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RUSSIA'S COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES ABOUT CRIMEA IN SPANISH-LANGUAGE SPUTNIK AND RUSSIA TIMES (2014-2018)

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Abstract: *We analyze Russia's communication strategies in the period leading up to and following the seizure (2014-2018) of the Crimean Peninsula in the Spanish editions of its digital platforms, Sputnik and Russia Times. Drawing from theories of political communication, we show how Russia used storytelling and framing to build an international image and political brand consistent with, and try to justify, its foreign policy actions. Specifically, Russian messages transmit no room for doubt about the legality of any of its strategies in Crimea. We argue that this communication strategy is consistent with the concept of 'sharp power' to describe Russian projection in the world. Cultural and emotional appeals designed to generate positive emotions about Russia, i.e., 'soft power', were far less common. In recent years, Russian projection of sharp power appears to have increased in the Spanish-speaking world, particularly in South America. In addition to helping explain Russian foreign policy, our findings contribute to broader debates about political branding and truth in a 'post-truth', multipolar world.*

Keywords: *Cyberpolitik; Post-Truth; Russia; Crimea; Sharp Power; Sputnik; Russia Times*

INTRODUCTION:
THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING IN THE CONTEXT OF POST-TRUTH

The post-truth phenomenon, including debates about disinformation and misinformation, political branding, and the nature of power projection via digital media (cyberpolitik), has become a crucial dimension for understanding international relations and foreign policy. One way to conceive of the current international order is as the space for a contest over the construction of meaning. States and other actors exploit the possibilities offered by digital media to transmit messages to project and reinforce ideas and meanings that are consistent with their interests. In particular, states use cyberpolitik (Rothkopf 1998, 325-359) to imprint their desired international image, defined as a "state brand" by Van Ham (2001, 2-6). We posit that when carried out by states whose democratic institutions are not robust (Fukuyama 2014), cyberpolitik converts digital media into instruments of power. It follows that when foreign policy is manifested through the new media (Sal Paz 2010, 2-17) and in terms of

cyberpolitik, it is no longer about 'soft power' (Nye 2017, 1-3) but about a positioning strategy (Mintzberg 1987, 66-75) that exceeds this category and corresponds rather to 'sharp power' (NED 2017, 6-24).

We build support for this argument by analyzing Russian messaging to assert sovereignty over the Crimean Peninsula in the Spanish-language editions of Sputnik and RT during 2014-2018. Our approach to this digital content draws from theories of political communication, which emphasize "storytelling" (Alexander 2017, 5-13) and "framing" (Mintz and De Rouen 2010, 149-166) as the fundamental concepts used to construct a political brand. Specifically, we show how storytelling and framing align with emotional/cultural and legal/strategic messages in all the news items about Crimea in this period, during which Russia invaded and annexed Crimea. There was a minimal reaction from the international community.

By way of introduction to the case, in the next section, we present a brief explanation of the actions that led up to the annexation of Crimea and the key events that occurred during the four years included in our study. The following sections develop our arguments about sharp power and present our specific methodology and the analysis results. A concluding section offers reflections on the post-truth phenomenon and how it relates to foreign policy in a multipolar world.

KEY EVENTS LEADING TO AND
FOLLOWING RUSSIA'S ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA IN 2014

Two specific events are especially crucial for understanding the context of Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea. The first dates back to November 2013, when Ukrainian President Víktor Yanukovych refused to subscribe to an association agreement with the European Union, alleging that the latter had not been entirely generous in providing significant resources for the Ukrainian economy. The president's refusal provided a grain of sand to an exhausted society that erupted in protests in different cities - especially in Kiev's Maidan Square - not only because of the presidential decision to ignore the agreement but because of the lack of legitimacy of the president among the opponents and groups of the extreme local right.

The second date to highlight is February 2014. After the repression of protesters, the EU induced Yanukovych and the leaders of three of the opposition parties to sign an agreement to anticipate the elections and thus generate a reform of the Constitution. Despite an agreement having been reached, he was not respected by his promoter; Added to this is Yanukovych's subsequent flight to Russia. Russian media described this event "as a coup" (Taibo 2017, 79) directed by Western foreign ministries to place Ukraine in the orbit of the EU and NATO to the detriment of Russian interests.

