongly aligned with the government’s key strategic narratives on the conflict and featured much direct commentary by many senior figures within the ROC.

RM produced very little output on the war, owing to the media outlet still being in its infancy as a news website and, moreover, internet resources of this kind not yet being viewed as vehicles for disseminating the government’s (strategic) narratives. The outlet’s main news report on the war, written by the head of the organisation, not only featured the same law-based discourse that was utilised by key political figures and Pervyi Kanal, but also systematically replicated the government’s above-mentioned strategic narratives.

**Summary: The Ukraine Crisis**

After the Russo-Georgian War, the country’s political and media elites decided that the political communication strategy that was adopted to narrate the conflict had proven ineffective. This conclusion that Russia had suffered ‘defeat’ in a perceived ‘information war’ led to a major revision of strategy on this front. By the time of the Ukraine crisis, these changes had been implemented and were already evident.

Pervyi Kanal had replaced law-based discourse for identity-related discourse, which heavily referenced culture, nationality and ethnicity. This discursive shift on the channel reflected the idea within the Kremlin that appealing to feelings, rather than relying
on and foregrounding the use of ‘facts’ and law-based discourse, could be more impactful and effective in manipulating and persuading audiences, which, in turn, could facilitate the government’s (geo)political objectives. An emotively charged sense of victimhood, centred on identity-based characteristics, was fostered on all three outlets. The following key strategic narratives promoted by the Russian government during the crisis also appeared prominently on Pervyi Kanal: 1) Russia is the only real opposition to the expansionist, destructive West; and, moreover, 2) Russia is the natural ally and partner for post-Soviet states because of close cultural, ethnic and historical ties. Once again, Pervyi Kanal was faithfully and repeatedly advancing the positions and narratives of the Russian government.

In terms of the frequency of crisis-related output, there were notable similarities and differences between OSMP and Pervyi Kanal at different stages of the crisis. OSMP adopted a relatively muted and distanced approach pre-conflict, strongly suggesting that, as appeared to be the case during the Russo-Georgian War, the ROC was exercising agency in following its own agenda. Whilst the Church was mobilised days prior to Russian military intervention in this case study, the Church’s sudden relatively muted stance immediately after the annexation operation for Crimea had begun which lasted for approximately a fortnight demonstrates organisational agency. Notably, this tactic was in contrast to the high-frequency output on Pervyi Kanal and RM at that time. OSMP’s frequency pattern for crisis-related news reports from around mid-May to mid-October 2014 closely followed that of Pervyi Kanal and FRM, indicating that the outlet was closely aligned with the government during the most intense military phase of the conflict. Furthermore, in terms of its output, OSMP supported the government’s strategic narrative of Russia as the natural ally and partner for post-Soviet states because of close cultural (i.e., religious) and ethnic ties.
was significantly more active in reporting on the Ukraine crisis than it had been on the Russo-Georgian War, producing a much higher frequency of crisis-related news output. Similar to Pervyi Kanal, the outlet articulated identity-based discourse, although narratives on cultural identity featured more frequently than on Pervyi Kanal. Furthermore, clear (frequency and content) patterns and pronounced shifts in output indicate that the outlet adopted a deliberate media strategy. On occasion, these patterns and shifts even mirrored developments in Russia’s political discourse (for example, Putin’s emphasis on culture and identity around the annexation of Crimea).

**Analysis of the Findings**

A comparative analysis of these media outlets and case studies reveals that there were notable differences in the approaches taken by the outlets in covering the military conflicts. Thus, conclusions can be drawn from these differences as to the nature and activity of the ROC and FRM. The extent to which these cultural organisations aligned with the Russian government is revealed by comparisons of OSMP and RM output with that of Pervyi Kanal.

It appears that FRM has extremely limited autonomy. FRM is a state-resourced organisation that was (relatively) recently established by the government for the purpose of engaging in cultural diplomacy and, according to the country’s official discourse and the organisation’s own objectives, of generating ‘soft power’ for Russia. An analysis of FRM’s output reveals that the organisation – much more than the ROC – was geared towards supporting and advancing the foreign policy agenda of the Russian government during the two military conflicts. This conclusion is based on the close alignment between RM and state-controlled Pervyi Kanal in terms of their frequency patterns, conflict narratives.
(including those during the Russo-Georgian War) and mobilisation at key stages of the Ukraine crisis, such as the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. Additionally, no cases were detected of FRM exercising significant agency by not replicating key government positions in its media output. Thus, RM output was highly politicised and Kremlin-aligned.

Thus, it appears that FRM, through its online media outlet, has functioned as an instrument for disseminating the Russian government’s (strategic) narratives during the Ukraine crisis. As the organisation is so closely linked to the government, this role would be easy to implement. This belies the characterisation of the organisation as one that is autonomous and, thus, produces ‘soft power’, akin to such organisations in Western democracies (e.g., the UK’s British Council).

A look at the ROC, however, reveals a different picture to that of FRM. The leadership of the ROC was navigating complex and compromising situations for the Church in Georgia and Ukraine at the time of their respective conflicts, both of which divided and tested its loyalties. In effect, the ROC was trying to balance its competing domestic and foreign interests. This tension was particularly pronounced over the crisis in Ukraine – a country in which the ROC has substantial material, spiritual and historical interests. As a result, the ROC (periodically) limited and carefully tailored its engagement in the crisis in order to protect its strategic interests in Ukraine and the broader region. This cautious approach taken by the Church is reflected in both the frequency patterns and content of crisis-related commentaries on OSMP.

Whilst the ROC’s autonomy might have been undermined and questioned as a result of the post-2012 scaling up of the church-state relationship, these case-study analyses indicate that the Church, unlike FRM, had its own agenda during both of the conflicts. At several major points in the conflicts, the Church clearly exercised agency
(both actively and passively) by acting in accordance with its own agendas. These cases are examples of the interests and objectives of the ROC conflicting with those of the Russian government. The church-state tensions during the two military conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine were especially significant and revealing given wartime national consolidation of the state (including the country’s mass media) and the increased pressure on major state actors to support the government during these periods of national emergency.

In one of the clearest examples of the ROC resisting political pressure in pursuing its own interests, the Church publicly resisted calls to incorporate Abkhazia and South Ossetia into its canonical territory after the Russo-Georgian War, despite government wishes to the contrary. It was later confirmed by clergy that this decision on canonical jurisdiction became a source of tension between the ROC and the Russian government. Similarly, it was reported that tension also arose between with the Russian government and the ROC over the latter deciding not to incorporate Crimea into its canonical territory post-annexation in 2014. Patriarch Kirill, never having publicly supported the state’s actions in Crimea, did not attend the historic state ceremony marking the accession of Crimea into the RF. The patriarch’s absence, albeit likely in consultation with the Kremlin, could be interpreted as an example of the Church exercising agency for reasons of self-interested religious diplomacy.

The ROC was more (pro)active and co-ordinated in trying to influence events on the ground during the Ukraine crisis than it was during the Russo-Georgian War. As well as OSMP producing more output on the Ukraine crisis, OSMP produced output that was notably different to its coverage of the Russo-Georgian War and to that of the other outlets in this study. Even when the frequency patterns of OSMP crisis-related coverage closely aligned with those of Pervyi Kanal, OSMP was taking a different approach in terms of content. Although OSMP’s output on the Ukraine crisis broadly supported the key strategic
narratives of the Russian government’s foreign policy, the ROC was not overtly supporting the government like it had been in 2008 post-war. The Church, even the more hardline Vladimir Legoida, did not make commentaries that could be directly associated with the Russian government. This approach lies in stark contrast to the controversial, overtly pro-Kremlin commentaries made by Archbishop Feofan in the context of Georgia in 2008. Therefore, the Church expressed agency by increasing its distance from the Russian government in the context of Ukraine, as well as by resisting political pressure on certain issues of importance to the ROC. This more cautious approach and increased distance from the government suggests that the Church learnt from its experience regarding the Russo-Georgian War and adapted its (media) strategy in relation to the Ukraine crisis.

