

Abstract: *In this paper, we borrow the dramaturgical analysis from sociologists and use it to analyze how contemporary Russian elites communicate with the public. It is my goal to analyze the performance of the Russian political elite when presenting the changes caused by the worsening Russo-Western relations over the Ukrainian crisis to the domestic audiences, with focus on the impact of sanctions introduced by the Western countries last year. Which strategies, narratives and symbols remain the same and which are adjusted, erased or newly introduced by the political elite when communicating with the public in order to justify the contemporary situation? We will focus especially on two basic components of the narrative: the symbolic level, particularly the use of history, geopolitics and other symbolic topics to frame the current situation; the pragmatic level, especially adjustment of current strategies and introduction of new plans and partners who will help to manage the new situation. As we will clarify later, our analysis will focus on symbolic arguments used by Vladimir Putin as “the national leader” and pragmatic politics introduced by him as “the president”.*

Keywords: *dramaturgical analysis, Russian foreign policy, sanctions, Ukrainian crisis, Russian politics*

Introduction

In this paper, we borrow the dramaturgical analysis from sociologists and use it to analyze how contemporary Russian elites communicate with the public. Based on the classic metaphor of Erving Goffman (1999), we will understand politics (just as any other social relation) to be a kind of theater-like performance. It is my goal to analyze the performance of the Russian political elite when presenting the changes caused by the worsening Russo-Western relations over the Ukrainian crisis to the domestic audiences, with focus on the impact of sanctions introduced by the Western countries last year.

¹ This paper was supported by grant system of University of West Bohemia, project „Česká zahraniční politika vůči zemím s nedemokratickými režimy“ number SGS-2014-012.

For this purpose, we divide the text into three parts representing the steps we need to make in order to find sustainable answers to this question. First, we will introduce the approach itself. As the dramaturgical analysis is not used very often in political science, I consider it useful to give a short introduction into some terms and concepts it works with, in order to clarify how these terms will be used in the text. Of course, the metaphor of theater is not unknown to political science and the IR, and several works were published under the label of “role theory”, which will be explored. Second, we will focus on the analysis itself. For the reasons explained below, the dataset of official statements of President Putin is collected and analyzed, in order to gain basic outline of the regime narrative and its change in response to the sanctions. Third, we will focus on the dataset collected from Russian state television in order to analyze the whole communication stream introduced to the Russian public in its complexity. We will especially focus on two basic components of the narrative: the symbolic level, particularly the use of history, geopolitics and other symbolic topics to frame the current situation; the pragmatic level, especially adjustment of current strategies and introduction of new plans and partners who will help to manage the new situation. As we will clarify later, our analysis will focus on symbolic arguments used by Vladimir Putin as “the national leader” and pragmatic politics introduced by Vladimir Putin as “the president”.

Politics as a theater

In the very beginning of the text, we shall introduce some key terms and concepts to build up the theoretical framework of this paper before we apply the approach on the case in question. In this sub-chapter we will go through the basics of Goffman classic dramaturgical analysis of society in order to introduce the key terms used in the following text. Later we will also look at the role theory in political science in order to explore concepts, which might be useful for our purposes.

In his famous text *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1999 [1959]), Goffman introduces relations in society as a theater, where all of us play various roles in front of various audiences. Each social role is tied to widely shared and socially constructed patterns of behavior, which distinguish the holder of a particular role from others and, at the same time, enable the audience to identify the role one is playing. Everyone plays multiple characters in their lives. One person can be a mother to her children (performing e.g. the role of an adviser or guardian), daughter to her parents (performing, for example, the role of respect or even obedience), wife to her partner (performing the roles of a caring partner, supporter, etc.), manager to her subordinates (performing the roles of another type of authority or effective problem-solver), and so on. Moreover, expressions used within individual performances vary broadly depending on

the situation (children perform their roles according to agreed standards, so a mother basically does not need to manifest her authority, in contrast to a situation when children are breaking rules and the mother needs to re-establish or re-negotiate them by more firm means) or depending on a combination of roles applied at the same time (performing the role of a mother in front of her own parents, performing the role of a wife in front of her mother-in-law, etc.).

We may thus understand a role as a pattern of behavior following some basic rules constructed by the society, which enable the audience to identify the person with the social status and/or situation and evaluate his/her performance. There are two important messages behind this understanding of the word “role”, which need to be said clearly. First, there is only limited freedom in our actions, we are driven by the rules of the characters we are playing all the time, and even the most rebellious players obey the basic rules of their role, otherwise their performance would become incomprehensible to the others. Second, there is ongoing process of evaluation by the audience, which further limits the scope of our choices and strategies (which is partially truth when applied to politics), in the form of acceptance, rejection or even punishment of our behavior in every particular role.

The role-playing, of course, consists of two inseparable and mutually fueling components – the verbal and the non-verbal performance. As we analyze television broadcasting, providing us access to visual data, we will pay close attention to both of these components. We will focus especially on how the particular role is illustrated in speech and posture and gestures.

In addition to the idea of individuals acting out their respective roles, Goffman introduces the concept of teams, who play common acts. Thus, role-playing is even more complicated when we accept the idea of teams. A man performing the role of a husband and a woman performing the role of a wife can play “a couple” together at the same time (which would not make any sense without both individuals playing husband and wife to each other at the same time) in front of a group of friends who come to visit them. Individuals are usually members of various teams, all of them having some membership conditions and acceptable or even group-defining patterns of behavior (a man can be a member of a married couple, but also a teammate of one of his visiting friends on a local hockey team, colleague of another, etc.). Team memberships can sometimes collide with each other (hockey buddy vs. loving husband) or influence one’s performance on other stages (mother and teacher can easily use some techniques from her job at home). Team members work together to create a desirable impression in front of an audience. Team members also usually share secrets of how create the impression. These secrets usually come to existence in the “backstage” – some place hidden from the audience where the members do not need to act as a team. The deal made backstage binds the team members together by a common interest to maintain a desirable image of the team, also giving them power to use

acknowledged secrets against members of former or non-present teams (most often in the form of gossip) or even against members of a current team in case of an internal conflict.

Let us summarize again what we have learned by accepting the idea that individuals not only play their solo performances, but they also participate in team acts. First, the scope of behavioral choices narrows even more, if the individual is part of a team. He/she is bound by deal and strategy chosen by the team for the particular situation, he/she has to oblige inside rules of the time that qualify him/her as an insider, he/she has to follow not only his/her personal interests but also goals and priorities of the team. Second, there is considerable amount of very powerful internal information, which is not known to the audience, but which drives the behavior of the actors on stage significantly.

Finally, it is useful for us to introduce the concept of front stage and backstage in more detail, as described by Goffman. Front-stage is basically a physical place where the performance takes place, and which is usually equipped to serve the purposes of the performer (a living room is usually equipped to represent the well-being of the family and provide a comfortable environment for guests). The front stage is equipped with various scenery items, which serve to support the actors (a huge library in the house of an academic scholar illustrates and materializes the wisdom he/she should perform). Front stage is also strategically and symbolically organized to strengthen the desired impact of the performance or represent desired hierarchies (not only the existence of the library, but also the materials used, its position in the room and its position in relation to the scholar and to the audience shape the impact it makes). Analysis of the front stage is very important in this paper, as it is the only environment providing additional information to the audience about the priorities, self-evaluation and self-image and, of course, also about the taste of the analyzed team or individual(s). For this reason, we will pay close attention not only to the act itself, but to the stage it takes place on, too.

In our case, the concept of the front stage has one more layer. The stage we have access to is basically the TV screen. So the first front stage for us to analyze is what actually happens on the screen. Nevertheless, the TV broadcasting takes us to other stages where the pictures shown on the screen were made (for example, the press conference of President Putin). These stages need another inspection (where the President is seated, who accompanies him, how the place is arranged etc.).

Backstage, on the other hand, is a space where individuals and teams can escape from the sight of the audience, take off the masks of their team and discuss secrets and prepare for the upcoming performance without being watched. In our family metaphor, the cloakroom, bathroom or even bedroom can hide particular family members in case they need to restore their image for their role (to make up, to calm down, to re-dress in order to enter the “home” and put off

the “job” costume). A hosting couple can leave their guests alone for a while to discuss a strategy how to impress them in the kitchen, or as “husband” and “wife” solve a disagreement about how to perform the role of a “couple”. Nevertheless, every backstage an individual shares with others is also a front-stage at the same time. In our kitchen, the man can take off his mask of the “one half of the couple” for a while, but he is still playing the role of a husband. Usually even if a person is alone, he/she performs the role of “him/herself” to him/herself, while adjusting his/her life experiences to a desired self-image.

Backstage, from its very nature, is not visible to us as audience, which is especially true when analyzing media content. What is broadcast is a result of precious tuning and editing by various professionals. Moreover, the content is broadcast only when some level of desired form is achieved. Viewers do not stand a chance to participate in the process. Nevertheless, there are some routines in the production of media content that we can expect to take place (e.g. order of information), there are some known external conditions defining how some things are done (for example, state ownership of the media), which partially allow us to include some backstage information into our analysis.