Something of a surprise factor was the second crisis of 2014, deployed in the Donetsk and Lugansk oblasts in eastern Ukraine. Unlike the support that there was in Crimea for independence, the Kremlin did not reiterate that attitude towards Donetsk and Luhansk at the time, which culminated in a policy of destabilization against the Ukrainian authorities. Moscow pushed for the organization of a referendum under the principle of self-determination in March 2014. The result was a majority favoring the peninsula's independence and becoming part of Russia. However, the legitimacy of this referendum was called into question, and the EU and the

United States applied the first package of sanctions to Russia. Since the conflict arose, Crimea has been the victim of sabotage and blockades like the blackout throughout its territory in December, and that energy crisis lasted until New Year.

Meanwhile, NATO ships were deployed in the Black Sea to monitor Crimea, and Russia denounced the double standards of President Barack Obama and NATO. Ukraine revised its nuclear power status and decided to enter into a strategic partnership with Turkey against Russia. At last, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe deprived the Russian delegation of the vote. Russia could also consider a strategic alliance with China, which would alert the West.

The concern over the dispute in Crimea and the threat of terrorism increased with the conflict in Syria, which began in 2015. Russia and The United States decided to cooperate on Arctic issues despite sanctions - set in 2015 and 2016 - and even the United States and Russia led a regional coalition to confront the Islamic State in Syria.

However, in 2015 Russia withdrew from the Consensus of Europe, and Ukraine gave up its status as a non-aligned country given joining NATO. The West's sanctions game against Russia continued, as the Russian state claimed that these sanctions violated WTO rules because they generated unfair competition.

Russia responded to anti-Russian sanctions with a food embargo on the United States, the EU, Australia and Canada for six months, even though the United States determined those averages for one year; all this led to a fall in oil prices, which meant another punishment for Russia. In addition, Ukraine condemned Russia before the UN order to remove its veto power in the Council of Security and Russia was removed from the G8. On the other hand, some peace talks between Ukraine and Russia took place with the mediation of the United States and the EU.

In Latin America, Russia strengthened its diplomatic relations with Cuba, supporting it in addressing the Crimea case before the UN General Assembly. Under the management of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, the Argentinian government also supported Russia for the sovereignty of Crimea as parallelism with the Malvinas issue. Curiously, in 2015, two documentaries were released: 'Crimea, the Road to the Homeland' with the leading role of Putin in audiovisual history, and the Russian Center of Culture and Science presented another titled 'Whose is Crimea?'.

During 2016, the sanctions crisis extended to the field of diplomacy, given that Obama expelled 35 Russian diplomats, ordered the closure of Russian headquarters, and the eviction of the consulate general in San Francisco and the offices in New York and Washington DC. This caused the Russian plant to be cut from 755 to 455 employees.

After two years, the NATO-Russia Council met again in April. Russia, the United States and NATO established a dialogue on arms control. Even so, NATO continued expanding its fleets in the Black Sea, and Russia signed a decree determining that it would continue to be part of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

In 2017, the United States applied new restrictions to senior Russian officials for the alleged interference of Russia in the presidential elections and measures that affected the construction of gas and oil pipelines of the Nord Stream 2 project. Moreover, the US approved the sale of lethal weapons to Ukraine. Another critical issue is that Russia strengthened relations with Argentina and collaborated in the search for the ARA submarine San Juan this year.

SHARP POWER AND EXPLANATIONS FOR RUSSIAN ACTIONS IN CRIMEA (2014-2018)

Four reasons are generally cited to explain Russia's reasons for its actions in Crimea.

First, there is the irredentist appeal to history. Crimea is a coastal peninsula of the Black Sea that traditionally belonged to Russia. In 1954, however, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev chose to 'cede' Crimea to Ukraine within the framework of the 300th anniversary of Ukraine's 'accession' to Russia. During the subsequent decades, the Russian population in Crimea increased. Russians constituted "58% of the peninsula's inhabitants" in 2014 (Pomeraniec 2020, 214). Thus, Russia's claim to Crimea included the argument that Crimea and its population were Russian. Second, the incorporation of Crimea into Russia allowed access and control of oil and natural gas deposits found in the Black Sea area. A third reason was a diversion. The idea is that Russia invaded Ukraine to distract attention from politics at the domestic level. President Putin shifted the focus from the social and economic problems at home to an international conflict thanks to the Crimean issue. Fourth is the argument that the West, particularly NATO and the European Union, provoked Russia into acting by courting Ukraine. This contention is famously associated with Mearsheimer (2014, 77-89).