Despite the strong church-state relationship and the highly restrictive environment of national emergency appearing to limit the ROC’s autonomy, the ROC still had the ability and will to exercise its agency: the Church pursued its own agenda in opposition to the government with regard to certain issues that were of major importance to its own organisational objectives. It is likely that the Church exercising agency in this way was a tactical move to try to minimise the development of anti-ROC sentiment in Ukraine in order to preserve the Church’s interests in the country. These main areas of disagreement with and divergence from the Kremlin are telling as to the nature of the church-state relationship, indicating that the ROC is not simply in the service of the state as a mere tool in Russia’s alleged ‘hybrid warfare’. It would be inaccurate to claim that the ROC is not subject to and affected by external pressure, but, at the same time, it would also be just as inaccurate to claim that the Church is completely subordinate to the government and devoid of the ability to pursue its own agenda. The findings in this thesis supports both of these conclusions.
In regard to a future case of military conflict involving Russia, one could hypothesise – on the basis of the findings established in this thesis – that the ROC and FRM would toe the official line set out by the Kremlin by: 1) not criticising the government and broader state; and 2) evoking Kremlin-preferred strategic narratives. FRM would be expected to toe this line particularly closely, more so than the ROC. In order to avoid reputational damage and reduce the risk to its own strategic interests, the ROC would likely refrain from openly and directly supporting the Russian government and would avoid endorsing all of the Russian government’s positions and narratives wholesale (rather, the ROC would selectively endorse government narratives). Indeed, even despite the more delicate approach taken by the Church to the Ukraine crisis – i.e., more distanced from the Russian government’s positions and narratives – the material and spiritual interests of the ROC were negatively impacted by the crisis.

Implications of the Research

This thesis shows how Russian cultural organisations relate to Russian foreign policy by providing a valuable insight into how culture and (identity-related) cultural issues featured in the state’s projection of its power in the ‘near abroad’. The research findings indicate that culture and cultural identity were utilised by the Russian state as a means of gaining support for its activity abroad (including military interventions). Whilst this may be the case, the state’s utilisation of culture and cultural resources was not uniform and fully controlled by the Russian government. From an examination of the country’s two biggest cultural organisations, this thesis reveals a nuanced picture regarding power relations in Russia.
This research challenges the assumption, which is prevalent amongst many commentators in the West, that the Russian government controls all levers of state power and all state actors at all times through a top-down command structure of coercive control, (i.e., the ‘power vertical’). By extension, this thesis also challenges the assumption that Russian groups and organisations have no autonomy and agency, as discourse on Russia’s alleged ‘hybrid warfare’ often implies. This thesis, specifically in relation to culture, contributes to a wider literature that challenges the position that the Kremlin’s hand lies behind the activities of all actors that have ties with the Russian government.

It is also important to acknowledge that Russia’s political communication strategy during Putin’s long tenure in office has not been static. The mobilisation of the ROC and FRM occurred sooner in the context of Ukraine than that of Georgia, with OSMP and RM coverage shortly prior to the annexation of Crimea and during the outbreak of (armed) conflict in eastern Ukraine similar to that of Pervyi Kanal. Thus, as Chapters IV and V show, Russia’s cultural organisations were more able and willing to mobilise their media resources in a co-ordinated manner by the time of the Ukraine crisis. In part, this difference in terms of the outlets’ preparedness and mobilisation between the two conflicts stemmed from substantial changes to the country’s communication strategy post-2008, such as the government’s increased attention towards Internet-based resources as a means of disseminating Kremlin-preferred narratives.

The post-2008 shift also reflected the systematic adoption by key actors in Russia’s political communication of the ‘information warfare’ framework to explain the information environment and justify their reporting practices. The ‘information war’ framework was explicitly adopted in RM’s and Pervyi Kanal’s output, but not in OSMP coverage. As this thesis argues, using military terminology to explain information flows and practices risks wrongly assuming that the impact of information can be predicted and assured in the same
way as that of conventional military weapons. Therefore, researchers should exercise caution and avoid uncritically adopting this politicised military metaphor as an analytical framework in their work.

Although this research did not systematically explore the extent to which the cultural organisations’ media narratives were consumed by and impacted on target audiences and populations, it is possible to make a tentative assessment as to whether the change in media strategy that was undertaken between the two conflicts was successful. The findings from this thesis suggest that, with regard to the projection of Russia’s positions abroad, there is little evidence to conclude that the new (post-2008) media strategy was more effective. Furthermore, the narratives produced by the Russian media do not appear to have succeeded in persuading foreign audiences (excluding those audiences in areas already inclined to support the Russian government) as numerous surveys reveal that public opinion in favour of Russia either in Ukraine or in Western countries has not been swayed.

With regard to Russia’s major media outlets, their apparent lack of independence from the government, their lack of objectivity and balance in their news output, and their high level of fabrications in covering the Ukraine crisis appeared to tarnish the credibility of the Russian media and limit their power of persuasion amongst certain audiences in the ‘near abroad’. Indicators of this are evident from a comparative analysis of pre- and post-2014 media audience surveys in Ukraine (see Chapter III) and from the extremely low audience engagement figures of the Russkii Mir television outlet. Therefore, claims that have been made about Russia ‘winning the information war’ against the West appear to be unfounded.

This thesis concludes that there are some problems surrounding the use of the emotionally loaded and highly politicised concepts of ‘soft power’, ‘hybrid warfare’, and
‘information warfare’ as analytical tools in scholarly research. At the same time, despite its apparent conceptual limitations and its occasional liberal, uncritical use by politicians, ‘soft power’ continues to be widely embraced by the scholarly community. The relative agency of the ROC from the state is commensurate with careful use of the concept in relation to Russia. Indeed, there are certain circumstances in which this prevalent and widely accepted concept could conceivably be used, cautiously and narrowly, by this researcher.

HW, despite there being well-grounded reservations relating to its politicisation and misuse post-2014, could also be employed as an effective analytical tool for scholarly research. These valid concerns could be mitigated, if not resolved, by using the concept in a clear, restrained and limited manner (for example, by adopting a distinction between ‘hybrid warfare’ and ‘political warfare’). Nevertheless, the concept is of limited applicability in assessing narrative framing in media communication. Furthermore, owing to examples of significant organisational agency opposing the interests of the Russian government, this concept is not able to explain the activity of the ROC. As for ‘information warfare’, although the metaphor of war is clearly inappropriate for use in analysing the complex ways in which information flows, is consumed and is received in the modern world, the fact that leading political, cultural, academic and media figures in Russia and the West continue to use the term means that, despite reservations, the concept needs to be acknowledged and taken seriously.

This thesis argues that the understanding of Russia’s political system and its political communication is enhanced by adopting a framework that focuses on varying, flexible and context-specific relationships between the Kremlin and a wide range of state-affiliated actors to whom different degrees of agency are permitted, as long as they operate within the broad parameters of acceptability that are set by the political leadership.
Limitations of the Research

It was not possible to definitively establish the sincerity of Russian cultural organisations’ divergence with the Russian government without having access to documented ‘hard’ evidence and testimonies from leading figures within the Church, FRM and the Russian government. As this conclusive evidence was lacking, judgements were made by the author in such cases of divergence using supplementary contextual information obtained from interviews and secondary sources. Despite the use of secondary sources to triangulate this issue, the problem still remains and must be taken into consideration.

The nature and methods of government influence over the country’s cultural organisations are expected to be different during times of peace: periods of war or crisis are exceptional circumstances in which a national government encourages state actors to ‘rally around the flag’ by presenting a united front and closely aligning with government messaging. As a result, these case studies of military conflict give snapshots of power relations in unique and rare contexts of national emergency, which are likely not reflective of power relations in peacetime.

As for extrapolating from this research project, the findings in this thesis are only applicable to Russia and, therefore, should not be considered applicable to other national cultural organisations, even those of similar neo-authoritarian states. The major cultural organisations of other countries have their own national and cultural contexts and organisational specificities which makes simply generalising these research findings to them misleading and flawed. In order to extrapolate these findings beyond Russia, additional academic research that details and takes into consideration the specific characteristics and contexts of the (non-Russian) cultural organisation(s) in question must
be conducted. In such cases, this research project could be used as a benchmark for comparative analysis.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

The research design of this thesis offers a methodological approach for closely tracking developments and patterns in news output, which could be applied to media analyses that are examining different organisational and national contexts. Therefore, this thesis could serve as the starting point for a comparative analysis of Russian cultural organisations with other analogous cultural organisations, which allegedly generate ‘soft power’, based in democracies and (neo-)authoritarian states alike in contexts of national emergency. A comparative analysis of this kind could shed light on the nature of different cultural organisations during ‘hard’ periods of military conflict, showing the ways in which political and cultural elites in different countries understand the concept of ‘soft power’.

This thesis could also lead to further investigations into the relationship between the Russian state and Russian culture, and how the Russian state uses culture to project its power abroad. As this research project only studied the ROC and FRM, a potential avenue for further research on Russia could be an investigation into the activity of Russia’s other major cultural organisation, Rossotrudnichestvo, in relation to the military conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine. Rossotrudnichestvo is a similar body to FRM – a manufactured, state-sponsored cultural organisation that is operational in the ‘near abroad’ and has its own website that features a news service. In terms of generating media output, however, Rossotrudnichestvo is not as advanced or as active as FRM. Owing to the two having similar origins, organisational structures and activity abroad, it would be expected that
**Rossotrudnichestvo** would behave in a similar fashion to **FRM** – i.e., support the key strategic narratives of the government in times of emergency.

