

Introduction

In today's media environment, it has become increasingly difficult to see the entire picture or understand the whole story. The 24-hour news cycle, 280-character tweets, and 60-second videos dominate headlines, often becoming entire stories themselves. International affairs practitioners have had to adapt quickly to keep up with this new way of conducting diplomatic business. Similarly, public diplomacy, dedicated to reaching foreign populations, has had to change how it connects with the very people that are driving this change. The question becomes: How do foreign ministries cut through the noise of the current media environment to reach their intended audiences in a meaningful way? While one cannot deny the power of tools like Twitter to broadcast a message, it is the *content* of that message that must be able to reach out and touch people. This is the power of narratives.

Narratives are frameworks that allow humans to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation (Miskimmon, 5). They offer a beginning, middle, and end to help us make sense of the world and its many moving parts. In the world of international affairs, strategic narratives are integral in how various actors view today's world order, on which so many foreign policy goals and strategies are based. Different moments in history have launched different world orders that have required different rules of engagement. Today's diplomatic environment has seen the development of new tools and techniques to help governments reach foreign publics in exciting ways. Still, researchers have determined that the message still matters. Miskimmon et al reinforces this by saying, "strategic narratives integrate interests and goals – they articulate end states and suggest how to get there," (5). Still, Miskimmon does not ignore the importance of today's media ecology in supporting a narrative, arguing that "mapping the circuits of communication, interpretation, and meaning in media ecologies is a first step," (148).

The following analysis will look at the power of narratives in the formation of a country's master identity, and what happens when such a narrative risks causing harm or chaos on the world stage. How does one country weaken and eliminate a problematic narrative? Looking at the real world, this paper will examine the narrative battle between the European Union and Russia currently happening within the young country of Belarus. This analysis will also offer recommendations for how the EU might succeed in establishing its narrative by appealing to Belarusians' desire for civil liberties, fair governance, and economic stability.

The European Union: International mediator

Master Narrative	Story Form	Archetype
European integration	Quest, rebirth, deliverance, good vs. evil	Hero, Villain
Human rights defender	Good vs. evil	Hero, Villain, Innocent
New renaissance	Quest	Creator, Explorer, competent leader

Table 1.

Because the European Union was created out of the ashes of the Second World War, its founders had a lot more freedom to decide what master narrative would define this conglomeration of nations. The only history on which to base this new identity was the tragic war from which the Union came to be. The trauma from World War II deeply influenced how the EU wanted to portray itself on the world stage in the next half-century and beyond. This resulted in three master narratives or identities through which the EU makes its policy decisions. The first is that of integration. The EU motto "united in diversity" highlights its never-ending effort to join disparate European nations in the largest experiment of integration, cooperation, and solidarity. Its creation can be considered a rebirth after the tumultuous 20th century, when the evils of fascism, communism, and war plagued the continent. This narrative continues to be reflected today. May 9 is considered Europe's official birthday, when in 1950, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman announced his idea for a new form of political cooperation in

Europe; his name is now used to market EU programs and events. The design of the EU flag is simple and generic, not giving attention to any one of its member countries. Its multiple government institutions reflect the complexities of governing across 27 nations. Online, the EU constantly celebrates its diversity, commemorating every member country's National Day and inviting public consultation on major policy decisions.

The second EU master narrative to consider centers on human rights. After the bloodshed of the 20th century, it is no surprise that the EU has established itself as this generation's defender of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. This is most clearly illustrated in the EU's commitment to humanitarian aid. It is one of the leading donors to the COVAX Facility, which seeks to secure access to COVID-19 vaccines for low and middle-income countries. It has committed funds and resources to conflict regions in India, Ethiopia, and South Sudan. It also boasts a strong relationship with the United Nations. The EU commemorates UN days centered around human rights, including Human Rights Day, Day Against the Death Penalty, Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and Holocaust Remembrance Day, among many others. Other actions that demonstrate this commitment include the public lashing of member countries over anti-democratic policy decisions, delivering demarches on its anti-death penalty stance, or forgoing military intervention in favor of peaceful resolution.