It is already apparent that we understand Goffmann’s metaphor within the framework of social constructivism. The relation of a performer and the audience is always mutual. Not only does a performer impress the audience, but the audience’s reactions and expectations influence the performer when planning the performance and also when delivering the act. The audience’s expectations are of special interest in our case. Another classic text from social sciences, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s *Social Construction of Reality* (2001 [1966]), helps us to recognize essential stages in the performer – audience (subject – society) relation. Berger and Luckmann describe a three-step process of social construction of the social reality. On one hand, a subject influences its surroundings by its actions (*externalization*), and at the same time, successful or powerful strategies of behavior become common and widely used, reactions of subjects in similar situations follow successful or popular patterns (*objectivization*) slowly turning into norms of behavior. In the end, society considers these appropriate and teaches them as behavior rules and demands them from the subject (*internalization*).

If we connect this concept with dramaturgical analysis, we must conclude that the ability to fulfill at least some minimum level of the audience’s expectations is usually a necessary condition for the individual to keep his/her role in the long term. It means that these widely accepted social rules and expectations impose limits to the behavior of the subject making his/her behavior to some level predictable, or at least a small number of possible strategies. These rules are quite stable evolving usually in public debate, which makes them observable for the external analyst.

The performance of politics

If we apply the presented framework on politics, a new and interesting perspective opens up to us. Politics seems to be a highly theatrical segment of social relations by definition. The widely used terminology enables us to use the theater metaphor very easily thanks to terms like “world stage”, “political arena”, “speech delivered”, “political performance” and, best of all – “political actor”. Politician is a social role that, from its very beginning, has been related to a specific facade and behavior attempting to *show* the public that they deserve a superior position in society. Politicians are representatives of others, leaders of the society and they are constantly supposed to prove they can *play this role*.

Unlike the roles of “mothers” and “wives”, we *expect* the “politician” to be a sort of act. Nevertheless, this should not blur our standpoints – we should not mix holding a role with pure rational fabrication or even lying. Holding this role is only partially, if at all rationally, calculated, and the rendering of the role springs usually, at least partially, from deep values and beliefs of the very person being “natural and sincere” for him/her. “Playing” does not necessarily have to mean “pretending” and it is very important to bear this fact in mind throughout this paper.

A political actor may knowingly pretend or lie, but this is also part of the act he “honestly” plays, based on his/her image of the political position he/she holds and based on social expectations imposed on him/her as a politician. For example, he/she might be afraid to admit some kind of behavior (e.g. being drunk) and lies about it because he/she is the president, and presidents are not supposed to behave this way, it would “*de-mask*” him/her, and might result into the decay of his/her social authority. In other words, intentional pretending is derived from the “role playing”, which we are interested in in this paper.

We should also consider the very interesting fact that in politics the audience can choose their actors. The role of a politician is most often granted by the public. When performing the role of a “politician”, stakes are usually very high for the individual as the audience demands satisfactory performance; otherwise, the politician might lose his/her right to enter the stage and may be replaced by someone else who is more persuasive and can better keep the facade and represent the role of a politician.

Whether the regime in question is democratic or not has, as it seems, smaller significance than we might initially expect. Public opinion can often be ignored in an authoritarian regime because legitimate means of expressing disapproval such as elections, strikes or demonstrations are limited, manipulated or prohibited. The opposition is bullied or threatened making the price of resistance extremely high in an authoritarian regime. Therefore, the opposition’s appearances tend to be limited. On the other hand, such limitation of legal means of disapproval deprives the government of the public opinion and immediate

feedback to their own actions. Authoritarians very often fear coups and revolutions and take preemptive measures to eliminate any signs of it because they have no honest feedback evaluating their own position. Therefore, public support makes authoritarian rule much easier and the occurrence of some type of breaking point less probable. It even provides a kind of protection within elite teams to the top-leaders of the regime if they are widely popular. For this reason, even authoritarian regimes try to gain public support and use various tools to convince the public they rule in the interest of the nation and its citizens.

Different political regimes seem to differ mostly in the importance they ascribe to various audiences and in tools using in their political play. Even under various regimes, the public, some kind of oligarchic political elite, the army, or even some foreign partners or groups of businessmen all become audiences of different importance to the political actors. Depending on the system and regime, the individual playing the “politician” categorizes audiences according to their importance for him/her. Irrespective of how noble an individual’s goals in politics, he/she can hardly pursue them without holding the office. Thus, a politician categorizes audiences according to which audience influences his/her chances of maintaining power the most, and then chooses strategies which allow him/her to pursue goals to the extent which makes the role worth playing (morally, economically, personally) and at the same time satisfy the important audiences to the extent securing his/her office.

Role theory and the international relations

Even if dramaturgical analysis is most often used in sociological research, it is not as exotic for the international relations as we might think. There is a well-established theoretical approach called the role theory, which partially overlaps with the dramaturgical approach introduced above. The concept became widely known in the 1970 s after the publication of K. J. Holsti’s *National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy*, and since then, it occupies a stable position among theoretical tools of foreign policy analysis. For introducing the basic stand points, we may quote Glen Chafetz and his colleagues (1996: 732) who noted that the role theory “assumes as do many scholars and other analysts of international relations and foreign policy that states are ‘actors’ who behave consistent with specific roles with which they identify”.

Holsti’s pioneering work remains very useful until today, even for this paper, because Holsti excellently did most of the thinking for us, when it comes to applying the concept of the individual social role to the international politics analysis. What is very useful of Holsti’s work is the terminology he develops. It will be useful to distinguish between “role performance”, which describes the very act of the role playing, “role conception”, referring to the actor’s image of how the role should be played and the actor him/herself should present it,

and “role prescription”, which means the image of the audience of how the role should be played. In our case, we will follow the role performance in order to identify how the actors introduce their conceptions to the audience and how they are limited by the role prescriptions while doing this.

Furthermore, Holsti makes two important points, which we suggest to be slightly reconsidered for our purpose. First, he claims that in the international environment the external pressure of norms and treaties is weaker than in the social relations among individuals, and concludes that it is mostly the domestic demand shaping conceptions of a national role for the policy makers (which was a ground-breaking opinion in 1970). Second, he observes that roles like “superpower”, which countries play in international relations, are much vaguer than social roles held by individuals (Holsti 1970: 242–243). These valuable arguments nevertheless mirror the state-of-the-art in the 1970’s and, in case we want to use his text in this paper, we should consider the changes which have happened both in the world politics and in the theory.

Firstly, the world opinion has grown much stronger than it was in the hey-days of the Cold War. As a result of the dissolution of the bipolar structure of international relations, of globalization of international trade and finances, the famous “Retreat of the State” (Strange, 1996) weakened the armor of national states. Empowered by cheap transportation and developments in communication, the global (civil) society is able to form strong opinion platforms to all relevant international issues, to which states (at least democratic ones, often meaning rich and powerful) have to react and respond. This does not undermine Holsti’s original argument nor does it mean a return to structural arguments that tied national roles to structural forces of the international system. Rather, it means that non-state actors who advocate and support norms and particular forms of behavior traditionally connected to the domestic political process are now present also in the international environment broadening the international audience who watches the role-playing. Also the data suggest that at least part of the presidential argumentation is inspired by external audiences and their perceived expectations, which makes the phenomenon important for our analysis. Nevertheless, as the reader will see below, great emphasis is put on domestic sources of the performance in our paper.

Secondly, the social constructivist approach to the international relations theory leads me to the conclusion that national role is yet another type of the social role. National role in Holsti’s understanding tends to be more practical, describing role merely as a behavior pattern defined in political bargain or, as Walker (1987) adds, given by cultural norms, which allows us to form role typologies and sort the states into prescribed boxes or sets of boxes. The constructivist approach seems to reach further into the social dimension of the role. Alexander Wendt introduces the concept of “role identity”, which suits our purposes better (Wendt 1999: 228). He introduces the role as inter-subjectively

negotiated between the self and others, which pushes the concept back toward its original “social” meaning more in accordance with our constructivist stance and Goffman’s approach.

Nevertheless, considerable analytical gaps remain in our argumentation including an abyss at the level of analysis between the “national role”, as introduced in this part of the paper, and personal roles introduced in the previous part. To make our stances clear, we need to provide a more profound explanation of the issue. First of all, for our purposes it is useful to consider the national role to be a social role negotiated and constantly evolving in the international environment. On one hand, the national role can be understood as a set of “generic statements about identity” (Chafetz – Hillel – Grillot 1996: 749), informing us of the “mission and the share of our state in the world” which “must be specified by statesmen before national interest and any particular event can be defined and pursued” (Shih 1988: 602). On the other hand, as noted above, the international environment itself creates context where the role-playing takes place. Moreover, the success or failure of the performance is double-reviewed. First, the domestic audience reviews the foreign policy and its coherence with the “self-image”, the “national perception” of their national role. Second, the international community of states and non-state actors reviews the performance according to their norms and perceptions of the state’s position in the world context. Of course, mixed results can occur in this double-review process. Actions approved by the majority of the domestic audiences may be condemned by important members of the international audience and vice versa. This is very often the case in Russian foreign policy, as we will see later.

