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A MODERN EMPIRE AND ITS PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: ON RUSSIA'S COMMUNICATION WITH ESTONIA[1]

Abstract
Defining the Russian Federation as one of the four contemporary empires (Zielonka 2012), this article links the imperial paradigm (Parker 2010; Zielonka 2012, 2013, 2015; Colomer 2017), social constructs building (Wendt 1992), strategic narrative theory (Miskimmon et al. 2013), and soft power-associated public diplomacy instrumentarium (Melissen 2005; Nye 2008; Cull 2008, 2009; Cowan and Arsenault 2008) into a single conceptual framework to examine public diplomacy by the Russian Federation towards the Republic of Estonia. This analysis assumes that Russia understands Estonia as its own periphery in imperial terms. However, since Estonia already is an integral part of yet another modern empire (the European Union), our article notifies that Russia is left with a limited range of effective mechanisms of strategic communication with its Baltic neighbours, and Estonia in particular. Respectively, we test the following claim: in order to effectively project its strategic identity, system and policy narratives to Estonia, Russia prefers using a range of public diplomacy mechanisms rather than other types of communicational strategies. Empirically, we engage with eight annual reviews of the Estonian Internal Security Service (2012-2019/20).

Keywords: Soft power, contemporary empires, public diplomacy, strategic narrative theory, security, centre and periphery, strategic communication, Russia, Estonia.

1. Introduction

> [Russia's border] does not end anywhere.
> Vladimir Putin (2016)

> Russia has chosen to be an adversary and poses a long-term existential threat to the United States and to our European allies and partners.
> Philip Breedlove (2016)

> In an infinite universe, every point can be regarded as the centre, because every point has an infinite number of stars on each side of it.
> Stephen Hawking (2016)

This article's analytical focus is on the conceptual intersection of the strategic narrative theory (Miskimmon et al. 2013; Roselle et al. 2014; Chaban et al. 2017, 2019) and public diplomacy studies (Melissen 2005; Nye 2008; Cull 2008, 2009; Cowan and Arsenault 2008; Chaban and Vernygora

[1] In memory of Johannes Kert (03.12.1959-04.03.2021).

2013). We use this theoretical 'knot' to explore and explain how the Russian Federation (hereafter Russia) communicates with the society of the Republic of Estonia (hereafter Estonia). As discussed in the Introduction to this Special Issue (see Chaban, Mondry, and Pavlov 2019-20), the trio of the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) continue attracting Russia's interest, and, specifically, in the contexts of post-Soviet geo-strategic evolutions on the European continent.

For Russia, the Baltic region in general, and Estonia in particular, stands out due to many factors. Among those are historical understandings (after all, the outcome of the Great Northern War became a prerequisite for the Tsardom of Muscovy to 'convert' into the Russian Empire in 1721) informed by stereotypes and perceptions, visions on strategy, geographical proximity, religion, social bonds, cultural values, et cetera. From the other side, Estonia has been impacted by conflictual communication from Russia since the two sides recognised each other in 1920, via the Treaty of Tartu (Ciziunas 2008; Stoicescu 2020). In most recent history, Estonia fought the world's first cyber war, when this Baltic Nordic state became a "subject of a new form of 'cyber violence'" experiencing a Russia-orchestrated largescale denial of service in 2007 (Haataja 2017, 160). Yet, we argue that the Kremlin had to 'soften' (as well as make it more sophisticated) its communicational strategy towards Estonia since then. This article questions the motivations behind the change in the strategy and the course of actions by Russia triggered by the revised strategy. To give a credible answer to these questions, we engage with, and test the imperial theoretical paradigm as one of our leading explanations.

Central to our study are the concepts of empire and periphery. Both are experiencing analytical revival in the post-Cold War period that has not proved to be a critical juncture for establishing a new international system (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 1). As for the current international system, it was 'cemented' at the Yalta Conference in 1945 by the concept of the world's five 'policemen' (Plokhy 2010) or the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). However, the UN-bound communicational practices were neither genuinely accepted by the international community of nations nor fully implemented even during the Cold War (Bisley 2012), let alone after the Soviet Union disappeared from the political map in 1991. Perhaps unsurprisingly, major powers of the 21st century (a somewhat different group of geo-strategic 'heavyweights' if compared to the world's 'policemen' as defined by the UN) have started searching for new communication mechanisms. In this process, they are

consciously or unconsciously reviving the imperial paradigm in the field of international relations. Relevant literature cited below argues how present-day major powers attempt to justify the imperial lead objectively, by endowing it with analytical relevance.

1.1. Background and structure

In this article, we build on the basic points and notions of Zielonka's (2012) seminal work on the modern international system and define Russia as one of the four contemporary empires, with the remaining three being the People's Republic of China (China), the European Union (EU) and the United States of America (USA). Intriguingly, Cooper (2004) also named the same international actors, but in the context of another debate, which is beyond the scope of this paper, arguing that Russia and China are more inclined to continue with Westphalia-bound interrelations, while the US and the EU are searching for a post-Westphalian approach. According to a growing body of literature on imperial entities of the present time (for example, Motyl 1997, 1999, 2001; Terrill 2003; Zielonka 2006, 2011, 2012, 2013; Parker 2008, 2010; Gravier 2009; Behr and Stivachtis 2015; Vernygora 2016; Vernygora et al. 2016; Parchami 2019; Kasper and Vernygora 2020), imperial paradigm is instrumental to single out a few specific characteristics of a geo-strategically significant interaction between the imperial core and periphery. For some, a modern empire's periphery is represented naturally by its immediate neighbourhood (either formally designated by the empire or not). It can also be a far-away locality (and not necessarily a former colony of the empire). Nevertheless, as argued by Parker (2010, 111), "empires' extension of domination has not been grounded solely in the internal nature of the given empire, but in empires' relationship to the wider environment: the ecological, social or political environment; the international system or the global setting." This factor brings an empire-periphery interlinkage right into the epicentre of social constructs-building process. In a way, this is where the premises of political realism, constructivism-bound debates on identities, and 'soft power'-originated postulates have a chance to make a unique analytical intersection for the benefit of students of international relations.

Since, according to Zielonka (2012, 509), an empire can be defined as "a vast territorial unit with global military, economic and diplomatic influence", it "must have a record of acting in a way that imposes significant domestic constraints on a […] periphery." Strategic communication wise, due to "the unstoppable inertial empire-forming process" (Vernygora et al.,

2016, 10) and in accordance with a particular situation that may require an empire's geo-strategic 'change of heart," an imperial entity can exhibit its "inborn inclination" to make use of different typologies in the process of delivering its strategic narratives to a peripheral area (Vernygora 2017). A given empire's record of imposing those "significant domestic constraints" can be exemplified by a range of communicational practices that the empire employs in the process of 'crafting' its strategic communication with its peripheries – a public diplomacy-driven social constructivism can be listed here together with a more-for-more pragmatic functional approach, a spillover-framed set of integrative applications and a hybrid warfare (Vernygora 2017). Out of the four types of communicational approaches, we argue that Russia primarily uses its 'public diplomacy-prescribed' instrumentarium – these are, according to Cull (2008, 31-32), listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting – for projecting its strategic identity, system, and policy narratives, while grounding these narratives in Estonia-focused contexts. This claim is to be tested in the article.

