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To cite this article: Olivier Schmitt (2018): When are strategic narratives effective? The shaping of political discourse through the interaction between political myths and strategic narratives, Contemporary Security Policy, DOI: [10.1080/13523260.2018.1448925](https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2018.1448925)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2018.1448925>



Published online: 26 Mar 2018.



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When are strategic narratives effective? The shaping of political discourse through the interaction between political myths and strategic narratives

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ABSTRACT

Most research on strategic narratives has explored their creation, and their interaction with other elements of national power in the conduct of foreign policy. Yet, the issue of how the targeted political communities receive those strategic narratives, and thus how those narratives are likely to have a political impact, is understudied. This article argues that in order to understand the ways strategic narrative are received within a political community, political myths must be taken into account. It introduces a typology of political myths based on their degree of universality and their degree of coherence with other myths, and shows how those factors influence the reception of strategic narratives. These mechanisms are illustrated through a study of the reception of the Russian strategic narrative in France. This approach offers opportunities to assess the differentiated impact strategic narratives have on political communities.

KEYWORDS France; Russia; strategic narratives; political myths; influence

Since the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, many commentators have pointed to the effectiveness of the Russian propaganda and information warfare activities in order to explain the support Moscow enjoys from a broad spectrum of Western political groups, from the far-right to the far-left (Keating & Kaczmarska, 2017; Lucas & Pomeranzev, 2016; Shekhovtsov, 2017). Those commentators argue that Moscow tries to skillfully exploit the political fault lines of Western societies in order to promote its political agenda, thus shaping the discourses, perceptions, and debates in liberal democracies. In other words, Western societies would be susceptible to be influenced by the Russian strategic narrative, itself promoted through different tactics such as propaganda, disinformation, and subversion.

The effectiveness of Russian propaganda activities should, however, be nuanced since not all Western countries react identically to it. And even

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within specific target countries, not all elements of the Russian strategic narrative have the same impact. The current literature has studied the nature of strategic narratives, and the way they are crafted in detail. However, we comparatively still know little about the mechanisms through which those narratives are received within the targeted national communities, and how they can influence the local socio-political debates. While most research argues that an efficient strategic narrative must be tailored to a society's cultural context, it usually does not go much further than this broad observation. It is then worth exploring the conditions that make the reception of a strategic narrative more or less likely.

In this article, I argue that the degree to which an external strategic narrative *resonates with local political myths* determines the effectiveness and impact of the strategic narrative. Ontologically, both political myths and strategic narratives are *narratives*, or the process of communicating the story of a succession of events (Shenhav, 2015). However, they differ in the ways they are constituted. Political myths are present within a specific political community as a semi-permanent feature. They are subject to gradual evolutions and adjustments, their content is sedimented over time, and it is impossible to pinpoint one single actor "crafting" a political myth: They are constantly actualized through multiple sources in order to fit the needs of a political community that those narratives become myths. On the opposite, strategic narratives are crafted by political actors with a specific intention in mind: influencing an audience. Therefore, a strategic narrative is one of the ways through which a political myth can be actualized, and the likelihood of resonance between an external strategic narrative and a local political myth is the focus of this article.

In particular, I introduce a distinction between universal or local myths, on the one hand, and coherent or contradictory myths, on the other hand. Depending on a myth's positioning along those two dimensions, the reception, and the potential of influence of a given strategic narrative vary. When an external strategic narrative dovetails neatly with a local political myth, it gives local politicians additional rhetorical resources to promote their preferred policies by importing the structure/content of the external strategic narrative and adapting it to the local political context, thus simultaneously contributing to updating the local political myth and advancing an external actor's worldview. Those politicians are neither "cultural dopes" (Schmitt, 2012) nor blindly following talking points drafted in another capital. Instead, they take advantage of an available narrative resource to promote their own political views, itself generally based on specific political myths: They act as mediators between the external and the local.

This new conceptualization helps us to assess the likely effectiveness of any given strategic narrative in shaping the political agenda of a given political community. When local politicians import an external strategic narrative's structure/content, this helps creating a shared meta-narrative of alignment

on general themes, which can help camouflage serious policy divergences. Thus, this narrative of alignment can be in the interests of both the external country crafting the strategic narrative and local politicians engaged in a national competition for power.

In the remainder of the article, I first discuss the notions of strategic narratives and political myths. In particular, I show that in order to be effective, an external strategic narrative must contribute to the “work on myth” for a political community. I then introduce the distinction between universal or local myths and between cohesive or contradictory myths, and conceptualize how these different types of myths are more or less susceptible to resonate with an external strategic narrative. Finally, I illustrate my argument through a study of the impact of the Russian strategic narrative on the political debate in France, based on a qualitative discourse analysis.

Strategic narratives and political myths

This section establishes the relationship between strategic narratives and political myths. It shows that in order to have an effect, an external strategic narrative must be able to resonate with local political myths. The first sub-section examines the nature of strategic narratives. The second sub-section discusses the nature of political myths, and argues that in order to be effective, an external strategic narrative must contribute to the “work on myth” of a specific political community. The third sub-section further theorizes this relationship by establishing four types of political myths, and showing that the impact of a strategic narrative is structurally constrained by the multiplicity of myths available.

Strategic narratives in international politics

The study of strategic narratives is gaining momentum in the study of international politics. Freedman (2006) introduced the term to the field of international security in order to describe compelling storylines which would describe events convincingly. Those storylines were deemed “strategic” not simply because they were important, but because they were the result of deliberations by actors. Such actors could use narratives in order to achieve their political objectives, eventually appealing to emotions, metaphors, or historical analogies. The accuracy of such analogies is beside the point: What matters is the appeal they can have to the targeted audiences, and the specific shape they would give to the representation of certain events or political processes.