As this thesis looked only at the *production* of crisis-related narratives in the Russian media, another area of further research would be to examine the *reception* of these outlets’ media messages on audiences. A research project conducted on audience receptions of Russian media in Georgia and Ukraine would be a significant contribution to this area of study as it would provide a crucial indication as to the effectiveness of Russia’s political communication and, more specifically, of Russia’s co-ordinated media campaigns in persuading audiences with Kremlin-aligned narratives. An evidence-based understanding of the impact of Russian narratives is essential for developing constructive and effective policy responses to the challenges posed by Russia’s activity on the international stage.
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Appendix I. Major Patterns and Shifts in Crisis-Related Output on OSMP

Table A1: Main Patterns and Shifts in Coverage of the Russo-Georgian War on OSMP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME-PERIOD</th>
<th>WHEN?</th>
<th>MAIN THEME</th>
<th>MAIN FRAME</th>
<th>PRIMARY COMMENTATOR(S)</th>
<th>AFFECTIVE ATTRIBUTE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Conflict</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>PEACEKEEPING &amp; GEORGIA</td>
<td>peace and/or commonality</td>
<td>Catholicos-Patriarch Iliya II</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During-Conflict</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>PEACEKEEPING</td>
<td>peace and/or commonality</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>+/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Conflict</td>
<td>15th August 2008</td>
<td>PEACEKEEPING → HUMANITARIANISM</td>
<td>peace and/or commonality → ROC benevolence</td>
<td>ROC (various figures)</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A2: Main Patterns and Shifts in Coverage of the Ukraine Crisis on OSMP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME-PERIOD</th>
<th>WHEN?</th>
<th>MAIN THEME</th>
<th>MAIN FRAME</th>
<th>PRIMARY COMMENTATOR(S)</th>
<th>AFFECTIVE ATTRIBUTE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Conflict</td>
<td>late February 2014</td>
<td>PEACEKEEPING</td>
<td>(spiritual/cultural/ethnic) unity</td>
<td>UOC-MP →</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During-Conflict</td>
<td>mid-June – mid-July 2014</td>
<td>PEACEKEEPING → HUMANITARIANISM</td>
<td>(spiritual/cultural/ethnic) unity</td>
<td>Patriarch Kirill</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Conflict</td>
<td>mid-June – mid-July 2015</td>
<td>HUMANITARIANISM → PERSECUTION</td>
<td>ROC benevolence → CLA – victim</td>
<td>ROC (various eparchies)</td>
<td>+ –</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 The ‘affective attribute’ of the output in question describes the overall emotional impression that was being communicated to the audience (i.e., whether the output was imbued with a positive or negative feeling).
Table A3: Correlations between Variables in Coverage of the Ukraine Crisis on OSMP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMENTATOR</th>
<th>MAIN OBSERVATIONS</th>
<th>MAIN THEME</th>
<th>MAIN FRAME</th>
<th>AFFECTIVE ATTRIBUTE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patriarch Kirill</td>
<td>moderate position; diplomatic</td>
<td>PEACEKEEPING</td>
<td>(spiritual/cultural/ethnic) unity</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROC (various eparchies)</td>
<td>presented as a large, federated and mutually supportive organisation</td>
<td>HUMANITARIANISM</td>
<td>ROC benevolence</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UOC-MP</td>
<td>presented as autonomous within the ROC and politically neutral</td>
<td>PEACEKEEPING &amp; PERSECUTION</td>
<td>(spiritual/cultural/ethnic) unity &amp; CLA – victim (respectively)</td>
<td>+ &amp; - (respectively)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vladimir Legoida</td>
<td>hardline position; critical of Ukrainian state; emotive and confrontational language</td>
<td>PERSECUTION</td>
<td>CLA – victim</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a comparison of Tables A1 and A2 reveals, each conflict period of the Ukraine crisis was more clearly associated with particular themes, frames and commentators than was the case with the Russo-Georgian War. Additionally, the patterns and shifts in output with regard to Ukraine were, for the most part, more pronounced than those in relation to Georgia. Thus, coverage of the Ukraine crisis on OSMP was more organised and structured, indicating a significant degree of co-ordination within the Church.

Table A3 shows that, with regard to the Ukraine crisis, several key figures and groups within the Church were strongly associated with a particular rhetorical style, thematic output and frame. In the context of Georgia in 2008, the association of certain content with particular Church figures on OSMP was significantly much less extensive and pronounced. It appears that the Church learnt from its experience of the Russo-Georgian
War and adapted its approach for the Ukraine crisis by increasing, strengthening and closer co-ordinating media roles in the Church for its key actors to perform.

The Church, in having different communication roles for its main figures, was able to articulate different messages at different times to address different aspects of the two military conflicts, but particularly of the Ukraine crisis. As a result, the ROC expressed a variety of ideas and tried to stimulate particular emotions through the commentaries and representations of certain key figures and groups within the Church. It is likely that some of these messages would have been considered too problematic for the leadership of the ROC to publicly communicate. Instead, specific figures lower down the Church hierarchy adopted the more combative discourse and controversial narratives. Archbishop Feofan, for example, fulfilled this hawkish, hardline role in relation to the Russo-Georgian War.

During the Ukraine crisis, the more forthright commentaries from the Church were, instead, made by the non-clergy Vladimir Legoida. It was probably deemed too controversial and likely self-harming for a clergy member to fulfil this particular media role for the Church in the context of the ROC’s interests in Ukraine becoming vulnerable, particularly after the annexation of Crimea by Russia in February-March 2014. A certain amount of distance from the leadership of the ROC is achieved by such discourse being used by Legoida instead of a prominent member of the clergy.
Appendix II. Critical Discourse Analysis of OSMP News Reports

In order to reveal how information and language are central to the framing of output on OSMP, a qualitative analysis of several of the outlet’s crisis-related news reports is undertaken in this appendix. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used to uncover the key framing techniques employed by this media outlet in these reports. Thus, the (media) objectives of OSMP are indicated.

Framing Techniques during the Russo-Georgian War

A pre-conflict anonymous news report entitled ‘Mikheil Saakashvili hopes for the return of Abkhaz churches under the control of the Georgian Church’ was published on 21st January 2008. As it concerns the then president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, discussing the religious situation in Abkhazia, this report was coded as ‘GEORGIA’.

An unflattering picture of Saakashvili is situated in a prominent position beneath the title: he looks tired and exasperated, with his hand on his forehead, as if in a state of despair. This picture, located in a salient position to ensure visibility for the reader, is likely designed to encourage the reader to perceive Saakashvili in a negative light by using suggestive negative visual imagery to associate with the person and his commentary.

CDA is a research method for the critical analysis of language and its historical and social context. This analytical tool is used as a means of revealing the influences and motives of those actors who are disseminating information and, in the case of media production, attempting to create a desired response amongst their audiences. For example, see: Fairclough (1995a and 1995b).

Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2008f).

A full list of theme-categories and accompanying descriptions for the coding of OSMP news reports can be found in Chapter IV.
Unlike most other crisis-related news reports in this case study, this report reads closer to an even-handed journalistic report, as it involves a degree of balance and neutrality. Saakashvili, notably criticising the (uncanonical) religious activity of the “Russian Patriarchate” in Abkhazia, is granted ‘voice’ by the author of the report. Additionally, the report contains direct speech from the former president which expresses loaded and controversial sentiments. Saakashvili is quoted as saying that there are “a great many completely abandoned and destroyed Georgian Orthodox churches and monasteries [in Abkhazia], since ethnic cleansing was committed there”.4

As the term ‘ethnic cleansing’ is such a highly emotive concept, Saakashvili portrays ethnic Georgians as victims in extremely strong terms. In using such a loaded and emotionally charged term, Saakashvili gives the impression that his cause is justified and morally righteous. This discursive tactic adopted by Saakashvili for the classification of actors was later employed against Georgia by the Russian government and Archpriest Feofan of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) over Georgia’s military activity in South Ossetia. Saakashvili’s spoken commentary in this report is significant because direct representation was not afforded to Georgia’s political representatives during and after the conflict.

In response to Saakashvili’s criticism, the ROC’s defence, as put forward in the reporting speech of the anonymous author, is that the ‘canonical status of the Orthodox community in Abkhazia remains uncertain’, but that the ROC, nevertheless, still considers Abkhazia to be the canonical territory of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). Additionally, the Church later stresses its ‘strict accordance’ with canon law regarding canonical jurisdiction, although the ROC was uncanonically active in Abkhazia and South

4 In this utterance, Saakashvili was referring to the alleged ethnic cleansing of ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia by local Abkhaz forces during and after the Abkhazia-Georgia War (1992-3).
Ossetia in a number of different ways prior to the war, as discussed in Chapter IV. In making such statements that do not fully reflect the truth, information was selectively used in this report to convey a particular understanding of the situation for the audience to consume and internalise.