Given the context, the main premise here is that Estonia's membership in yet another modern empire (the EU) creates completely different analytical 'setup defaults'. Since 2004, the country is no longer situated in what Samokhvalov (2018) described as a "shared neighbourhood" of the EU and Russia in Eastern Europe. With Estonia now being a Member State of the EU, Russia is arguably left with a limited range of strategic communication mechanisms, which can be effectively employed by the world's largest country when it attempts to link with its Baltic neighbour(s). Indirectly supporting this statement, Nielsen and Paabo (2015) argued how vital for Russia is to employ a 'soft' means in regards of Estonia. There is also a factor of Western (including EU) sanctions against Russia as well as Russia's retaliatory restrictive measures, which make a substantial difference to Russian foreign policy (Korhonen et al. 2018; Müürsepp 2021). With that, however, Estonia and its two Baltic neighbours also share common borders with Russia and host a considerable number of Russian citizens and Russian-language speakers, residing in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania on the permanent basis. It is, therefore, predictable that significant efforts of Russia-originated strategic communication (regardless of its type) are directed to those two groups within the Baltics. At the same time, if we specify the context further, such a situation leads to a range of discrepancies in understanding how a particular type of communicational framework (i.e., public diplomacy) can be defined in/by Russia and, for example, Estonia.

On 1 January 2020, Statistics Estonia confirmed that people who declare themselves ethnic Estonians represent the country's most sizeable ethnic group (909,552), while ethnic Russians (327,802), Ukrainians (24,897), Belarusians (11,536), Finns (8,297) and Latvians (3,329) represent the next five largest ethnic groups. However, there are two other statistical indicators, which make the situation rather confusing from the statistics side. Estonia is the country of birth for 1,129,934 residents and the country of citizenship for 1,128,559 people. The latter two figures are very similar, but they can be pushing towards a set of wrong generalisations on the 'portrait' of the Estonian society. This is because 115,890 residents of the country were born in the Russian Federation (not necessarily being ethnic Russians though), while Russia is the country of citizenship for 83,989 residents of Estonia (not all of them are ethnic Russians either). Moreover, the citizenship is not specified in 71,361 cases, and these people are recognised non-citizens (so-called 'grey passport-holders'), a sizeable group of Estonian residents (of different ethnicities, including even Estonians) who opted to not apply for any country's citizenship for a number of objective reasons (lack of knowledge of the Estonian language, no desire to serve in the Estonian Defence Forces, possibility to visit Russia without a visa, other reasons).

This article starts with elaborating a leading conceptual framework in the broadest possible sense. What Russia and Estonia represent now is directly coupled with the field's major debate – on the current international system. The next section details Russia's attempts to interact with the society of Estonia, classifying these interactions vis-a-vis the aforementioned public diplomacy-associated communicational modes specified by Cull (2008), but keeping in mind a range of differences in defining the same modes by established Russian scholars and early-stage researchers. Imperial paradigm predetermines a variety of security concerns. These are perpetually projected by the Kremlin towards the locations that it perceives as its periphery. Reflecting on those concerns, the Estonian Internal Security Service (Kaitsepolitseiamet, or KaPo) surveys projections by Russia towards Estonia and openly reports on the situation to the Estonian public in order to raise awareness, while proposing a course of actions for the Estonian government. A number of KaPo's annual reviews (2012-2019/20), which focused predominantly on Russia-originated activities towards Estonia, are in the empirical focus of this study. Method-wise, the article engages with discourse analysis and process tracing (Klotz and Prakash 2008). A pluralistic essence of these methods reflects on the article's observational nature when plenty of descriptive material is required and precise causalities are sought for. The idea is to give an observation-based interpretation, whilst

being in agreement with Neumann (2008, 62) that discourse is about maintaining "a degree of regularity in social relations" because it "produces preconditions for action."

Arguably, the data from a national internal security agency may have a bias. A public diplomacy action by Russia towards Estonia can be treated as 'effective' for the Russian side, but considered 'harmful' by Estonia. This in-built bias of the dataset – which we openly acknowledge – does not undermine the rationale behind studying this discourse. Aware of a potential bias of the Western academia towards Russian public diplomacy efforts in general, we widen the insights into the field of public diplomacy and engage with a substantial academic contribution by Russia-based scholars. In its discussion section, the article revisits its main claim that different elements of Russia's public diplomacy towards Estonia get operationally interlinked with Russia's formulation and projection of strategic narratives.

1.2. Setting definitions

The understanding of terminology used by the KaPo annual reviews and other similar official reports issued in Estonia is grounded in the vision formulated by Mikk Marran (2020, 2), Director General of the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service: "[t]he main external threats to Estonia's security remain the same," and that the country is "particularly threatened by neighbouring Russia, whose leadership is aggressively and actively opposed to the democratic world order." In this light, the study draws analytical boundaries and detects overlaps in the notion of public diplomacy with the concept of propaganda. Some of the definitions considered in this study are provided by NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence-issued report 'Improving NATO Strategic Communication Terminology' (Bolt and Haiden 2020). Given the already specified security factor of the empire-periphery communication, this approach will make the process of employing the key notions to be terminologically compatible with the KaPo annual reviews.

Respectively, this study understands 'discourse' as "accepted positions [created and maintained through communication] that constrain debates and shape worldviews," while 'narratives' are understood as "morals drawn from stories" (Bolt and Haiden 2020, 30). What is essential for this discussion is that a narrative can become 'strategic' when states attempt to use it to "sway target audiences" (Roselle et al. 2014, 74). It makes it distinct from 'narrative strategies' and perfectly fit for framing up a discussion on public diplomacy,

which can be described as "an international actor's attempt to advance the ends of policy by engaging with foreign publics" (Cowan and Cull 2008, 6), while focusing on engagement "with those outside government" (Dasgupta 2011, 54). Linking public diplomacy definition to strategic narrative concept gives an opportunity to identify the role "the strategic narratives play in shaping behaviour in an observable way" (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 142). This may lead to a more prominent role for a government – including a foreign government – in information guidance when it comes to international relations and foreign policy.

2. Theoretical Framework

It could be argued that for any big power that undergoes the process of solidifying its geo-strategic relevance, it is challenging to follow President Theodore Roosevelt's advice to communicate (speak) softly – a 'big stick' of power is with you all the time, and your ambition is to extend your influence. Offensive realist Mearsheimer (1990), in his 'Why we will soon miss the Cold War," advocated for keeping the international system to be run by a group of "more equal than others" (Orwell 1944). In contrast, social constructivism (for example, Wendt 1992, 1995) argued for a possibility for power politics to be institutionally transformed with almost no harm for international security. What makes this debate even more complicated is that a big power has many names, and this fact can easily spawn a reason to antagonise one political theory against another one. To illustrate the point, in his seminal *After Hegemony*, Keohane differentiated between a hegemony and an empire, noting that "unlike an imperial power, [a hegemony] cannot make and enforce rules without a certain degree of consent from other sovereign states" (1984, 46). Almost instantly, Keohane (1984, 49) gave away a prediction that "neither the Europeans nor the Japanese are likely to have the capacity to become hegemonic powers themselves in the foreseeable future."

2.1. The absence of what was designed in 1945

Those academic claims and predictions were being made at a time when (apart from random and predominantly American 'prophecies' on chances for the political West to ever see the USSR to collapse, e.g., Kennan (1947) or Brzezinski (1969)), there was no solid theoretical concept that would be seriously forecasting the Soviet Union's disappearance from the political map. On the European side, even Jean Monnet (1978) treated the Soviet Union as a geo-strategic as well as monolithic given that was to stay. A life

after or without the Yalta Conference-produced international system sounded like an improbable science fiction between the 1940s and the 1980s.