The third EU master narrative relies on a more forward-looking notion that portrays the Union as the leader of a new renaissance. Ever since Ursula von der Leyen became President of the EU's top governing body, she has promised to launch the EU into a digital, green, and equitable new chapter. This story form places the EU as the pioneering protagonist, leading its citizens into a "new renaissance" of technology, innovation, and climate action. The bloc constantly touts its EU Green Deal package of climate initiatives in interviews, public statements, and branded digital content. Its international delegations are told to thread this narrative through their own public diplomacy efforts.

Top EU leaders attend major global conferences and use commemorations like Earth Day to speak about their plans. It is a good example of how repetition can help solidify a narrative when a country does not have the luxury of a long history.

These narratives form a rhetorical vision, which “integrates master narratives into an emotional and logical sense,” (Halverson, 182). As seen in Table 1, the story form of “good versus evil” and the archetype of “champion/hero” appears in more than one EU master narrative. Through this framework, the EU hopes to present the overall vision of itself as a beacon of inherent goodness. It is also easy to place Russia in the role of the Bad Guy, as Putin seems intent on undermining the very democratic ideals EU leaders tout as necessary for a free and fair society.

These master narratives play out through system narratives, which “help us explain how structures ‘emerge and are sustained, changed, and transformed over time,’” (Miskimmon, 7). Because the EU considers human rights one of its founding principles, it values working with other countries and institutions to achieve goals that benefit humanity. Some of these system narratives include: the right to protect (R2P), exemplified by the EU’s close relationship with United Nations and dedication to providing humanitarian aid; promoting democratic values and conflict resolution through cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); the EU’s insistence on building a stronger Union as the United States’ role declines and more problematic nations rise; the involvement of the EU Member States in policy decisions through EU’s citizen-elected voting arm, the European Parliament; and finally, violence as a last resort in conflict situations – the EU does not operate a traditional military. All of these further the European narrative that cooperation and collaboration is better than going it alone.

Several high-profile issues have highlighted the EU’s master narrative and how it works with other nations. These issue narratives “seek to shape the terrain on which policy discussions take place,” (Miskimmon, 7). Just in the last six months, this has included: the attempted assassination and jailing of

Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny; the expulsion of several EU diplomats from Moscow; and continued European efforts to extend EU and NATO membership to Russia's neighbors. These examples highlight how the narrative battle between these two powers will not cease any time soon. Since the EU's inception, the two sides have held competing narratives that prohibit closer political cooperation. As Miskimmon et al iterates, "narratives that are framed as inclusive may not be interpreted as such by others," (5). Russia does not view the European narrative of increased integration as a good thing, but rather a threat to Russia's regional hegemony. This then informs how it acts on the world stage.

Russia: A return to Soviet glory

Russia's own master narrative has roots going back thousands of years. By the end of World War II, the Soviet Union had established itself as a global superpower. While the EU was in its infancy, the USSR/Russia had already endured hundreds of years of instability. Because of these struggles, Russia has developed into a more isolationist nation, or an "independent center of power on the world stage," (Gurganus and Rumer). Today, President Vladimir Putin views Russia as a victim of the same Western aggression and corruption that caused the Soviet Union's demise. In response, he is rewriting Russia's master narrative so that instead of weak and vulnerable, the country is portrayed as a formidable economic and political force. He seems intent on retaining Russia's sovereignty and returning to its pre-Cold War glory days. The following system narratives support this: Russia seeks minimal participation in international institutions, often contributing only when in its self-interest; the Kremlin disregards many of the principles of the liberal world order, such as human rights – Putin ignores international calls for Russia to cease abuse against dissidents and minority groups; Russia loves flaunting its military prowess before its smaller neighbors, as seen at the Ukrainian border; and most of Russia's alliances seem purely transactional and aimed less at making the world a better place for all. Table 2 illustrates the differences in master, system, and issue narratives between the two powers.