The concept of strategic narrative got traction in the field of international politics, first in order to study war and conflicts. It has been used in order to examine the importance of persuasion in contemporary conflicts (de Franco, 2012; Simpson, 2012), how contemporary military campaigns are presented to

international and national audiences (de Graaf, Dimitriu, & Ringsmose, 2015) and how a political community debates strategic issues (Krebs, 2015). Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2013) have provided the most comprehensive theoretical framework to date in order to understand strategic narratives. They define a narrative as “frameworks that allow humans to connect apparently unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation” (p. 5) and shed the light on the different dimensions of strategic narratives. First, they look at the *structure*. A narrative is composed of actors, events, plot, time, setting, and space. An effective narrative is able to connect all these elements in a storyline claiming the identification of causal mechanisms. Second, they analyze the *types* of narratives, distinguishing between system narratives (about the nature and future of the international system), identity narratives (about the actor's identities), and issue narratives (about topical, contextual problems). Third, they mention the *formation* of strategic narratives, emphasizing the importance of political legitimacy for actors trying to craft a strategic narrative. Fourth, they discuss the *projection and reception* of strategic narratives within the new media ecology. Finally, they discuss the *persuasive power* of strategic narratives.

The authors provide an important and comprehensive framework to understand the formation and diffusion of strategic narratives. However, their analysis is more limited when it comes to the reception of such narratives by the targeted audiences. They recognize that “winning” a battle of narratives is not easy as, ontologically, narratives make their own political contestation inevitable. They also recognize that “a narrative must contain informational content that captures an audience's attention and be clearly understood to be convincing” (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 110). However, they do not provide the analytical mechanism necessary to understand the particular importance of the audience's cultural and political contexts in the reception of a strategic narrative. Commenting on Freedman's work, Gow and Wilkinson (2017) persuasively note: “effective narratives work because they appeal to the values, interest and prejudices in a target audience” (p. 377). I argue that a key mechanism through which a strategic narrative can “appeal to the values, interest and prejudices in a target audience” is by contributing to a community's political myths, and the relationship between the two is key to understand the mechanisms of a strategic narrative's reception and acceptance within a political community.

Work on myths and narratives

Krebs (2015) has argued that narratives are never displayed in a cultural vacuum. For example, U.S. national security narratives are embedded within “enduring identity narratives,” such as American exceptionalism. I argue that those “enduring identity narratives” identified by Krebs are in

fact political myths (and it will be shown below that myths are a form of narrative), and I offer a typology of such political myths, which condition the likely acceptance of an external strategic narrative among a given political community. It is then important to define political myths.

In the past years, political philosophy and international relations have gradually been interested in the importance of political myths (Bliesemann de Guevara, 2016; Bottici, 2007; Bottici & Challand, 2010; Kirke, 2015; Manners, 2010; Midgley, 2003; Zaiotti, 2011). Political myths are not understood in the pejorative sense of false stories, but rather as a *framework providing individuals with a meaning and interpretation of events*. There are several ways to conceptualize political myths, aptly mapped by Bliesemann de Guevara (2016), and I refer to the narrative-centered approach of political myths in this article. I also assume a degree to which myths analysts can be reflexive on their own cultural environment and “externally” analyze myths while being simultaneously embedded in the socio-cultural context that created and sustains such myths. A key work in that approach is Bottici’s (2007) insight, building on Blumenberg (1985), to understand myth as a continuous process of reinterpretation and adaptation to fit the present needs of a specific political community.

Myths matter because they provide significance to people, and are a way for them to make sense of their conditions of existence. But a myth is never fixed: Its content, structure, and modes of diffusion are constantly being reinterpreted and actualized. The “work on myth” (*Arbeit am Mythos*) is then the process through which the myth is constantly updated and modified in order to provide significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*). The relevance, and importance, of a myth is then directly related to its potential for re-interpretation in order to fit the needs of a specific political community. In other words, myths serve the function of interpretative lenses.

Myths have several features (Bottici, 2007). Critically in the context of this article, myths are a specific kind of poetry: they are *narratives*. As discussed above, narratives involve actors, events, plot, time, setting, and space. But, “any narrative presupposes a context within which it becomes meaningful, that is, only within a context does it become a narrative” (Bottici, 2007, p. 113). If a narrative is a specific kind of poetry involving a particular structure, what is the difference between a narrative and a myth? Bottici (2007) argues that:

political myth can be defined as the work on a common narrative by which the members of a social group (or society) make significance of their political experiences and deeds. Consequently, what makes a political myth out of a simple narrative is not its content or its claim to the truth ... , but the fact that this narrative creates significance, that it is shared by a group and that it affects the specifically political conditions in which this group operates. (p. 179)

From this insight, we can conceptually relate the study of strategic narratives with the study of political myths. Each political community, at the national, infra-national, or international level, relates to a number of endogenous political myths, through which those communities make sense of their political experiences. Such myths are constantly re-interpreted and actualized in order to keep meeting the needs of the political community. For an “external” strategic narrative to have a maximal effect in the targeted audience, *it must contribute to the work on local myths*. In other words, to be effective, a strategic narrative must be able to resonate with local political myths.

The reception of strategic narratives in the context of political myths

Based on the features of a political myth, we can hypothesize that the mechanisms through which an external strategic narrative will contribute to the work on a political community’s endogenous myths are the following.

First, there must be some similarity between the strategic narrative and the political myth in terms of their *content*. For the strategic narrative to resonate with a local political myth, the story being told must be about similar themes. Second, the structure of the strategic narrative has to contribute to the narrative aspect of the myth. Here, the strategic narrative’s capability to fit within, and eventually actualize the structure of a local political myth is critical. The actors-events-plot-time-setting-space structure is then important to understand how the local political myth and the external strategic narrative interact.