Simultaneously, numerous examples revealed that the UN-bound communicational patterns and permissions were becoming incongruous and even meaningless. In 1945, during the United Nations Conference on International Organisation, Andrey Gromyko (as cited in Bisley 2012, 72) was pushing for the universal acceptance of a nearly metaphysical belief: "If the problem of peace is to be solved, there must be mutual trust and harmony among the greatest world powers, and they must act in harmony." Objectively, this vision has never been delivered by the UN-bound international system. Moreover, some of the "more equal than others" – specifically, post-Suez Britain and France (McCourt 2009; Sorlin 2019) – who were assigned in 1945 a special role of being two of the world's 'five policemen," stagnated in understanding their veritable geo-strategic relevancy. The Yalta international system was further undermined by the 1971 Beijing-Taipei swap at the UN. On top of that, as argued by Bisley (2012, 79), "the most important relationship in post-[WWII] international security was not part of the UN Security Council's business." Evidently, Bisley meant the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States. By the 1970s, the two super-empires ('major powers," 'hegemonies," or whatever the name theoreticians used) were comfortable in communicating with the rest of the world through monologues, while inventing a Cold War variation of the latent G2. According to social constructivists, "shared understanding (or intersubjectivity) form[ed] the basis of […] interactions" (Theys 2017, 36). Both the USA and the former USSR understood well the other side, not expecting any positive surprises from the counterpart. Nevertheless, that real or perceived stability was anything but a virtue of Yalta and its communicational practices. We argue these practices had never been translated into actual international relations, gradually cobbling the path for the revival of empires in search for a new international setup.

For Europe, "the foreseeable future" (in the parlay of Keohane 1984) arrived to the continent in the politico-economic form of the EU in the beginning of the 1990s. However, it was not the main tiding for the failing UN-based international framework. By then, the Soviet Union was already history, with many countries, including Estonia, having successfully made their international comebacks via regaining independence. An additional issue relevant to the context was directly linked to the Russian Federation, one of the sixteen titular 'pieces' that had ever constituted the Soviet imperial

'puzzle'. Even though, as argued by Pain (2009, 61), Russia exemplified a struggle to either become a "political civic nation project" or "a neo-imperial project", it had to wait until President Vladimir Putin's 'arrival' to clarify that the country's imperial intentions had not substantially changed since 1721. President Putin (2016) once noted that "[Russia's border] does not end anywhere." An imperial way of acting (and an empire-based international system) is taking place against particular features specified by Zielonka (2013, 10): "[b]orders within the system are fuzzy and there is disassociation between authoritative allocations, functional competencies and territorial constituencies."

In terms of global strategic communication, the Soviet Union's dramatic derailment and then disappearance puzzled the field of political science. Unlike "[t]he end of global wars in 1918 and 1945 proved to be critical junctures […] to construct new international orders" (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 1), the Cold War's finale did not provide for any meaningful leads on how to interact in the post-Yalta international environment. Katzenstein and Sil (2004, 21) pointed it out that "[t]he totally unanticipated end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union […] generated not re-examination of whether and why theories drawn from the major research traditions had proven inadequate." These scholars argued that "[i]nstead, these events yielded another round of ad hoc explanations and bold predictions that essentially served to protect the natural worldviews embedded in each of the traditions."

2.2. The arrival of a new approach: Soft power, public diplomacy, discourses and narratives

Using Lotman's expression, the field kept driving "deep into a Procrustean bed of concepts" (2013, 41), without finding a new set of explanatory approaches and an analytical tool set on a) how to analyse interactions between different major actors and their perceived as well as actual peripheries in the new reality and, b) the nature of their communicational linkages established in the absence of the Cold War-originated theoretical 'stability'. One of the intellectual challenges to the discipline's stagnation came from Nye (2004, 2008) and his notion of 'soft power'. The concept proved to be productive to theorise the phenomenon of 'public diplomacy' (Nye 2008, 96), since culture ("in places where it is attractive to others"), political values ("when it lives up to them at home and abroad") and foreign policies ("when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority") can be effectively projected. Theorising further on public

diplomacy, Cull (2008, 2009) offered a hierarchical structure to understand it, distinguishing its five elements: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting. Significantly adding to the conceptual understanding of the process, Klyeva and Tsetsura (2015) argued the dualistic nature of soft power, which can generate (or even represent) both enabling and disabling environments.

At the same time, there are two crucial theoretical additions to the debate on the soft power-public diplomacy interlinkage, and they are associated with contemporary empires and strategic narratives. On the one hand, Zielonka (2006, 2012, 2013) pointed to the terminological confusion existing between the notions of 'hegemony,' 'empire' or 'power' and made an analytical breakthrough in regards of 'rehabilitation' of imperial paradigm. In the context of Russia, for example, Zielonka (2012, 511) argued that the country's "prime interests" are focused on "recovering from the Soviet collapse", its "key sources of power" are represented by "energy and the military", and the essence of its imperial "civilising mission" is framed around "ensuring stability and security."

On the other hand, as argued by Miskimmon et al. (2013, 143), "[s]trategic narratives are central to the identity of its actors and the meaning of the system", and this argument analytically interlinks a country's strategic identity, system and policy narratives in the context of building sustainable long-lasting relationships. In a way, it was a very timely scholarly 'assistance' for Wendt (1992, 398), so his colossal argument – "[i]dentities are the basis of interests" – can have a new life. The analytical cornerstone here is "the narrative of your state [that] comes to constitute an important part of the identity of another state […] [and] this will shape its behavior" (Miskimmon 2013, 143).

In continuation, Roselle et al. (2014, 71 and 74) proposed the next step in theorising 'soft' power, arguing that "[s]trategic narrative is soft power in the 21st century" and recognising a big challenge in identifying "soft power resources" and "the processes through which soft power operates" as well as understanding "under what conditions soft power resources can be used to support foreign policy." The point was that a "chaotic world" is to appreciate some assistance from a soft power-originated communicational side. More notably, according to Roselle et al. (2014, 74),

> [s]oft power resources – culture, values, or policies, for example – may be attractive because they fit within a preexisting or developing

> personal narrative. Strategic narrative, then, directly addresses the formation, projection and diffusion, and reception of ideas in the international system.

The scholarship of strategic narrative states that "the post-Cold War international system opens space for significant contestation over narratives" (Roselle et al. 2014, 77). Arguably, there is a distinct link between a) a striking and deliberately crafted similarity of "Comrades! Citizens! Brothers and sisters! Men of our army and navy! I am addressing you, friends of mine!" (Stalin 1941) and "Dear citizens of Russia, dear friends! Today, I am addressing you, all of you, because you have entrusted me with the highest office in the country" (Putin 2000) and b) a Russian strategic narrative that "Russians and Ukrainians constitute one nation and that the countries should find a way to integrate" (Putin 2019). Mearsheimer (2014) with his 'Getting Ukraine wrong' had already pushed for that case anyway, but on the strategic narrative theme, Putin "has been able to achieve narrative continuity" (Miskimmon et al. 2013, 259). For Müürsepp (2021), Russian foreign policy, on the general level, is associated with the following strategic narratives-forming themes: a) Russia's direct 'communication' with the United States; b) Russia's prime-level place in the UN-based international system that needs to be maintained, and c) Russia's particular attitude and approach to the so-called "ближнее зарубежье" ('near abroad') that does not need to be defined too precisely.

