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Research Article

A Constructivist Approach to Understanding Russian's Public Diplomacy through Humanitarian Aid during COVID-19

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Abstract

Applying discourse analysis of Russia's narrative on humanitarian aid and its perception by the Western collective identity at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study identifies several challenges that constructivism poses to the current understanding of public diplomacy (PD). In contrast to the mainstream positivist tendency to evaluate the effectiveness of PD through models, this article expands the PD narrative by inquiring about the role of power, intersubjective knowledge, and collective identities in public diplomacy. In particular, it examines the PD questions often ignored by researchers regarding how collective identities can exercise discursive power to interpret incoming narratives, which challenge domestic intersubjective knowledge. It also argues that, because the Russian political elite failed to ensure a coherent story and provide informational support for its humanitarian aid, the Western intersubjective knowledge on Russia negatively contributed to the perception of PD narratives. Thus, the article underscores the importance for PD practitioners to understand how the socially constructed nature of knowledge can improve or harm PD strategies.

Key words: public diplomacy, constructivism, collective identity, soft power, knowledge, power

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Introduction

Public diplomacy (PD) plays an important role in international relations since governments can extend their power beyond borders and use the growing political influence of the public to their advantage. As "the process by which direct relations are pursued with a country's people to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented" (Sharp, 2005, 106), PD allows governments to overcome the limitations of traditional state-to-state diplomacy. At the same time, while conventional diplomacy uses well-established communication practices, the growing power of PD to interact with the public requires investigation. To date, scholars have introduced various ways to explain the nature and effectiveness of PD, including "the pathway of connection" (Sevin, 2015, 2017); soft power (Nye, 1990, 2004, 2011; Wei, 2016); conspiracy theory (Yablokov, 2015); image cultivation (Yang et al., 2012); the Cascading Activation Model (Entman, 2003); the Excellence Theory (Yun, 2006). However, others have noticed that a "more coherent and integrated research agenda is needed" (Vanc & Fitzpatrick, 2016, 5) since plurality has not led to a consensus on the best practices and universal rules of PD. In contrast to their observation, this paper argues that before the integration of different theoretical views is considered, it is important to first deepen our understanding of the existing approaches. In particular, it is necessary to re-examine the often misunderstood and understudied constructivist approach to PD.

The "strong positivist tendencies" of the existing views constrain theoretical diversity in PD studies (Pamment, 2014, 50). Using Russia's PD as an example, while researchers have attempted to evaluate its effectiveness (Gerber & Zavisce, 2016; Kragh & Asberg, 2017; Carter & Carter, 2021), they have tended to concentrate on quantitative data and to omit the socially constructed nature of its narratives by trying to determine the "facts" or "the truth" behind them. Faizullaev and Cornut (2017, 595) argued that "it makes little sense" since narratives are compilations of various pieces of reality and, thus, cannot be approached apart from the intersubjective knowledge and practices by which they are enacted, produced, or reproduced. As a result, the positivist idea that meanings and knowledge are exogenously given affects epistemological and methodological approaches to narratives, resulting in a rather limited view on how we understand PD and its effect on foreign societies

This continuing dominance of positivism directly affects how scholars understand constructivisms' main claims. Although there is no agreed-upon definition of constructivism because of its complexity (Reus-Smit, 2005), this paper understands it as a theory that recognizes "stressing, in particular, the role of collectively held or "intersubjective" ideas and understandings on social life" (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, 392). Several researchers have argued that constructivism could give "fresh insights" to the understanding of PD and move the needle forward toward a more inclusive approach to theory building (Van Ham, 2002; Gilboa, 2008, 75; Byrne, 2012). However, many of them (Zhang, 2009, 2019; Van Ham, 2010; Huijgh & Byrne, 2012) continue to use certain aspects of "conventional" constructivism, which is often described as positivist since it continues to see social reality through formal models (Abbot, 1990; Hopf, 1998; Wiener, 2006).

At the same time, PD studies continue to overlook the postpositivist and critical roots of constructivism, in particular, claims about the influence of power, the socially constructed and intersubjective nature of knowledge, and the role of collective identities in the dissemination and reception of PD narratives. As a result, some of the serious challenges that constructivism poses to the main views on PD have not been fully articulated or, in some cases, have even been misinterpreted. Consequently, while scholars focus on developing a comprehensive research strategy to apply constructivism and practice theory in the analysis of diplomacy (Neumann, 2002; Adler & Pouliot, 2011; Pouliot & Cornut, 2015), PD still lags behind in acknowledging the complexity of constructivism.

Thus, this paper aims at challenging the long-established positivist views on PD by reintroducing constructivist theory. First, based on the contrast with contemporary literature in which constructivism is used to analyze PD, it highlights the main problems related to the approach to power, intersubjective knowledge, and collective identities. The article then discusses how the current positivist approach affects the analysis of Russian PD. After describing the methodology in detail, the study uses the case of a Russian humanitarian aid narrative and its reception in the West at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. It argues that, although the Russian government failed to provide a coherent narrative with the timely presented information, preexisting intersubjective knowledge about Russia also played a significant role in how it was perceived.

Constructivist Challenge to Mainstream PD

Despite interest in diplomacy, constructivists avoided extensive discussions of PD. They argued that diplomacy is necessary to develop a sense of common identity or destiny among states through practice, interactions, and changing knowledge (Neumann, 2002; Adler, 2013; Groulier & Tordjman, 2020). However, the majority concentrated on diplomacy at the state-to-state level (Wendt, 1992, 1999; Neumann, 2002; Pouliot, 2010; Adler & Pouliot, 2011; Adler, 2019). Since the constructivists' focus on power relations largely defines the central role of states in knowledge construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Wendt, 1999; Dreher, 2015), discussions of a "public" component of diplomacy were largely ignored. Consequently, the field lacks a much-needed constructivist understanding of PD in terms of power, identities, and knowledge.