A parallel can be drawn in this case study between the ROC’s emphasis on its compliance with canon law and the Russian government’s emphasis on its adherence to international law. This alignment of the ROC referencing Orthodox law and the Russian government referencing international law suggests similarity in approach between the two in representing this military conflict.

The report also quoted the ROC describing itself as a diplomatic actor within the Orthodox community, arguing that its ‘peacekeeping service’ is ‘vitally important for establishing lasting and fair peace’ in the region, and that the ROC is willing to act as a mediator ‘to normalise the church situation in the region’. This classification of the ROC primarily as a peacekeeping actor in post-Soviet space was later heavily used by ROC figures in the first three days of the post-conflict period.

In the during-conflict period, a news report featured on the outlet on 8th August 2008, entitled ‘They are praying for the end of bloodshed in South Ossetia at the Alan Courtyard in Moscow’.

This report, the author of which was anonymous, was coded as ‘OTHER’, as its subject matter is not covered by any of the main theme-categories.

This report concerns a commentary made by a temple elder at the Ossetian church in Moscow to the news agency Interfaks. Giving a temple elder ‘voice’ on a prominent media platform to express his opinions on the (then) unfolding military conflict – which were extremely critical of the Georgian state – creates the impression that the commentator...
is acting as a spokesman for the Ossetian people, as he is from South Ossetia and is held in regard amongst the diaspora community at the Ossetian church in Moscow. Although the elder is connected to this particular church, he is not a member of the clergy. As a result, the Church is seemingly distanced enough from the speaker’s opinions to afford itself to publish and directly quote his commentary without being seen to be too politically involved.

This news report is an example of partial reporting. Notably, none of Georgia’s state representatives are granted ‘voice’ to explain their position(s) on the conflict; not even an indirect representation of Georgia’s main position(s) and/or justifications for military action was provided. In this way, selectively choosing which actors speak was a tactic employed in this news report to help imbue the audience with a desired interpretation of the military conflict.

The speaker uses historical references to cognitively distance South Ossetia from Georgia and move the former closer to North Ossetia and Russia by saying that, in 1774, a ‘united Ossetia voluntarily joined Russia [emphasis added]’. This historical reference alludes to the argument that the Ossetian people, as a single ethnicity, are divided and, consequently, should be reunited within one state (i.e., the Russian Federation). The elder stresses his argument that South Ossetia has had better relations with Russia by saying that South Ossetians have never fought with North Ossetia (Russia). Again, the ethnic connection is stressed by referring to those in North Ossetia as “our brothers” (svoikh brat’ev).

In comparison, the elder talks of the ‘impudent aggression’ (nagloi agressiei) of “little Hitler” (malen’kii Gitler) (i.e., Saakashvili) against the people of South Ossetia. Therefore, the classification of actors in this report affectively positions Georgia in stark contrast to North Ossetia and Russia. The word ‘impudent’ aligns with the negative
characterisation of the Georgian authorities that was being advanced in Russian political
discourse during the war. Encapsulated by the line ‘forcing Georgia to peace’
(prinuzhdenie Gruzi k miru), the Russian government portrayed Georgia as acting
immaturely and above its station.

The metaphorical comparison of Saakashvili to Hitler is an example of
instrumentally exploiting the memory of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-5 (GPW), which
is powerful in both Russia and in parts of the post-Soviet space. The emotion-laden and
resonant collective memory of the GPW was only occasionally exploited during this case
study, whereas it was mobilised as a discursive instrument in the creation and
dissemination of narratives to a greater degree during the Ukraine crisis.

An anonymous post-conflict news report was published on 13\textsuperscript{th} August 2008,
entitled ‘Archpriest Feofan of Stavropol and Vladikavkaz: If Russian peacekeepers had not
taken the main attack upon themselves, there would have been even more casualties’.\textsuperscript{6} The
report was coded as ‘PEACEKEEPING’, as Feofan discusses the wartime actions of
Russia’s ‘peacekeepers’ and talks about the need to engage in post-war peace efforts. The
overarching ‘frame’ of this report, therefore, is ‘peace and commonality’.

In the first sentence of the report, the Church expressed its support for the ‘Russian
peacekeeping troops’ in protecting the people of South Ossetia. It is highly unusual that the
Moscow Patriarchate began the report by expressing a declarative political statement, as
the vast majority of OSMP news reports open with basic factual information on the topic
and/or event in question, date(s) and those representatives of the Church involved. As this
report was published when the ROC was undergoing considerable mobilisation, this initial
declarative statement is interpreted as a manifestation of the ROC aligning itself more

\textsuperscript{6} Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2008e).
closely with the government’s positions and narratives after hitherto displaying significant agency with its relatively muted approach to commenting on the conflict.

Feofan positively discusses the ultimate sacrifice made by the country’s peacekeepers which allegedly resulted in fewer civilian lives being lost. Feofan’s discussion supports the government’s strategic narrative that Russia has a paternal role over the ‘near abroad’ as the guarantor of peace and stability, especially with regard to the country’s ‘compatriots living abroad’. Georgia, according to the archpriest, also falls under Russia’s protection – “not for decades, but for centuries, Russia was protecting the integrity and interests of the Georgian people”. In the first three days after the war, the Church aligned with the Russian government in promoting this key strategic narrative.

Feofan distances the Georgian people from the actions of their government under Saakashvili – ‘it is not possible to say that the entire Georgian people are with Saakashvili’. Feofan stresses that he does not want ‘Georgia-phobia’ to develop and also emphasises the ties between the two peoples and countries by saying that ‘Russians and Georgians have too much in common’. These sentiments contribute to this report’s ‘peace and commonality’ frame, which feeds into the Church presenting itself in the immediate aftermath of the war as a peaceful and unifying force.

Feofan also talks of the ‘orchestrators of this catastrophe’, who ‘stand behind him [i.e., Saakashvili]’, implying that the conflict was pre-planned and that Saakashvili’s US-led Western allies are strongly influencing, if not dictating, Georgia’s political and military actions. This highly political, controversial statement made by Feofan – one of several – aligns with Russia’s official political discourse and strategic narrative at the time that claimed the West’s/USA’s destructive geopolitical manoeuvrings lay behind the war.
Framing Techniques during the Ukraine Crisis

A pre-conflict news report was published on 23rd February 2014, entitled ‘The word of His Holiness Patriarch Kirill in the week of the Last Judgement at the Moscow church of Archangel Michael in Troparevo’. As the report is a verbatim transcript of Patriarch Kirill’s address, the patriarch is the author. This report features a selected transcript of a personal appeal from the patriarch to the people of Ukraine, particularly those protesting in Kiev. As the head of the ROC is calling for restraint and dialogue, this report is coded as ‘PEACEKEEPING’.

A notable framing technique used in this report is found in the classification of actors. As can be seen in a large number of news reports in this period, one word that repeatedly appears in relation to the ‘Ukrainian people’ is a derivation of the word ‘brother’ (brat): Patriarch Kirill referred to the deadly skirmishes in Kiev as ‘fratricide’ that is spilling the ‘fraternal blood’ of his ‘brothers and sisters in Ukraine’. In a religious context, the address of ‘brothers and sisters’ has a different meaning to that in a secular context: ‘brothers and sisters’ is a standard address from a Christian priest to their parishioners, referencing the New Testament expression of ‘brothers and sisters in Christ’ (brat’ya i sestry vo Khriste). In the context of the relationship between Russia and Ukraine, however, a reference to ‘brothers and sisters’ acquires an additional meaning.

Historically, many references have been made by Russian political, cultural and media figures to the immemorial brotherhood between the Russian and Ukrainian nations and peoples as a way of denying, or, at least, questioning, Ukraine’s statehood and identity as being separate from Russia. In this context, use of the term ‘brother’ by the patriarch could be interpreted as being highly contentious. Patriarch Kirill’s reference to ‘blood’

7 Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2014b).
alongside ‘brother’ in both this report and others further suggests that his addresses were intended to be interpreted beyond a purely religious context.

Whilst the ROC has previously acknowledged Ukraine’s political separateness, Church figures repeatedly emphasised the country’s spiritual and cultural closeness to Russia, which gives the news report its frame of ‘(spiritual/cultural/ethnic) unity’. Thus, the matter of the extent to which Ukraine is separate from Russia is raised: if Russia and Ukraine are united in a spiritual-cultural and, even, ethnic sense, then the latter’s national distinctiveness is significantly undermined.