Arguably, the narrative considerations are of direct relevance for Estonia. The key narrative projections can be traced from both Vladimir Putin's speech delivered at the 2007 Munich Security Conference and his article 'Russia in the Changing World' published in 2012. Had they been accounted for by the EU's political elites, they would have been less surprised by the fact that Russia, especially in 2012-2013, understood the EU's Eastern Partnership Programme as a competing empire's attempt to, using Putin's terminology, oust "the bear" out of "the taiga" (Putin 2014; Vernygora et al. 2016). More so, let alone the allegedly 'disputed' neighbourhood that includes countries like Georgia, Moldova or Ukraine, the Russian Federation still has plenty to say in imperial terms towards Estonia, Finland, Latvia, and Lithuania, which are already integral parts of the EU. Such situations are not unique – as argued (Zielonka 2012, 518), "[b]oth China and the US consider the Asia-Pacific region to be their own backyard."

2.3. Russia and its ‘spiritual shackles’ of influence

Public diplomacy is not a know-how of modernity. It has been practiced in other historical periods, yet in today’s international relations it is remarkably heightened in importance (Belonosova 2020). And while it is still a challenge to provide a single-cut understanding of the phenomenon, a relative consensus emerged among many scholars who point to the initial interplay between a government and a foreign public as a basis for analysing its effectiveness in the field. In general, not much has changed principally, and public diplomacy of the 21st century, as noted before, still focuses on engagement with a foreign civil society to mobilise support. However, there is a booming theme on new features of public diplomacy. For example, Frangonikolopoulos and Proedrou (2014) already talk about a new version of the old phenomenon that appears in the form of “strategic discursive public diplomacy”, which ‘look after’ grand-debates on development and growth, climate change and even nuclear proliferation-associated issues. Complementary to the discussion, Graz and Hauert (2019) note the importance of civil society organisations in the process of developing international standards. In short, for the current environment of international relations, the process can be driven by countries or, with an increasing visibility, different organisations, including even non-governmental arrangements. Evidently, the Russian Federation can be considered a prime example of the former rather than the latter when it comes to its interactions with the Estonian society.

Lebedeva (2021) argues that the 9/11 events became a catalyst for the Russian Federation to start developing its own distinct public diplomacy, since the USA turned its attention to it as well. However, while searching for a productive adaptation of its post-Cold War imperial civilising mission for the modern time, Russia has managed to create a range of atavistically archaic “скрепы” (can be loosely translated as social ‘clams’/ ‘stapes' or ‘spiritual shackles’), which are evidently as well as extensively applied by the Kremlin in the process of projecting strategic narratives, utilising the country’s old public diplomacy-related toolkit. The efforts are jointly carried out by many state or state-associated agencies ranging from Россотрудничество (the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation or Rossotrudnichestvo), Фонд ‘Русский Мир’ (The Russkiy Mir Foundation), Россия Сегодня (Rossiya Segodnya), RT (formerly Russia Today) to name a few.

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia tries spreading its soft power to the 'near abroad," but the process does not seamlessly lead towards enhancing the country's attractiveness among its closest neighbours (Cwiek-Karpowicz 2012). Characteristically, Russia's communication with the Estonian society is 'sharpened up' towards the so-called соотечественники (compatriots), whom Russia engages during its own socio-strategic 'exercises' ('Соотечественники и военно-мемориальная работа' 2021), while, as it was described by Kallas (2016, 2), "claiming the diaspora." Many in Estonia would argue that such a situation poses a threat to the country's integrity, becoming pivotal for considering local security provision. Thus, a detectable countermeasure – for example, Integrating Estonia 2020 ('Estonian Government approved integration goals until 2020' 2018) – may directly or indirectly 'argue' on Russia-originated public diplomacy mechanisms being noticeable or not.

Overall, considering the aforementioned generalisations and a relative stability of societal interconnections within Estonia, it is worth testing this article's main claim that Russia prefers channelling its communication with Estonia through public-diplomacy-bound mechanisms, all in order to project its strategic identity, system, and issue narratives. The general push, as argued by Saari (2014, 54), comes from the two distinct features of Russia's public diplomacy objectives associated with Russia's vision of empire's immediate periphery – "the post-Soviet states are a priority" and the Baltics "continue to be included in the post-Soviet category despite being EU and NATO members." These conceptualisation of the public diplomacy correlates with the interpretation of imperial paradigm and its understanding of periphery discussed above.

3. Russia communicating with the Estonian society: when terminological consistency is not important

Once Rawnsley (2015) noted that "the success of soft power […] depends on communication via public diplomacy to make sure ideals, values, policies and behaviour are attractive to a target population." In the particular case of Russia, as confirmed by Burlinova (2020, 5), "there is a conceptual confusion and often there is no understanding at all of which projects belong to the sphere of public diplomacy (сфере публичной дипломатии), and which – to the communal/societal (общественной)." Intriguingly, the fact that the Russian side makes a distinction between 'public diplomacy' and some kind of 'communal/societal diplomacy' does not assist in clarifying the aforementioned terminological confusion. More concretely, for the so-called

'communal/societal diplomacy' to be conceptually different from what Cull (2008) describes as "exchange diplomacy", it should have absolutely nothing to do with the Russian state, but it is evidently not the case. Speculatively, it could be argued that Russia immensely benefits from this terminological vagueness and, most probably, opts to maintain such confusions.

At the same time, Burlinova (2020, 8) underlined that, within the Russian context, "public diplomacy is not perceived as a system of institutions, but is defined as one of the areas of work along with cultural and humanitarian cooperation, communal/societal diplomacy and strategic communications", being focused on "specific target audiences" such as "representatives of political and business elites, the media community, the civil sector, young leaders, experts." While the latter definition directly interlinks public diplomacy practices with the particular groups that are to be targeted, it is still difficult (if not impossible) to imagine a situation where a Russia-originated public diplomacy initiative can be precisely focused only on those high-profile decision-makers and decision-shapers, without attempting to capture attention of ordinary public. For example, a distinguishing analytical line can hardly be found between the Russian version of public diplomacy and the so-called гуманитарное сотрудничество (humanitarian cooperation), which, according to Klyueva and Mikhaylova (2017), has plenty to do with the protection of the interests of peripheral compatriots living abroad as well as their consolidation into a united community and establishing partnerships with the imperial centre on culture, education and science. Considering the region in focus, as argued by Saari (2014, 57-58), the Russian policy "stands on four pillars", namely media policies, NGO diplomacy, political involvement, and cultural diplomacy. All of these pillars are seen 'living' within the previously specified elements of public diplomacy, and this fact assists in bringing the Russian Federation's conceptual understanding of the phenomenon's classification closer to what Cull offered in 2008. In any case, as Glebov (2018) noted, public diplomacy, be it of Russia or any other actor, represents a powerful tool placed under foreign policy's strategic communications scope, where it stands along with public relations and information operations.

3.1. Who is the Estonian Russian speaker?

Out of Estonia's total population of 1,328,976 people ('Population figure' 2020), the country's Russian-speaking communities are diverse. The profile of these communities in each case is determined by different waves

and kinds of migration (deportations and directed migration of labour force included), generational shifts, geographic areas, professional background and many other factors (Kirch and Tuisk 2015). On the side of intra-societal communication, since the mathematics insist that about 85 per cent of the country's population are Estonian citizens, it can only mean that any representative of this societal cluster has the Estonian language proficiency to be at the B1 level at least ('Examinations and Tests' 2021).