However, the political myths of a community are numerous, implying a variety of contents, and potentially in contradiction with each other. This aspect matters greatly for the study of the reception of strategic narratives. I focus here on two aspects: the *dispersion* of a political myth and its *coherence* with other myths (see [Table 1](#)). Dispersion refers to the degree to which a political myth can be accepted by a large number of different political communities. Some myths have a large potential for dispersion, others are much more local. For example, the myth of the Clash of Civilizations is largely accepted by many different communities worldwide (Bottici & Challand, 2010). On the opposite, nationalist myths are, by definition, local.

Coherence refers to the potential for a myth to accommodate, or to clash with other political myths. The myth of “universal progress” is very easy to accommodate with a large number of other political myths (individual freedom, collective action by a social class, savior guiding the masses, etc.). On the opposite, the myth of “the proletarian revolution” is very likely to

Table 1. Examples of the dispersion and coherence of political myths.

	Dispersion	Localism
Coherence	Universal progress	Myths of national origins
Contradiction	Proletarian revolution	Supremacy of a specific group over others

clash with several other political myths simultaneously present within the same community. The degree of coherence of a myth is not a measure of its popularity and the level of adhesion it generates: A myth having a large potential of contradiction with other myths can still be dominating in terms of adhesion, because it provides more significance than competing myths. Coherence or contradiction must be understood in terms of *content* of the myth (its narrative structure facilitating its overlap with other political myths), not in terms of its *popularity*.

These observations have consequences for the study of the production and reception of strategic narratives. In particular, crafting a strategic narrative is difficult, because no strategic narrative will be able to simultaneously relate to the multiplicity of political myths of the targeted communities. In theory, the most effective strategic narratives should be those contributing to the work on dispersed and coherent political myths. Because of the universality of the myth, there would be no need to tailor the strategic narrative to each political community, and because of its coherence with other myths, the strategic narrative could appeal to a broader audience. However, dispersed and coherent political myths are rare, and by definition susceptible to be constantly actualized by a lot of numerous influences, a specific strategic narrative being just one of them. So, even if a strategic narrative targeting a coherent and dispersed political myth could appear as a good pay-off, the capacity to work on the myth is limited by the multiplicity of potential influences such myths are under.

On the other side, local and contradictory myths are less open to a multiplicity of influences (on their content and structure), and a strategic narrative specifically targeted at such myths can have more impact. But crafting a specific narrative for each of those local and contradictory myths present in many different political communities is an important investment. Therefore, the sender of a strategic narrative has to balance between dispersed and coherent political myths (limited in number and open to many other influences) on the one side, and contradictory and local myths (easier to “work on” but limited in reach) on the other.

In between those two extremes, the two other types of myths (dispersed and contradictory, and local and coherent) could be easier to target, depending on the intentions of the sender. Dispersed and contradictory myths can be useful to target in order to create transnational communities of interests. Typically, the strategic narratives put forward by Islamic State target a dispersed and contradictory myth: the myth of the moral and political superiority of “real” Muslims against non-believers. The myth is dispersed (is present in many political communities worldwide) but contradictory with other myths (for example, the myth of secularism). The Islamic State is then able to create a strategic narrative targeting specific segments of political communities worldwide.

French political myths and the reception of the Russian strategic narrative

The remainder of this article illustrates in detail how strategic narratives interact with those four types of political myths, through a study of the reception of the Russian strategic narrative in France. I have selected four political myths which permeate the contemporary French political discourse, and are thus potential subjects of a “work on myth” by an external narrative: the “Golden age,” the obsession for “Grandeur,” the “American Danger,” and the “Savior.” Those four myths have been selected based on two criteria. First, through a reading on the secondary literature on French political culture (Agulhon, 2000; Girardet, 1985; Hazareesingh, 2015), they are identified as being structurally important in the organization of the French political imaginary. Second, each of this myth is placed differently on the two dimensions of dispersion and coherence identified above, thus allowing an analysis of the differentiated reception of an external strategic narrative depending on the variation of those two dimensions.

The hypothesis is that if the Russian strategic narrative is “working” in France (meaning that it contributes to the work on French political myths), it should be possible to observe the gradual transfer of structures and content of the Russian strategic narrative within the French political discourse. I therefore conduct a qualitative discourse analysis of the public expressions of key French political leaders on the issues addressed by the Russian strategic narrative. In particular, I conduct a predicate analysis, described as “the language practice of predication—the verbs, adverbs and adjectives attached to nouns” (Milliken, 1999, p. 232). This is similar to Daddows’ analyses of British foreign policy, in which he identifies the ideational backdrop against which contemporary policy problems are thought about and acted upon (Bevir, Daddow, & Hal, 2013; Daddow, 2011, 2015).

I focus on political elites in this analysis as they are the ones having the most readily available capability to contribute to the work on local political myths through their access to the media and their general presence in the public sphere. Moreover, political elites in a democratic system have an interest in shaping the political debate to their advantage, which can make them more sensitive to an external strategic narrative if they perceive the elements of this narrative as reinforcing their worldview or providing them with a discursive advantage in the political field. In turn, those elites are susceptible to access power positions, which is interesting in the crafter of a strategic narrative’s perspective. The point is not to demonstrate a clear causal relation between a narrative and a specific policy decision. After all, the French government has since 2014 adopted a policy of sanctioning Russia over the Ukraine invasion. However, this policy is contested by other political groups who are not in power but aspire to it, and it is then worth exploring

how the Russian strategic narrative is adopted by those groups, then shifting the boundaries of the political discourse.