This close cultural coupling of the two countries ties in with Russia’s official political discourse, where high-level politicians play down or, even, deny the separateness of Ukraine from Russia. Putin, for example, prominently stated on numerous occasions during the Ukraine crisis that Ukrainians and Russians are one people (“we are […] one people [odin narod]”). In making such claims, Putin has adopted an imperial-era view on Ukrainian identity; in the time of the Russian Empire, the Tsarist government was of the position that Ukrainians and Russians were part of the same pan-Russian identity. The territory of southern and eastern Ukraine was also termed ‘Novorossiya’, which was also evoked by Putin in 2014. It was only during the Soviet era that Ukraine was recognised as a separate people.

To stress the unity between Russia and Ukraine, particularly spiritual unity, Patriarch Kirill uses (shared) history to stress the links between the two. For example, the head of the ROC refers to ‘undivided Rus’ and ‘Ukraine, […] Kiev – […] the mother of Russian cities.’ The patriarch also talks of the unity of Orthodoxy in Ukraine through the prism of history, referring to the ROC-affiliated UOC-MP as the only means to ‘preserve

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9 For example, see: RT na russkom, (2014); Prezident Rossii (2014c).
10 Plokhy (2017).
the spiritual unity over the course of a thousand years’ and of ‘preserving the tradition of […] the great Prince Vladimir’. As did the Russian government, the ROC used culture-based historical narratives extensively in this case study, more so than during the Russo-Georgian War. The approach taken by the Church of drawing heavily on discourse and issues relating to culture and identity fed into the Russian government’s strategic narrative of the international system which advanced the argument that Ukraine’s future, owing to its ethno-cultural closeness to and shared history with Russia, is best served through political and economic alignment with Russia, rather than with the West.

A during-conflict news report entitled ‘Metropolitan Sergii of Voronezh and Liski met with refugees from Ukraine’ was published on 1st July 2014.11 As the Church’s humanitarian aid programme was mobilised, reports about eparchial humanitarian activity served the purpose of publicising the Church’s efforts from July to mid-September 2014 in providing significant material, psychological and spiritual assistance to eastern Ukraine. Therefore, this report was coded as ‘HUMANITARIANISM’ and has the frame of ‘ROC benevolence’.

This news report discusses the humanitarian aid relief that an ROC eparchy bordering eastern Ukraine was carrying out for over 100 refugees fleeing the Lugansk Oblast of Ukraine. The report states that all of the Voronezh Metropolitanate helped the refugees, with parishioners providing aid in the form of furnished flats, money, food products and clothes at their own expense. Therefore, this report presented the aid as fundamentally selfless, large-scale and, largely, grassroots. In turn, this humanitarian activity portrays the Church in a positive light as a benevolent and neutral actor: the

refugees were presented as being grateful to the Church ‘for the welcoming reception, attention and support’ and that ‘[s]uch material assistance turned out to be very useful’.

Implicit within the Church’s discourse surrounding its humanitarian efforts lies the argument that the Church has a historical responsibility of paternalism over the territories, (Orthodox) religious-cultural sites and parishioners/people that make up ‘Holy Rus’. This notion ties in with the government’s broader strategic narrative that Russia (i.e., the government, state structures and the Church) is the only power in the region that is able to fulfil such a paternal role in the post-Soviet space. Throughout this case study, the state’s paternal ‘responsibilities’ were strongly linked to the country’s ‘compatriots living abroad’ (CLA), who were represented in Russian political and media discourse as being under threat spiritually-culturally and existentially, thus requiring protection and support.

Given that the Church was providing aid to those fleeing the military conflict in eastern Ukraine (who were described as suffering, desperate and practically penniless), the reports are fundamentally based on a negative context. As a result, many ‘HUMANITARIANISM’ news reports feature negative and emotional language. In this report, for example, the refugees, ‘not holding back their emotions’, had ‘tears in their eyes’, with one also explaining that her grandchild is suffering from trauma. This news report, coded as ‘HUMANITARIANISM’ but also relating to ‘PERSECUTION’, is an example of overlapping thematic content on OSMP.

The following post-conflict reports are a combined analysis of two (relatively) short news reports that were coded as ‘PERSECUTION’ and both feature the ‘CLA – victim’ frame. These reports detail the attempted capture of UOC-MP churches in

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12 Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ (2015a and 2015c).
Ukraine by clergy, parishioners and supporters of the UOC-KP. The chairman of the prominent communication-oriented Synod Information Department of the Moscow Patriarchate, Vladimir Legoida, is the primary commentator in both reports.

Legoida, an outspoken figure on the crisis, gave commentaries that were notably more emotive, more dramatic stylistically and less diplomatically reserved in comparison with those of high-positioned ROC clergy. A possible reason behind this difference in rhetoric could be that Legoida is not a clergy-member, which provides the Church with seemingly enough distance to express more controversial, hardline opinions. During the Russo-Georgian War, it was a clergy member, Archpriest Feofan, that adopted this ‘hardline’ role for the Church. In consideration of the ROC’s vulnerable position in Ukraine during the crisis, it was possibly too controversial and likely self-harming to have a clergy member fulfil this role for the Church.

There are numerous examples of emotive language scattered throughout both reports in relation to the UOC-MP and its parishioners, such as ‘sad’, ‘suffering’, ‘much-suffering’. In the opening sentence of one of the reports, Legoida ‘judges’ and offers ‘condemnation’ of alleged UOC-MP victimisation, which gives the impression of him having authority to evaluate the situation in a manner akin to a court judge. Additionally, references to crime and punishment are made in the reports, such as ‘unlawful’, ‘criminal activity’, and ‘illegal’. Consequently, these news reports portray a sense of legal and moral righteousness falling on the side of the alleged victim – the UOC-MP.

Expressive language of an aggressive nature relating to conflict permeate the two news reports – for example, ‘clashes’, ‘injuries’, ‘violence’, ‘expulsion’, ‘seizure’, ‘force’. All of these lexical choices are geared towards provoking a strong visceral response in the

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13 A number of local parishes in Ukraine voluntarily, but also, in several cases, as a result of outside force, changed church allegiance from the UOC-MP to the UOC-KP. For more on parishes in Ukraine switching church affiliation, see: Verstyuk (2016).
reader by encouraging acute negative emotions – i.e., Russia’s Orthodox-identifying ‘CLA’ is besieged under prolonged and sustained attack in a desperate struggle for the right to religious expression. This language-use is common in reports that feature the ‘CLA – victim’ frame.

In these reports, much of the discussion includes the following words and their morphological derivations: ‘canon’, ‘schism’, ‘radical’, ‘nationalism’. The first two words relate to the religious concept of ‘canonical territory’. This concept was often raised by the Church during the crisis, often in relation to the UOC-KP. Legoida pejoratively talks of the UOC-KP’s non-canonical status, using ‘so-called’ to refer to the Kiev Patriarchate, prefixing UOC-KP with ‘non-canonical’ and referring to the UOC-KP’s adherents as ‘schismatics’.14 Furthermore, Legoida discusses the UOC-KP alongside the ‘violent actions’ of ‘militarised groups’ consisting of ‘radical nationalists’. This framing technique of association through juxtaposition conflates representatives of the UOC-KP with extremist far-right Ukrainian nationalists.

Legoida uses inferential language that serves to undermine the authority and efficacy of Ukrainian state structures. Moreover, Legoida repeatedly directly condemns the state for discriminating against and committing illegal acts targeting Russian-speaking, UOC-MP-affiliated Ukrainian citizens. Amongst other examples, Legoida claimed that ‘the authorities are systematically closing their eyes’ to the plight of the UOC-MP and, even, ‘taking part in despotism’ that involves ‘the use of violence against parishioners’. Therefore, the discrimination against and victimisation of the UOC-MP is presented as

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14 The word ‘schism’ (raskol) is of historical significance to Russian Orthodoxy, as it is associated with Russian Orthodoxy’s 17th-century schism that occurred following the adoption of liturgical and ritual reforms. Thus, the word ‘schism’, with this historical context attached, is a highly loaded term that has strong negative connotations.
structural and state-sponsored, as the law enforcement bodies are portrayed as being complicit through inaction and, at times, direct participation.
Appendix III: Critical Discourse Analysis of RM News Reports

A number of news reports published on Russkii Mir (RM) are explored in this appendix. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used to reveal the framing techniques employed by this media outlet in its representations of the two military conflicts.¹

Framing Techniques during the Russo-Georgian War

An analysis of the first and main RM news report on the Russo-Georgian War provides an insight as to how FRM presented this conflict through its media outlet. Entitled ‘War and Peace’, a conflict-related article was written for the August 2008 edition of the Russkii Mir.ru magazine, which was then published on the organisation’s news website on 21st August 2008.²

Notably, FRM’s response to the war came directly from the organisation’s head – Vyacheslav Nikonov. The authorship of this report indicates that the topic was of sufficient importance to the Russian government to warrant FRM’s framing of the war to be articulated by the head of the organisation. The positions and narratives that were advanced in the report align significantly with the Russian government’s strategic narratives at the time.