Considering the above, when it comes to an attempt to communicate with Estonian 'Russian speakers' (especially, when this vaguely determined group is to be virtually placed in the same 'basket' with Estonia-based Russian citizens), there can be a problem of misidentification of whom a message should be directed to. Ideally, from the scientific perspective, these people would never be analytically 'unified' into one group – they belong to different ethnicities, hold different citizenships and have different levels (if any) of socio-political association with the Russian Federation. Moreover, their attitude to Russia may vary from extreme glorification to extreme antagonism, and they can hardly be precisely counted even in such a relatively small society as of the Republic of Estonia. Nevertheless, as noted by Klyueva and Mikhaylova (2017, 130), when it related to the Russian Federation's foreign policy, "[t]he strategic use of the Russian language and culture […] aims to foster pro-Russian sentiments among the Russian-speaking communities, Russian Diasporas and compatriots living abroad." In a significant addition that still does not quite clarify the differences existing between these three societal groups, the same scholars argued that the notion of a "compatriot would then extend to many generations of individuals with Russian ancestry, including those defined above as the Diaspora, who may not or no longer identify as Russian and whose connection to the Russian language and culture is potentially conflicted" (Klyueva and Mikhaylova 2017, 131).

Therefore, this article understands Estonia's Russian-speaking communities as being intentionally generalised by Russia into a single quasi-group for the purpose of strategic communication. On the Estonian side, however, as KaPo (2012, 5) noted, Russia-originated compatriots policy makers understand that the fact of "[t]reating Russian-speaking diaspora as compatriots who are loyal to Russia" and the fact that "Estonia's wish to integrate its Russian-speaking population into the Estonian society" represent "competing concepts." The main security concern for Estonia here is about constraints-imposing activity – "[t]he success of Russia's compatriots policy is dependent on the segregation of the Russian-speaking

population within its country of residence" (KaPo 2012, 5-6). As argued by Miskimmon et al. (2013, 256), "[i]t is imperative for foreign policy makers to try to persuade their international rivals of the validity of their narrative", therefore "the era of communication power opens up opportunities for practitioners of public diplomacy to reach beyond elite circles and reach overseas publics." Thus, let us now see how Russia communicates with the Estonian society.

3.2. Advocacy, or "Друзья […], прекрасен наш союз!" ["Friends, beautiful is our union!"]

Advocacy, as an element of public diplomacy, is analytically blurry and, thus, it is not an easy task to measure its direct effectiveness. Cull (2009, 18-19) defines it as "an actor's attempt to manage the international environment by undertaking an international communication activity to actively promote a particular policy, idea or that actor's general interests in the minds of a foreign public." Advocacy can be considered an integral part of the communicational process, because, as a rule, it can hardly be found as 'working alone'. Instead, it is usually integrated into every other element of public diplomacy (especially when it comes to international broadcasting) and informs different types of monologues on myriads of topics.

As for Russia on a concrete example of advocacy in Estonia, KaPo (2018, 8) detected, it "approved its new migration policy doctrine", but its "State Programme for Voluntary Resettlement in Russia has not proved popular in Estonia" and "[t]he Kremlin's attempts to boost its attractiveness have failed." the Estonian society was advised by KaPo (2018, 8) that the advocated programme, among other things, intended "to extend the legal consequences of the Kremlin's policy of division to the inhabitants of the formerly Soviet-occupied Baltic[s]." However, as noted by KaPo, since "such efforts by the Kremlin have not met with much success over the past few decades, it is in its interest to keep using a vague concept of Russian compatriots to justify its interference in the internal affairs of other countries." However, even the Russian Ambassador to Estonia, Alexander Petrov, commented that Estonian Russians almost are not interested in resettlement – in 2018, there were only 17 people who expressed interest, but there is some noticeable interest in applying for Russian citizenship, with "more than 500 residents of Estonia hav[ing] received Russian citizenship" in 2019 ('Russians in Estonia not very interested in resettling, ambassador admits' 2019). Another example of advocacy, as argued by KaPo (2016, 10), was on "using alternative interpretations of World War II in an increasingly

aggressive manner" when "[t]he Immortal Regiment parade held in Tallinn on 9 May 2016 showed that revanchism and the display of provocative symbols are more important than celebrating the anniversary of the end of the war and commemorating fallen soldiers." What is the system in place for advocating such programmes?

Even though conventional cabinet diplomacy may not pay in attractiveness, unable to deliver into masses and is restricted to a circle of finely groomed professional diplomats, evidently, the initial steps to communicate with the Estonian society 'on the ground' are arranged to be made by the Embassy. After all, the Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots (CCRC), which is an umbrella organisation for Estonian non-governmental establishments that are interlinked with the Russian compatriot policy, "act[s] under the guidance of the Russian [E]mbassy" (KaPo 2013, 5) and the Embassy "have a decisive say in who belongs" to the CCRC (KaPo 2012, 6). In one of its more recent reviews, KaPo (2018, 7) claimed that the CCRC had "no real representative function or direct ties with local minorities", being essentially "a virtual non-entity." The Russian Federation uses diplomatic missions in its immediate 'near abroad," assigning them with tasks of running the CCRC's annual events, coordinating the agenda of an extensive network of institutions implementing policy abroad (Bulakh et al., 2014, 38). Indirectly supporting imperial paradigm, KaPo (2015, 6) suggests that "the near abroad" policy is based on "the idea that a good neighbour is a controlled neighbour", which is distinctly imperial in its geo-strategic nature.

Structurally, the CCRC is tied in a solid power hierarchy, while administering movement of people whom Russia treats as compatriots. The first level of engagement comes in civic organisations of host countries, further expanding to national coordination councils. Davydova-Minguet (2018) specified that the upper level of the structure is called World Coordination Council. Advocacy-wise, the CCRC is notorious in Estonia. As Kallas (2016, 10) argued, the movement's establishment in Estonia in 2007 was a reflection on "a gap [existing] between [Moscow's] political ambitions and the realities of the compatriot movements on the ground", but the "movement was […] paralysed by a series of rivalries, favouritism and corruption scandals almost from its inception." The blunders in the work of the local branch were spotted to be crucial. KaPo (2013, 6) reported that "[c]orruption is common given the lack of transparency in the financing of the Russian compatriot policy", because "[t]here is no shortage of interested parties who would like to access a piece of the Russian national budget." The

observational process introduced the KaPo to "the jargon of Russian officials" that was referring to either распил ("the slicing-up") or откат ("kickback"). If the former is relatively self-explanatory, the latter is related to the fact that "money is always limited, but the number of people looking for an easy income from the funds is always high" – therefore, "a patron must be found from among the officials in Moscow", and, in return for approving the allocation of the funds the patron receives some money back (KaPo 2013, 6).

In April 2011, RT reported about Russia's plans to establish a fund to protect Russian compatriots abroad and quoted the then President Dmitri Medvedev stressing that "protecting the rights and interests of Russians living abroad would remain a priority for Moscow." Later, the Fund for the Legal Protection and Support of Russian Federation Compatriots Living Abroad was created, and its aim was to preclude what was perceived as offences against the rights of the Estonian Republic's multi-faceted minority of Russian-speakers or Russian citizens living in the country. More specifically, as KaPo (2012, 6) detected, Konstantin Kosachev, a high-profile Russian politician who is currently Deputy Chairperson of the Federation Council where he also chairs the body's Foreign Affairs Committee, declared that "Russian compatriots could develop into the main link between Russia and the local civil society and elites", shifting "from the consolidation stage over to the stage in which they legitimise themselves as influential civil society players who play a role in local power structures and decision-making." The same KaPo's review (2012, 7) singled out some of the Fund for the Legal Protection's activities – for example, it decided to issue "financial support to the Estonian resident Anton Gruzdev so that he could compensate the material damages that he caused in Jõhvi in 2007 in the course of mass unrest." Furthermore, the organisation financed the participation of activists of Мир без нацизма (World without Nazism) on OSCE-organised conferences (KaPo 2012, 7).

