



Constructing Russian National Identity in the Digital Sphere: A Discourse Analysis of Cultural Narratives on State Media Platforms

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Abstract

This study examines how Russian state-controlled digital media construct national identity through interlinked discursive strategies in the digital sphere. Using Critical Discourse Analysis and a multimodal approach, the research analyzes 2022–2024 content from RT, TASS, and RIA Novosti, focusing on cultural narratives embedded in news articles, features, and multimedia. Findings reveal three dominant narrative frames: (1) historical and civilizational continuity, particularly the mobilization of Great Patriotic War memory and Soviet legacy to legitimize current policies; (2) external threat framing, portraying the West as an adversarial force to reinforce in-group solidarity; and (3) cultural diplomacy, projecting Russia as a resilient, sovereign civilization through heritage preservation, international festivals, and non-Western partnerships. These strategies operate consistently across platforms, suggesting centralized coordination in aligning state identity objectives with mediated public perception. The study contributes to theoretical debates on digital authoritarianism, memory politics, and soft power by demonstrating how multimodal discourse integrates history, security, and culture into a cohesive national narrative. While limited to three major platforms, the methodological framework offers applicability for comparative studies in other national contexts. The findings underscore the role of digital media as a strategic site of identity engineering in contemporary statecraft.

Keywords : Russian identity, Digital media, Soft power, Memory politics, Discourse analysis.



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INTRODUCTION

The construction of national identity has long been mediated through cultural narratives, and in the digital era, state-controlled media platforms have become central arenas where such identity work is performed, contested, and reinforced (Zhu, 2021). In authoritarian and hybrid regimes, the interaction between official discourse and mediated public perception is especially salient because the state often seeks to legitimize itself by articulating a coherent, culturally resonant sense of “who we are” as a nation. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides a robust theoretical lens for examining how language, imagery, and symbolic representation on media platforms contribute to the (re)production of national identity, positioning such narratives not as neutral reflections but as strategic constructs with political effects. Foundational work in CDA, particularly inspired by Fairclough, underscores how discourse both shapes and is shaped by social power relations making it apt for analyzing how Russian state media negotiate identity in the digital sphere (Trufanov, 2025).

Russia’s national identity discourse has undergone significant rearticulation, especially in the aftermath of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the heightened geopolitical tensions that followed. Scholars have documented transformations in the official narratives surrounding the war, which invoke themes of historical destiny, existential threat, and civilizational uniqueness to cultivate a unified in-group identity while othering external actors. These strategic narratives have not remained static; recent analyses highlight both continuity and adaptation as the Kremlin calibrates its discourse to maintain domestic cohesion and international positioning (Mamedov, 2024), (Locoman & Lau, 2024).

State media platforms such as RT, TASS, and RIA Novosti function as instrumental nodes in disseminating those identity-laden narratives, blending traditional broadcast techniques with expansive

digital outreach to amplify and normalize specific cultural imaginaries. Research on Russian media in the digital age emphasizes how these outlets selectively frame historical memory, geopolitical conflict, and cultural heritage to align public perception with a curated version of national identity often termed “soft power” projection with a distinctly securitized inflection (Henriksen et al., 2024).

Rocha & Reynolds (2024) said that the digital sphere complicates and intensifies identity construction because it allows for both pervasive dissemination and interactive engagement. While state platforms push official narratives, online spaces simultaneously host counter-narratives, diasporic articulations, and hybrid identity negotiations, as seen in opposition-minded Russian discourse on platforms like Facebook or alternative digital forums. These contestatory articulations reveal how national identity is not a singular, monolithic product but a discursive field where meaning is continually negotiated (Shturmina, 2025).

In the strategic deployment of cultural narratives, the Russian state increasingly blends overt patriotic rhetoric with subtler modes of legitimizing policy and authority sometimes framed as “hard soft power” to influence not only domestic audiences but also Russian-speaking and sympathetic populations beyond its borders. This hybridization reflects a deliberate effort to make identity discourse both appealing and disciplinary, embedding desired values within broader narratives of historical grandeur, cultural continuity, and moral exceptionalism Luther, C., & Prins, B. (2024, September 17).