At the same time, several researchers have recently employed some aspects of constructivist theory to investigate cultural diplomacy (Villanueva, 2007), various PD programs (Zhang, 2010, 2019), the influence of the domestic dimension of PD (Huijgh & Byrne, 2012), nation-branding (Van Ham, 2002, 2008, 2010; Sasikumar, 2016), and emotions (Graham, 2014). The general tendency continues to be to use the theory in a restricted manner by applying certain constructivist ideas without acknowledging their postpositivist complexity. Consequently, several approaches remain in the literature that constructivism challenges and could contribute to improving

First, scholars tend to overlook the complexity of power in constructivism by aligning it with other approaches. PD and especially soft power scholars have argued that PD is more effective in achieving its goals when practitioners listen to and understand foreign audiences (Nye, 2004, 2011; Melissen, 2005; Atkinson, 2010; Rawnsley, 2015; Wei, 2016). It highlights the necessity of two-way communication between governments and the public to create a sense of common values and interests. This view partially corresponds with constructivists' notion of collective identity formed in the process of interactions despite both of them arising from different traditions. Consequently, Van Ham (2010), building his argument on constructivist ideas, argued that "social power" is similar to soft power because of its seemingly "harmonious" character, which diverges significantly from the theory of constructivism.

Since Berger and Luckmann (1967), constructivists have noted that unequal participation in reality construction characterizes power relations: the one with power produces reality (Dreher, 2015, 59) or has more opportunities to affect it favorably. They observed that attempts to co-opt (Van Ham, 2010, 4) actors might meet defiance or resistance, leading to conflict rather than cooperation (Haacke, 2003) because of differences in identities. Others argued that diplomacy is a tool that promotes "forceful narratives" by which it creates or sustains collective identities (Mattern, 2001, 351–352). Thus, states use "the oppressive force of public diplomacy… to alter one culture to suit the preferences of another culture, based on differences in access to power" (Dutta-Bergman, 2006, 117). In that context, the "harmonious" character of social power is debatable since the more powerful actor might create and impose its knowledge on "others." However, the lack of discussion of power by Van Ham does not advance the debate on how power relations affect PD communication between states and the public.

Second, constructivism claims that knowledge is intersubjective, meaning that actors come and act together based on a system of common beliefs about the social reality (Wendt, 1999, 158; Weldes, 1999). Despite an attempt to utilize constructivism, Zhang (2010, 298) argued that "emphasizing the power of ideas," Obama reflected "a constructivist worldview." However, neoliberalism recognizes the power of ideas as well (Goldstein & Keohane, 1993; Chwieroth, 2007). In contrast to neoliberalism, constructivism focuses on how these ideas, or the intersubjective knowledge that forms them, emerge and are enacted (Mattern, 2005, 36). Following the positivist tradition, Zhang concentrated on the surface manifestation of discourses in one of Barack Obama's speeches by highlighting particular words (e.g., "dialog," "change," "values") rather than analyzing the social constructions or intersubjective knowledge behind them.

In addition, in contrast to the positivist assumption about the exogenous character of identities, ideas, and interests (Wendt, 1992), constructivists understand differences in socially constructed identities and intersubjective knowledge as significant factors that define meanings (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Fitzpatrick rightfully noticed, when Obama implemented new a U.S. PD based on "mutual interests" and "shared values," that none of these had been defined (Fitzpatrick 2011, 34–36) nor was there anyone who would define them among different "social collectives" (ibid, 38–39). In other words, declaring a "common

worldview" does not imply "an inherently two-way symmetrical communication action" (Zhang, 2010, 298) but could allow a more powerful actor to impose "mutual interests" on those less powerful (Weldes, 1998; Dreher, 2015). In that context, constructivists would rather focus on identifying how socially constructed identities, interests, and knowledge of a state and the foreign public interact. This allows understanding the socially constructed intersubjective knowledge behind words rather than the surface manifestations of such speech.

PD and soft power researchers are less inclined to analyze how interests and values appear in the first place, which leads to the understanding of them as static. The common approach to PD is based on a positivist idea that through logical investigation, it is possible to establish the meaning of good and bad, right and wrong, and attractive and unattractive values and interests. This concept does not account for the complexity of interactions and power relations between states with unique identities and knowledge. Thus, it offers limited insight into how to improve PD to achieve better results by establishing a two-way symmetrical dialog, especially between conflicting identities with their differentiating constructions of knowledge, values, and interests.

In contrast, constructivists argued that attractiveness is a socially constructed phenomenon, which encourages us to focus on the socially constructed identities of states. If they share similar knowledge about what is attractive and what is not, the value/efficiency of dialog and listening will likely increase due to the preexisting shared knowledge (Checkel, 2001; Lebow, 2007, 2008). Otherwise, two-way communication does not necessarily characterize an effective PD strategy since, based on an initially unequal balance of power, governments impose a certain discourse on the foreign public, which, in turn, can lead to rejection and confrontation. It also leads to the failure of the positivist approach to fully explain that Obama's diplomacy had little effect in some countries (Hayden, 2011), especially Poland (Pew Research Center, 2020), but a positive effect in others (Golan & Yang, 2013).