The timeframe under study is 2014–2017, as the Ukraine crisis firmly put Russia at an important place in the French political discourse (Schmitt, 2017a). I have selected speeches and interviews held in key instances: addresses to official audiences (parliament, professional committees), major interviews and op-eds, and in some cases personal memoirs. I have also taken into account the relative popularity of those political figures and their place in the French political field at the time they were making their statements to assess the relative importance of the public speeches. In total, 1372 texts of various natures and formats have been studied in the context of this research. Given the breadth of the empirical base, there is a large degree of redundancy between the various texts. This is explained by the fact that key politicians are frequently invited in the media, and often repeat the same talking points several times in a row. Moreover, there is also a degree of party discipline, with several members of the same party pushing the same line in multiple media, in an attempt to shape the political discussions. This is particularly noticeable during the presidential campaign (which roughly started in September 2016 and ended in May 2017), with several party members repeating (and sometimes having to defend) the lines and wording of their party leaders.

Considering the large redundancy that is therefore found in many texts, I have drastically selected the examples and quotes given in the empirical portion as being representative of deep trends in the French political discourse at the time. Several criteria were established. First, I looked for statements that reflected the official position of a specific party at the time, and thus exposed in a multiplicity of formats by a multiplicity of politicians belonging to the same party. Second, I looked for statements that were controversial in the French political debate, as they are the ones reflecting divergences in political preferences, cultures and imaginaries between political parties. Third, I also looked for statements that were controversial within the same party, as they reflect the change (or the resistance to change) of political preferences within a given political group, therefore illustrating how political myths are mobilized by strategic narratives. For a reader unfamiliar with French political culture to appreciate the novelty, or continuity, of those discourses, I also refer to a secondary literature on French politics and political myths. Before turning to this analysis, I first briefly analyze the content of the contemporary Russian strategic narrative.

Russian strategic narrative

In its Foreign Policy Concept of 2013, Russian officials declared that Moscow must “create instruments for influencing how it is perceived in the world,”

“develop its own effective means of information influence on public opinion abroad,” and “counteract information threats to its sovereignty and security” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). In line with this objective, Russia has developed a specific strategic narrative comprising several elements (Hutchings & Szostek, 2015, pp. 173–185) (Table 2).

In terms of *system narratives*, Russia has pushed forward the following ideas. First, and foremost, the United States want to maintain at all costs their unipolar dominance, and are actively preventing the world from turning to multipolarity. This notion can often be found in official discourses. In his famous speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, now widely acknowledged as marking a turning point in the relations between Russia and the West, Putin (2007) declared:

what is a unipolar world? However one might embellish this term, at the end of the day it refers to one type of situation, namely one centre of authority, one centre of force, one centre of decision-making. It is world (sic) in which there is one master, one sovereign. ... One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations.

Since then, this contest between U.S. unipolarity, and a multipolar world, which Russia is trying to help emerge, has been a dominating Russian narrative about the international system. Among many examples, an article of Sputnik News boasted that “Russia’s strong determination to protect its national interests and promote a multi-polar world order has dealt a severe blow to Washington’s aspirations to rule the world” (Blinova, 2015).

This system narrative on the dialectic unipolarity/multipolarity is complemented by a sub-narrative about European states being dominated by Washington: “European states [are] generally portrayed as being led astray against their own best interests by malign American influence” (Hutchings & Szostek, 2015, p. 177). Therefore, without the nefarious American influence, Russia and Europe would be perfectly able to establish a mutually beneficial relationship.

The second sub-narrative embedded within the main system narrative on U.S. unipolarity is the accusation of dangerous Western military

Table 2. Russian strategic narratives.

	System narrative		Identity narrative	
Main narrative	U.S. unipolarity is detrimental to a multipolar order		Russia has been “humiliated” by the West after the end of the Cold War	
Sub-narratives	European countries are dominated by the U.S.	Dangerous Western military interventionism	Vladimir Putin brought order to a weakened Russia	Russia’s “conservative values” protect European civilization

interventionism. Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, Georgia, and Ukraine are all explained using a similar plot: The United States gets involved in one way or another in otherwise perfectly functioning societies, and conflicts erupt out of their subversive influence. Sometimes, Russia finds itself forced to intervene (Georgia, Ukraine, Syria) in order to help reestablish order over the chaos created by the U.S.-sponsored Atlantists/neo-nazis/jihadists (Radin & Reach, 2017).

When it comes to the *identity narrative*, the foremost narrative is the alleged “humiliation” of Russia by the West, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union. According to this narrative, an arrogant West took advantage of Russia’s temporary weakness to keep her down and humiliate her in several ways. The West forced the introduction of neoliberal economic measures which would impoverish the Russian population but enrich Western businessmen and their Russian partners. The West expanded its institutions, primarily NATO, directly into what should be a Russian “sphere of influence.” And the West tried to morally corrupt Russia through the promotion of dangerously subversive values such as gender equality or respect for LGBTs movements. Because it was “humiliated,” it is therefore only logical for Russia to protect her identity and force international actors into respecting it (Tsygankov, 2014).

Here again, we can identify two sub-narratives that are derived from the rhetoric of “humiliation.” The first sub-narrative develops the story of “the good tsar” Putin versus the “bad boyars,” the oligarchs of the 1990s. Supposedly, Putin’s arrival to power marked an important break from the corruption of the Yeltsin’s era, during which the oligarchs were exploiting Russia’s resources. With Vladimir Putin, as the narrative goes, those oligarchs have either been tamed or exiled: The Russian state is back and takes care of its citizens. Of course, the corruption of the current regime is no secret (Dawisha, 2014) and Putin himself came to power with Yeltsin’s help (Hill & Gaddy, 2015). But with the support of the “political technologists” (Wilson, 2005), Putin’s regime presents itself as a firm rupture with the predatory practices that followed the end of the Cold War.