Regarding the issue of the level of analysis, we face the problem of interconnecting the national role of the state with Goffman’s almost anthropological perspective. First of all, as also the above-mentioned authors of the role theory are aware of, there is the simple fact that a state, as unobservable immaterial social institution, can by definition hardly “play” or “perform” any kind of role to any audiences. It is the statesmen who act as intermediaries between abstract national role scenarios and practical politics. They deliver the national role to the audiences, which again allows us to return to the analysis of the presidential performance.

Russian political theater

Even basic knowledge of the Russian political system ables us to identify the most important actors of the Russian political *ensemble*. Institutionally, it is the president who plays the *leading role*, while the government is seen as an *supporting actor*. The system is dominated by the executive power and a legislative body, which can be bypassed if necessary, even though it has proved it can make the governing process more *dramatic*. In terms of representing the system,

President Putin is also in practical terms the key *figure* of the contemporary system in front of both domestic and foreign audiences to the extent that the term “Putin’s Russia” is now being widely used. This fact led us to focus on the president’s performances in this article.

Based on the role theory, if we analyze the performance of President Putin, we need to analyze all of the above-mentioned levels of his acting. First, there is the national level – role of the “national leader”. On this level, a person presents and advocates the image and interests of his/her country and nation. Second, there is the individual role. Here the same person delivers the act of the politician named “the president”, the one for the job who, in the best case, deserves to be chosen to play the national leader. On the level of the “national leader” in accordance with Holsti’s approach – a president needs to deliver performance reflecting expectations of the domestic audience regarding Russia’s position in the world. Further, to follow Wendt’s constructivist logic, he also needs to take into account expectations and perceptions of influential foreign audiences regarding the same issue. On the individual level – “the president” act – close to Goffman’s perspective, he needs to deliver all of the above-mentioned as a president of the Russian Federation, which by itself poses various demands on the performance form.

Both levels meet at all important stages. First, it is necessary for “Mr. Putin” to negotiate his leading position on the stage which can be nicknamed “internal Kremlin politics”. At this stage Vladimir Putin negotiates conditions with official or informal interest groups, under which they are ready to obey his leadership as “the president” and to which scope he will be able to shape the “national leader” position if it is granted to him. Second, leaving the “internal Kremlin politics” in the backstage, he needs to deliver his political decisions to the public on the “domestic politics” stage by such a performance that the audience will accept, not only because of the content of the policy, but also because it is presented by someone they may respect as “our president”, the accepted head of state, and to whom they may assign the role of the “national leader”. Third, he needs to act as president of the Russian Federation on the stage of “international politics” with his performance driven by his desire to achieve advantageous positions as the “Russian president” – i.e. a trusted partner, capable competitor, etc. – and avoid to be seen as incapable puppet of some shadow masters, psychopathic dictator, etc. in order to open as much space as possible for successful representation of his country as the “national leader”. In this perspective, despite his magnificent personal power in the system, his maneuvering room seems surprisingly narrow and his behavior much less unpredictable than it might seem at the first glance.

Let us focus closer on the teams the president is a member of. Based on the Russian Constitution, the most obvious and officially fully supportive team of President Putin consists of members of the Government led by Prime Minister

Medvedev.² Another supporting team of the president, which is officially presented to both the domestic and foreign public, is United Russia, a political party without any political priorities except for those presented by the president. The United Russia team is not established by the Constitution per se, nevertheless its existence is a result of the constitutional order, which expects the Government to be able to achieve support of the Parliament, and at the same time, expects the same Government to be president's close cooperative. In front of foreign audiences, and sometimes also in front of the domestic public, the president presents himself as a proud member of the "Russia team", as one of the country's citizens. Other unofficial and often not publicly presented teams, whose influence is based on custom and power balancing within the system and not on its legal foundations, include the Army and secret service officials, informal groups of businessmen, the Church etc. These teams can partially personally overlap with the governmental team and the United Russia team, but they are not officially and publicly presented and their loyalty and the relations of their members to the president are the subject of never-ending disputes among analysts.

If we focus on the leading man, the audiences to his actions are obviously all of these previously mentioned teams. His position is thus dependent on maneuvering among several teams and their interests and on the use of secrets enabling him to exert his strength, get rid of his opponents, push back the opposition, and hold the role of the leader both in the institutional and (most probably also) real power hierarchy.

It is apparent now that when delivering his act to the domestic public, President Putin is of course bound by conditions negotiated among the elite teams in exchange for their public support and also by pacts made with international partners when negotiating their support on various issues. But at the same time, when delivering his act to the international audiences, he is again tied with domestic conditions for the public and elite support or tolerance for his regime. In terms of dramaturgical analysis, on the every political front stage, he has to respect deals and rules agreed in the backstage in order to present a sustainable and viable act.

If we focus on the stages of the "domestic politics" and "international politics", it is crucial for this paper that the Russian political elite actively works towards gaining support for the regime. In comparison to democratic leaders, an authoritarian politician can "manufacture" success to a larger extent – also via the state media. In our metaphor, authoritarian leaders can sort out who will appear with them on the political stage and whether their part will be significant

2 Dmitri Medvedev is in our metaphorical world the unappreciated actor, who was able to play the role of "president" in the institutional branch of the system for an ascribed period of time, without stealing the role of the "national leader" from Vladimir Putin.

or the one of a hero or a villain. But despite all this power and their control over the play, they still need to make their performance satisfactory enough for the spectators not to leave the theater and choose for coup or revolution. For this reason, we can consider the state media to be the basic active tool of the political elite to deliver their desired message to the Russian public and to the international audiences. In order to confirm the role of the media in the message delivering and in order to analyze the peculiarities spreading from simultaneous communication with the domestic and international audiences, let us have a closer look at the image-making in the Russian environment.

When focusing on the president as the leading man of the regime performance, Vladimir Putin has always carefully worked on his image. His adventures became legendary during the years presenting a nice example of the issue of too a heterogeneous audience. Putin's heroic actions may inspire jokes by the Western media, but their spirit is often quite understandable – even if old-fashioned – in the Czech environment and the same actions are probably hitting the right targets among parts of the Russian audience. Acceptance of “gender stereotypes, and a patriarchal culture that privileges maleness and masculinity over femaleness and femininity” is something Valerie Sperling considers essential for using gender symbols in Russian politics (Sperling 2015: 5). Vladimir Putin presents himself as a “Marlboro man”.³ He performs physical fitness (famous half-naked fishing), combat skills (judo duels), survival instincts (shooting a tiger attacking his group), bravery and dedication (fire-fighting) and leadership skills (leading the birds). Elisabeth Wood recognizes two versions of President Putin's “Marlboro man” acts – heroic leader (who stands above the others and dominates the power hierarchy) and the street style tough guy (who navigates securely through dangerous everyday life). This side of his image is underlined by his limited body language and scale of facial expressions. Without any doubt, the desired impression is authority and the desired reaction is respect. And it works. When asked to give the name of a “real man” among Russian politicians, almost one half (44,8 %) of the respondents named Vladimir Putin (Ryabov – Ryabova 2011: 60). There is also a “softer” side of the President's image when he shows graciousness and smiles. Nevertheless, this side appears mostly when in contact with women, pets or Prime Minister Medvedev.⁴ Even the president's more relaxed performances actually fits into

3 Elisabeth Wood calls it “Marlboro man” style in her great lecture *Putin: Masculinity and Hypermasculinity* delivered at University of Michigan in 2011. Available at Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEoPDOH_wHc (7. 5. 2015)

4 This sarcastically looking remark actually has an observable ground, as some analysts argue that Dmitri Medvedev underwent social “feminization” during the presidential campaign of 2008 – he was presented in such situations and making such comments that Putin's tough image was not endangered or even competed (Sperling, 2015).

his “macho” image of the tough, responsible and dedicated man, protector of the weak and appreciator of beauty.⁵

The state media work as a precise transmitter of the desired images of the president’s life to the public, where the right pictures and right moments are chosen to be broadcast in the desired amount, varying from zero (March 2015) to most of the news coverage (especially in pre-election periods).

When we focus on the regime performance as a whole, there are several tools used to support the president’s act and solidify the regime, and the media again serve as the transmitter to the audience. First, there are supporting actors appearing on the domestic or international stage who support the presidential line, and their performances are broadcast by the media to the domestic or international public. The most familiar faces include Prime Minister Medvedev, but also *silovik* ministers such as the Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu and obviously the Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov. In the position of *guest stars*, various celebrities, experts and foreign politicians participate on building the united and desirable media image of the regime.