This dominant view on PD also led Van Ham (2002, 262; 2008) to falsely claim that constructivism is not able to explain why states perceive the same norms differently. This statement relies on positivist logic and dismisses years of constructivist research into the socially constructed character of norms. In contrast, Graham (2014) observed that the role of constructivism is to analyze not only what people value or what norms they share but also the intersubjective knowledge behind them. As social groups constantly construct and reconstruct collective/intersubjective meanings that define how they will perceive social reality, the positivist understanding of communication limits the ability of a researcher to analyze how the targeted society will receive and interpret PD narratives. Therefore, constructivism expands the understanding of PD communication efforts to penetrate the discourse of foreign societies with accounts of the complexity of intersubjective knowledge.

Third, constructivists consider collective identities to be one of the main means to control intersubjective knowledge by using power. "Collective" refers to groups or identities aligning themselves with others to create a "cognitive extension of the self, rather than independent"

(Wendt, 1994, 386). It does not mean that collective identities are obsolete since "strong national identification" can oppose "collective identification" (Kaelble, 2009, 203). Moreover, not all collectively implemented actions signal the existence of the collective "agency" (Wendt, 2004, 297). Despite that, constructivists distinguished certain forms of collective identities, such as "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983 [2006]), "security communities" (Pouliot, 2007), and international organizations (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001).

They argued that it is important for social groups or identities, including states, to receive a seal of legitimization from the collective or a "relevant community of meaning" (Hopf, 1998, 179). Within a collective identity, members use power to produce, discipline, and police intersubjective knowledge, which is necessary to maintain a sense of the common "self." On the one hand, the "common lifeworld" (Risse, 2000, 10) itself provides legitimacy for its members to participate in the construction of discourses and contributes to mutual recognition of attractiveness since their values, norms, and interests are based on intersubjective knowledge. On the other hand, it imposes a discursive control over intersubjective knowledge (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). This control creates a necessity of "protecting" collective knowledge from the incoming alternative discourses, thus creating discursive barriers to alternative and often challenging structures of meanings. If necessary, it also allows the delegitimation of certain members of the collective whose intersubjective knowledge diverges from the "mainstream" and creates an internal challenge.

Since diplomacy provides a platform "where beliefs about state interests and capacities are enacted, reproduced and changed" (Neuman, 2002; Adler-Nissen, 2016, 95), constructivists see diplomatic interactions as a means to promote shared meanings among states to develop intersubjective knowledge (Adler, 2013; Group & Tordjman, 2020). In that context, PD acts as a channel between states that imposes their knowledge about "self" and the world on the foreign public. If successful, the state and the public acquire a certain form of collective understanding based on shared beliefs, which reinforces positive and silences negative perceptions of the state, its identity, and actions.

In that case, collective identities can install or ease discursive barriers depending on the PD-projecting and PD-receiving actors. If both the state and the public belong to a "liberal" collective, which possesses shared intersubjective knowledge on the predominant importance of individual rights over national security, the state's efforts will be received in an environment predisposed for PD to succeed. On the contrary, if the state implementing PD and the recipient public belong to different collective identities, the original PD message will face discursive barriers and will unlikely maintain its intended meaning or have its intended effect.

The problem becomes even more acute in cases where the state and society belong to identities that directly oppose each other. As pointed out by Faizullaev and Cornut (2017), where there are significant contradictions between interpretations of events, practices of communication between opposite camps will eventually contribute to the escalation or peaceful settlement of the conflict. Using the example of conflicting Russian and Western

efforts to convince the public of their interpretation of the Crimean crisis in 2014, intersubjective knowledge or "background knowledge" played a significant negative role in the rendering of each other's PD narratives.

To sum up, PD efforts do not exist in a vacuum but are context-dependent. While this limits researchers' ability to measure the general effectiveness of PD and define a "good" policy, this approach seems to be the most inclusive of various factors from both theoretical and practical perspectives. In contrast to previous research, this study argues that understanding how collective identities and their intersubjective knowledge affect PD is crucial to providing insights into why certain PD efforts fail or succeed. To illustrate the benefits of applying constructivism to the analysis of PD, this research will employ a case study of the Western perception of Russian humanitarian aid narratives at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Complexity of Russian PD Analysis

The ongoing confrontation between Russia and the West is one of the most vivid examples of how significant the influence of intersubjective knowledge is on mutual perception. From the constructivists' point of view, the appearance and persistence of a real or imaginary external threat can lead to the creation of a shared identity or a "collective security identity" (Wendt, 1992, 408). In other cases, the process can be reversed, and an existing collective identity leads to the formation of threat perception (Risse, 1995). In both cases, the image of an enemy becomes a constitutive part of the collective "even in the absence of solid, confirming evidence of hostile intentions" (Stein, 2002, 395). In other words, justifiably or not, the Western collective has preexisting intersubjective knowledge about Russia that defines the perception of its narratives. As argued above, collective identities use power to maintain their interpretation of social reality, which creates struggles between narratives over power to interpret events.

This paper understands "the West" as "a complex and varying identity" (O'Hagan, 2002, 43), a "blur in material terms" (Acharya, 2014, 3), and a dynamic that cannot be universally defined. As noted above, collective identities such as the West represent a "cognitive extension of the self," or self-identification. It does not mean that a certain state's self-identification is legitimate for other states. This paper argues that for Russia, "the West" is intentionally unidentified since it allows juxtaposing Russia's "self" to a vague opponent and simultaneously avoids confrontation with specific countries (Vershinin, 2021). In other words, "the West" is a social construct that exists through acting on common interests, norms, and values. At the same time, the U.S. is a central actor through which the Russian political elite identifies the collective "West."