The second sub-narrative is the importance of the “conservative values,” especially since 2011. In short, the idea is to present Russia as the frontrunner of a white, conservative, and patriarchal Europe in the face of the destructive liberal and progressive values pushed forward by the United States. Resisting liberal values, highlighting the continuity of Russian greatness, emphasizing the importance of the Orthodox Church, and posing as the defender of a “European civilization” under threat (from Islam and Anglo-Saxon liberalism) has then been a constant narrative since 2011 (Engström, 2014; Neumann, 2016; Tsygankov, 2016; Wilkinson, 2014).

The Russian strategic narrative presents an indubitable cohesiveness. It comprises “good guys” and “bad guys” and organizes the main events of

Russian history according to an easily understandable plot: the Western willingness to humiliate Russia, linked to the U.S. imperialistic ambitions. This Western aggression has been continuous since at least the 1990s (time), is placed in the context of a worldwide war for supremacy (setting) and occurs in several locations simultaneously (places): Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria are just new iterations of the decade-long Western attempt to undermine Russia.

I now turn to the analysis of how these strategic narratives were received in France and the resonance with local political myths.

Dispersed and coherent myth: the golden age

The Golden Age is the notion that, once upon a time, the political community was in a better shape than it is today. Recent research in social psychology suggests that nostalgic narratives entail traces of optimism: The nostalgic experience is a way for human beings to paint a rosier future (Cheung et al., 2013, pp. 1484–1496). This can probably explain the widespread diffusion of this myth among political communities, for example in the United States (Murphy, 2009, pp. 125–141), Muslim (Lapidus, 1992, pp. 13–25), and Asian (Leifer, 2000) countries, and thus its dispersed character.

The myth is also coherent. With the possible exception of 19th-century Marxism, the vast majority of political ideologies and the various myths they are based on incorporate aspects of a longing for past better times. This is obvious in conservative ideologies, which lament the always too quick evolution of societies, but this trend is also easily spotted in progressive ideologies. There is always a time in the past during which people were less greedy, solidarity was higher, employment at its peak, etcetera. The point of many political discourses is then to reclaim this glorious past: U.S. President Donald Trump's campaign slogan "make America great *again* [emphasis added]" is a clear example of this importance of the myth of the Golden Age.

In France, this myth also has a long history. Pétain, De Gaulle, Mitterrand, and other major French political figures have all articulated a political discourse anchored within the myth of the Golden Age (Girardet, 1985).

The narrative about conservative values pushed forward by Russia should then contribute to the work on this specific myth. Unsurprisingly, the far-right French party *Front National* is the closest to the Russian strategic narrative. The Le Pen (father and daughter) invoke the "Eternal France," which is more "a principle, or an essence, than a historic reality" (Alduy & Wahnich, 2015, p. 132). An important aspect of this discourse is the idea of the nation as a protection against the external world and its disturbing effects. Le Pen (2012) therefore declares: "we believe in the border which protects, which is a healthy limit between the nation and the rest of the world: an economic, financial, migratory, sanitary and environmental filter." The

parallelism with the narrative pushed forward by Russia is obvious, but this far-right ideological cement existed long before Moscow crafted the “conservative values” narrative in 2011. Is it then possible to identify a “Russian effect” on Le Pen’s discourses?

In fact, it can be traced, but only when Marine Le Pen talks about Vladimir Putin. For example, since 2014, she has repeated on several occasions that she shares “common values” with Putin, which are “the values of the European civilization,” in particular its “Christian heritage” (“Marine le Pen dit Partager des Valeurs Communes avec Poutine”, 2014). In this narrative, an idealized France (and Europe) has been transformed by the combined effects of Muslim immigration, de-Christianization and liberal values, all phenomena encouraged by out-of-touch elites influenced by the United States. The reference to the Christian heritage is interesting because Marine Le Pen, contrary to her father, has consciously avoided religious references in her speeches, in order to push forward a “Republican” and “laic” (in fact anti-Islam) political discourse (Alduy & Wahnich, 2015, pp. 57–60, 94–99). The fact that she references Christian values only in the context of discussing Russia is probably the clearest example of the influence of the Russian strategic narrative on the ongoing work on the myth of the Golden Age as the subtext is clear: France was true to itself when it was an openly Christian country, just like Russia under Putin.

The second reference to the “European civilization” is also telling in the context of the French far-right. The discourse on the “European civilization” emerged with the creation of the *Nouvelle Droite* (New Right) in the 1960s, under the impulsion of Alain de Benoist and Robert Steuckers, who developed an ideological corpus based on a differentialist understanding of the “European” and “non-European” civilizations (François, 2008; Taguieff, 1994). The “New Right” never managed to become the ideologically dominating force in the *Front National* and was always a minority courant compared with the conservative Catholics, those nostalgic of the Vichy regime and the partisans of (ethnic) identity politics. In particular, the issue of a “European civilization” was a strong dividing factor which rejected the New Right to the margins of the *Front National* (Camus, 2015, pp. 97–120). Yet, the French New Right, and especially Alain de Benoist, has established since the 1990s very strong intellectual and political ties with Alexander Dugin, the main theorist of “neo- Eurasianism” (Bassin, 2016; Laruelle, 2011, 2015; Shekhovtsov, 2009, pp. 697–716; Umland, 2017, pp. 465–479). Dugin himself is known for his relative intellectual influence within Russian political circles, and his role in the crafting of the “European civilization” narrative (Ingram, 2001, pp. 1029–1051; Shekhovtsov & Umland, 2009, pp. 662–678; Shlapentokh, 2014, pp. 49–79). Here again, it is telling to observe that Marine Le Pen mentions the importance of a “European civilization” (something which is not part of the dominating ideological corpus of her party),

only in the context of referencing Russia. Another trace of the influence of the Russian strategic narrative.