	Master and Identity Narrative(s)	System Narrative(s)	Issue Narrative(s)
EU	<p>Integration = long-lasting peace and prosperity; protection against repeating history</p> <p>International defender of human rights</p> <p>One of the largest donors of humanitarian aid</p> <p>Values-based foreign policy</p> <p>Rule-abiding</p> <p>Focus on citizens' rights</p> <p>No standing army → cautious of direct military intervention</p>	<p>R2P: Close relationship with United Nations to combat humanitarian conflicts</p> <p>Overall promotion of international institutions</p> <p>Protect democratic values and peaceful conflict resolution through NATO</p> <p>Rising global power amid falling U.S. influence</p> <p>Military intervention as last resort</p> <p>Role of EU Member States in major policy decisions</p>	<p>Borrell visit to Russia</p> <p>Support for Belarus opposition</p> <p>Poisoning and imprisonment of Alexei Navalny</p> <p>Nord Stream 2 pipeline</p> <p>Expulsion of EU diplomats</p> <p>Extending NATO membership to more Eastern European countries</p> <p>Extending EU membership to more Eastern European countries</p>
Russia	<p>Protection of national sovereignty</p> <p>Return to pre-WWII glory</p> <p>Revenge for past injustices against Russia</p>	<p>Rejection of most international institutions</p> <p>Exertion of military, economic power over smaller nations</p> <p>Alliances seen as purely transactional</p>	Same as above

Table 2.

Belarus: A case study

The contradiction between the European and Russian master narratives has become abundantly clear in the Eastern European country of Belarus. Since August 2020, both the EU and Russia have been engaged in their own battle to install their master and system narratives as the superior choice.

Belarus is a fledgling nation previously under Soviet control and still feeling its shadow. According to a history of Belarus in the Encyclopedia Britannica, it was first occupied by the Russian empire at the end of the 18th century but was declared a National Republic in 1918. However, soon after it was forcibly absorbed by the Bolsheviks into what became the Soviet Union. During World War II, Nazi Germany

occupied Belarus before Russia took control again in 1944. It remained under Soviet control until its sovereignty in 1990 and independence from the USSR in 1991. So much time under Russia's watchful eye has not allowed Belarusians the opportunity to develop or outwardly celebrate a fully-fledged national identity. To this day, it appears Belarus is still searching for its own master narrative. Since last summer, the country has been gripped by mass protests and public frustration over an election widely believed to have been rigged in favor of long-time President Alexander Lukashenko. Since then, the protests have continued to be "fueled by complaints about widespread corruption and poverty, a lack of opportunities and low pay," (BBC). Government distrust, an ineffective civil society, and worsening economic situation has created a glaring chasm in the Belarusian identity – a prime opportunity for Russia to present itself as the answer to the West's influence. With its history under Russia's wing, its poor grasp of democratic ideals, and a Kremlin-friendly President, Belarus already leans heavily toward adopting more of a Russian identity than a Western one. If the EU wants to halt Russia's authoritative power and ensure Belarus can flourish on its own, it should encourage Belarusians to adopt the European narrative and work toward becoming a fully free and fair democratic country.

For Putin, Belarus is a middle-man country for Russian oil flowing West, and he views Belarus as a buffer against encroaching NATO power. To protect the country from what he thinks is a Western threat to Russian sovereignty, Putin is attempting to manipulate this situation to his benefit. He has said that he wants Belarus to reactivate stalled plans for more integration with Russia (Osborn and Balmforth). He even offered to set up a police force to support Lukashenko as the protests raged on (Tétrault-Farber and Makhovsky). In a piece published by the Atlantic Council in March 2021, author Brian Whitmore claims we are actually witnessing a "soft annexation" of Belarus by Russia. He argues: "We should be prepared for a slow, stealthy, and methodical operation that will be over before most people even know it is happening. It will be an annexation hiding in plain sight," (Whitmore). He goes on to add that on March 2, both countries' defense ministries signed a five-year strategic partnership agreement for the first time. They

also recently signed a three-year agreement to ship tons of refined oil products via Russian ports. Finally, “Putin’s regime is now actively putting the pieces in place to assure Moscow controls the Belarusian legislature through pro-Kremlin [political] parties,” according to Whitmore. Additionally, the long-time, highly personalized, and Kremlin-connected nature of Lukashenko’s rule is likely to delay the maturation of any Belarusian narrative.