In light of recent events, including the crisis in Ukraine, alleged election interference in the U.S. elections, and cases of poisoning, the discord between Russia and the West has reached a new high. Outside the purely political struggles, both sides are engaged in an

ongoing process of narrative creation, which they project through various PD channels in an attempt to convince the public of their interpretations of events. As Birge and Chatterje-Doody (2021) observed, Russian PD "thrives on uncertainty" by using crises and challenging the narratives of the Western media. Since the COVID-19 pandemic has a significant influence on geopolitical transformation, it has become one of the ways for great powers like Russia and China to expand political influence (Simons, 2020). In other words, the pandemic opened a window of opportunity for Russia to reduce the negative effects of its foreign policy actions abroad and at home on Russia's image by producing favorable narratives.

At the same time, scholars tend to align Russian PD with propaganda (Yablokov, 2015; Snegovaya, 2015; Inkster, 2016; Gerber & Savisca, 2016; Watanabe, 2018). Being an epistemic community, or a group with power over discourse and knowledge construction (Haas, 1989) and acting as "guardians" of intersubjective knowledge, scholars contribute to the formation and functioning of the discursive barriers to Russian PD. Since the Western collective has the hegemonic power to define the "correct" practices of PD and soft power (Kiseleva, 2015), it tends to establish what researchers call "anchoring practices" (Adler & Pouliot, 2011) and to overlook Russia's specific PD practices (Just, 2016). Because Russia maintains a government-centered approach (Simons, 2014; Velikaya, 2018), which is reflected in strict control over narratives, instruments, and institutions, it diverges from the Western practices and is often delegitimized as mere "propaganda."

Moreover, Russian researchers (Lukin, 2013; Velikaya & Simons, 2020) observed that the government has an outdated approach to information, including closed archives, the perception of providing information support as a service rather than a duty, and the absence of separate institutions that directly regulate the work of the Russian PD. At the same time, the term propaganda is often employed to delegitimize opposing views without a throughout analysis of practices, which becomes especially pronounced in relations between Russia and the West (Chernobrov & Briant, 2020). Consequently, although PD may consist of various "constellations of practices" (Wenger, 1998), certain practices are not given enough attention or academic scrutiny since they are considered to be "incorrect."

The issue becomes even more complex when scholars reflect on the distinction between propaganda and PD. They argue that it "is likely to lie in the eye of the beholder" (Saari, 2014, 51) or that moral or "immoral" intentions define the difference (Cull, 2009, 23). Thus, the dominant positivist focus on defining "intentions" or seeking "the truth" often makes it difficult to separate the analysis from the intersubjective knowledge that scholars share as a part of a certain collective. For clarity, it does not mean that Russian foreign policy decisions or disinformation campaigns do not matter. The negative interactions that Russia has with the Western collective identity contribute to the formation of specific intersubjective knowledge about Russia through repeated patterns. However, the important question is how good the traditional positivist approach to PD is in understanding Russian policies and intentions since a precise and unbiased analysis is crucial for the peaceful settlement of many of the current issues.

Thus, the case of the pandemic is important to consider since Russia had an opportunity to utilize humanitarian aid as an emergency measure against the existential threat of COVID-19. Instead, of securitization of the pandemic as a domestic national security issue similar to the U.S. approach (Sears, 2020), Russia attempted to employ PD instruments to switch the focus from the discourse of the Russian threat to the West to a global security threat. As Copenhagen School scholars argued (Buzan et al., 1998, 25), securitization is possible only if the audience accepts what is being securitized as a serious threat. A globally accepted characterization of COVID-19 as an existential threat created an opportunity for Russia to present itself as a part of the global collective identity fighting against a common "enemy." Therefore, utilizing the pandemic and other global crises can be beneficial in terms of creating a new unifying narrative of the "self" against the "other," which allows reducing the negative impact of intersubjective knowledge of Russia and the West about each other.

The Constructivist PD and Russian Humanitarian Aid

Following the above discussion, the main goal of PD is to create, project, and maintain a positive discourse about the country for foreign audiences. As Holzscheiter (2013, 144) formulated, discourse is "the space where intersubjective meaning is created, sustained, transformed and, accordingly, becomes constitutive of social reality." Once governments create discourse, embody it with narratives and release it into the information space, it becomes part of a wider social construct and is open to reinterpretation. Consequently, successful PD should be able to preserve the originally conceived discourse in its intended form before and after its consumption by the foreign public.

To present a constructivist approach to PD and help navigate through the case, this study offers a four-stage visualization of the Narrative Life Cycle (Figure 1). Since a narrative represents a "structure of meaning-making" (Hayden, 2013) that helps to construct the reality around us to "know, understand, and make sense of the social world" (Somers, 1994, 606), compilations of them act as building blocks of discourse. Thus, although discourses have the same life cycle, the study will concentrate on narratives.

Since the scope of this research is theoretical and qualitative, the selected datasets are limited and require further empirical research into the interplay of power, intersubjective knowledge, and collective identities in PD. In this study, the focus is on reintroducing the theoretical views of constructivism into the field of PD. An interpretative analysis of Russian and Western official statements and media outlets represents the construction, projection, and collision of narratives. The reception of narratives also requires future explicit investigation of various social groups, their intersubjective knowledge, and their perception of narratives.