2.2. Who do you listen to…in exchange?

In a similar fashion as with advocacy, listening is no less vague in terms of its measurability, but its importance for public diplomacy can hardly be underestimated – it deals with collecting opinion of the public in focus. For Cull (2009, 18), this part of public diplomacy represents "an actor's attempt to manage the international environment by collecting and collating data about publics and their opinions overseas and using that data to redirect its policy or its wider public diplomacy approach accordingly." Moreover, as

Di Martino (2020, 133) argued, it was with the help of listening public diplomacy was able to be distinguished from propaganda. Defining exchange diplomacy, Cull (2009, 19) talked about an actor's "attempt to manage the international environment by sending its citizens overseas and reciprocally accepting citizens from overseas."

In the context of Russia's communication with the Estonian society, there is not much of an 'overseas' factor in place; instead, there is a strong evidence that the listening is tightly interlinked with the exchange diplomacy – the latter simply represents a means to achieve perfection of the former. Who does the Russian Federation listen to in Estonia, and, considering the context, how does it do it? KaPo (2013, 14) maintains the argument that "[t]he main strategic target of Russian military intelligence is NATO, the political and military planning of the alliance, its classified information, and the people who can access that information." As reported (KaPo 2019/20, 25), in the last decade, "20 people have been convicted of criminal offenses related to intelligence activities against Estonia", including "traitors and those who have simply worked for the Russian special services against Estonia." Those people represented the first and the smallest group to whom the Russian side was listening.

The second group of people are associated with the eastern fringe of Estonia, more specifically – the City of Narva, a border town where both the EU and NATO end their geographic presence. Intriguingly, Ivangorod, a Russian town on the other side of the border, used to be known as Jaanilinn, being an internationally recognised part of Estonia until 1944, when it was 'attached' to Russia during the second Soviet occupation of the country. Narva is Estonia's third most populous city of 58,610 residents, but it also has disbalanced ethnic and citizenship compositions ('Narva in digits' 2018). On 1 January 2018, ethnicity-wise, Narva hosted 48,535 ethnic Russians (83 per cent), 2,114 Estonians (4 per cent), and 1,393 Ukrainians (2 per cent). At the same time, citizenship-wise, 27,951of Narva residents hold Estonian passports (48 per cent), while 21,134 of them are Russian citizens (36 per cent). Even though Estonian political elites tend to downscale the issue, addressing it in a very mild manner – for example, President Kersti Kaljulaid (2018) once noted that "Narva is of course very special, but it is an average Estonian city in the best sense of the word" – but this particular locality is where the Kremlin is very active on listening and exchange. As KaPo reported (2016, 8), at the Russian State Duma elections, a high-profile Russian politician Konstantin Zatulin "from the distant city of Sochi set up his candidacy in a minor electoral district, and visited the Estonian town of

Narva during his campaign", stating "in connection with his Estonian visit that it was common practice in Estonia to repress representatives of the Russian-speaking community, that Estonia maintains a Russophobic stance in its internal and foreign policies, and has discontinued the broadcasting of Russian TV channels at the national level – all false statements that suit the Kremlin." The same review (KaPo 2016, 11) had a picture of the Mayor of Narva signing a friendship agreement in Kingissepp (formerly Yamburg, a town in the Leningrad Oblast, about 20 km east of Narva), and a representative of the Russian town was wearing the controversial ribbon of Saint George during the ceremony.

The third group is much broader, and the observed methodology on listening to them is more sophisticated, often being interlinked with the other public diplomacy mechanisms. It is youth. KaPo (2017) marked several new formats to introduce youth to a broader compatriot movement: in 2017, the World Games of Young Compatriots were held (initially launched in 2015 as a common undertaking of the Ministry of Sport, Ministry of Education and Rossotrudnichestvo, held in Kazan, Tatarstan), the 3rd World Youth Forum of Russian Compatriots 'Destiny of Russia: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow' (held in Sofia, Bulgaria), and 19th World Festival of Youth and Students (held in Sochi). All these events were meant to serve patriotic (Russian) upbringing, consolidation of foreign youth and teaching or, at least, introducing the 'correct' language, culture and history. Considering the reception of these messages, the numbers of attendees were modest. In 2019, an event organised in Bulgaria, managed to gather only 130 participants and it became the largest of its kind in history ('Fifth World Youth Forum of Russian Compatriots Opens in Sofia' 2019). Moreover, there were two youth forums, BaltFest and My Baltics which took place in 2017 in Estonia. Both were organised by peer efforts from the Russkiy Mir Foundation and the Russian Embassy in Tallinn. BaltFest managed to gather 40 youngsters (KaPo 2018). Russia's urge to foster Russia-related youth living in foreign countries was implemented in 2013 by inviting them to athlete camp 'Soyuz' devoted to the Soviet Union's victory in WWII. The event was attended by schoolchildren from one of Maardu schools (KaPo 2013).

2.3. Cultural diplomacy à la Russe

Cull (2009, 19) gives yet another classic definition, treating cultural diplomacy as "an actor's attempt to manage the international environment through making its cultural resources and achievements known overseas and/or facilitating cultural transmission abroad." Language and culture are

strategic assets for states, thus some of them create cultural institutions, such as the British Council, King Sejong Foundation, Goethe Institute and Confucius Institute to project their messages globally. Russia established its own analogue of such organisations to promote the Russian language studies, the Pushkin Institute.

Klyeva and Mikhaylova (2017, 128) acknowledge that "culture as an axis of propaganda has long been an essential component of the Soviet information efforts," but they argue that Russia's approach is to treat the phenomenon of cultural diplomacy as humanitarian cooperation (гуманитарное сотрудничество). Remarkably, this element of public diplomacy enjoys plenty of normative 'attention'. As argued (Klyeva and Mikhaylova 2017, 129), there are three main normative documents on the subject: the Cultural Diplomacy Conception (2010), the Russian Foreign Policy Doctrine (2013), and the Charter of the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (2008).

Arguably, today's Russia builds its cultural diplomacy as a prototype of the Soviet one (Terry 2018, 29). Often this idea is proven with Russia's revitalisation of Soviet-made institutions, referring to Rossotrudnichestvo together with its cultural policy. Language and culture became intertwined with the Russian identity (Klyeva and Mikhaylova 2017). Another powerful source is religion and 'spirituality," which is 'managed' by the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (the latter was revived by Joseph Stalin in 1943). Since 1991, the Estonian context was always on the strategic radar of the Russian Orthodox Church – Patriarch Alexy II who was in charge of the Patriarchate from 1990 until 2008, was born in Tallinn, a little more than a decade before Estonia was occupied by the USSR. Terry (2018, 42) argued that, due to the close cooperation between President Putin and the Church, the latter became yet another state institution dealing with foreign relations, being institutionalised as a special body responsible for the cultural side of public diplomacy and cooperation with outer public.