On the other side of this moral divide, proclaiming its devotion to democracy and the rule of the law, stands the EU. The situation in Belarus is attractive to the EU’s master and system narratives of international mediator and proponent of international cooperation. The EU is the largest donor of financial assistance to Belarus, and the country’s success is important to stifling Russian influence in Eastern Europe. The EU condemned the August elections as “unfree and unfair,” and has instituted several rounds of sanctions against individuals “responsible for repression and intimidation against peaceful demonstrators,” (European Council). Additionally, EU leaders have been vocal in their opposition to Lukashenko – often called “Europe’s last dictator” (BBC) – by releasing statements and pledging support for opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. Unlike Putin, the EU has not promised any military intervention, hoping its diplomatic, mediating role will quell the need for further violence. Reducing political chaos in Belarus is also essential to maintaining a workable rapport with Russia. Despite their moral differences, the EU and Russia are still connected economically. Germany, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland hope to finalize the installment of the controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline to bring oil from Russia into the EU. And of course, some of the Eastern European member countries in the Union still depend on the East economically.

Based on this evidence, the EU’s soft response clearly does not match up to the Kremlin’s more vigorous efforts. Besides multiple rounds of sanctions on individuals and entities involved in the oppression of protestors, little more has been done to exert pressure on Lukashenko or address the

situation with Putin. So long as the status quo remains, Belarus will continue to be a narrative wasteland ripe for Russian exploitation. Countering the Russian disinformation behemoth and the complicated web of corruption Putin has been spinning for decades is a near-impossible task that will take valuable time. If the EU wants to ensure its master narrative reigns supreme in Belarus in the near future, it must engage in narrative contestation. Miskimmon et al describes narrative contestation as “not just a matter of the elimination of subjugation of a rival’s narrative, but the destruction of the conditions that make alternative narratives plausible, communicable, and intelligible,” (104). To contest Russia’s narrative and argue the superiority of its own, the EU should adopt the following public diplomacy strategy.

Audience Analysis

Much of Belarusian identity has been influenced by Russia, but there are pockets of national pride throughout the country that can grow with the right attention. For example, the Belarusian language, which is related to but distinct from Russian, is central to national identity. Almost half of Belarus’ population is between the ages of 25-50, which means most of their lives saw several years of the excitement of a free Belarus. Nearly 80 percent of the population live in urban centers, the result of a post-war industrial boom after the country’s agricultural sector disappeared during World War II. These young, urban people are the ones protesting Lukashenko’s reign, eager to see their country continue its democratic progression. The EU should encourage the growth of this existing national pride to their advantage.

In analyzing Russian disinformation campaigns in nearby Ukraine and Georgia, public diplomacy practitioner Vivian Walker stressed the importance of contextualization: “Build in full, nuanced understanding of vulnerable domestic target audiences and prevailing perceptions, expectations and biases,” (Walker, 2020). To support this point, she listed several key issues that are important to the average Ukrainian or Georgian. In both countries, the top five most important issues were related to the

economy and way of life – rising prices, poverty, healthcare, wages, and social protection for the poor. It would not be farfetched to assume many people in Belarus – a neighboring, former Soviet Republic – feel similarly about ensuring economic stability for themselves and future generations. This is the sweet spot that European leaders should exploit as they argue the superiority of their master narrative.

However, the wants and wishes of the Belarusian people mean little if the country's president is unwilling to heed them. This makes Lukashenko a fellow protagonist in the EU's overall endeavor to pull Belarus back to the side of inherent goodness. He should be considered another target for the EU's public diplomacy efforts to convince Belarus to follow its footsteps toward becoming a liberal democracy.

Media Landscape

Just as important as *who* to reach is *how* to reach them, so that the message is received and internalized to the point of salience. An efficient way to do this is through the country's media and Internet resources, which can easily reach millions of people in seconds. Unfortunately, Belarus has been heavily criticized for suppressing free speech, muzzling the press, and denying the opposition access to state media, according to the BBC. On a scale of 1-100 with 100 signifying "most free," Freedom House gave Belarus a score of 35/100 for Internet Freedom. It also ranks 158 out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index from press freedom organization Reporters Without Borders. Television is the main news source in Belarus, but the nine national channels are state-controlled. State-owned newspapers outnumber private ones. This blatant censorship is an important obstacle that EU leaders must consider and attempt to break down if it wants its narrative to achieve salience with the Belarusian people.