During the coronavirus pandemic, humanitarian support and collective actions have become important parts of PD efforts. In the context of deteriorating relations with the West, Russia was able to use PD tools with the unifying effect similar to that of joint antiterrorism efforts with the U.S. after the 9/11 terrorist attack. The initially designed narrative was to

present Russia as a country with good intentions and to show itself as a responsible member of the international community. Therefore, the first "Narrative Construction" stage reflects how governments create certain discourses, which mainly reflect the values and interests of a dominant group rather than of society as a whole. According to the report by Russia's Center for Advanced Governance (Shakirov et al., 2020), as of August 2, 2020, Russia had sent pandemic aid to 46 countries, including Serbia, Iran, Brazil, and China. For purposes of this paper, the focus will be on two countries that figure prominently in the traditional West identity—the U.S. and Italy.

The Narrative Projection stage represents a practical part of PD efforts. It includes the ways, techniques, institutions, and other means to project the created discourse. The main sources of state discourses are white papers, legal documents, official media, Embassies, and PD institutions. However, the newly created pandemic discourse has a more current basis and is projected mainly through the media, including state channels and the social network accounts of Russian officials. The abovementioned experts noted that Russia largely failed to provide information on its humanitarian actions systematically and openly. In this situation, instead of an organized campaign designed to support the intended discourse, the informational coverage passed into the hands of the media.

This strengthened the possibility that new outlets in Russia would affect the discourse from the beginning. Consequently, the information acquired an ambiguous character. Regarding humanitarian help to the U.S., the main PD channels, such as RT (2020) and Sputnik ("Krylo pomoshchi", 2020), generally presented a short and neutral reporting. In an interview with TASS ("Rossiya napravila pomoshch'", 2020), Russian representatives also highlighted that Putin offered help with the expectation that the U.S. would reciprocate this action, thus, rejecting the idea that the assistance was charity. At the same time, other news outlets such as the Zvezda (Bratsky, 2020) published information about the reaction of Italian citizens, which was seemingly exaggerated to create an image of a significant positive response to Russian aid. The Zvezda, directly sponsored by the Russian Department of Defense, has a specific patriotic focus in its journalistic work. This reflects the intersubjective knowledge of a certain group inside Russian political circles working on domestic propaganda rather than on PD. This had a significant effect on the narrative projected; Russian political elites incorporated the narrative into the official discourse (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, 2020) because it fitted their intersubjective knowledge.

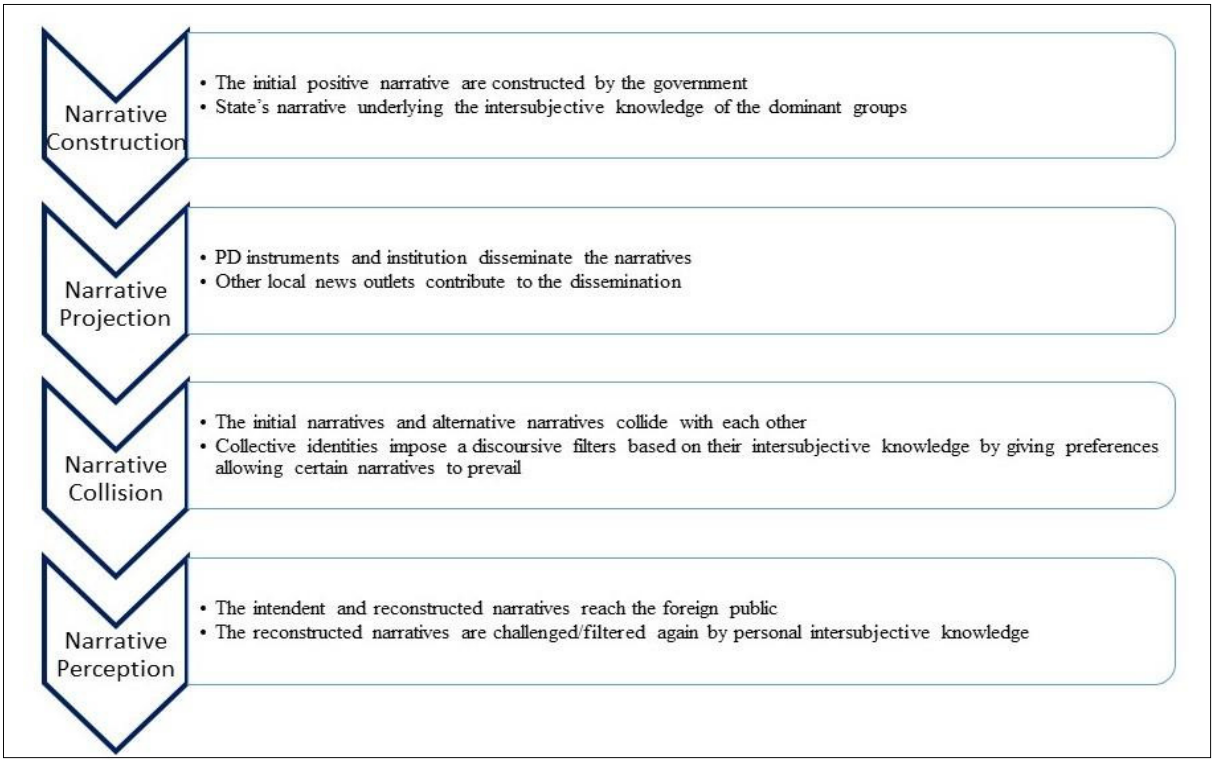

Figure 1. The Narrative Life Cycle

The Narrative Collision stage demonstrates how Russia's initial discourse and alternative discourses interact with each other. At this stage, collective identities and intersubjective knowledge have a direct impact on the perception of the incoming PD narratives because, as scholars (Pamment, 2014; Schmitt, 2018) have argued, narratives should correspond with the local construction of social reality. During the collision, narratives can have from small to significant differences in intersubjective knowledge on which they are constructed. Consequently, these differences determine the degree of the conflict between the incoming and existing narratives. If the incoming narratives contradict the social reality of the targeted foreign public and do not possess enough power over discourse construction, they will be blocked by a discursive barrier that dilutes their effectiveness.