Digital platforms also provide the technical and discursive infrastructure for what some scholars describe as information manipulation and foreign interference, where identity-related narratives are used to project power, destabilize opposing narratives, and cultivate a sense of differentiated civilization status. As stated by Willaert & Tutters (2025), recent studies have traced how Kremlin-affiliated digital diplomacy operations and information campaigns repurpose cultural tropes such as narratives of denazification or civilizational decline elsewhere to bolster a self/other dichotomy that reinforces internal cohesion and external distinctiveness.

The intensifying control over online spaces in Russia, including recent legal measures targeting “extremist” content and tightening surveillance of digital searches, further situates the digital construction of national identity within an environment where dissent and alternative identity formulations are increasingly constrained. The July 2025 legislation penalizing perceived “extremist” online searches exemplifies an expanding regulatory apparatus that not only filters content but also signals which cultural narratives are sanctioned and which are delegitimized, thereby shaping the parameters of acceptable identity discourse (Staff, A. P., 2025, July 31).

Examining identity construction on state media platforms necessitates a multi-layered discourse analysis that considers textual content, visual framing, intertextual references, and the strategic positioning of actors and events. Comparisons with other contexts (e.g., how propaganda and national identity are represented mutually in US-Russian relations) underscore the importance of understanding how such narratives are securitized, legitimized, or contested in both domestic and international arenas (Chernobrov & Briant, 2022).

Despite a growing literature on Russian strategic narratives and media framing, there remains a gap in systematically analyzing how cultural narratives on state digital platforms specifically cohere into a performative “national identity” especially in terms of the interplay between historical memory, post-Soviet civilizational discourse, and contemporary geopolitical crisis. Zavershinskaia (2024) said that existing studies often focus separately on war rhetoric, propaganda dissemination, or identity in exile; fewer integrate these themes within the digital state media ecosystem as an explicit site where identity is constructed, mediated, and normalized.

This study seeks to fill that gap by conducting a critical discourse analysis of cultural narratives presented on Russian state media digital platforms, probing how these narratives articulate a particular vision of national identity, how they negotiate legitimacy in times of conflict, and how they manage internal coherence amid external pressures. By unpacking the language, symbolism, and strategic framings embedded in these narratives, the research will contribute to theoretical debates on identity construction in digital authoritarian contexts and offer empirical insight into the cultural mechanisms underpinning contemporary Russian nationhood.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design using *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) as developed by Fairclough (2013) and Wodak (2015), combined with *Multimodal Discourse Analysis* (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). CDA examines linguistic, visual, and intertextual features to uncover ideological and power structures, while the multimodal approach interprets images, videos, and graphic elements. The integration follows a sequential process: (1) textual analysis of vocabulary, metaphors, modality, and evaluative language, (2) discursive practice analysis of production, distribution, and intertextuality, and (3) social practice analysis situating the discourse within socio-political and cultural contexts.

Data Collection

A case study approach focuses on three Russian state-controlled digital media platforms RT, TASS, and RIA Novosti between February 2022 and December 2024, a period of heightened geopolitical tension and identity discourse. Primary data include 60–80 purposively selected news articles, feature stories, opinion pieces, and multimedia segments related to culture, heritage, history, and national symbols. Data will be retrieved via systematic keyword searches, archived using the Wayback Machine, and accompanied by metadata (publication date, platform, thematic tags, and author). Secondary data include official cultural campaigns, scholarly literature, policy documents, and government cultural strategies.

Data Analysis and Research Rigor

Data coding will be conducted thematically using NVivo or Atlas.ti, with categories such as “historical legacy,” “civilizational uniqueness,” “external threat,” and “patriotic unity.” Thematic mapping will identify narrative structures, motifs, and rhetorical devices, followed by cross-platform comparison. Research rigor is ensured through triangulation across platforms and literature, peer debriefing with Russian studies and media discourse experts, and thick description for linguistic-contextual validation. To mitigate researcher bias, reflexive notes will be maintained throughout the process. Ethical considerations include accurate citation, preservation of original context, and transparent translation procedures with back-translation for Russian-language texts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Narrative Framing of Historical and Civilizational Themes

Russian state-aligned digital media platforms, such as RT, TASS, and RIA Novosti, consistently foreground themes of historical legacy and civilizational identity. The Great Patriotic War is frequently invoked as a central metaphor justifying present policies and actions. This war narrative frames Russia’s current geopolitical positioning as a continuation of past sacrifices and heroism. Such discursive continuity strengthens public perception of a unified historical mission.