Besides the troupe, also proper *scenery* has to be built on the stage. There are two types of sceneries: first, the physical one – where the actor stands, what he wears and holds, how the scene is arranged. Second, I decided to call them symbolic – symbolic matters the actors use regularly to support their position and message. In this category in the Russian case, there were at least two important features of the current regime that the spectators could find interesting and that the politicians regularly use to generate support. Firstly, this was a rapid economic growth allowing Russian elites to include a whole range of activities into their performances, which are hidden behind symbolic cards of prosperity and well-being and acclaimed by the public (rising wages, building a social security system, renovations of infrastructure and public places) (Sakwa 2008: 247). Secondly, the performance was decorated by nationalism-supporting symbols carefully crafted around traditional easily revivable sources of Russian national pride. In this context, I consider Russian greatness to be the key symbol used by the patriotic revival (Leichtova 2014: 13–14), which has apparently inspired a great number of activities orchestrated by the current Russian elite (V-Day celebrations, Sochi Olympic Games, G20 summit, popularity of geopolitics in the IR theory, the idea of Eurasianist civilization, etc.).

Recent developments, however, seem to have withdrawn a portion of the economic tricks from the repertoire of the current regime. The economic conditions of the Russian Federation are worsening and furthermore, they have been hit by the economic sanctions launched by the Western countries in response

5 After all, President’s statements regarding women are sometimes (to put it mildly) disputable – for several examples inspired by his remarks on Hillary Clinton see: Radio Free Europe (2014). A Real Ladies’ Man: Putin’s Remarks On Women Over the Years. Available under: <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-putin-women-comments/25411775.html> (7. 7. 2015)

to the Ukrainian crisis. The leading teams and actors representing the current regime would need to adjust their performance in order to keep the audience satisfied and it seems that they have decided to fill the stage with nationalism and push the economic issues to the backstage now, out of the audience's sight.

In this paper we focus on this process, we follow the changes in the stage scenery and symbolic narratives used by the Russian ruling elite in their political acts in order to soften the impact of the economic slowdown and deterioration of relations with some international partners on their public support.

The narrative of the leading man

In this case study, we analyze several performances of the leading actor of the Russian political system – President Putin – directly reacting to the sanctions imposed between Russia and the Western countries and on the economic situation caused by them. First, we would like to confirm our hypothesis that national pride based on Russian strength and greatness is offered to the public as a substitute for economic prosperity in the Russian political elite's performance during the unwelcome plot twist represented by Western sanctions and economic slowdown. Second, we would like to analyze the tools and acting techniques used in the Russian political theater in order to convince the public to support, or at least tolerate, the performance.

Based on what had been said, I assume that the main stage for politicians to perform in front of the public is the media – this fact also shaped my definition of the data source. Moreover, specific conditions on the Russian media market indicate that the media coverage of the national leaders' performances truly serves as a *stage* for them. In Russia, the most popular media is television delivering news to most Russians, while only several channels broadcast nation-wide. The most popular PervyiKanal (*First Channel*) is a state-run television *channel*, which *channels* the political performance directly to the public. This situation may be unlucky for Russian viewers, but it is very useful for my analysis. In other words, broadcasting can be analyzed as a stage for the particular performance, part of the performance presented and edited consistently with the priorities of the political leaders, channeling their political message to the public.

I have collected two sets of data. The first set of data analyzes the leading man of the *ensemble*. I have collected all official statements of the Russian president where sanctions were mentioned in the period July-October 2014⁶ from the official website of the Kremlin and matched them with video footage of particular speeches available on the Internet (mainly on YouTube). This set of data

6 The period begins in July 2014 when the US (July 16th) and then the EU (July 31st) broadened their economic sanctions against Russia and covers three months of regime adjusting to the new conditions, providing the actors enough time to re-arrange the performance and introduce new symbolic narratives to the public.

allows us to analyze the president's performance in a "raw" form – full-length and without any journalists' processing. This material provides us with a set of strategies, priorities and interpretations, which the president – as a leading man of the performance – repeats during his public speeches regarding sanctions, and provides us with guidance through the adjustment period of the regime. The second set of data analyzes media broadcasting targeting domestic audience. All news broadcast by the First Channel where sanctions were mentioned between September 12th and November 12th were analyzed in order to see the regime performance as a whole and grasp the adjustment of the narratives, change of presentation strategies and other tools used to deliver basically bad message (worsening of international position and economic slowdown) without endangering the regime.

The leading man's act

The "raw" material used for this paper contains several speeches given by President Putin, the last of which was the meeting of the Valdai discussion club held on October 24th, 2014 and the first of which is the already famous "world barracks" speech to ambassadors and diplomats delivered at July 1st, 2014. When analyzing the material from the above-mentioned perspectives, we focus on how Vladimir Putin plays the role of the "Russian president" and "national leader" on the "domestic politics" *stage* in order to present the unpleasant situation to the domestic audience without losing their support for him to keep the above-mentioned roles.

First, let us take a closer look at the physical arrangement of the stage. Throughout the whole sample, which includes footage from the occasions broadcast by television or photography material taken during the occasions, there are several patterns in the stage arrangements for the leading man – most of which correspond to arrangements used during political performances of leaders also in other countries. In the event that it is meant to be a discussion with partners, members of the meeting sit around a table or several tables facing each other. The president, if possible, has a prominent central position (in the middle of one side of a square table, the middle of the longer side of an oval table, or the front side – the other being empty – of a rectangular table). If the occasion is meant for the president to be answering questions or delivering a speech, the space is physically divided into a stage and an auditorium sector, the stage being slightly higher in most of the analyzed cases.⁸ The scene where

7 The day when a new round of sanctions was imposed and we may expect a cascade of comments made by Russian officials channeled through the media. The period of two months is representative enough to show how regime delivers the messages to the public, how the ensemble works, what symbols and narratives are used, how they are framed and presented by reporters and editors in order to achieve the desirable impact.

8 Even though experience with other speeches of President Putin proves that the risen stage is not a necessary part of his Q & A sessions.

presidential speeches take place is usually identified as “Russian” – it is common to see national colors used in the particular interior or Russian flags decorating the stage. Sometimes the space is modern and universally applicable (LED screens and white chairs of the Russia calling! summit), while at other times, the space underlines the tradition and dignity of the presidential office – the president enters through huge golden doors when meeting the Human Rights Council or appears behind a movable golden wall to meet journalists after the BRICS meeting. To sum up, the physical side of the scenes usually underlines the importance of the person in the presidential role, underlines the person’s authority in relation to the audience or the discussion partners and identifies the head of state as the head of the Russian state via national symbols. The scene thus helps Vladimir Putin to be interpreted as “the President” even before he has entered the stage, which is common practice probably known from most of the official occasions attended by presidents of any country.

President Putin always comes last⁹, while the others (members of the Government, Human Rights Council members, journalists) wait for him, and after brief greetings the president rushes to work. Again, this is nothing unusual, but we can consider it a part of the performance of “the presidential” role. The president is always spatially centered occupying a prominent space on the stage, which attracts most of the audience’s attention. He is presented as the one without whom any meeting cannot start, the one who is expected by others, and shortly upon his arrival things start moving. All these symbolic arrangements inform us that the president is the leading man of the play and also, that he is effective and capable of dealing with the presidency.

From analyzing the scene and settings we shift our focus to the leading man’s act – how Vladimir Putin physically portrays the roles of the “Russian president” and “national leader”. The president keeps almost always his signature “poker face”¹⁰, which is also supposed to be understood as a part of the performance and not as a lack of his acting talent.¹¹ Absence of emotional expressions has several positive outputs for the president’s performance. Firstly, it fits into the Russian cultural framework – Russians do not smile as often and their body language is not as expressive as that of southern Europeans or Americans. Secondly, every real smile is very rare and makes the audience grateful for it. The president uses this acting skill and “awards” audience with jokes, or wide smiles from time to time with a guaranteed response from the audience. Otherwise, the president usually goes along with just hints of smile, boredom

9 And quite famously and often with delay.

10 The most famous exception to this long-term image of the president is his emotional speech after the 2012 elections (available at YouTube also with English subtitles under the title Putin’s Victory Speech 2012 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=30oMuEo4eDw> (12. 3. 2015))

11 The gossip that the president’s alleged Botox surgery makes the poker face a necessary, not chosen, look; however, we leave it up to the reader to consider.

or irritation. Third, by not revealing his actual emotions too often, he opens a space for himself to react to a situation later. When someone else is speaking, the president usually has the expression of polite interest, often writing notes. The president's body language mostly indicates self-confidence, sitting casually with no signs of nervousness and using limited gestures, which is underlined by his limited facial expressions. This, combined with his undeniably central position on the stage, self-confident behavior and subordinate behavior of other members of his team, supports his authority in front of the audience. In sum, Vladimir Putin's portrayal of the "Russian president" and "national leader" in our samples is based on the image of strength, intelligence and control. The president is presented as a strong authority, with advice or valuable opinion always at hand, driven by pragmatism and rationality rather than emotions.

As for the content of the president's speeches, we will consecutively focus on several mutually interconnected levels, which follow our theoretical standpoints. Regarding Vladimir Putin's role as the "national leader", we will focus on broad concepts that the president uses to frame his practical policies – concepts connected with Russian national identity and its place in the world. Special attention will be paid to the "symbolic" scenery of his performance; what historical events are remembered to encourage the national pride, which features of national identity are cherished and emphasized, what are the relations to the outside world framed into wider concepts of friends and enemies and Russia's historical mission? Regarding his performance as "the President" we will evaluate the "practical" scenery of his performance – policies and strategies that he suggests applying as a response to the Western sanctions. Finally, we will consider relations between both roles held by Vladimir Putin, how do his broader concepts of Russian identity and place in the world fit into his policies and vice versa?