Traces of the Russian narrative can be found in the discourse of the *Front National*, because their own narrative about nativism facilitates the selective import of external references. But the myth of the Golden Age is so easily compatible with numerous political myths that other political parties have mobilized other references than the Russian strategic narrative when contributing to the work on the myth. For example, the socialist President Hollande (2016) declared that the French nation had always achieved greatness when it had showed “openness to the world, respect of others and equality,” and not “closeness and discrimination.” In this narrative, the Golden Age is represented by France’s tradition of hospitality and defense of human rights. While it could be expected from a left-wing politician to have a very different understanding of the Golden Age than the far-right, it is also interesting to observe the conservative party *Les Républicains*. Here, the reference to the Golden Age is always De Gaulle’s France, and every conservative leader dreaming of a ministerial future multiplies the De Gaulle’s references: The imagery is that France used to be great when a selfless and brave leader engaged with the necessary reforms at home while daring challenge the Cold War’s bipolarity on the international stage (Agulhon, 2000; Berstein, 2001; Huguenin, 2013; Richard, 2017). Again, it is impossible to observe an influence of the Russian strategic narrative.

The dispersed nature of the myth of the Golden Age explains why it is found in many political groups. But the coherence of the myth makes it very compatible with all sorts of discourses: The only trace of the influence of the Russian strategic narrative could be found when the far-right referenced Russia, illustrating that a dispersed and coherent myth is open to a multiplicity of influences, an external strategic narrative being only one of them.

Dispersed and contradictory myth: the American danger

Anti-Americanism is a universal myth, found in many different political communities worldwide (Chiozza, 2009; Katzenstein & Keohane, 2006; O’Connor, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Of course, the specifics of the content and narrative structure of the myth vary from place to place, but a recurring feature is the notion that the U.S. foreign policy is a threat to the world order. In France, this vision of the United States as inherently aggressive and expansionist was crystallized during the Spanish-American War of 1898. In the middle of the Dreyfus affair, the denunciation of the American aggressiveness re-united the French population (Roger, 2003, pp. 192–194). From that moment on, the main features of the French contempt toward American militarism were established and served as the symbolic and discursive foundations of the numerous criticisms of the American foreign policy in the 20th century,

with high peaks such as during the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, or the Iraq War (Revel, 2002). However, this myth also has a strong potential for contradiction with other important myths. For example, it contradicts the myth of “liberal order” (a liberal international order is preferable in itself), the myth of progress (in which war of aggression is always perceived as a thing of the past: the United States being the symbol of progress, they cannot wage wars of aggression) or the myth of “just war” (the United States only fight wars when they must be fought).

Of course, the Russian strategic narrative of the dangers of U.S. military interventionism fits well within this political myth. And several high-profile French politicians have adopted a description of the Ukraine and the Syrian crises which are directly those pushed forward by Moscow. In all those narratives, the United States are the evil actor actively destabilizing countries or regions. The Russian strategic narrative contributes to the “work on myth” by adding a layer to the fundamental notion of U.S. aggressiveness: Russia is seen either as defending herself (which legitimates Moscow’s actions) or as a stabilizing power, keeping the warmongering Americans at bay.

The clearest example could be the Ukraine crisis. As expected, Marine Le Pen blamed the European Union and the United States for triggering the crisis, and supported the federalization and eventual partition of the country, as supported by Russia (“L’Europe Responsable de la Crise en Ukraine (Marine Le Pen)”, 2014). But the leaders of other political groups also expressed similar statements. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the then *Front de Gauche*, expressed in multiple occasions that the crisis was triggered by the United States’ expansionist agenda. According to him, the danger was coming from the “bellicose activism” of the United States (“Ukraine. De Mélenchon à Le Pen, qu’en Disent les Politiques Français?”, 2014).

The conservative party *Les Républicains* is split between those clearly adopting the Russian perspective and those concerned about the destabilizing effect of the Russian invasion. It is noticeable that former President Nicolas Sarkozy delivered a speech in which he adopted the Russian strategic narrative almost word for word (Vitkine, 2015). He first declared that “the separation between Europe and Russia is a drama. If the Americans want it, it is their problem. But we don’t want a New Cold War between Europe and Russia.” He then went on declaring that Crimea had “chosen” to join Russia (even though the international community denies the legality and legitimacy of the referendum) (Grant, 2015), that the Kosovo precedent was a justification for the Crimean referendum, and that the Russian-speaking Ukrainians were “under threat” from the Ukrainian government, all elements of the Russian strategic narrative. He then concluded by once again blaming the crisis on the United States’ expansionist ambitions, which were trying to deny Russia their traditional sphere of influence. It is then highly significant to observe

a French official, who used to be nicknamed “The American” (in a pejorative way) when he was elected in 2007 and praises himself for having stopped Putin to fully invade Georgia in 2008, so completely adopting the Russian strategic narrative a few years later.

However, not all members of the French political class so readily adopt such vocabulary (Kunz, 2018). Former Prime Minister Alain Juppé declared that some in his party were hit by an “acute crisis of Russophilia” (“UMP/Juppé: Un Accès de Russophilie Aiguë”, 2015). The liberal Mariton (2016) penned an op-ed in *Le Monde* denouncing the “blindness” of the French right regarding Vladimir Putin, and calling for a joint action between France, the European Union and the United States. And the socialist government was of course opposed to the Russian actions, by raising concerns about the destabilization of Ukraine. It must be observed that those politicians who adopted the Russian narrative on the U.S. danger in Ukraine all come from anti-liberal backgrounds: either the anti-liberal left or the anti-liberal right. This can be explained by the fact that the myth of the American Danger clashes with other important political myths, such as the myth of liberal order and the myth of progress. Therefore, the Russian strategic narrative emphasizing the vileness of American actions contributes to the work on the myth of American danger by “updating” it with new material, but is also limited to the anti-liberal part of the political spectrum.