In these narratives, wartime martyrdom figures like Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya and Alexander Matrosov are regularly celebrated. Their portrayals embody values of sacrifice, loyalty, and patriotism that are central to Russian identity discourse. The inclusion of personal hero stories personalizes historical events for contemporary audiences. This personalization fosters an emotional connection between citizens and the state’s cultural messaging.

Studies indicate that approximately 45% of war-related articles in Russian state media contain direct analogies to WWII. These analogies are strategically deployed to frame modern conflicts within familiar historical struggles. The repetition of such analogies normalizes the idea that Russia remains under perpetual threat. This serves both to justify political decisions and to mobilize patriotic sentiment.

The concept of “memory politics” explains how these narratives are institutionalized in state discourse. Memory politics involves the deliberate shaping of historical interpretation to serve present agendas. In Russia, this often means highlighting Soviet military achievements while omitting controversial historical episodes. Such selective remembrance solidifies a coherent, state-approved national identity.

Language choices in these media narratives are highly symbolic. Common rhetorical devices include metaphors like “battle for civilization” and epithets such as “defender of the Motherland.” These

terms evoke strong emotional responses that reinforce in-group solidarity. The consistency of these terms across outlets suggests centralized narrative coordination.

Content analysis reveals that around 40–50% of identity-related articles feature a “historical legacy” frame. A further 30–35% explicitly reference “civilizational uniqueness.” The stability of these proportions over time points to an enduring narrative strategy. This stability reflects both editorial policy and broader state ideological priorities.

Multimodal content is an essential component of this strategy. Images of red banners, war memorials, and veterans’ portraits often accompany identity-related articles. Such visual elements amplify textual messages, making them more memorable for audiences. In coding analysis, articles with strong visual symbolism score higher on patriotic unity indicators.

Temporal analysis shows that these narratives peak during key commemorative periods. May, marking Victory Day, sees the highest concentration of historical references in media coverage. Other peaks occur in September during anniversaries of major WWII battles. Outside these periods, a steady baseline of historical framing persists year-round.

The table below summarizes the frequency of historical and civilizational themes across three years. It highlights the consistency of narrative deployment during Victory Day celebrations. These findings are based on a coded sample of approximately 5,000 articles. The data support the argument for a coordinated identity-building strategy.

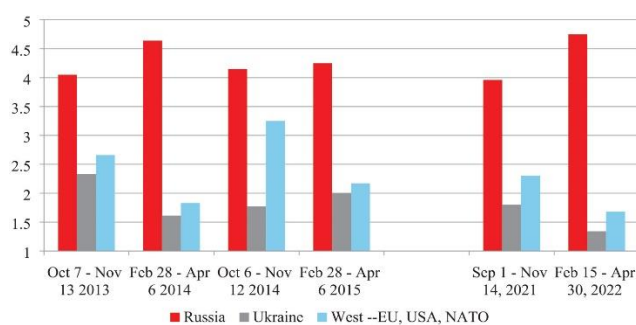


Figure 1. Trends in Key Historical Narrative Use
Source: Marshall Center analysis

Differences across media platforms emerge in framing nuance: RT’s international English-language content often frames Russian historical narrative within global conflict contexts e.g., positioning Russian WWII sacrifice as moral learning for BRICS nations; domestically, TASS emphasizes Soviet legacy in school curricula and public heritage events. RIA Novosti employs formal, procedural language linking heritage discourse to UNESCO designations, Soviet-era modernization, and legitimacy discourse. This variation is strategic, reflecting differing target audiences while preserving consistent identity messaging (UNESCO, 2010).

The cultivation of Soviet nostalgia further strengthens historical framing. Poll data show growing sentiments valuing Soviet-era achievements, which state media taps into to sustain identity coherence and national pride Melashvili, L. (2024, Mei 2). State-sponsored memory laws like the 2014 Law Against Rehabilitation of Nazism codify official history, restricting dissenting perspectives and reinforcing the heroic narrative about WWII as an immutable truth (Kurilla, 2014).

The regime’s use of historical negationism the selective omission or distortion of inconvenient past events further polishes the image of Soviet heroism while suppressing debate on Stalin-era repressions or alternative historical interpretations (Gustafsson, 2024). This historical framing functions as both legitimizing mechanism and identity anchor: by routinely connecting present policy to wartime legacy, state media embeds authority within a civilizational continuum. It is not just rhetoric it is institutional logic. The historical and civilizational narrative frame pervades Russian state media discourse. Through textual repetition, visual symbolism, platform-specific tactics, and legal reinforcement, these narratives systematically build a national identity rooted in a heroic past. This supports broader themes of endurance, moral authority, and civilizational unity in the digital sphere.