Indeed, Russian cultural diplomacy is a business of many: there are overlapped competences between the country's Ministry of Culture and Education, Rossotrudnishestvo, Foreign Ministry, and the Russkiy Mir Foundation. In the former Soviet Union, however, there was a more distinct structure designed for the process. Thus, Russian Association for International Cooperation (RAIC or, sometimes, RAMS) was established to coordinate the work of non-governmental organisations within the scope of

Russian public diplomacy in the near abroad and in the West. These days, as per Klyeva and Tsetsura (2015), RAIC/RAMS consists of 96 public organisations among which are Russia-Germany Society, Russia-Japan Society, Society of Russian-Chinese Friendship, Society of Russian-Armenian Friendship, Association of Friends of France and some other establishments.

The Russkiy Mir Foundation as a strategic agency was established by President Putin on 21 June 2007, and its work was declared to be devoted to "promoting the Russian language as Russia's national heritage and a significant aspect of Russian and world culture, and supporting Russian language teaching programs abroad" ('Decree of the President of the Russian Federation on the establishment of the Russkiy Mir Foundation' 2007). It is a well spread organisation, which has 49 centres around the world, including in Estonia ('Russian Centers of the Russkiy Mir Foundation' 2020). As Terry (2018) articulated in her report, the Foundation was rather more politically biased and pressurised for more language right for the society in Ukraine than, for example, in Germany. Vyacheslav Nikonov, one of the top state-level Russian strategists and the grandson of Vyacheslav Molotov, is the organisation's Chairman of the Management Board. This fact in itself underscores the significance of cultural dimension in the whole scheme of Russia's strategic communication-building practices.

When it comes to the Russkiy Mir Foundation in Estonia, it appears that the Pushkin Institute is the full executant acting in its name. Positioning itself as an "educational, licensed institution of the Republic of Estonia," Pushkin Institute (2020) notes that its local Russian centre enables it to act in multiple roles: informational, educational (Russian language study materials), creative (provides many opportunities to create cultural content), and communicative (formation of communication patterns). Since 2005, the Russian Language School has been operating at the Pushkin Institute, where, according to a special program, children are taught Russian language and literature, culture and history of Russia (Pushkin Institute 2020). Some of the formats arranged or co-arranged by the Pushkin Institute represent security concerns for Estonia. For example, KaPo (2018, 8) reported about a "joint programme of the Russian Embassy in Estonia and the local Pushkin Institute," which "offers young people living in Estonia the opportunity to study at Russian universities and is financed by Rossotrudnichestvo," "designed specifically for Russian-speaking young people living in expatriate communities and seen by the Kremlin as future carriers and promoters of the idea of the 'Russian World' in their home countries."

Another important organisation that is directly involved in Russian culture promotional activities is the Russian Cultural Centre (Vene Kultuurikeskus) in Tallinn. In 2001, the Center was transferred under the authority of the Mayor of Tallinn and became a municipal enterprise ('О Центре русской культуры' 2020). Objectively, this particular institution, can hardly be treated as being or gradually becoming directly associated with Russian public diplomacy. Structurally and content-wise, it appears to be searching for its own niche in the Estonian cultural space. The Centre's activities revolve around classical theatrical performances as well as festival hosting and arranging, and the organisation visibly appears to be striving to represent the Russian culture of Estonia. Despite culture and language being named as strong anchors by Klyeva and Mikhaylova (2017), Kallas (2016) argues that Estonian Russians have already generated their territorial identification, naming Estonia their homeland. The younger generation raised in Nordic culture, may particularly dissociate from the Russian society since they do not know life there. For some, the identity may be described as 'in between' (Parshukov 2017, 39), neither purely Russian nor Estonian.

2.4. International broadcasting

As an integral element of public diplomacy, international broadcasting can be characterised as a method of communication, which enables translation of national soft power imperatives to foreign publics with the help of communication technologies. In other words, according to Cull (2009, 21), the phenomenon reflects a situation when an actor attempts to manage "the international environment by using the technologies of radio, television and Internet to engage with foreign publics." In addition, Ryzhova (2019, 15), while focusing on RT in the context of strategic narratives found in the Russian news media portrayal of Sweden, argued that, because of its tangible gains, some countries tend to prioritise international broadcasting over other ones.

Possibly, one of the most noticeable examples when international broadcasting was used by Russia in the Estonian context can be traced from 2011. As KaPo reported (2012, 9), "[w]ell before the official results of the [population] census became available, the news portals regnum.ru and newspb.ru tried to gain the upper hand by writing about census results that supposedly indicated that the Estonian population was dying out." Since those news items did not generate any social turbulence in Estonia, one of the top-TV channels in the Russian Federation (Rossiya/Россия) "made a

news story on the census" which was authored by Jekaterina Zorina, "who became well known in Estonia thanks to her unique take on the events that took place in Estonia in April 2007" (KaPo 2012, 9). Two years later, KaPo felt obliged to notify Estonia that the situation was to get more serious. In its review, KaPo (2014, 8) reported on "the establishment of the Russian state information agency Rossiya Segodnya (Russia Today) in 2013" and that it "was preceded by the launch of the English-language TV channel RT […], part of the information agency Rossiya Segodnya"; immediately after there was a note about "[a] new project […], the multimedia channel Sputnik" that, as argued, "has the ambition of broadcasting multimedia content through radio stations, websites and press centres in 34 languages, including Estonian."

Simons (2018, 208) argued that media is at the forefront of an information war that is taking place between Russia and the political West. Russia strictly controls media climate domestically, but it also managed to build and promote the concept of RT, with its extensive apparatus and global outreach, with an auditorium of about 700 million people that 'consume' pro-Kremlin narratives (Shukhova 2015, 74). In the 'far abroad' (дальнее зарубежье), it evidently hits two goals: it acquaints the people of a foreign country with Russia's position on world affairs, reflecting advocacy element and gaining attention as a short-term goal; and traps people with catchy airing (using conspiracy theories), which further sway perceptions of audience.

In Estonia, media market has been traditionally liberal and market-oriented, which paved the way for Russian TV networks through a cable or satellite connection. However, the background in which Russia operates with its outreach is important, since Estonians and non-Estonians often 'live' in different information spaces, often with contrasting content (Bulakh et. al. 2014, 51). Estonians, whose language of daily communication is Estonian, are prone to use Estonian language and English-language media, trust Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR), Estonian language TV channels and online news reporters ('Monitoring Integration in Estonia' 2017). However, there is an ambivalent situation concerning the use of media by Russian speakers, and this factor has been extensively exploited by Russia. KaPo (2014, 9), while describing the process of launching the Baltnews media brand in the Baltics, noted that the project was "funded by Rossiya Segodnya" and that the baltnews.ee website would be "led in Estonia by Aleksandr Kornilov, a member of the local Coordination Council of Russian Compatriots and head of the propaganda portal baltija.eu." Later on, the story

became even more compelling as KaPo (2016, 9) specified that "[t]he activities of the Baltnews propaganda portals […] are coordinated by several employees of Rossiya Segodnya" who "effectively manage the work of the entire portal and the topics it covers," with the same Alexandr Kornilov receiving "transfers of 11,400 euros every month from tax-free companies." In a significant addition, as detected, "[t]he aforementioned coordinators also regularly communicate recommended topics to the offices of Sputnik, the official sub-division of Rossiya Segodnya", and the latter "obliges the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian Baltnews portals to cooperate with the Sputnik offices and to support and repeat the news they publish" (KaPo 2016, 9). On the Estonian side, the Russian-language Estonian channel ETV+ was launched in 2015, and this case deserves a separate study in the context of Russian public diplomacy. Apart from that, the country's major media sources – Postimees and Delfi – provide for both Estonian and Russian language-based editorial teams, and this factor is often reflected in different contents produced by the two different editors in each case. When it comes to radio stations focused on Estonian Russians, it is worth mentioning Raadio 4 owned by ERR.