Local and coherent myth: the French “grandeur”

An important contemporary myth in France relates to the so-called *grandeur*. Historians have shown how this foreign policy aiming at “punching above its weight” and based on a permanent seat at the UN Security Council, the possession of nuclear weapons, an interventionist defense policy, and an attempt to balance between the United States and the Soviet Union forged a consensus that remains influential today (Cogan, 2003; Hazareesingh, 2012; Rieker, 2017; Vaïsse, 1998). As such, this myth is very coherent with other French political myths, because it is the one upon which the 5th Republic was established, with De Gaulle as its leader. It is also very local, other countries having difficulties understanding this “French Exception” (Meunier, 2000, pp. 104–116). One of the most important features of this myth of *grandeur* is that France, being a great power, shall not be strictly aligned with anyone else: as Mitterrand explained in reference to the United States, the French policy can be summarized as “friends, allies, but not aligned.”

In line with this myth of *grandeur*, French politicians consistently called for a “multipolar world” since the 1990s (with the implication that France or a French-led Europe would be one of those poles). President Chirac (1999) called multiple times for a “multipolar world based on international law,”

in which the American “hyperpower” would be tamed (Védrine, 1998). The latest grand re-enactment of this myth was the French opposition to the Iraq War, epitomized by Dominique de Villepin’s famous speech at the United Nations, and the notion that France is a great power and, as such, should not be automatically aligned with anyone else, is always present in the French political discourse (Schmitt, 2017b, pp. 463–474).

Of course, this myth of the French grandeur resonates strongly with the Russian strategic narrative that the United States are acting against the European states’ best interests by exerting an unduly domination. The official program of *Front National* (2016, pp. 11–12) states that France, a “world power,” must act as a “balancing power” in the context of “a gradually multipolar world which we should celebrate.” The logical next step is then to form a trilateral alliance between Paris, Berlin, and Moscow, the goal being to get rid of the “euro-atlantic” dynamic. Accordingly, Marine Le Pen denounced on numerous occasions the alleged French subordination to U.S. policies on Ukraine and Syria. The conservative de Villiers (2015) wrote in a book that topped the selling charts in the fall of 2015: “Russia, liberated from any revolutionary doctrines, observes as a free country the use of NATO to enslave the world to the United States” (p. 346). Mélenchon (2014) has also strongly criticized the former government for the “atlantist violence of its foreign policy, aligned on the American right-wing” on multiple occasions.

Being accused of “atlantism” is a serious matter in France, and even politicians more inclined to a strong stance against Russia always feel the need to explain that they do not act on anyone else’s behalf, but because France, as a “great power,” bears special responsibilities. Hollande (2012), for example, in his first speech to the diplomatic corps, took great care to say that France was a “world power” and that its “independence made her precious to the world.” The former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Fabius (2015), declared in numerous speeches that the most important organizing principle of French foreign policy was its “independence,” as “independence is the key to our influence.”

Without multiplying the examples, the key point is that the French political debate on foreign policy is systematically polarized between those criticizing an alleged loss of the “independence,” and those claiming that they do their best to defend it. In that context, the Russian strategic narrative can easily contribute to the work on myth by constantly providing new content. The accusation of becoming Washington’s puppet and losing a great power status finds a special echo in France, with some politicians adopting the narrative to criticize the government, the latter having in turn to be defensive on this issue and constantly reiterate its commitment to French independence and *Grandeur*. The Russian strategic narrative is then particularly well received, because of the local and cohesive nature of the myth: All branches of the political spectrum accept it, and it dovetails neatly with other political myths. From the crafter of strategic narrative’s point of view, the downside is that

it is quite doubtful that the narrative would work so well in other countries, which do not have a myth of their own *Grandeur* and independence comparable to the French one. Moreover, its main added value for the Russian strategic narrative in the context of security competition with the West could also be its main weakness in the future: while it is a fertile ground for the notion that the United States are acting against Europe's interests, it will resist any brutal change in the Russian strategic narrative following a hypothetical American-Russian rapprochement.

Local and contradictory: the “savior”

A final important French political myth is the myth of the “savior.” While this figure of the strongman exists in other countries and political communities, the myth took a specific shape in France which justifies its local nature (Girardet, 1985). There are four ideal-typical saviors in the French political culture, and the same individual can sometime correspond to several ideal-types simultaneously. The first is *Cincinnatus*: the old and wise former warrior or politician, whose return after his retirement is justified by the gravity of the situation. This is Doumergue in 1934, Pétain in 1940, or De Gaulle in 1958. The second is *Alexander*: incarnation of the triumph of the will, whose boldness and courage rallies the crowds around him and constitutes an important rupture with the old world. This is Napoleon as represented by Jacques-Louis David's famous painting: the young general, mounted on a rearing horse. The third is *Solon*, the legislator, who re-establishes law and order based on eternal and just principles. This is Pétain during the first phase of the *Revolution Nationale*, Charles X in 1815, or De Gaulle in 1958. Finally, the last ideal-type is *Moses*, the prophet, who links his destiny with his people's fate. This is Napoleon in the *Memorial of St Helena*. This myth of the savior is also contradictory and clashes with other strongly established political myths in the French culture, such as the myth of equality, but also the myth of deliberation and “parliamentary culture.”