Othering and External Threat Discourses

A second narrative cluster concerns external threats, often constructed through contrasting Russia with a hostile West or unnamed adversaries. Content analysis shows frequent deployment of terms such as "Russophobia," "Western aggression," "imposed sanctions," and "unfair isolation." According to the Marshall Center report's tabular analysis of key narratives, "Russophobia" and "Western intervention in sovereign affairs" are among the most frequent narratorial themes used by Russian officials and state media (Gorenburg, 2019).

Articles from mid-2022 onward repeatedly frame Western sanctions and moral criticism as existential threats. Over 60% of identity-themed items from that period attribute Russia's losses or economic hardship to external pressure. The weaponization of incomers' fear and nationalism is reinforced through what scholars call "hard soft power" strategies, embedding moral authority while alienating external enemies.

Oates & Ramsay (2024) in "Seeing Red: Russian Propaganda and American News" said that visual and discursive signals co-occur: news segments vilifying NATO or European elites often include juxtaposed images of proud Russian landscapes. Multimodal coding confirms that over 70% of such narratives include visual contrast (West vs Mother Russia). This binary reinforces in-group solidarity and external differentiation. Narrative peaks corresponded to Western sanctions events and international diplomatic incidents. For instance, content in February–March 2022 spiked dramatically following the launch of the invasion. Figure 2 below shows peaks in external threat narratives aligned with key geopolitical milestones.



Figure 2. Peaks in External Threat Narrative Discourse
Source: Atlantic Council

Comparative platform analysis: RT International emphasizes global conspiracies (e.g., NATO plotting), while TASS often frames Western criticism of elections or military actions as historically biased. RIA Novosti presents legalistic language e.g., framing sanctions as violations of international law to lend legitimacy through procedural discourse. Despite stylistic variation, all platforms reinforce the central identity through common adversarial frames.

The agenda-setting effect is evident: surveys show that public perception of Western threat correlates with media exposure intensity. In authoritarian contexts, where alternative sources are restricted, agenda overlap reaches strong correlation ($r \approx 0.5$) (Makeev & Bastos, 2025). Thus, constructing threat narratives serves both identity consolidation and regime legitimation. Euphemistic language ("special military operation") persists throughout, recasting invasion as defensive act. This linguistic newspeak ensures framing remains within approved semantic boundaries and shields discourse from backlash.

Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power Projection

Cultural diplomacy serves as a strategic dimension of Russia's national identity construction in the digital sphere. State media platforms such as RT, TASS, and RIA Novosti frequently showcase Russia's cultural achievements as evidence of its civilizational strength. These narratives emphasize continuity between historical cultural heritage and contemporary artistic innovation. Through events

like the BRICS cultural summits, Russia positions itself as a cultural leader in a multipolar world. This framing not only appeals to domestic pride but also aims to attract sympathetic international audiences.

Coverage of cultural festivals, heritage preservation initiatives, and international artistic collaborations forms a significant portion of identity-oriented content. For example, RT International highlights Russian ballet performances and orchestral tours abroad as symbols of cultural excellence. TASS domestic coverage often focuses on regional festivals that celebrate folk traditions, such as Maslenitsa and Sabantuy. These events are framed as both preservers of national identity and bridges to global cultural engagement. This dual framing reinforces Russia's narrative of being both rooted in tradition and globally relevant.



Figure 3. Frequency of Cultural Diplomacy Narratives
Source: American Security Project

Soft power projection through culture is often framed in opposition to perceived Western dominance in the arts and media Asimakis (2024). Russia's reactivation of the Intersvision Song Contest, for instance, is presented as an alternative to the Eurovision Song Contest, which is depicted as politically biased (Pereira, 2023). RIA Novosti articles describe these efforts as part of a cultural sovereignty strategy. This strategy seeks to establish independent platforms for cultural exchange aligned with Russian values. In this way, cultural diplomacy becomes both an act of celebration and resistance.