Moreover, epistemic communities, including politicians, scholars, and media, act as interpreters or guardians of the incoming narratives for the domestic audience, meaning that the foreign public will receive a reconstructed rather than the intended narrative. The difference between the intended and received narratives corresponds with how intersubjective knowledge of each particular group affected the initial meaning of the narratives. In the case of Russian narratives, they are more likely to fit conservative or "far-right" groups' intersubjective knowledge rather than those of liberal-democratic politicians (Schmitt, 2018).

Russian medical support for two of the countries most affected by the coronavirus (as of late March/early April 2020)—Italy and the U.S.—has received visibly negative coverage. In response to Italy's lack of critical medical (Horn, 2020) and financial resources, Russia

provided 600 ventilators and 100 military medical specialists (Russia sends 600 medical ventilators to Italy, 2020). Despite an intention to illustrate a "soft" side of PD with narratives of a "responsible" or "good" international actor, the reception within the Western collective identity was in line with the current mainstream discourse on Russia. *The Radio France Internationale* accused Russia of using the COVID-19 to propagate the idea that neither the EU nor NATO was able to help their allies (Made, 2020).

Braw (2020), a contributor to *Foreign Policy*, wrote on March 14 that the EU had failed to support Italy "in its hour of need," but on March 30 claimed that both Russia and China were "bad Samaritans," using the coronavirus to achieve "geopolitical gains" in their attempts to support affected countries. *The Le Stampa*, citing high-level anonymous sources, claimed that "eighty percent of Russian supplies are totally useless" ("80% of Russia's Coronavirus Aid, 2020"), although no explanation has been given as to why they are "useless." Since the narrative of "disingenuous support fitted the mainstream discourse about Putin's "regime," the anonymous character of the reporting and missing information did not stop it from becoming one of the most cited narratives in the media. Moreover, while the source claimed, "totally useless or of a little use," such Western think tanks like the Chatman House (Giles, 2020) and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (Mankoff, 2020), and the media ("Coronavirus: Russia brings army doctors," 2020) omitted the "little use" part.

On the one hand, since Russia plays the role of the "other" for the West because their intersubjective knowledge and identities often diverge, it helps to reinforce an understanding of the Western "self." As a result, the media perceived the Russian actions as an attack or a plot of the "other" against the collective identity by highlighting that Russia sent aid to "the West" or Europe (Emmort & Osborn, 2020) rather than to a particular country. It also was dismissed as being "useless," relying on anonymous reports, which the official government or political elites did not confirm. The "useless" narrative also contributed to maintaining the dominant-negative discourse on Russia by implying that even if the "other" had helped the collective, it did not play a significant role. In other words, despite not having solid evidence, the claims about the disingenuous and useless character of Russian aid were accepted because they fit the discourse.

The same narrative repeated itself after Russia sent humanitarian aid to the U.S. *Reuters*, similarly citing an unknown source, wrote, "this cargo was a symbolic thing" (Taylor & Stolyarov, 2020). *The BBC* questioned the intentions of the Russian government and concentrated on "fake stories" of positive responses to medical supplies reported by some domestic media ("Coronavirus: What does "from Russia with love" really mean?," 2020). *The New York Times* pointed out the misinformation of Russia's state media about the "humanitarian" character of the aid, for which both countries shared the cost (Troianovski, 2020). Despite both Donald Trump and spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus classifying it as humanitarian aid or "assistance" ("U.S. Confirms Arrival Of Russian Plane," 2020), the original Russian formulation of the aid as "assistance of a humanitarian nature" was taken as an attempt to mislead the public.

According to the official documents on which Russia relies when providing humanitarian aid ("Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of 20.04.2014 No. 259"), the United States cannot be included in the list of recipient countries of gratuitous aid. These countries include either developing countries or countries that maintain good relations with Russia. Thus, U.S. emergency aid went beyond the official discourse of what is "humanitarian aid" and distorted the informational flow, which the Russian officials could not manage before the media reports.

Consequently, the inability of the Russian officials and media to take the leading role in conducting information led to a discrepancy in perceptions: either Russian officials made a mistake with the naming of the assistance due to the unprecedented situation, or they had malicious intentions. As a result, the ambiguous character of communications facilitates preformed intersubjective knowledge to take a leading role in interpreting the narratives. Whether Russian officials planned to hide the payment for the "aid" or not, the lack of information reinforced the perception of the Russian actions as propaganda.

It is worth mentioning that the West as a collective is not a solid or singular entity. It brings together other identities with their intersubjective knowledge of Russia and the West itself. After reporters in the U.S. raised the question of the humanitarian aid being a part of Russian propaganda, President Trump responded that he was "not concerned" about it ("Remarks by President Trump," 2020). Another example provided by the Deutsche Welle (Goncharenko, 2020) is conservative voices in Germany, which evaluated the aid as "worthy of praise," but noticed that Russian foreign policy remains aggressive. At the same time, the left-liberal media took a highly critical stance. Since "the West" refers mostly to a liberal or liberal-democratic ideology, conservative and other parts of the political spectrum have less pronounced but still existing differences in intersubjective knowledge with the dominant political power.