The deliberately oxymoronic expression that was adopted and frequently repeated by the government to describe Russia’s military operation in the South Caucasus, ‘forcing Georgia to peace’ (prinuzhdenie Gruzii k miru), was, notably, also used by Nikonov in this report. The coverage of the war in Nikonov’s article featured three important

¹ For a definition of CDA, see: Footnote 1 (Appendix II).
² Russkii Mir (2008).
characteristics: the adoption of two of the government’s central strategic narratives – i.e., Russia as a ‘great power’ and the West/USA as Russia’s historical foe – and the use of discourse relating to law, legality and legitimacy which was prioritised and foregrounded by the country’s key political figures.

Nikonov employed discourse on law and legal norms to support the official Russian position that, in accordance with international law, Russia was legally duty-bound to act in August 2008 in order to fulfil its official peacekeeping mandate that was introduced following the previous Georgia-South Ossetia military conflict in 1991-2. As a result, this discourse reflected that which was promoted during and after the war by the Russian government. Whilst stressing the legal, treaty-bound peacekeeping role of Russia’s forces in Georgia, Nikonov fails to mention the questionable and, arguably, provocative actions of Russia’s ‘peacekeeping forces’ in Abkhazia and South Ossetia leading up to the war which appeared to extend beyond the parameters of peacekeeping operations.

In this report, Nikonov’s emphasis on the law – even mentioning the law background and law-oriented mentality of the (then) President Medvedev who ‘paid close attention to the legality of [Russia’s] actions on this issue’ – is designed to associate the military actions taken by the government with truth, objectivity and legality. The contrast between the classification of Russia/Medvedev and Saakashvili as central actors in the conflict is stark. Nikonov presents Russia as having obligations to its neighbours in the region based on law, morality and honour. Conversely, Saakashvili, to whom no ‘voice’ is given in the report, is portrayed by Nikonov extremely negatively, often acting outside of the law, as: 1) authoritarian, mentally unstable and a liar; 2) shamelessly manipulative (i.e., illegally starting a war purely for political gain to improve his falling popularity); 3) illegitimate and anti-democratic (i.e., regarding accusations against him of vote rigging in national elections); and 4) in the context of this conflict, a ‘war criminal’.
According to Nikonov, Russia’s legal peacekeeping mandate had to be fulfilled in order to ‘protect the lives of thousands of one’s own citizens and servicemen’. This sentiment aligns with the Russian government’s key discourse on protecting and supporting the country’s ‘compatriots living abroad’ (‘CLA’). Throughout the war, the ‘CLA’ were much discussed by Russia’s politicians and in the media. The Georgian attack on South Ossetia was portrayed by Nikonov as ‘ethnic cleansing’ and ‘genocide’, which threatened the existence of the entire ethnic-Ossetian population in the territory, not just Russia’s ‘compatriots’. This interpretation of Georgia’s military campaign being, fundamentally, ethnically motivated was the Russian government’s official position.

Once again, in close alignment with repeated claims made by many government figures at the time, highly exaggerated casualty figures were mentioned several times by Nikonov. Nikonov claimed that ‘thousands were killed’, which included ‘around 1,600 of the civilian Ossetian population’. Even this exaggerated figure, however, does not support the claim of ‘genocide’ or ‘ethnic cleansing’. (According to the Russian government’s own official figures compiled in 2009 by the Investigative Committee of the Prosecutor’s Office of the RF, the number of Ossetian civilian casualties was, in fact, much less than was claimed by Russian politicians in 2008 – 162.)

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3 In his article, Nikonov did not mention that RF passports were issued to citizens of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the weeks and months leading up to the war. This process, which provided these ‘compatriots’ with a legal status and legal protections in Russia, has been termed ‘passportisation’. For more on Russia’s policy of ‘passportisation’ in the two territories, see: Littlefield (2009); Nagashima (2017); Souleimanov, et al. (2018).

4 Conversely, Human Rights Watch concluded that, by committing human rights abuses and violating humanitarian law on a significant scale in the territory, ‘South Ossetian forces attempted to ethnically cleanse [...] villages that were predominantly comprised of ethnic-Georgians’. Human Rights Watch (2009).

5 Interfaks (2009). Nikonov also exaggerated the number of casualties from the 1991-2 South Ossetia War – ‘thousands were killed’ (tysyachi ubitykh). For more information on casualty figures of the 1991-2 South Ossetia War, see: Human Rights Watch/Helsinki (1992).
Nikonov, using these highly emotive concepts, raises the stakes of Ossetian victimhood. As a result, the notion of ‘persecution’ bestows upon the victim virtuous traits, such as truth, the right for equality and justice, and moral righteousness. By prominently raising the concepts of ‘genocide’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’ in his rhetoric, ‘victimhood’ was employed by Nikonov as a political tool to justify Russian military intervention and generate support for the Russian state amongst Russophone populations in the post-Soviet space. As a result of using these terms, Ossetians are classified by Nikonov overwhelmingly as victims, either in the form of casualties or refugees. The repetition of these exaggerated civilian casualty figures throughout the report serves to increase the chances of the reader retaining and internalising this false claim. A desired outcome of employing such tactics would have been to stimulate negative emotions towards Georgia, which, in turn, would help with the broader goal of increasing support for Russia’s military intervention.

One of the main strategic narratives advanced in this report is anti-Americanism. At several points, Nikonov strongly alludes to significant involvement in the war from the US: 1) militarily, as he suggests is evident from the numerous US military trainers and ‘foreign advisers’ in Georgia at the time; and 2) politically, by strongly implying that the USA is behind Saakashvili and his actions, owing to the ‘dependency of the Georgian regime [on the US]’. Nikonov insinuates that the United States are ‘global puppeteers’, who are simply manipulating Georgia for selfish geopolitical gain. This characterisation of the United States ties in with heavily anti-American political discourse in Russia which portrays the USA as striving to dominate world politics at the expense of Russia. Moreover, the USA allegedly undermines Russia’s national interests in the ‘near abroad’ by manipulatively supporting anti-Russian actors in post-Soviet states in order to weaken Russia geopolitically. For example, both EU and NATO expansionism in eastern Europe
are considered by much of Russia’s political elite to be clear manifestations of this primary goal of the USA.

These well-established anti-US narratives tie in closely with Nikonov’s discussion of ‘great power’ politics in the broader geopolitical landscape. It is this discussion of geopolitics that relates to and supports another of the government’s main strategic narratives – Russia as a ‘great power’. The notion of Russia as a ‘great power’ was prominent in the discourse of the country’s top government figures during and after the war: Medvedev, for example, insisted that other major states recognise Russia’s sphere of “privileged interests” and said that “we want them [i.e., other major powers] to respect us, respect our state, respect our people, our values”.

The war – described by Nikonov as a ‘clear milestone in geopolitics’ – was presented as the major event that marked Russia’s return to the status of ‘great power’ on the international stage. The author argues that, consequently, ‘the interests of Russia’ – long undermined and ignored by the USA – must be taken into consideration, including those national interests relating to Ukraine and NATO. Nikonov expressed this geopolitical ‘return’ with the metaphor of the ‘vacuum’ – created by the collapse of the USSR – being ‘filled’. As was the case in Pervyi Kanal’s coverage of the war, Russia is portrayed in this article as a paternal actor – as the region’s only ‘great power’ – that ensures peace and stability for the nations and peoples of the post-Soviet space, amongst which Russia’s ‘CLA’ are found.

Russia and Russians are clearly classified positively as victors – a ‘victory’ in a war that was ‘a great success’ – and, by extension, the USA/West are classified as the defeated

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on the grounds that they were unsuccessful in achieving their primary geopolitical and military objectives in Georgia. This ‘victory’ for Russia over the West in the South Caucasus touches on long-felt insecurities within Russia’s political establishment over a (perceived) shameful ‘capitulation’ and ‘defeat’ in the Cold War caused by the collapse of the USSR in 1991. In part, this historical context helps to explain why the notion of Russia as a (returning) ‘great power’ was so prominent in the country’s political discourse on the war.

From an analysis of this report, Nikonov clearly follows the government line at the time on the war, uncritically repeating the discourse and key strategic narratives that were advanced by high-profile government figures, such as Medvedev, Putin and Lavrov.

**Framing Techniques during the Ukraine Crisis**

In the pre-conflict period, a news report, entitled ‘Russian compatriots came out against the spread of Nazism in Crimea’, was uploaded to *RM* on 9th January 2014. As it is based on a social aspect of the conflict (i.e., an anti-Euromaidan public protest in Crimea, comprised of civil society groups and ordinary citizens), this news report was coded as ‘SOCIETY’.