Vladimir Putin as National Leader

When focusing on the broader framework President Putin uses in his speeches we can identify several repeating topics and patterns of argumentation, which present a picture of the regime's perceptions of the world agreed within the circles of the "internal Kremlin politics" and acceptable for the public. First, the president warns against chaos.

Chaos is not a new threat or issue in President Putin's worldview and it is one of the evergreens of Russian post-Soviet politics in general. The early 1990 s were (for several very good reasons) perceived as chaotic already during Yeltsin's 1996 presidential campaign where "Yeltsin successfully exploited slogans of continuity, stability and reform" (Sakwa, 2008 b: 174). Nevertheless, the following political and economic development had not brought much of the highly desired consolidation transforming the demand for stabilization into the public political priority number one. This clearly made way for Putin and

his stabilization policies, which, after a few years of ambitious reforms targeting Russian competitiveness in global affairs, slowly turned into a conservative regime relying on bureaucracy, centralization and exclusion of external risks (Medvedev, 2008: 225). Even if perceptions of the meaning of stability changed, the policies announced in their name varied, and the tools and methods chosen for their achievement evolved, the topic was there to stay.

As an issue very well-known and broadly accepted in internal politics, the threat of chaos and promise of stability work very well for President Putin also in Russian foreign policy. Again, it is nothing new or invented by Putin's Administration. The Russian mission of bringing stability to Europe was already promoted in Tsarist Russia, the world stability relied on US-Russian relations and nuclear power balance for most of the post-war history. In the name of global stability, President Yeltsin also tried to exploit the Russian superpower reputation in the early years after fall of the Soviet Union in relations with the West (Lo, 2002: 110). Later, with the growing influence of Eurasianism and conservatism, Russia was not only pictured as a great power, "it was also a status-quo power facing a revisionist United States" (Clunan, 2009: 200). This is a very important – even if not very surprising – twist in Russian perceptions of the world. The worsening of the Russo-American relations was a long-term process fringed with milestones like the NATO enlargement, solution of the Bosnian war, controversies over the first Chechen war, bombing of Serbia, the Iraq invasion and many more. The main lesson Russia learned during the post-Soviet period was, that expecting an equal position to the US in the world politics was too optimistic (Leichtova, 2014). Instead, for the Russian foreign policy narrative, United States slowly became the source of instability in the current international system while instability was perceived as a threat to the so much desired stability. Such perceptions slowly led to a division, as mentioned by Clunan, between the revisionist (destabilizing) power of the United States and the status-quo (stabilizing) defender – Russia.

These views are clearly demonstrated on several places in the dataset. The president repeatedly warns against deterioration of the international order, slipping into chaos, disrespect for international law, unilateral actions and revolutions in general. And while warning against all these disturbing phenomena he makes it clear who is the one to blame. President Putin has blamed the US for building a "global barracks" at the July meeting with ambassadors¹², where he also mentioned that Russia is not treated as an equal partner as it is given only an observation role in the questions of international and European security. During his interview for ITAR-TASS¹³, Putin labeled US behavior towards some

12 Meeting with ambassadors: Available in English under the title "Putin unveils new Russian foreign policy (live recorded feed)" at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzNL-rRF7FI> (20. 10. 2015)

13 Interview for ITAR-TASS, available in Russian at <http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/46218>. (10. 12. 2014)

countries as harassment, and at his press conference following his journey to Latin America¹⁴, he called the US foreign policy “aggressive”. At the same occasion, he indirectly spoke about those who might cause war by blindly pushing their own interests. Very similar notions of how war can be started by selfish policies are made during his speech at the First World War anniversary ceremony.¹⁵ There is no other actor, state or region in the president’s speeches that is blamed more often for the deterioration of good international relations than the US. At the same time, Russian-American relations are marked as those of global interest suggesting that Russia is a superpower, which should not be (but is) underestimated by the US.¹⁶ In this sense, the nuclear power of Russia is reminded during several occasions such as the meeting with the Russian youth during Seliger 2014.¹⁷

The president also suggests that such developments pose a threat to international security. This is a logical conclusion if US actions are interpreted as endangering the system stability, at the same time, stability is cherished as one of the most important values of national as well as international politics. At the meeting of the Valdai discussion club, the president said directly: *“Sadly, there is no guarantee and no certainty that the current system of global and regional security is able to protect us from upheavals”*.¹⁸

The values that may help Russia deal with challenges of the external world are also indicated in the dataset. It is conservatism and patriotism. These have been no novelties in Russian politics, which is especially true under President Putin’s regime since 2003/2004. At that time, several events occurred which, according to many observers, turned the perceived presidency into a more authoritarian direction quite promisingly. During his first term, foreign analysts and politicians were quite optimistic regarding the new president and skeptical to his ability to possibly turn the Russian state into an authoritarian regime.¹⁹

14 Responses to journalists’ questions, available in Russian at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/46236> (10. 12. 2014)

15 First World War memorial speech. Available under the title “Great Vladimir Putin Speech about World War I Russia – WWI 1914” also in English at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K81T66P7MGg> (4. 3. 2015)

16 Interview for the Politika newspaper available in Russian at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/46806> (10. 12. 2014)

17 Seliger Youth Forum 2014. Available with subtitles under the title “Vladimir Putin answers – with Secret Service informations – FULL HD Subtitles” at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxTLkCl6fBA> (4. 3. 2015)

18 Valdai Discussion Club meeting. Available in English under the title “Putin at Valdai – World Order: New Rules or a Game without Rules (FULL VIDEO)” at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9F9pQcqPdKo> (4. 3. 2015)

19 Thomas Nichols, for example, in 2001 in his great work on the developments in the Russian presidency doubts Putin would be able to change the political course even if he wanted to, because “The transition in 1999 and the subsequent election in 2000 show that Russians have gotten accustomed to speaking their minds, to communicating freely with each other, to voting, and even to the idea that Russia is, and will remain, a capitalist state.” (Nichols, 2001: 180).

Nevertheless, it was the shadow of revolution endangering the stability – the Orange revolution in Ukraine in 2004 and mass protests of seniors in Moscow in 2005 (according to Horvath, 2013: 6), or even earlier the regime criticism after the Yukos take-over in 2003 and an uncontrolled threat of terrorism after Beslan 2004 (according to Medvedev, 2008: 225) that led the regime to emphasize centralization and self-preservation in order to gain more control over the changes in society.

Again, from this internal perspective, Putin's conservatism in foreign affairs is easier to understand. What the regime fears at home – upheavals, revolutions and uncontrolled acts of violence – it seems to fear in international affairs, probably also for similar reasons, therefore its aim being control of the internal and external environment and its evolution in order to sustain power for the regime. Holding power is – without any need to access secret information – probably the basic deal made between President Putin and other actors on the “internal Kremlin politics” stage. Fulfillment of such a deal is much easier in a stable, controllable and slowly evolving internal and external environment. It may be for this reason the president is sure that:

*“Mass protests and rallies are an entirely legitimate method for expressing one’s opinion and fighting for one’s interests, but all of this needs to happen within the framework of the law. Revolutions are bad. We have had more than enough of those revolutions in the 20th century. What we need is evolution”.*²⁰

We shall also focus on President Putin's interpretation of nationalism. He does not hesitate to call himself the “*biggest nationalist in Russia*”²¹ which is very illustrative for his view of nationalism. In his perception nationalism is inextricably connected with the State, its institutions and also government.²² The Seliger meeting gives us a very useful historic example:

*“In the First World War, the Bolsheviks wished to see their Fatherland defeated. And while the heroic Russian soldiers and officers shed their blood on the fronts in World War I, some were shaking Russia from within and shook it to the point that Russia as a state collapsed and declared itself defeated by a country that had lost the war. It is nonsense, it is absurd, but it happened! This was a complete betrayal of national interests!”*²³

20 Valdai Discussion Club meeting. Available in English under the title “Putin at Valdai – World Order: New Rules or a Game without Rules (FULL VIDEO)” at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9F9pQcqPdKo> (4. 3. 2015)

21 ibidem

22 In this sense, he claims he is his own biggest supporter, which is undoubtedly truth

23 Seliger Youth Forum 2014. Available with subtitles under the title “Vladimir Putin answers – with Secret Service informations – FULL HD Subtitles” at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxTLkCl6fBA> (4. 3. 2015)

Regardless of what they believed in, of any higher principle they might have believed to follow, Bolsheviks betrayed national interest by revolutionary dismissal of Russian state institutions. It is obviously the best self-preservation strategy for the regime, to proclaim the state institutions untouchable by any revolutionary or unconstitutional means by pronouncing such activities non-patriotic or betraying national interests, while getting under control all legal ways of a possible change. Similar logic seeps into foreign policy. The President maintains that Russia always deals with official leaders of a country and does not support any unconstitutional changes such as coups, revolutions or civil wars:

*“Russia always supports the acting authorities. We are not like some of our partners. Maybe, in this regard, they are even being more pragmatic, they are always putting their eggs into multiple baskets. Moreover (the Americans do this), even if a government somewhere is loyal to them, they always work with the opposition. Always!”*²⁴

In support of patriotism, President Putin has also other symbolic cards in his hand than the State itself. All of them can be linked with the idea of Russian greatness. Despite that the president says he does not look for any special place for Russia in world affairs, just for a respected position with its interests taken into account²⁵; he also makes it clear, that such position is equal to the world’s most powerful states. We have already mentioned the nuclear power hints here and there, we may also include the military power in general. A very illustrative example for this whole section is the following quote from the president’s meeting with the parties represented in Duma:

*“Russia, just as any other large, powerful, sovereign state, has different tools for ensuring its national interests, and these include the Armed Forces and military equipment. However, this is not a cure-all and we do not intend to run around the world waving a razor blade, as some people do.”*²⁶

Also the victory in the Second World War is mentioned now and then²⁷ with indirect or direct contemporary messages:

Regrettably, in some European countries the Nazi virus “vaccine” created at the Nuremberg Tribunal is losing its effect. This is clearly demonstrated by open mani-

24 Ibidem.

25 Valdai Discussion Club meeting. Available in English under the title “Putin at Valdai – World Order: New Rules or a Game without Rules (FULL VIDEO)” at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9F9pQcqPdKo> (4. 3. 2015)

26 Meeting with members of political parties represented in the State Duma <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46451> (10. 12. 2014)

27 Naturally it happens mostly in May when the V-day is celebrated.

*festations of neo-Nazism that have already become commonplace in Latvia and other Baltic states. The situation in Ukraine, where nationalists and other radical groups provoked an anti-constitutional coup d'état in February, causes particular concern in this respect. Today, it is our shared duty to combat the glorification of Nazism. We must firmly oppose the attempts to revise the results of WWII and consistently combat any forms and manifestations of racism, xenophobia, aggressive nationalism and chauvinism".*²⁸

The Second World War is also used as a symbol of national pride and proof of Russian strength.

In the world shaken by unilateral actions of the US, the European countries – despite their alliance with the United States – are still presented with much more understanding. This, again, has roots older than the current Ukrainian crisis. First of all, on the domestic stage the relations to Europe are framed into the centuries-long question whether Russia is or is not a European country. Second, it is linked with the turn in Russian foreign policy which came already with minister Primakov in late 1990, who sought to counter-balance the American prevalence in the system. Under the new president, the change has become much more visible and also effective. Bobo Lo, aptly as usual, sums up:

"The single most powerful factor in effecting this change has been Putin himself. Although he [2000a, p. 156] has echoed Gorbachevian ideas of a 'common European home' by stating his conviction that Russians are 'a part of Western European culture', he has in practice pursued a highly flexible approach to issues of cultural-civilizational location. In particular, he has balanced a personal Eurocentrism by assiduously promoting relations and contacts with non-Western countries and regions. He has thrown himself into a frenetic programme of two-way visits, involving not only the major Western and non-Western powers, but also several countries – North Korea, Cuba – which his predecessor conspicuously ignored. He has also carefully tailored his messages to his audience. When visiting Europe, Putin has spoken the language of European integration [2001c, p. 1]; in relations with the CIS member-states, the emphasis has been on post-Soviet integration and common values and interests arising from a shared past and present [2001 b, p. 4]; with China, the focus has turned to 'strategic partnership' in a multipolar world [2000c, p. 6]; and Moscow has sought common cause with the Islamic world on the basis of, among other things, a civilizational front against the menace of international terrorism [2001c, p. 2]" (Lo 2002: 159)

28 Interview for the Politika newspaper available in Russian at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/46806> (10. 12. 2014)

This “obsession” with multi-polarity partially relieved the situation for the regime when sanctions were imposed on Russia. Europeans are introduced as dependent and under American pressure in the current situation. The president says directly: *“We are aware of the pressure our American partners are putting on France to force it not to supply Mistrals to Russia.”* during the speech for ambassadors.²⁹ While China and other BRICS countries are introduced as cure for the trouble, as we will see later. At first sight, according to the narrative, it seems as if almost nothing has changed in the Russian foreign policy following the sanctions.

To sum up, as national leader President Putin pictures the contemporary world as a place of growing instability caused by the unilateral activities of the United States. The situation is presented as potentially dangerous to Russia especially by its potential to bring about chaos instead of the deservedly earned stability. As a counter measure to such undesirable developments, he prescribes nationalism understood as loyalty to the State, supported by national pride on heroic history, military power and international importance of Russia. Another important value is conservatism and opposition to any abrupt changes that might cause instability resulting into declared support for ruling governments and opposition to revolutionary forces in foreign as well as domestic politics – with considerable freedom, as proved in the Crimean case, to label various political movements home and abroad revolutionary and unconstitutional, or just and rightful.

Vladimir Putin as “the President”

When drawing a bigger picture of the world shaken by American activities directed in case of sanctions once again against Russia, President Putin has to propose practical steps to solve the situation. As national leader he may frame the situation into broader context in order to explain to the public what happened and why it happened, but as “President” he also needs to say what is to be done in order to deal with the situation. In our case the situation in question is the imposition of Western sanctions. The president’s immediate response to the situation available in the dataset may be summed up as follows:

- sanctions are groundless and illegal
- sanctions don’t work, have a boomerang effect and damage those who impose them
- for Russia, the sanctions are an almost welcomed opportunity to develop itself
- Russia can find substitutes for their Western suppliers and markets, especially in China but also in Latin America.

²⁹ Meeting with ambassadors: Available in English under the title “Putin unveils new Russian foreign policy (live recorded feed)” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzNL-rRF7FI> (20. 10. 2015)

The common message in all of the above-mentioned arguments if translated into the “national leader” narrative may be interpreted like this: the United States not only attempt to destabilize Russian immediate surroundings by sponsoring the Ukrainian coup, but now they are trying to destabilize Russia itself by attacking it in the form of sanctions. During his interview for the Russian main news agency ITAR-TASS, he said directly that Russia is harassed and under American attack:

*“Recently Russia has been exposed to a sanction attack from the United States and its allies. We are grateful to our BRICS partners who have criticized such practices in different forms. At the same time, substantive conclusions should be drawn from the current situation. Together we should think about a system of measures that would help prevent the harassment of countries that do not agree with some foreign policy decisions made by the United States and their allies, but would promote a civilized dialogue on all points at issue based on mutual respect”.*³⁰ President Putin repeatedly describes the sanctions as illegal and unilateral claiming, for example, at the meeting with ambassadors, that international sanctions must be based on Article 7 of the UN Charter otherwise such step should not even be called sanction but political instrument.³¹

Regarding the impact of the sanctions – some damage is expected but it is expected to be mutual for both sides. The Russian President blames European and American leaders for damaging their own companies, which are not allowed to do business in Russia even if they would profit there.³² Quite a lot of attention in the dataset is dedicated to the argument that Russia will not only manage the situation thanks to its internal strength but can even profit from it. The president summarized his position during the Valdai meeting:

*“Russia is not going to get all worked up, get offended or come begging at anyone’s door. Russia is a self-sufficient country. We will work within the foreign economic environment that has taken shape, develop domestic production and technology and act more decisively to carry out transformation. Pressure from outside, as has been the case on past occasions, will only consolidate our society, keep us alert and make us concentrate on our main development goals”.*³³

30 Interview given to the news agency ITAR-TASS. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46218> (10. 12. 2014)

31 Meeting with ambassadors: Available in English under the title “Putin unveils new Russian foreign policy (live recorded feed)” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZNL-rRF7FI> (20. 10. 2015)

32 Press conference following President’s visits to Cuba, Nicaragua, Argentina and Brazil. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46236> (10. 12. 2014)

33 Valdai Discussion Club meeting. Available in English under the title “Putin at Valdai – World Order: New Rules or a Game without Rules (FULL VIDEO)” at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9F9pQcqPdKo> (4. 3. 2015)

If we link this approach with the “national-leader” role, the president definitely refers to Russian greatness (physical and symbolic) and also to Russian rich (and rated as heroic) history of suffering in the name of the country. This is also a level, where it is possible to combine very naturally the “presidential” and “national leader” parts of his performance: *“If we did not think – if I did not think – that Russia’s agriculture sector is up to the challenge, we would never have taken these counter sanctions”*.³⁴ In this quote, the president presents himself, in accordance with the visual part of the performance, as the moving engine within the country’s leadership making a connection between its policies and the patriotic belief in Russian greatness and ability to survive.