As we show in the analysis in the following sections, the factors above are echoed in Russia's use of digital media to assert sovereignty over Ukraine. Political communication in a context of invasion, annexation, and other aspects of realpolitik is hard to fit into the analytical category of 'soft power', which focuses on shaping the preferences of others through appeal and attraction (Nye 2017, 1-3). Studies of 'soft power' often focus on cultural diplomacy designed to produce a positive impression. The idea of 'sharp power' (NED 2017, 6-24) provides a better lens through which to analyze this case. We join a small but growing group of scholars arguing that the strategic use of digital media cannot be understood under the conception of soft power (Szostek 2014). Still, it is an even more complex dynamic that responds to a positioning strategy (Mintzberg 1987, 66-75). Scholars have used the concept of sharp power to analyze the positioning strategies of states like China (Cole 2018; Jieh-min 2020; Martínez Cristobal 2021), Poland (Skoneczny and Cacko 2021), United Arab Emirates (Boubtane 2021) in domestic issues or their geopolitical interests. Most literature analyzing the sharp power as a phenomenon are case studies for China. We believe the category is beneficial for studying Russia. Political communication theories may be incorporated into a sharp power approach, as we argue in the next section, which presents our methodology.

A STUDY OF POLITICAL BRANDING IN SPUTNIK AND RUSSIA TIMES

Our principal empirical aim in this study was to identify the dimensions that constitute the international image Russia seeks to convey as part of its positioning strategy, according to the concept of Mintzberg (1987, 66-75). The temporal bounds of the study are March 2014 - coinciding with the referendum in Crimea that determined that territory is part of the Russian Federation - and March 2018 - corresponding with the re-election of Vladimir Putin.

We opted to use material from the Spanish language versions of Sputnik and Russia Times (RT). These two are the main media of communication from Russia that produces content for non-Russian speaking audiences. Russia Times, formerly known as Russia Today, is a news

outlet funded and run by the Russian state, which began broadcasting with international reach in December 2005. RT has developed a global network of television channels, websites, and social media accounts that publish content in English, Spanish, French, Arabic, German and Russian. Even though Sputnik was released in November 2014, this native digital media came up from the merger of the international state information agency RIA Novosti and the Voice of Russia radio, which ceased their activity in 2013. Sputnik manages radio broadcasts, websites and social media channels in more than 30 languages.[1] Thanks to the social media boost, these platforms are among the 15 most shared domains for publications in Spanish about Russia and related issues.

This investigation is a type 1 case study, according to Gerring, since the variation of a single unit over time is observed and has an explanatory-confirmatory purpose (Bennett and Elman 2007, 170-195). The independent variable is Russia's foreign policy with Ukraine through Sputnik and RT. The dependent variable, our primary variable of interest, is the international image that Russia builds through these digital platforms. The control variable is the intensification of criticism by perceived adversaries according to a chronology of historical milestones. To construct these variables, we selected the textual contents in Sputnik and RT that present the keywords 'Crimea' and 'Ukraine' during the study period. This constitutes a sample of 3,897 publications. Of the entire sample, 3,741 posts belong to Sputnik and 156 to RT, as seen in Figure 1.

At first glance, both outlets published the most content about Crimea in 2014. In the case of Sputnik, there were 1,073 posts; and RT had 82. By 2015, Sputnik featured 815 posts; RT published 67. In 2016, 817 were registered on Sputnik and only 3 on RT. In 2017, Sputnik generated 834 posts and RT again 3. Finally, from January to March 2018, Sputnik had 202 posts and RT only one.

As time goes on, decreasing coverage by RT for the Crimean issue is observed. On the contrary, Sputnik kept the issue on the agenda with a similar frequency between 2015 and 2017. The two Russian media coincide in prioritizing the events linked to Crimea, especially in the first year the dispute broke out.