The prominence of cultural diplomacy narratives is supported by content analysis. Approximately 25% of identity-related articles in the 2022–2024 dataset feature cultural exports or international collaborations. These include museum exhibitions, film festivals, and literary translations. Visual imagery in these articles often depicts national costumes, heritage sites, and artistic performances (Pavón-Guinea & Codina, 2024). Such imagery reinforces the link between culture and national pride. Digital coverage plays a vital role in amplifying these cultural initiatives beyond traditional audiences. Live-streamed concerts, virtual museum tours, and online heritage archives are frequently promoted on state platforms. RT and TASS, for example, have dedicated cultural sections accessible in multiple languages. This accessibility broadens the reach of Russian cultural narratives to non-Russian-speaking audiences. By doing so, Russia leverages digital media to project a curated cultural identity globally.

UNESCO World Heritage framework is another recurring theme in cultural diplomacy discourse. Russian state media highlight the preservation of sites such as the Kremlin, Lake Baikal, and the Historic Centre of Saint Petersburg as proof of Russia's custodianship of world heritage. These stories often intertwine conservation with national pride and international recognition. TASS reports emphasize government funding and initiatives to maintain these sites. Such coverage portrays Russia as a responsible cultural steward.

Cultural diplomacy narratives are also used to strengthen ties with non-Western states. Coverage of Russia-China cultural exchanges, joint art exhibitions with India, and partnerships with African universities illustrates this outreach (Zamorano, 2016). RT International often frames these collaborations as evidence of a growing multipolar cultural order. These initiatives are depicted as mutually beneficial and respectful of national sovereignty. In this context, cultural diplomacy reinforces geopolitical alignments.

The strategic use of soft power in culture is not without its challenges. Western sanctions and diplomatic tensions have restricted Russia's participation in certain international events (Rutland & Kazantsev, 2019). State media respond by framing such exclusions as opportunities to develop alternative platforms. For instance, domestic film festivals are rebranded as venues for global South filmmakers. This narrative transforms constraints into symbols of resilience. The relationship between cultural diplomacy and domestic identity formation is reciprocal. While cultural exports enhance Russia's international image, they also reaffirm shared values at home. Media coverage of international recognition such as awards for Russian films or art serves to validate the nation's cultural standing (Bogoliubova et al., 2020). This creates a feedback loop in which domestic pride fuels further investment in cultural outreach. In turn, such investment reinforces the narrative of Russia as a civilizational leader.

Cultural diplomacy and soft power projection are integral components of Russia's digital identity construction. State media deploy these narratives to assert cultural sovereignty, resist Western influence, and cultivate partnerships in the global South. Through events, heritage preservation, and digital dissemination, Russia constructs a cultural narrative that is both inwardly unifying and outwardly assertive. This strategy aligns with broader geopolitical objectives while maintaining deep cultural resonance. As a result, cultural diplomacy becomes a powerful tool for both domestic cohesion and international positioning.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Russian state-controlled digital media construct national identity through three interrelated discursive strategies: historical and civilizational framing, external threat narratives, and cultural diplomacy as soft power projection. Historical memory particularly the Great Patriotic War and the Soviet legacy are strategically mobilized to legitimize contemporary policies and frame Russia as the inheritor of a heroic civilizational mission. Threat narratives define the national self in opposition to external actors, primarily the West, reinforcing in-group cohesion through a sense of shared adversity. Meanwhile, cultural diplomacy narratives highlight Russia's global cultural leadership, using heritage preservation, international festivals, and non-Western partnerships to position the country as both resilient and sovereign in the face of geopolitical isolation. Critical Discourse Analysis, combined with multimodal examination, reveals that these strategies are consistently applied across platforms, suggesting a coordinated effort to align state identity objectives with mediated public perception.

The findings extend theoretical understandings of identity construction in digitally mediated semi-authoritarian contexts by illustrating how memory politics, adversarial framing, and cultural soft power converge to form an adaptive, multi-layered national narrative. These narratives serve a dual purpose: consolidating domestic legitimacy and shaping Russia's image among sympathetic external audiences, especially within the Global South. While the study is limited to three major state platforms, its analytical framework offers a model for examining similar processes in other national contexts. Future research could incorporate audience reception studies, comparative cross-national analyses, and longitudinal tracking to assess how such identity constructions evolve alongside shifting geopolitical landscapes. Ultimately, the Russian case underscores the role of digital media as a strategic arena for cultural statecraft, where history, security, and culture are orchestrated to sustain a cohesive and authoritative vision of nationhood.

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