Moreover, neither the United States nor Italy has officially criticized Russia's approach to humanitarian aid or its information campaign on this matter. Thus, Russia retains a certain level of legitimacy for taking positive action toward the West in the framework of international relations, since it represents humanitarian diplomacy legitimized within international practices (Reignier, 2011). At the same time, it faces obstacles in interacting with the Western public since even the idea of humanitarian aid from Russia to the West lacks legitimacy in the eyes of the population (Huang, 2020). Despite the influence or less severe discursive barriers to reaching certain parts of the West, the ability of Russian PD to influence foreign policy remains limited, as the more accessible conservative voices usually do not have sufficient power to influence the mainstream discourse overall.

The Narrative Collision stage demonstrates how the act of PD itself collides with the interpretation, not of the essence of PD but of the intentions behind it. Deteriorating relations with Russia and a widespread campaign against misinformation maintain the discourse of Russian's actions being overwhelmingly aggressive or questionable. Formed intersubjective knowledge about the "character" and "intentions" of Russia leads to the rejection of narratives

in their intended form. Thus, because of preexisting knowledge, international actors who are negatively perceived by the collective identity possess a limited ability to conduct humanitarian policy and PD toward. The counter-positioning of Russia to the Western identity, intended and practiced by Russia itself, has led to a lack of legitimacy in exercising a "good" or "soft" policy toward this collective identity. Consequently, this discursive barrier is "likely to assist in activating previously suppressed fears and prejudices" toward Russia (Tsygankov, 2019, 18), directly affecting PD effectiveness.

The Narrative Reception stage represents the final version of settled discourses, which target the country's domestic actors with discursive power that can reproduce as part of their discourse on Russia. At that stage, the initially designed discourse reaches the public after its reconstruction by other actors with discursive power on the previous stage. However, personal discourses may also imply their additional discursive reconstructions. At the same time, because the collective not only produces and disciplines but also polices intersubjective knowledge, groups or individuals who share divergent views inside the collective are often delegitimized. Some media argued that Trump dismissed the concerns about Russian propaganda because of his affinity with Russia and Vladimir Putin (Siddiqui, 2019). Others, such as Radio Free Europe ("U.S. Confirms Arrival Of Russian Plane," 2020), despite being an instrument of U.S. PD, attempted to delegitimize President Trump's position toward Russian aid by highlighting his "close relationship with Putin."

Mismanagement of Intersubjective Knowledge

Despite intersubjective knowledge of collective identities influencing the perception of "others," it is possible to, if not overcome the "vicious circle of distrust" (Wendt, 1992) between Russia and the West, at least to facilitate a type of detente. As constructivists and practice theorists, in particular, argued, "Actors can learn and unlearn their relations through practices" (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2018, 147). This means that with changes in practices, it is possible to alter intersubjective knowledge. However, there were several weak points in nondiscursive practices of PD or practices that represented institutional and instrumental aspects, which consequently contributed to its failure in establishing a more positive discourse on Russia.

The first weakness was the inability to present coherent narratives concerning current events. Scholars generally agree that one of the major persistent problems in Russian PD is the difference between what Russian does and what Russia says (Avgerinos, 2009; Simons 2011, 2014; Velikaya, 2018). Since recent major events, including Russia's alleged interference in the U.S. election and disinformation campaigns that strengthened a negative dimension of intersubjective knowledge on Russia, the role of PD is intended to present a consistent message. However, while the narrative to provide aid to Italy was "unconditional help" (Emmott & Osborn, 2020), the U.S. humanitarian aid was provided with the expectation of reciprocal service. Russian spokesperson Dmitry Peskov initially stated that Moscow was counting on reciprocal assistance when the United States could produce enough medical

equipment to cover domestic demand ("Kreml' zayavil", 2020). Thus, inconsistency damaged the narrative, causing the Western epistemic communities and the public to question Russian intentions.

Second, the Russian government was unable to provide informational support for the conceived narrative, which led to ambiguous messaging. Despite the Western media's claim about the overwhelming use of "humanitarian aid" for propaganda purposes, there was a significant lack of information from Russian official sources to dispute it. Russian officials were giving explanations only postfactum about Russian propaganda that were circulating in both the foreign and domestic media. They also were unable to communicate with Italy and the U.S. to present a unified approach to the information. For example, the Guardian (Giuffrida & Roth, 2020) noticed that Italy's officials did not confirm the information provided by Russia's foreign minister about the aid. Furthermore, Italian political circles did not deny Le Stamp's article about the "useless" help. Thus, the lack of information was compounded by the inability to secure contracts with other governments to corroborate the Russian government's narratives

Third, despite the Russian political elite maintaining significant control over the domestic media, it was not able or not willing to exercise it. While Russian official PD channels maintained a neutral description of the humanitarian aid at the beginning, some Russian domestic media outlets used various exaggerations and unconfirmed information ("Druz'ya poznayutsya v bede", 2020; "Zhiteli Italii snimayut", 2020). This poses a significant problem, as Russia's centralized view of communications and media is often compared to the "old pattern" (Tsygankov, 2019, 26) in the Soviet Union of media control. Consequently, domestic newspapers associated with the Russian government, officials, or other pro-Kremlin entities can be characterized as Russian state propaganda. Thus, while not coming from the official Russian state agencies, BBC, citing another media figure from the Russian opposition media Dozhd, presented incorrect information from the Russian media as "…manipulation. A hybrid lie" (Zakharov & Soshnikov, 2020).