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[1]For further information, see the report by the US Department of State that was published in January 2022:
https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Kremlin-Funded-Media_Spanish_March-07_508.pdf
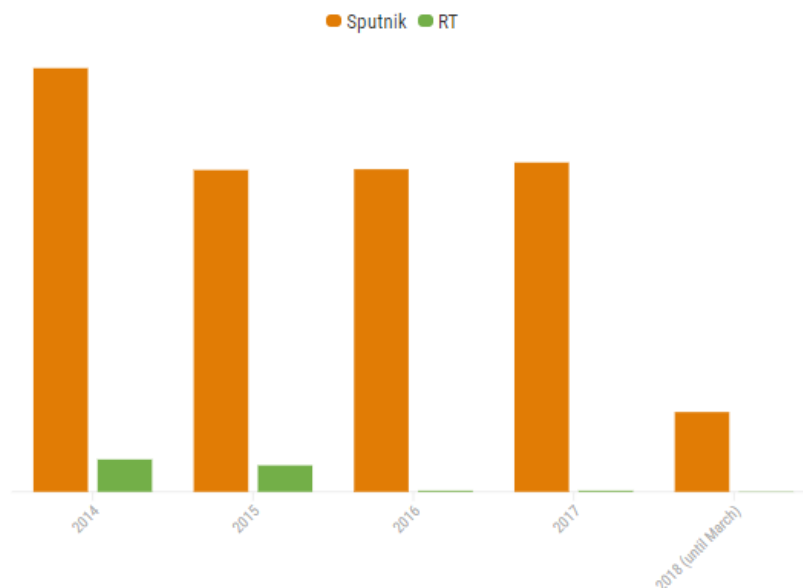
Figure 1: Number of Publications Registered by Year and by Media (Source: Authors' depiction based on the registry of publications on the websites of both media)

However, we mention an important caveat: in 2014, of the 1,073 posts on the Sputnik website, 992 'removed' content (not enabled for online viewing) were identified. We classified them as 'removed' since the fact that their validity on the Sputnik website has been suspended is an absence of data that also informs: that, in 2014, there were 992 publications that Sputnik uploaded to its platform and that, in 2020, decided to remove access to that content from the audience.

For the entire time cut, the most predominant narratives (Pryhara 2018, 25) are the following:

1. "The West is an enemy that wants to destroy Russia" (T7N27, according to the coding system).
2. "The Crimean referendum was an initiative of the Crimean people, not Russia" (T2N11, according to the coding system)
3. "Russia is not involved in the events in the Donbas region" (T3N13, according to the coding system).

The marked difference in volume between the T7N27 narrative and the other two emphasizes the rivalry between the West (the United States, the European Union, Australia, Canada, NATO, and other international/multilateral organizations) and Russia.

Figure 2 illustrates that 5 narratives (Pryhara 2018, 25) presented a more significant proportion of change across the period. These were:

1. "The Crimean referendum was an initiative of the people of Crimea, not Russia" (T2N11, according to the coding system).
2. "The West is an enemy that wants to destroy Russia" (T7N27, according to the coding system).

3. "Russia is not involved in the events in the Donbas region" (T3N13, according to the coding system).
4. "Ukrainian government officials are ultranationalists" (T5N21, according to the coding system).
5. "Crimea is better off in Russia than in Ukraine" (T2N12, according to the coding system).
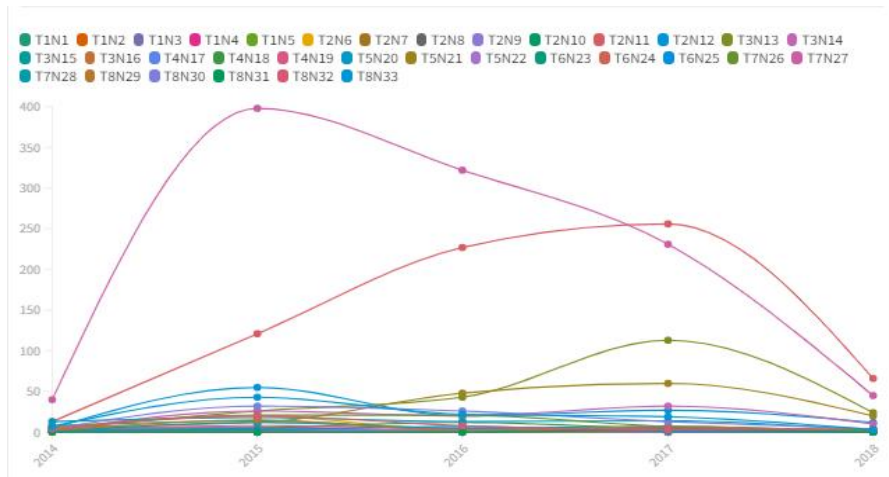

Figure 2: Narratives about the Coverage of the Crimean Conflict by Sputnik and RT and how they have changed from 2014 to 2018 (Source: Authors' depiction based on the registry of publications on the websites of both media)