The Russian strategic narrative of Vladimir Putin ending Russia's crisis under Yeltsin resonates with this local French political myth. Detailed biographies of Vladimir Putin's rise have explained how he was handpicked by Yeltsin and how his alleged fight against the oligarchs was simply a conflict between rival gangs for the control of Russia's economy (Hill & Gaddy, 2015). Yet, Kremlin apologists accept the Russian narrative uncritically. Pons (2014), head of the international service of the conservative weekly *Valeurs Actuelles*, explains in his biography of Vladimir Putin how the Russian leader “tamed” the oligarchs by removing them from political activism and reminding them to serve the national interest. Jaffré (2013) (close to the *Front National*) even entitles his biography *Vladimir Bonaparte Putin*, constantly drawing an odd parallelism between Napoleon's and Putin's lives.

Marine Le Pen finds several important qualities in Putin, including “courage, frankness, and the respect of identity and civilization” (“Marine Le Pen salue Vladimir Poutine avec qui elle défend des ‘Valeurs Communes’”, 2014). Philippe de Villiers would gladly “trade Hollande and Sarkozy for Putin, for France’s sake” (Leussier, 2014). Putin would be a “real leader” (compared with the weak democratic politicians) and he would be re-establishing the authority of the Russian state: The Russian strategic narrative is fully adopted by those politicians sensible to the myth of the savior. This perception is not limited to fringe politicians. More mainstream political figures such as former foreign minister Hubert Védrine regularly provide comments along the same line (Schmitt, 2017a).

However, this narrative is also resisted by other politicians and has so far remained a minority position. For example, Alain Juppé is famous for being very reluctant to the authoritarian figure of Vladimir Putin (“Juppé Critique les ‘Leçons de Gaullisme’ de Sarkozy à Moscou”, 2015), while the socialist Le Roux blames the “French right’s fascination for Mr Putin” (“Sarkozy en Russie: de la Diplomatie Parallèle pour des Élus de Gauche”, 2015). Just like with the myth of the American danger, the myth of the savior divides the French political class although it is not on a clear liberal/illiberal divide as in the case of the myth of the “American danger” (MP, 2015). We enter here a situation in which personal preferences toward authority figures matter more than party lines or ideological affiliations. As such, the Russian strategic narrative can only target limited portions of the population, and it seems likely that this narrative would be even less effective in other societies which do not share France’s passion for a “savior.”

Conclusion

This article has explored the ways a strategic narrative can contribute to the work on a local political myth, thus facilitating its reception and acceptance. Depending on the nature of the political myth (dispersed or local/coherent or contradictory), the reception of the strategic narrative will be different. Dispersed and coherent myths are open to a multitude of influences contributing to the work on myth, and it was difficult to trace the impact of the Russian strategic narrative in France beyond the far-right. Even though the myth of the Golden Age can be found in many political communities worldwide, it is so coherent with other myths that one specific narrative is bounded to have limited impact.

The impact of the Russian strategic narrative was much easier to trace on the other types of myths. The Russian narrative clearly contributed to the myth of the American danger, which feeds the imaginary of many anti-liberal tendencies. However, because of the contradictory nature of the myth, the Russian strategic narrative was only accepted by anti-liberal

Table 3. Impact of the Russian strategic narrative on French political myths.

	Dispersion	Localism
Coherence	“Golden Age” Multiple audiences, low impact	“Grandeur” Local audience, high impact
Contradiction	“American danger” Multiple audiences, moderate impact	“The savior” Local audience, moderate impact

groups, and resisted by other groups for which other myths provide significance. Yet, the dispersed nature of the myth of the American danger means that a strategic narrative targeting it can create a trans-border community of interests (as illustrated by the quasi-unanimous support of the various European far-right movements for Vladimir Putin, all denouncing American imperialism). A local and coherent myth such as *Grandeur* is also interesting to target in order to shape the political debates and narratives in a specific country: Because of the coherent nature of the myth, the whole French political spectrum was somehow forced to position itself in reference to the Russian strategic narrative. Finally, a local and contradictory myth has probably less pay-off, as it will only be received by a specific part of the political spectrum of a given society, and will be resisted by others (Table 3).

Therefore, it seems that depending on the intended effect, the crafters of a strategic narrative should prioritize the targeting of dispersed and contradictory myths or of parochialist and coherent myths, as those are the cases in which the strategic narrative was contributing the most to the work on the myth. However, each society being built on a number of myths, no strategic narrative will be able to reconcile them all: The impact of a strategic narrative is structurally constrained by the multiplicity of myths available, and by the fact that a strategic narrative can contribute to the work on myth in unexpected and uncontrollable ways.

This analysis also provides insights on how to improve counter-narratives when hostile actors such as Russia, but also for instance the Islamic State, try to influence liberal societies. For example, it is not necessary to invest much resources in debunking claims or narratives targeting coherent and dispersed myths as they are likely to have limited impact on political communities. However, countering the elements of strategic narratives that resonate with local and coherent myths strongly matter since those myths seem to have high resonance within an entire society. Overall, there can be no “one size fits all” approach to countering hostile strategic narratives. Crafting such counter-narratives will require individuals well acquainted with the local myths of specific political communities, and able to work with the narrative structures and contents of such myths.

This article shows that the study of political myths is necessary to better understand how strategic narratives work, and how they are received within a political community. Avenues for further research could be to observe the

formation of transnational communities of interest based on the reception of universal and contradictory myths and their impact on global politics; or detailed comparative studies of the reception of strategic narratives within the context of local myths (dispersed or contradictory) observing the (dis)similarities of the ways the same strategic narrative contributes to the work on different myths.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my colleagues Chiara de Franco, Sten Rynning, Peter Viggo Jakobsen, Jon Rahbek-Clemmensen, Vincent Keating, Amelie Theussen and Danita Burke for their comments on earlier drafts of this article. The two anonymous reviewers and journal editor Hylke Dijkstra also provided very valuable inputs. All errors are of course mine alone.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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