At the same, the preexisting knowledge on Russia and especially its PD directly affected the perception of actions of the Russian government. As scholars argued, think tanks, the media, or political journalists act as epistemic communities or communities of practice since they not only distribute but also produce knowledge (Aday & Livingston, 2008; Balch, 2009; Usher & Yee Man, 2020). Thus, major news agencies and think tanks, because the public recognizes their authority or epistemological functions within the collective identity of a state or group of states, have the discursive power to construct or reconstruct knowledge about Russia and its humanitarian aid. As the case study shows, the media and think tanks engaged in discursive practices, or patterned meaning-making, that legitimizes/delegitimizes certain knowledge, in this case prioritizing negative aspects of the Russian humanitarian aid narrative.

Although the contribution of Russia to recent international crises directly affect the discourse or knowledge of Russia, constructivism allows discussing the role that power,

knowledge, and identities play in maintaining a "regime of truth" or the mainstream discourse that defines what is "true" (Foucault, 1977, 13). In the case of Russian humanitarian aid, the epistemic communities reinforced the discourse of fear and threat regarding Russia's actions by de-legitimizing it as "propaganda." The important question remains whether the West as a collective will be able to recognize any good intentions from the current Russian government within a presented "regime of truth."

In the case study, the Russian government's attempts to use the securitized case of the pandemic to its benefit have failed because Russia was unable to avoid changing its securitized status in the eyes of the West. Moreover, the continuation of the Russian political elite's efforts to build "self" in its counter-positioning to the West as "other" increases the contradiction between identities. It significantly contributes to how both scholars and the public understand Russian PD through their intersubjective knowledge. By having excessive control over the media and not being able to provide coherent information, Russian narratives reinforced preexisting intersubjective knowledge about Russia's aggression and propaganda, sustaining the securitized image of Russia within the West.

Discussion

Constructivists attach great importance to the multilateral process of the interaction of various discourses based on intersubjective knowledge. In this context, the effectiveness of PD depends not only on how governments implement it but also on whether there is a fundamental discrepancy between discourses. The existing discourses about Russia rely on a different set of intersubjective knowledge, which can contradict or reinforce each other. Therefore, it is the role of PD practitioners to construct their messages in a way that will limit possible negative consequences of the clash between various constructions of Russia. This paper argues that recognizing preexisting intersubjective knowledge is essential in understanding how different social identities, including collectives, states, and nonstate actors, interpret specific PD practices and how to avoid the collision between intersubjective knowledge.

In contrast with traditional PD or soft power approaches, which assume the existence of a "common good," constructivism allows working with the differences in values and interests, but more importantly, gives scholars the ability to trace how distinct social identities understand each other. As shown in the Russian humanitarian aid case, the existing contradictions between preexisting intersubjective knowledge that different identities share often lead to situations in which the action itself becomes blurred and insignificant because of preassumed meanings attached to it. However, it also raises questions for PD practitioners about how to avoid clashes between narratives or how to lower the reinforcement of intersubjective knowledge.

Despite the rejection of Russia's narrative, it is not impossible to break through the discursive barriers created by Western intersubjective knowledge. As Neumann (2008, 146–

147) argued, “Putin is playing a wrong game” by expecting Russia to be recognized by acting by the rules but based on different knowledge and practices. Likewise, the Russian political elite cannot expect its PD efforts to be easily accepted while maintaining state control over the media, which have been delegitimized in the West. Thus, the alteration of both discursive-like “othering” the West, and nondiscursive practices, such as the dissemination of information, can lead to positive changes.

Moreover, other channels of PD such as sport (Chehabi, 2001) and science (Kharitonova & Prokhorenko, 2020) diplomacy, which are less involved in political controversies, rely less on the securitization of “threats” and more on an existing collective understanding of meanings and the importance of culture, arts, and science. Although those channels cannot escape the mainstream discourse, they have not lost their “soft” character because of their limited involvement in advocacy; thus, they are considered less threatening/challenging for intersubjective knowledge of the collective.

While some scholars continue to equate Russian PD with propaganda that represents a threat to the West (Gerber & Zavisca, 2016), informational warfare used to “disrupt and dismantle Ukraine” (Snegovaya, 2015), and “outward-facing propaganda” by autocrats (Carter and Carter, 2021). Others have argued that the “aggressive Russia” narrative applied to its PD policy may contribute to the escalation of international conflicts (Osipova, 2014). At the same time, “the Western derogatory discourse” (Baumann, 2020, 16) and view on PD is seemingly applied to the current Russian government and may change if the government changes.

At this point, it is necessary to carefully analyze the current Russian government’s approach to PD and propaganda practices. As noted by Stephen Hutchings (2018), the approach of Russian political elites to the construction of narratives is a complex interaction between discourse, epistemic communities, and knowledge rather than just “ready-made for transmission.” In other words, positivism limits scholars’ interest in what knowledge and power relations are behind the Russian way of communicating with the world. Thus, addressing challenges that constructivism poses for the current approach to Russian PD opens up a way to develop a better understanding of the nature of PD, propaganda, and relations between Russia and the world.

At the same time, constructivism, as a theoretical basis for PD, is at an early stage of its implementation for analysis and practice. In recent years, research on PD from a constructivist angle has demonstrated progress in incorporating theory into an explanation of deeper underlying processes of domestic and international realities. At the same time, they mostly maintained a positivist approach to questions of power, intersubjective knowledge, and identities. Since this paper is theoretical in nature, further empirical studies based on constructivist methodology are necessary to reflect on PD narratives that interact with targeted societies, challenging intersubjective knowledge, rejecting or becoming a part of the domestic discourse. Thus, future research will have to take the theory to its full capacity for a further and broader implementation of constructivism for analyzing practice.

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