The memory of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-5 (GPW) was used heavily in this report. In Russia and eastern Ukraine, memory of the GPW continues to have significant prominence in and an effect on society. As well as stemming from the fact that the war’s costly and devastating impact on the Soviet Union is still within living memory, the

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7 Russkii Mir (2014b).
8 A full list of theme-categories and accompanying descriptions for the coding of *RM* news reports can be found in Chapter V.
9 The Great Patriotic War was the name given during the Soviet period to World War II. The term is still used today.
continued resonance of the GPW is also a result of history being used in contemporary Russian politics for the purpose of national identity formation; the GPW is treated as the (often-mythologised) foundational event for Russia as a nation-state. The notion of the GPW as Russia’s foundational event is advanced by the government and broader state, and is disseminated through the country’s mass media. Therefore, the topics of Nazism and fascism have a contemporary relevance for and impact on Russian citizens.\(^{10}\) In Ukraine, however, interpretation of the GPW has been a key dividing issue in the country’s politics around (national) identity.

The official Russian interpretation of the war that is actively promoted by the Kremlin enjoys strong support in the Donbass region and Crimea, but notably less support in western Ukraine.\(^{11}\) A different approach to understanding the war was advanced under (the former) President of Ukraine Viktor Yushchenko (2005-2010), however.\(^{12}\) Yushchenko’s approach faced sharp criticism and opposition in the Donbass and Crimea, owing to the way it more positively interpreted the wartime activity of the Ukrainian nationalist movement and more negatively interpreted that of the USSR. In Russia, those who shaped the official narratives around the Ukraine crisis were aware of the politically and socially divisive nature of narratives on the GPW in Ukraine. Hence, GPW-related narratives were utilised during the Ukraine crisis strategically, manipulatively and intensively by state-owned and state-controlled Russian media outlets, such as FRM’s Russkii Mir.

The word ‘Nazi’ was used frequently in this report in different morphological variations. Alongside ‘Nazi’, the report also featured other similarly historically loaded and

\(^{10}\) For a closer look at the role of the GPW in the formation of Russian national identity, see: Torbakov (2011); Malinova, O., ‘Political Uses of the Great Patriotic War in Post-Soviet Russia from Yeltsin to Putin’, in: Fedor, et al., eds. (2017), pp. 43-70.
\(^{11}\) Fedor, et al., eds. (2017).
\(^{12}\) For more on Yushchenko’s approach on the GPW, see: Klymenko (2015).
negatively charged terms relating to the GPW – for example, ‘fascism’, ‘fascists’ and ‘Hitlerism’. Russia’s historical experience of the GPW means that Nazi ideology and symbology is interpreted negatively in Russia. The use of such historical language by RM draws on national memory and evokes past national trauma in order to achieve present-day objectives.

These historical terms serve as cognitive shorthand for the Euromaidan protestors through direct and indirect association in the report. Therefore, associating the Euromaidan street protests with Nazism and fascism in such an overt and blanketed fashion is designed to provoke an acutely negative and emotionally charged response in the reader towards the protests in Kiev and its actors. This association also aims to misrepresent the protests’ nature and status by distorting the protestors’ motives and actions. As a result, the Euromaidan street protests are presented in RM news reports, such as this one, as having no political legitimacy, no historical justification and no moral righteousness. As they resonated widely in the Donbass, Crimea and Russia, (GPW-linked) narratives on Nazism and fascism were useful for FRM in appealing to audiences at home and in southern and eastern Ukraine.

The sentiment of the report’s declarative title (which was also repeated in the opening sentence), without qualification in the form of punctuation or certain words to indicate an opinion, reads as the media outlet asserting that the ‘spread of Nazism’ in Ukraine, of which the Euromaidan is portrayed as a manifestation, is a matter of fact. This salient sentiment mirrors and supports the Russian government’s main narrative at the time of Nazism and fascism, in the form of extreme Ukrainian nationalism, being the driving force behind the Euromaidan street protests, which puts Russia’s ‘compatriots’ under threat.
In framing theory, this tactic of positioning favoured information at the beginning of a text, especially in the title and/or opening sentence(s), is employed because such information is more likely to be read and processed than the remainder of the text. The final sentence of the news report features the negatively loaded term ‘propaganda’ as well as the word ‘neo-Nazi’ thrice. Thus, the sentiment at the start of the report is repeated at the end. The opening and closing statements mirroring each other is an important aspect of news framing because such repetition increases the likelihood of selective foregrounded information being internalised and remembered. It has been common practice for news reports to be structured in this manner during ideologically charged media campaigns, which the Russian state-controlled mass media began systematically orchestrating after the large-scale street protests of 2012 in Moscow.13

As for the classification of social actors, the author portrays the Euromaidan protestors negatively – i.e., as radical right-wing extremists from Ukraine’s various nationalist groups. (In fact, subsequent scholarly research on the composition of protestors on the Maidan found that only a minority of protestors were representatives of radical right-wing groups.14) Conversely, those people demonstrating against the Euromaidan protests are portrayed in a positive light – i.e., standing up to Nazism and fascism in Ukraine, thus creating a historical connection to the GPW.

At no point in the report is ‘voice’ permitted to those taking part in or in support of the Euromaidan street protests, with neither an explanation nor a justification given regarding such protestors’ positions or activity. The clear omission and exclusion of a central position held by one side in this crisis is an example of unbalanced reporting, which

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13 For more on media campaigns in Russia post-2012, see: Tolz and Teper (2018).
14 Whilst the openly Ukrainian nationalist far-right represented a minority amongst the protestors on the Maidan, some scholars have argued that it had a significant, if not crucial, impact on the development of events during the crisis. For example, see: Ishchenko (2016); Katchanovski (2019). Additionally, see: Likhachev (2015).
can only be for the purpose of wilfully promoting a certain (i.e., favoured) viewpoint over others. This tactic of presenting a biased, one-sided picture was highly likely designed to make the reader adopt a particular interpretation of events.

In the report, identity-related terminology is present throughout. As observed by Vera Tolz and Yuriy Teper (2018), the strategy of discussing identity has been increasingly employed by political and media elites in Russia. (In the media environments of most countries, coverage of identity-related issues linked to politics has increased). Throughout the crisis, identity-based narratives in relation to Ukraine were both common and prominent in the Russian media. For example, the title of the report contains the term ‘Russian compatriots’, for which the rossiiskii adjective is used to denote a civic-national understanding of Russian identity, whereas the main body of the report contains the quote ‘[we, the] Russian citizens of Ukraine’, for which the russkii adjective is used to refer to, conversely, an ethno-cultural understanding of Russian identity. The use of these different terms impresses upon the reader that the pro-Russian protestors are nationally, ethnically and culturally close to, if not the same as, Russians.

According to Teper (2015), use of the ethno-cultural variant of the word ‘Russian’ (russkii), as opposed to the civic-national option (rossiiskii), increased significantly amongst political elites in Russia from the beginning of the crisis, indicating that language was being used tactically to try and shape perceptions and understandings of Ukrainian identity in order to facilitate geopolitical objectives. Additionally, references to culture and cultural issues increased in the Russian media and in commentaries made by Putin prior to and during the annexation of Crimea.15 In the Russian media throughout the crisis, Ukrainians – Russian-speaking and otherwise – were presented as belonging to a single

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15 Kasianenko (2020).
pan-Russian civilisational identity, which overlaps strongly with the culture-based identity concept of the ‘Russian World’.

In the body of the report, assertive metapropositional verbs are present: ‘underlined’ and ‘demanded’. These types of words that are describing the protestors’ direct speech are imbued with confidence and assertiveness, which assist in creating an air of factuality to the comments. The selective use of direct speech in the report without critical analysis or qualification also allows the author to present people and events in a desired way by promoting certain sentiments vicariously. As they are repeated and unchallenged, such opinions are promoted in the report. The demonstrators’ slogans, for example, are seemingly appropriated by the outlet through being repeated without analysis: ‘[p]articipants came with the slogans “Stop Nazism!”, “Down with all Banderovites from power!”, “Neo-Nazism is the plague of the 21st century.”’