In a way, all these developments assisted the field in the process of collecting plenty of unique data on how the Russian Federation is channelling through its strategic messages to Estonia and its society. Evidently, Russia, when it comes to Estonia, is inclined to engage the whole spectrum of public diplomacy-associated mechanisms, since other types of communication cannot be used for different reasons. Even though, as KaPo argued (2019/20, 20), recently, "the Kremlin's politics of division was dominated by a lack of ideas and resources," that does not stop the world's largest country from attempting to project its strategic narratives internationally and, particularly, to the localities that Russia considers its periphery. During the following discussion, an attempt will be made to link Russia's imperial paradigm, main strategic narratives, and communicational methods used in the context of Estonia.

4. Discussion and conclusion

As Roselle et al. (2014, 79) argued, "[t]he challenge – and the promise – of studying strategic narratives lies in the conceptual underpinning that invites the use of multiple methodologies to inform our understanding of influence in the world today." This article tackled the argument that the Russian Federation, while trying to make practical sense out of its imperial geo-strategic aspirations, endeavours to project its strategic identity, system,

and issue narratives via public diplomacy-associated modes of communication, when it comes to the Estonian society. The imperial paradigm brought its centre-periphery linkage to the conceptual framework. After all, as Zielonka (2012, 505) argued, "concept of empire is certainly not perfect, but […] its use can be quite revealing."

Firstly, Russia still treats Estonia as its periphery. Secondly, the world's largest country never denies its intentions to take a decisive part in the global geo-strategic redesign, since the Yalta international system has become history. Thirdly, on the Estonian side, Russia's communication with the country's society openly brings myriads of serious security concerns, giving the KaPo to reflect on those in the agency's every single annual review. Fourthly, due to the fact that the structural elements of public diplomacy are largely defined by the Russian state differently, if comparted to the Western school of political science, this article detected a range of obvious terminological confusions existing in the field. This is where the instrumentarium of strategic narrative theory can be considered analytically determinant to link public diplomacy elements in their empirical association with strategic identity, system, and issue narratives.

In general, Russia, as any other major power (not to mention one of the four imperial entities of the contemporary), exhibits a formidable range of mechanisms when it comes to strategic communication. With Estonia which (together with Latvia and Lithuania) arguably represents a special case in the context of Russia's behaviour in what it treats as its periphery, the Russian Federation has to adopt a softer approach as compared to Ukraine, for example. In the current Russia-Ukraine interactions, the Russian side opted to launch a hybrid war (Rácz 2015) to communicate its strategic narratives to the Ukrainians. As this article demonstrated, while remaining a powerful actor and possessing an astonishing range of possibilities, Russia lacks a comprehensive approach in linking its public diplomacy mechanisms with what it attempts to project as the country's strategic narratives.

Remarkably, both listening and exchange diplomacy (these two elements are detected as being closely intertwined in the context of Russia's communication with the Estonian society) as well as international broadcasting are not engaged in solidifying the Russian Federation's strategic identity narrative. However, with its 'combo' of listening and exchange practices, Russia strives for achieving a common-for-theory goal, which is "to see public diplomacy responding to shifts in international opinion" (Cull 2009, 18). In this communicational framework, the Kremlin

is evidently combining the 'near abroad' strategic theme with how Russia would like to interact with the United States. In his widely cited Munich Speech, President Putin (2007) expressed his dissatisfaction with how NATO (understanding this organisation as something that almost entirely depends on the USA and its position) managed to be enlarged right through to Russia's borders:

> It turns out that NATO has put its frontline forces on our borders, and we continue to strictly fulfil the treaty obligations and do not react to these actions at all. I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernisation of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust.

Therefore, since the idea is about "convincing others and consider changing course themselves" (Miskimmon et. al. 2013, 143), Russia's special attention to Narva and particular exchange practices (be it arranged in Russia or elsewhere) are indeed about one of the most stable strategic narratives of Russia that does not seem to be disappearing any time soon – the country's geo-strategic discomfort with the fact that the Baltics joined the EU and, especially, NATO without asking for Russia's permission.

Advocacy, which has a distinct 'active' self-promoting connotation, is ignored in the process of effective projecting Russia's policy narratives – instead, the Russian side is predominantly using listening that is 'passive'. Nevertheless, Russia's advocacy activities in Estonia are directly linked with a particular theme, out of which the Kremlin is formulating and projecting its policy narratives on the peripheral 'near abroad'. This theme was clearly voiced by Putin (2012) when he was about to start his third presidential term:

> We are determined to ensure that Latvian and Estonian authorities follow the numerous recommendations of reputable international organisations on observing generally accepted rights of ethnic minorities. We cannot tolerate the shameful status of 'non-citizen'. How can we accept that, due to their status as non-citizens, one in six Latvian residents and one in thirteen Estonian residents are denied their fundamental political, electoral and socioeconomic rights and the ability to freely use Russian?

This is the situation when the demanding tone of communication helps in arguing the case on setting out a particular policy of Russia towards Estonia.

In general, Roselle et al. (2014, 76) claimed that this is the case when issue/policy narratives are formulated on "why a policy is needed and (normatively) desirable, and how it will be successfully implemented or accomplished."

On cultural diplomacy, since it involves the Russian language promotion, it can be easily misinterpreted as being contextualised with strategic identity narratives only. However, this part of public diplomacy is more sophisticated. When Parker (2010, 127) noted about "[a]n irony of arguing for the prominence of empire in geopolitics", he was trying to make a point that "it is so often a form of geopolitics which dares not to speak its name." Putin's strategy-defining article (2012) proved that point with precision:

> Russia has a great cultural heritage, recognised both in the West and the East. But we have yet to make a serious investment in our culture and its promotion around the world. […] Russia has a chance not only to preserve its culture but to use it as a powerful force for progress in international markets. The Russian language is spoken in nearly all the former Soviet republics and in a significant part of Eastern Europe. This is not about empire, but rather cultural progress.

At the same time, one may argue that Russia's cultural diplomacy-driven communication, while being imperial in nature, supports a particular strategic system narrative about the world's largest country's place in the international system. In a way, the citation above is only a continuation of what the Russian President noted in 2007, in Munich: "Russia is a country with a history that spans more than a thousand years and has practically always used the privilege to carry out an independent foreign policy." Therefore, Russkiy Mir as a concept has never been about identity – it has always been about what Russia perceives as a just international system.

This article, while building a platform for linking the imperial paradigm, the theoretical nature of public diplomacy-bound mechanisms and strategic narrative theory, aimed to trace multiple dimensions of Russia's communication with Estonia. As a bonus, it can provide for a possibility to academically 'craft' a message on the effectiveness of Russian public diplomacy in the Republic of Estonia. This research exposed numerous cases of divisive underground projects and networks featured by speculations, weaponised use of funds, corruption, connections of (the core imperial centre in) Russia with (peripheral) Estonian political circles – these factors made

Russia losing its credibility before the Estonian society in general. Since this research brought a more nuanced understanding of the situation, it could be a good chance for the two sides to eventually start reconciling the differences and move on as partners. If only…

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