To build the measure of political branding, we rely on the concepts of 'framing' and 'storytelling'. 'Framing' is the response transmitted by the ruling politicians in the face of a foreign policy problem. It is necessary to explain the fact and provide a tentative solution (Neack 2008, 126-128). This scheme communicates in a cascade modality, from top to bottom, since the public receives this window of information and - to a certain extent - it produces cognitive blindness for not knowing the reality of the events. As Mintz and De Rouen (2010, 149-166) explain, the application of framing has two functions. One is thematic, implying the purpose of influencing decision-makers choices and molding public opinion by prioritizing specific content above others on the agenda. The second refers to an evaluative purpose, where the setting acts as a parameter for evaluating the environment and a positive or negative perception are attributed to the facts.

'Storytelling' consists in telling stories through technology, and so a story is the narrative of an event or series of events crafted in a way to interest the audience and make the best effort to build engagement (Alexander 2017, 5-13).

The building of meaning by the Russian state in terms of cyberpolitik, or political branding through the digital platforms of the two Russian media analyzed, serves as our unit of analysis, and each of the 3,897 publications on Sputnik and RT serves as our unit of observation. We explore framing and storytelling that constitutes the international image sought to be transmitted, and the level of compatibility of political communication acts with cultural identity.

We take the classification of Mintz and De Rouen (2010, 149-166) as a reference because it condenses the complexity of the messaging-making process in an international field to pursue geopolitical objectives. There are five relevant types of framing that the authors propose: 'priming', which highlights the prominence of a feature at the expense of discounting other related ones; 'symbolic', where the use of symbols is appealed to allude to emotion and patriotism; 'threat', this covers a particular aspect of a fact that generates tension to establish that it means a threat to the government itself, the state and its citizens; 'emotionally saturated', the frame is configured from elements that appeal to the emotional sense of people with a saturated use of qualifying adjectives; 'non-compensatory' *vs.* 'compensatory' terms, in the first the framework used induces a decision focused on a single dimension of the situation without taking into account the context, while in the second the multiple variables are considered by adding the positive ones and contrasting them with the negative ones. All these elements are tactics used by leaders to promote their foreign policy. In the case of the Crimea dispute, Russia uses these frames to add supporters to its cause and actions nationally and internationally.

The three most predominant framing for the entire time cut is priming with 1164 publications, compensatory terms with 826, and symbolic with 694.

The priming was used to highlight that: the Crimean people's vote to reunify with Russia was democratically executed; The West is an enemy that attacks Russia; Ukrainian officials are ultra-nationalists and threaten the integrity of Russian speakers in Ukraine; and that Russia was not part of the conflict in Donbas.

Using compensatory terms established the actions and reactions of the West and Russia in the successive sets of sanctions, considering the measures of both sides and their consequences.

Symbolic framing rhetorically alluded that: the Ukrainian government is heavily influenced by the United States; the West organized Euromaidan; Crimea improved its socio-economic situation after 'accession' to Russia; the Crimean Peninsula has historically belonged to Russia; the Russian state is responsible for protecting the Russian diaspora on its territory and beyond its borders; Russia is interested in resolving conflicts and tensions with a peaceful and cooperative attitude.

The framing of the threat announced the threat of the advance of NATO troops in Eastern Europe and areas surrounding Russia, the breach of the Minsk Agreements by the Ukrainian government, and the sabotage and blockades organized by Ukrainian authorities and far-right groups.

Using non-compensatory terms functioned as a way of responding to accusations against Russia. Therefore, the emphasis was that Russia denied the acts denounced by the West without giving explanations or more details of that context.

The emotionally saturated frame was recorded mainly in opinion articles and newsworthy publications based on the life stories of Ukrainians, Russians or Americans in Crimea and the Donbas region.