At the same time, the president emphasizes that the situation has not come to existence by Russia’s fault, but by decision of the Western countries, especially the US. Further, he reminds of the validity and Russian readiness to engage in common economic and humanitarian Eurasian space from Lisbon to Vladivostok during his meeting with ambassadors.³⁵ Russian counter-sanctions are presented as a necessary measure taken only under the condition of an unlawful attack:

“Government of Russia has made the decision to limit imports from many nations that imposed entirely unfounded and unlawful sanctions on Russia. But I want to note that this is not just a retaliatory measure”.³⁶

The last important argument the president gives regarding the sanction situation is the chance for developing the Asian vector of Russian foreign policy to substitute the Western one. It is again a strategy known for at least 20 years, when the then foreign minister Primakov introduced his foreign policy concept of natural Russian world power interest to have multilateral international ties (Lo, 2002: 19). His concept included development of strong ties with China (and also India). President Putin and the multi-vector foreign policy of his first two terms follow the pattern with greater ambition, resources, and some observable success. Therefore, emphasizing partnership with China and Asia in general in times of disputes with the Western countries is a natural strategy which is, at least partially, based on existing experience and knowledge of the audience. The president exploits this fact in order to emphasize there is nothing really special about the situation and Russia will cope with it just by following its long-term policies suggesting indirectly that Russian leadership was basically prepared

34 Russian Popular Front Actions Forum. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47036> (10. 12. 2014)

35 Meeting with ambassadors: Available in English under the title “Putin unveils new Russian foreign policy (live recorded feed)” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzNL-rRF7FI> (20. 10. 2015)

36 Meeting with members of political parties represented in the State Duma. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46451> (10. 12. 2014)

for something similar coming from the West. For example during his visit to Italy, President Putin said to the journalists at the press conference: *“We are expanding our contacts with countries in Asia and the Pacific. This is not a political decision. This is because we have long been working in this direction, bearing in mind the economic growth rates in the Asia-Pacific region”*.³⁷ During the Russia Calling! investment forum in St. Petersburg, he also stated clearly: *“Among our priorities is greater business, trade, investment and technological partnership with Latin America, the Asia-Pacific region and our colleagues within BRICS, including China and India, naturally”*.³⁸ Summed up, in the president’s speeches, Russia is definitely introduced as a superpower, a superpower that is paying for its “rebellion” against American dictate, while it would like to build open relations with the US but is not allowed to; a country whose arms are open for European partners but it is not accepted, therefore it turns to more open and rational partners that will treat Russia better.

In the most specific part of the performance dealing with practical policies, President Putin is from time to time very detailed when suggesting the steps to be taken, quoting precise numbers and introducing short-term development scenarios.

For example, in order to prevent the ruble from free fall he suggests using the Russian currency in international trade (especially with China), which would increase demand for ruble and stabilize it.³⁹ Also at the Russia calling! summit, the president introduced massive programs of state investments which would support national industry especially in innovations and patents, and develop national agriculture. This again may be tied with his “national leader” position, as it is the State taking care of the situation; citizens are seemingly supposed to hold on and wait for state policies to ease their lives. Further, several times within the dataset, the dichotomy between the somehow negatively presented West and positively described Russia appears again even though in very new connotations:

“Unfortunately, mass food production in many industrially developed countries is largely based on the use of chemicals, on medicines that they give to cattle to keep it healthy, and the various growth stimulators: the faster your cattle grows the faster your turnover and the more money you can make. But this is harmful. Look at the

37 Answers to journalists’ questions after the official visit to Italy. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46827> (10. 12. 2014)

38 Russia Calling! Investment forum. Available under the title *“RUSSIA CALLING!’ Putin’s full speech, Q & A at key investor forum”* at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SoTGKuLugmE> (2. 3. 2015) quoted transcript available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46713> (10. 12. 2014)

39 Russia Calling! Investment forum. Available under the title *“RUSSIA CALLING!’ Putin’s full speech, Q & A at key investor forum”* at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SoTGKuLugmE> (2. 3. 2015)

*situation with obesity in some countries. It is terrible! This has to do with food. Our produce is of course much better and healthier”.*⁴⁰

On this level of analysis, the visual and rhetorical parts of the performance meet nicely. President Putin evidently likes presenting himself as the one who always has the exact information in hand, who knows about all important aspects of basically any issue relevant for his country. This fits perfectly to the physical arrangements of the occasions mentioned above. The president likes to cite the exact amounts of bilateral trade, sums of trade deals, size of investments, etc.⁴¹ Such behavior emphasizes his role of the central character in the performance and his ability to play the role of “the President” in front of the audience. This strategy works usually quite well with a few exceptions where the president’s range of knowledge may seem almost absurd for some members of the audience (so for the author): “*A decade ago, we imported 360,000 tons of poultry from the United States. Last year, as far as I remember, the figure was only 200*”.⁴²

The orchestrated dance of the ensemble

We have described quite extensively the performance of President Putin. His performance is channeled to the public via the media. To gain more detailed information about the performance as a whole, we will focus on the media coverage in order to describe the performance Russian public is being presented with in its complexity. I followed the broadcasting of one of the biggest state TV channels – the First Channel, where I expected the biggest impact on the population. TV is the main source of information for Russians, as about 98 % of the population watch TV, while it is only the First Channel and Rossiya, both state-owned TV channels, reaching over half of the Russian population each week (Pietilainen – Fomicheva – Resnianskaia 2010: 48).

We will not spoil any surprise if we confirm now, that our premise that the media coverage is in accord with the president’s line.⁴³ According to the dataset, the First Channel constantly broadcasts good news about the Russian regime and its ability to overcome any difficulties that may be caused by sanctions. The First Channel, in accordance with President Putin’s public speeches, clearly helps repelling any concerns among the public that might have been given rise

40 Meeting with members of political parties represented in the State Duma <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46451> (10. 12. 2014)

41 This is such an extensively used feature of President Putin’s public appearances that basically any sample from the dataset would do to support of this claim.

42 Meeting with members of political parties represented in the State Duma <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46451> (10. 12. 2014)

43 All cited reports are available in Russian at the website of the First Channel after inserting the keyword “sankcii” into the search engine <http://www.1tv.ru/>

by the sanctions. There are several types of performances presented on the First Channel News roughly corresponding to the president's performances.

The first type is the *"sanctions do not work"* performance: news like the success of Rossiya Bank (October 9th) – where the president himself in one of my favorite performances of his self-confidence outside of the dataset period – opened an account (March 21st), the success of Vneshekonombank (September 23rd), news from the Defense Ministry that supplies for the army will be delivered to the full this year (October 10th), refusal to introduce a new tax on sale (September 19th) or cited statistics of the good macroeconomic state of the Russian economy (Putin during the Russia Calling summit with investors, Medvedev during a meeting with investors, September 24th). This applies also to the ruble, as the Central Bank announced it would let the ruble float freely until the end of October and then stabilize it within a 4.5 – 6.5% inflation rate. Further, an ambitious plan to invest 74 billion rubles into sport development until 2020 seems to fit into this category (October 9th). In short, everything disturbing is presented as temporary, or sometimes even planned in advance, while assuring the audiences that the federal budget is strong and fulfills the agreed targets (October 3rd).

The second type of performance is *"sanctions are an opportunity for our own development and will damage those who have imposed them"*. As mentioned before, President Putin himself delivers speeches on this topic during his solo acts. This line has fully been supported by Prime Minister Medvedev at the International Investment Forum (several reports on September 20th), where he cited several reasons why Russia will survive the situation, including the fact that it has 150 million citizens and stretches over half of Eurasia, which fits nicely into the rhetoric of a "national leader". Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov talked in a similar manner to a journalist on September 24th, emphasizing that Russia will not retreat from its priorities in order to have the sanctions lifted, and that those who imposed them will be losing lucrative opportunities in Russia.

The third type of performance presented to the Russian public is *"there are others who are keen on doing business with us"*. The deal signed by President Putin with Chinese representatives served this purpose repeatedly on September 14th. Moreover, Sergei Lavrov claimed in his above-mentioned speech that there are others to work with on the Russian Antarctic shelf, if American companies do not want to, and Prime Minister Medvedev goes even further claiming that for Germany, it took 40 years to become Russia's best customer, although he cannot say if it would also take as long to replace it by China (September 21st). Again, the role of BRICS and Latin America as prospective regions for trade and investments is mentioned several times within the sample.

The fourth type, *"the West is divided"* performance, is widely used in the news. Various politicians, analysts and experts are quoted who do not agree with the sanctions imposed on Russia or are willing to express their hope for the situ-

ation to improve. The former president of the Czech Republic, Václav Klaus (November 3rd) and the incumbent president Miloš Zeman (besides indirect quotes in the dataset, he gave an often cited interview for the Russian media on November 16th) are being quoted, too. However, the German long-time and now former minister Hans Dietrich Genscher appeared on the First Channel claiming that Russia is part of Europe and sanctions are unlikely to be effective (September 20th). Even almost extreme cases appear: for example, the American political scientist Geoffrey Stenberg introduces his theory of a devastated Western financial market where tycoons force President Obama to get hold of Ukraine in order to acquire new resources and markets (September 21st).