A glimmer of hope lies in the Internet, which has been used by the opposition to coordinate the recent protests. According to Data Reportal, Internet penetration stood at 79 percent and social media penetration at 41 percent in January 2020. The number of mobile connections is roughly equivalent to 126 percent of the population. Protesters have already used this to their advantage by planning and

executing the protests against Lukashenko. The EU should capitalize on this power and use mobile and social media technology to reach young Belarusians more efficiently.

History has demonstrated Russia's ability to exploit a weak civil society and tightly controlled media environment. European leaders must address the risk of Russian interference that has already showed itself powerful enough to infiltrate countries as developed as the United States. Any efforts to establish the EU's master narrative in Belarus must include media literacy trainings and credible messengers to make older and underserved communities aware of this threat.

How the EU can win

According to Freedom House, Belarus lacks an independent judiciary, a fair electoral process, and a stable government. There is no freedom of assembly or independent media. Belarusian culture is currently more congruent with that of Russia. Because of all this, European leaders should utilize the EU's master and system narratives to bolster their argument for Belarus to shirk Russian influence, celebrate its own cultural identity, and reap the economic benefits of becoming a liberal democratic society. This involves presenting the European values of human rights, democratic values, and the rule of law as psychological universals that have contributed to the success of today's prosperous societies.

With the audience established, the EU now must ensure its messages are straightforward and offer clear benefits that appeal to the desires of everyday Belarusians. This means making them aware of the tangible benefits of aligning with the democratic societies of the West. Because economic strife is prevalent throughout Belarus, EU leaders should make the case that a freer democratic society would encourage enterprise and entrepreneurship, building up the Belarusian economy so that it invigorates young people while also providing for older populations. An independent judiciary and press would hold corrupt officials accountable, allow for mass assembly, and give voice to the many rich stories that make up Belarus' master identity; by internalizing the importance of the rule of law, the Belarusian people

would be able to live happier lives without fear of unjust prosecution or corruption. Aligning itself with the European narrative also offers the benefit of more engagement with 27 other countries through trade, cultural exchange, and education. All of this would empower young Belarusian people to feel excited about their Belarusian identity and want to create a narrative that matches this new era.

It is important that the EU stay true to the frame that its own master narrative has created economic success and improved livelihoods for many people. Any message that expands this frame to include faceless institutions or a connection with Russia will only establish the EU as Russia's opposite, not as a separate entity that can offer something better for Belarusians.

Of course, the EU cannot ignore Lukashenko. EU leaders must personally press him on these issues so that he can understand the benefit of making political decisions that benefit his electorate and thus his standing on the world stage. EU leaders should appeal more to the economic advantages of presiding over a liberal democratic society, noting that a successful Belarusian economy will only improve the country's standing on the world stage and invite foreign investment from powerful Western nations. If it is power and credibility that Lukashenko seeks, he should understand that his stance with Western world leaders will improve if he aligns more with European values. By doing this, he will make more friends that can offer him and Belarus an abundance of helpful resources, instead of leaving him to rely on the one corrupt "friend" who is increasingly hard to trust: Putin.

Conclusion

In summary, strategic narratives are powerful tools in public diplomacy. They help people make sense of the world, including the complex nature of international affairs. According to Miskimmon et al, strategic narratives contribute to how the international order is conceived, produced, and maintained. They can empower and constrain actors, as well as help formulate and project policy preferences in an

increasingly diffuse international system (61). From this, narrative contestation helps us understand what makes a narrative salient and what is needed to challenge it in favor of something better.

This paper set out to examine the competing master narratives of both the European Union and Russia, and how that has been illustrated through the recent instability in Belarus. The EU has established itself as a potent superpower intent on defending human rights and the rule of law. As it integrates more countries into its democratic web, this massive supranational bloc inches closer to Russia's borders. In response, Russia remains apprehensive over how the West's encroaching influence could stymie its own journey toward global primacy. After all, repeating history is not an option. Belarus shows us what happens when these two contrasting identities meet. After decades of living under the shadow of the Soviet Union, Belarus has yet to develop a salient master narrative of its own. Without a country identity to lean on during uncertain or troubling times, Belarus is vulnerable to the influence of nefarious personalities. The EU has stepped up to ensure Russia is not able to once again force Belarus under its wing. Which narrative will prevail? The answer could influence other Eastern European nations to embrace their own narratives and shirk Russia's influence – or drive the rise of Soviet Union 2.0.

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