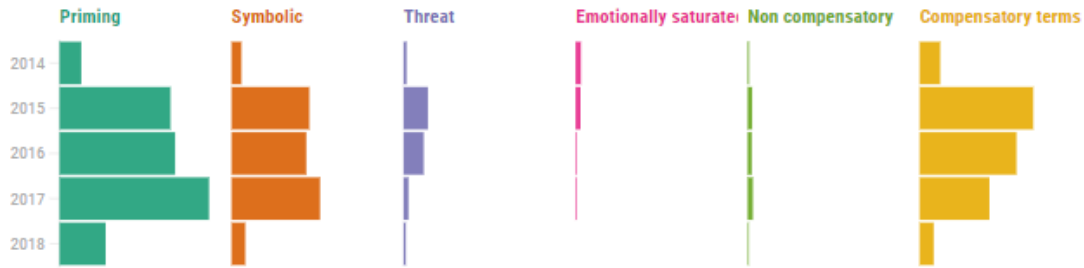The breakdown of the use of framing in our sample is reported in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Use of Framing According to the Typology of Mintz and De Rouen (2010) (Source: Authors'
depiction based on the registry of publications on the websites of both media)**

The marked predominance of storytelling with legal arguments over the emotional
connotation was recorded in all the years covered. These may be observed in Figure 4.
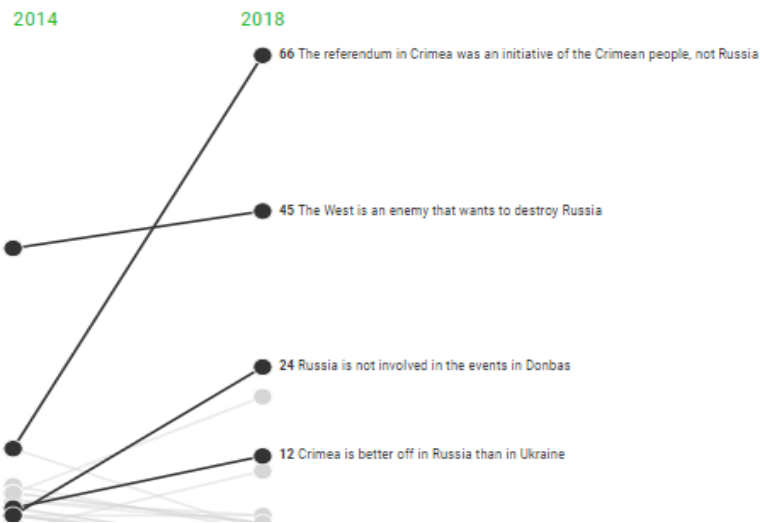

**Figure 4: Storytelling Narratives about Crimea in Sputnik and RT, 2014-2018 (Source: Authors' depiction
based on the registry of publications on the websites of both media)**

Although we can observe that a certain emotional connotation was registered in the
textual contents of the sample, in comparison with the legal arguments, the presence of
elements that question emotion, such as life stories, opinion articles, editorials and caricatures, is
significantly lower than those that seek to offer rational foundations and supported by data and
norms of International Law.

To support this causal inference, we applied the control variable according to this
chronology of historical milestones throughout the development of the Crimean dispute, where
the intensification of criticism of Russia by the adversaries - the United States, NATO, and the
European Union - is observed. Interesting curve results are portrayed in Figure 5.
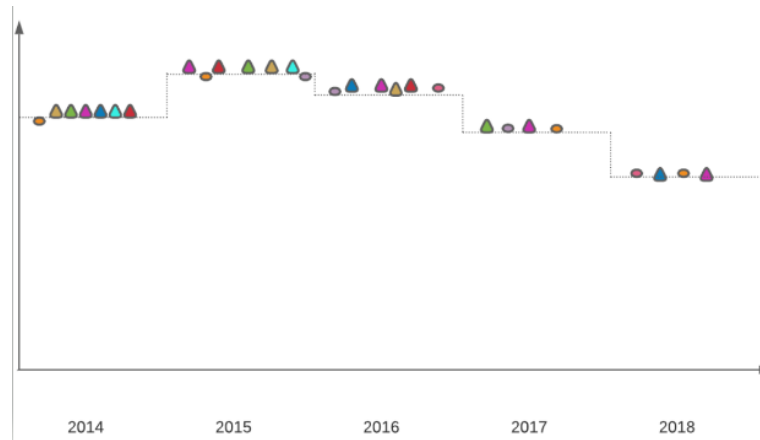
Figure 5: Intensification of Tension between the West and Russia According to the Chronology of Historical Milestones (Source: Authors' depiction based on the registry of publications on the websites of both media)