Moreover, several *reports serving only to support the current regime* appear. First of all, support ratings of the current country leadership are quoted as record-high (September 28th). Secondly, there has been a new launch of patriotic sentiment, including T-shirts with President Putin in the Moscow GUM shopping center, which was welcomed by thousands of customers and broadcast by the media (October 6th). Several references to Second World War were made (September 28th) introducing Russia as guarantor of a peaceful and stable world order.

Quite open *criticism of the Western countries* can be found in the sample, furthermore, very often from the mouths of Western politicians, authors, and experts. Inclusion of Western experts is undoubtedly a part of the performance accentuating the impression that Russian elite opinions and opinions of the First Channel are supported worldwide. Sometimes the message is not only critical but even threatening. This is especially the case when NATO is mentioned in the narrative. Usually pictures of civilian victims, explosions and military equipment illustrate the message on the screen (also on quite unexpected occasions, such as reporting on Sergei Lavrov's speech in the UN on September 28th) while the US are presented as direct threat to Russia, including in military terms (September 29th). To sum up, no single case of open criticism of the president's performance can be found in the sample. Throughout the dataset, the governmental team plays hand in hand supporting President Putin's views on all levels analyzed above. Government members are usually providing similar information like the president, only from various viewpoints depending on their specialization. Sometimes they provide more details or contextual information making the message more trustworthy for the viewer. A specific phenomenon is presentation of foreign experts and politicians. Their comments and opinions are in accord with the president's performance and we can hardly find another reason for them to be incorporated into the broadcasting than further support for the presidential line. The opinion presented in the media is thus quite coherent while supported by domestic and foreign authorities and experts, without confusing the viewer too much. The message is quite clear and uniform from the president down to the commentators. We may probably add that overall

experience with other Russian state-owned media suggests that the credibility is further enhanced by considerable accord among various media channels.

The media team supports the official line not only by the scripted texts for their reporters but also by various technical and professional means. It is noteworthy that the level of similarity between the official line and the media coverage during the observed period of two months basically cannot be random, and therefore suggests some level of coordination between the media and the political ensemble. Also the topics and opinions presented in the media follow in most cases timely their appearance in the political narrative, giving us the hint that the agenda setting – the topics to be broadcast – are mostly created on the political stage, and not that much in the media editorial offices. At times, the media sample goes further than the presidential sample in particular topics. There are no discrepancies but the broadcasting is occasionally more “radical” in criticism, outrage, patriotism, etc. There is more space for speculation and unconfirmed scenarios in the broadcasting than the president might use in his performance without endangering his credibility. This feature has also positive impact on President Putin’s performance of authority and leadership as, in comparison to other voices on the media stage, his appearances are moderate and rational.

Conclusions

There are several modest conclusions we may draw from our analysis. First of all, dramaturgical analysis proved a useful metaphorical framework for this paper, providing us with very useful distance from the analyzed problem of sanctions imposed on Russia, allowing us to grasp the issue as a partially unexpected plot-twist that forces the main actors and their teams to improvise on stage in order to keep the audience satisfied. This framework allowed us to focus on the actors and their acting skills, on Russian politicians and their communication with the public rather than on searching for reasons for Russian behavior based on external information. We could follow President Putin, his team, strategies, frameworks and symbolic reasons for their actions rather than following external interpretations imposed on them. I hope all my interpretative work above was always clearly consistent with the dataset while understandably linking the particular parts of the performance for the reader to understand my conclusions even if possibly not agreeing with all of them.

We may now sum up our findings regarding President Putin’s roles. Vladimir Putin performs simultaneously in two slightly different but strongly interlinked positions of “the national leader” and “the President”. The first position describes a person who inspires and leads the society in a broader symbolic and spiritual manner, a person who presents acceptable versions of such topics as national identity, patriotism, characteristic of the outer world, etc. The other position describes a person who achieved the institutional position of the Presi-

dent and is accepted as the person performing the job by introducing specific policies, carrying out daily administrative duties and representing the country abroad. I considered it useful to distinguish these roles, as I believe it is possible to hold one of the roles without holding the other – for example in the years 2008–2012, Vladimir Putin was not “the President”, but only few would question his role of the “national leader”. In our research, we focused on the domestic political stage and the message delivered to the Russian public, but we shall not forget that especially in case of President Putin all his performances are simultaneously presented to influential groups behind the main stage, whom we nicknamed “internal Kremlin politics”, and most of his performances are also followed by spectators from the stage of “international politics”.

In his role of the national leader, President Putin puts strong emphasis on the issues of stability, evolution, patriotism and conservatism. As argued above, his priorities are not new in Russian political thinking, which makes them easily “digestible” for the general public. Moreover, all mentioned topics are clearly interlinked. International stability relates directly to the stability of the state and the domestic regime, while patriotism is presented as loyalty not only to the nation but also to the state. Only evolutionary changes are acceptable and should be implemented in the form of healthy conservatism, ensuring the bases of the nation and the state are not being undermined. All of the above mentioned topics are here and there elegantly framed into the unifying topic of Russian greatness and exceptionality.

This framework is transmitted into the contemporary world in quite a clear manner. The main source of danger is instability and the main source of instability is the unilateral and arbitrary behavior of the United States. As a remedy for threats posed by US American actions conservatism and new partners are advisable to balance the US. According to the narrative, most promising partners are to be found in East Asia.

As “the President” solving the unwelcome issue of economic sanctions launched against his country, President Putin follows the above-mentioned framework. First of all, he presents the sanctions as an illegal and arbitrary action of the United States fittingly accompanying the above-mentioned logic of the US as the main threat to Russian stability. Then he announces the strong role of the state in coping with the new situation, which again fits the idea of the state as embodiment of the nation. While introducing ambitious plans and strategies the president calls for patriotism understood again as support for the state institutions and regime. Historical symbols are also present on the stage, where on several occasions historical heroism of the Russian nation is remembered and connected with the fact that in the most heroic moments – especially the World War Two fulfills this symbolic role – the people actually suffered. The motive of enduring and unification under pressure is present on several places in the dataset and might be considered culturally specific.

The presidential line is further taken up by the media. Only when following the state media we may observe the performance delivered to the Russian public in its complexity and also formally independent from the “international politics” stage. The framing and priming made by Russian state media gives the presidential message its final sense and tone quite independent from the opinion of foreign audiences (who watch the president’s speeches framed and interpreted by their own media).

Not a single case of discord was found in the media dataset if compared with the presidential dataset. On the media stage, President Putin’s performance is complemented with the performances of supportive teams and actors. First of all, not very surprisingly, such role is reserved for the government members including the Prime Minister. Their loyalty to the president is already stipulated by the constitutional order of the country and further cemented on the “internal Kremlin politics” backstage. We would expect similar behavior from the majority of the members of Parliament if they appeared in the dataset, as many of them are tied with the presidential line within the common team of United Russia.

Second, many seemingly independent politicians and experts are engaged in the broadcasting, who often originate from the Western countries. This has definitely a very significant effect on the overall impression of the viewer. All such guests at least partially agree with the line of the Russian regime or at least disagree with the Western actions and successfully provide credibility of the widely shared and repeatedly confirmed opinion of the official line. In the dataset, not a single purely critical comment was given a voice in the broadcasting, even though we are aware that such critical voices do exist. If we focus on the case of the Czech Republic, it was our incumbent as well as the former president who appeared in the dataset criticizing the sanctions regime, while supporters of the sanctions from the Czech political spectrum were not quoted.

Third, the reporters themselves and the staff responsible for the technical and visual side of the news do not doubt the official line. The agenda setting is made on the political level and state media only broadcast the message to the public. Sometimes we may find that the media picture some actors or events in an even more graphical way than the president’s speeches. This can be interpreted in the framework of dramaturgical analysis – President Putin always plays on several stages, so he needs to balance his steps in order not to discredit himself in front of any of the audiences. On the other hand, Russian state media target mostly and primarily the Russian public. They are not very interested in “internal Kremlin politics” deals and accept their results by accepting the official narrative; foreign audiences do not pay mass attention to the Russian national broadcasting either. Even the president needs credibility and authority to deliver satisfactory performance, while repeated false accusations or inaccurate information might discredit his performance. The current situation provides

him even with the opportunity to act as a rational and moderate leader under the conditions of aroused emotions.

The dataset contained supportive materials for all of the above-mentioned positions of President Putin being it Russian greatness, heroic past, destabilizing United States, patriotism as loyalty to the state. Thus the performance is quite convincing and clear for the viewer without leaving him in doubt. The domestic situation under the sanction regime is pictured in bright colors with massive investment programs broadly introduced; good news is listed regarding the Russian economic performance, the national reserves are presented as an engine of the country's development. On several occasions, sanctions are described as Russia's opportunity to build up its own sources and create new partnerships (especially in China) in the international trade arena. Despite the fact that difficulties are expected, this information is presented either with the vision of a better future or with a clear identification of the culprit. The one to blame are the United States and (somewhat less) European countries, their sanctions being considered illegal and unprovoked. This is a very important interpretation in clearly stating that the current situation was not caused by the Russian leadership, and even sending quite openly the message that Russia's interests and economy are under external attack, which probably carries significant potential to generate wider support for the regime.

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