On 18th March 2014, a during-conflict news report entitled ‘The ‘International Shevchenko Festival – ‘artifex orbis’ in Kharkov’ was uploaded to Russkii Mir. This particular news report appeared at a time of intense media activity on RM relating to Ukraine (i.e., from mid-February to mid-April 2014). At this time, the outlet was undertaking considerable efforts through its activity in Ukraine to present those aspects of Russian language, culture and history that are shared with Ukraine as unifying forces for the country. The report, coded as ‘CULTURE’, reports on a cultural event that took place in Kharkov, eastern Ukraine. This FRM-sponsored event received a grant from the cultural

\[\text{References}\]


\[\text{Russkii Mir (2014a). On this date, Crimea was officially incorporated into the Russian Federation.}\]
organisation to organise an academic-cultural festival celebrating the life and work of one of Ukraine’s most famous national poets, Taras Shevchenko.\(^{18}\)

*FRM*, tasked with popularising Russia’s language and culture abroad, was promoting an author who was born during the time of the Russian Empire in modern-day Ukraine, wrote mostly in the Ukrainian language and is widely regarded in present-day Ukraine as the country’s foremost national poet. Shevchenko was at the forefront of delineating the identity of Ukraine as separate from the identity of the ‘Great Russians’ (*velikorossy*) in the nineteenth century.\(^{19}\) The emphasis of this particular event was, nevertheless, fundamentally on Shevchenko’s links to both Ukraine and Russia.

By using Ukraine’s biggest historical literary figure to emphasise such links between the two countries, this event is a clear and significant attempt at linking the cultures, people and histories of Russia and Ukraine.\(^{20}\) In doing so, the separateness of Ukraine from Russia is minimised, which aligns with the opinion held by a large segment of the Russian political elite that the two peoples are actually one people. Any differences between Russians and Ukrainians are considered by such elites to be simply minor, regional cultural variations within the single pan-Russian ethno-cultural identity, rather than to be evidence of separate cultures. Even President Putin in March 2014 claimed that “the Russian and Ukrainian peoples are practically one people”.\(^{21}\) As such a perspective was not an official position during the Soviet period, Putin adopted an approach to Ukrainian identity that was last generally held by the government during the days of the

\(^{18}\) For a notable period of his life, Shevchenko lived in Saint Petersburg – at the time, the capital of the Russian Empire – where he died in 1861.

\(^{19}\) Remy (2016).

\(^{20}\) At that point in time, Ukraine did not exist as a country, but a Ukrainian nationalist movement had been present since the 19\(^{th}\) century. Shevchenko also published some work in Russian.

Russian Empire, almost one hundred years prior. Putin has since repeated this claim of shared ethnic identity between Russians and Ukrainians on numerous other occasions.

In the main paragraph of the report, references are made to connections between Russia and Ukraine. The links made between Russia and Ukraine are not only historical, as when Shevchenko is used to highlight cultural connections (for example, when discussing ‘the influence of the Ukrainian and Russian intelligentsia on his worldview’ and ‘the path of the artist in the Russian Academy [of Arts in Saint Petersburg]’), but also contemporary (for example, when referring to ‘students of Ukrainian and Russian educational institutions’ and informing that ‘published materials from the forum will be sent out to the leading libraries of Ukraine and Russia’). The primary frame employed in this news report is ‘(Russian-Ukrainian) unity and commonality’, owing to the report’s strong and repeated emphasis on: 1) historical and present-day Russo-Ukrainian cultural connections (as aspects of a positive and unifying shared culture); and 2) cross-border organisational collaboration and administrative co-operation over cultural events.

This emphasis on (cultural) commonality portrays an image of strong, deep and enduring ties between Russia and Ukraine. Furthermore, the author’s phrasing ‘beyond time and beyond borders’ serves to devalue and de-emphasise the role of national borders in Russo-Ukrainian relations, as well as to emphasise the alleged timelessness of the shared cultural relations between the two peoples. By attempting to incorporate such a major Ukrainian literary figure into Russian culture and history, the notion of a Ukrainian identity that is separate from Russia is diluted. Furthermore, Ukrainian national identity has historically been contested by many of Russia’s political, cultural and intellectual elites.

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22 It was only during the Soviet Union that Russians and Ukrainians were officially recognised as two separate peoples.
23 For example, see: Prezident Rossii (2020).
24 For more on the perception of Ukrainian identity in Russia, see: Tolz (2001).
This cultural coupling constitutes part of a broad state effort to pull Ukrainian consciousness and policy closer to Russia, which would, theoretically, stave off Ukraine’s drift out of Russia’s orbit.

In the post-conflict period, the news report ‘Vyacheslav Nikonov: An anti-Russian Ukraine is being created before our very eyes’ was published on the RM news website on 13th April 2015. This report, based on an appearance on the federal television channel Rossiya 1 by the head of FRM, was coded as ‘MMST’ (i.e., monuments, memory, symbology and toponomy). The publication of this transcript creates the impression that the views expressed by Nikonov represent those of FRM, as there is almost no ‘distance’ between the report and the direct speech of the commentator. Additionally, Nikonov’s repeated use of the word ‘our’ encourages a sense of proximity, which serves to increase the chances of the reader relating to and being persuaded by the speaker.

The report discusses the adoption of a law by Ukraine’s Verkhovna Rada on 9th April 2015 that officially condemned and seemingly equated both the communist (USSR) and National Socialist (Nazi Germany) regimes of the 20th Century. Earlier, the European Union adopted a similar resolution on 2nd April 2009, which ‘recognises Nazism, Stalinism and fascist and Communist regimes as a common legacy’. A backlash from Russian politicians followed. Since 2009, the political establishment in Russia has become more vocal and combative with regard to what it considers to be ‘revisionist’ interpretations of

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26 Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (2015). The Verkhovna Rada is the parliamentary chamber of the Ukrainian political system.
27 European Parliament (2009). A year earlier, a resolution, which also caused indignation to be expressed by the Russian government, was introduced by the European Union, stating that the Holodomor in Ukraine was an ‘artificial famine’ that was ‘cynically and cruelly planned by Stalin’s regime’. European Parliament (2008).
historical topics and events and, moreover, the influence of what it perceives as anti-Russian ‘politics of memory’ on the discourses and subsequent policies of the EU.  

Petro Poroshenko, Ukraine’s president at the time, aligned Ukrainian law closer to that of the EU on the remembrance of communism and Nazism by introducing this legislation. It was this law that provided the basis for Poroshenko’s prominent ‘decommunisation’ policy, which, in a way that was similar to the political reaction in Russia to the EU’s 2009 law, spawned protestations and objections from many of Russia’s top political figures. The basis for this negative response was that, according to such political figures, the law devalues the role and dishonours the sacrifice of the USSR (and, by extension, of Russia – the official successor state to the Soviet Union) in its efforts to defeat Nazi Germany during the GPW. Thus, representatives of the Russian government felt that the wartime legacy of the Soviet Union and, consequently, one of the foundational pillars of contemporary Russian national identity was being distorted and disrespected.

Throughout the report, loaded terms and phrases are used, such as: ‘anti-Russian’ (in both an ethno-cultural and civic-national sense – antirusskaya and antirossiiskaya); ‘to demonise Moscow, to demonise Russia’; ‘hostility to our country’; and ‘harm’. It is such negatively charged, emotive language that builds up a strong sense of discrimination against Russia. The frame in this news report is ‘CLA – victim’, which was established through language-use (for example, repeatedly referring to ‘anti-Russian’ discrimination) and subject matter (i.e., portraying Russia as the victim of a revisionist assault on objective history by Ukraine at the bidding of the West, which is resulting in the erasure of a shared Russo-Ukrainian identity by airbrushing out Soviet achievements and prohibiting all Soviet

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28 In 2009, a commission was set up by (then) President Medvedev to counter ‘attempts at the falsification of history to the detriment of Russia’s interests’ over contested historical issues. (The commission was discontinued in 2012.) Prezident Rossii (2009b).
symbols). The issue at hand is presented by Nikonov as a battle of facts versus falsehood and historical reality versus political ideology, rather than differing interpretations of history that are held by different actors and groups.

The term ‘Banderovites’ was used in many news reports on RM. ‘Banderovites’ is a derogatory term, which originated in the Soviet period, that is used to describe people who revere the prominent mid-20th century Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera and allegedly desire a far-right Ukrainian nationalist course for the country. Bandera, who led the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) between 1940 and 1950, is a controversial figure, particularly in Russia and eastern Ukraine, because he collaborated with the Nazis during World War II in the expectation of receiving support from Nazi Germany to form an independent Ukrainian nation-state. Use of the term ‘Banderovites’ in RM reports conforms to the well-established Russian narrative about nationalist-oriented Ukrainian elites both historically and presently sympathising with Nazism. Nikonov, for example, makes a claim of ‘Banderovites’ and ‘Nazis […] being glorified’ in Ukraine, despite allegedly having ‘killed hundreds of thousands – maybe millions – of not only Poles, not only Russians, but also Ukrainians’. Thus, Nikonov heavily implies that Ukrainian nationalists (i.e., ‘Banderovites’) are not only a threat to Russia, but, as history has shown, to Ukraine and Ukrainians themselves.

29 Nikonov also discusses the alleged role of the USA in Ukraine during the crisis (for example, the ‘fulfilment of [the US’s] military-political goals’ in the country).