The axe X represents the years, and the axe Y points to intensifying the tension between Russia and the West. There are 9 categories of events identified by circles, which are events with a minor level of tension, and triangles when the tension is higher: 1° cultural event (orange circle), 2° sabotage and blockades (red triangle), 3° strategic partnership (light blue triangle), 4° economic sanctions (green triangle), 5° cooperation/support/dialogue (purple circle), 6° diplomatic sanctions (yellow triangle), 7° litigation (blue triangle), 8° provocations and threats (fuchsia triangle), and 9° visits of delegates to Crimea (pink circle). This chronology is based on the events that came up from the coverage of Sputnik and RT during the 2014-2018 period, which was summarized in the second section of this paper.
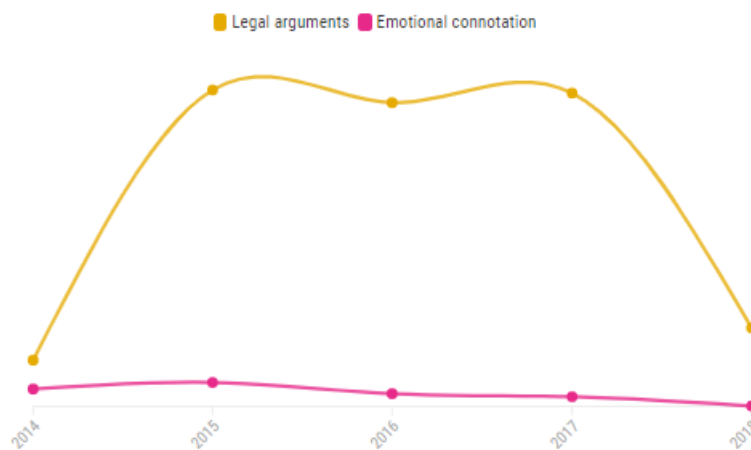

Figure 6: Level of Compatibility of the International Image with Cultural Identity (Source: Authors' depiction based on the registry of publications on the websites of both media)

The most important thing to note about Figure 6 is:

- That 2015 had the most significant flow of tensions because it coincided with the outbreak of the conflict in Syria, the first anniversary of the Crimean referendum, the harshness of the packages of economic sanctions against Russia and the instances of cooperation in the fight against terrorism In Syria.
- The tension began to ease with the arrival of Trump to the presidency in 2016 by becoming a possible catalyst for changes in favor of Russia.
- In 2017 Trump did not promote relevant modifications, and the economic sanctions continued.
- In 2018 tensions descended due to reports by numerous delegates who visited the peninsula in previous years and, especially in March, to examine the electoral process in Crimea.
- And that Russia always remained on alert, given the presence of NATO in Eastern Europe and areas surrounding Russia.

Taking into account the purpose of the notion of "storytelling" (Alexander 2017, 5-13), which aims to engage with the audience by telling stories and empathizing in some way through either prior their own experiences and details or using data and facts, the lower presence of emotional connotation - that means it is equated with Russian cultural identity - shows that the storytelling that Sputnik and RT implemented for their coverage was based in legal arguments that could justify its strategic positioning along the conflict in Crimea. The geopolitical factor explains the preponderance of storytelling with legal arguments in Sputnik and RT publications. In these acts of communication, Russia seeks to deflect Western criticism about its conduct in Ukraine.

CONCLUSION

The communication from the Russian media analyzed built an international image tailored to the country's needs in the geopolitical context in the post-Cold War, and this article has argued, specifically, in the case of the annexation of Crimea. Russia communicated the events related to Crimea according to a positioning strategy - sharp power - designed not just to persuade and win friends but to transmit a message that it has power, sharp power and that Russia, faced with any perceived threat to its territory, immediately and beyond its legal borders, chooses military mobilization and response. Russia has no interest in exercising its soft power to deal with this dispute. Its messaging is a way to establish this willingness to use its hard power as common sense. At the same time, Russia does provide some answers to criticisms by its perceived adversaries. In general, when it comes to states with democratic institutions that are not robust, with access to and control of the media, 'sharp power' is a more helpful category than 'soft power'. This conclusion suggests that the receivers of messaging that employ 'sharp power' are meant to incorporate more than positive feelings about the sender's culture or reasoned debate.

Our arguments about Russian sharp power apply to that country's projection all over the globe. Most of the Spanish-speaking world is geographically remote from Russia, but Russia has

become more active even in the Western hemisphere. We note that Sputnik and RT have become even more prominent in Spanish-language coverage of Russia since the outbreak of the War in Ukraine following Russia's invasion of the eastern regions in 2022 (Ponce de Leon 2022). This suggests that it is imperative to continue to study Russian messaging in these media. In particular, future work should concentrate on how this messaging is perceived in the region and other regions.

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