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Research article

From Soft Power to Sharp Power: Weaponising Western Academic Knowledge in Russian Political Discourse

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Abstract

This paper examines how Russia appropriates Western academic knowledge as a tool of influence in its communication with Western audiences. It pursues three main objectives. First, it argues that the concept of soft power has been widely misunderstood due to its intangible, non-kinetic nature, often being mischaracterized as disinformation and manipulative practices associated with Russian influence. Second, the paper offers a refined interpretation of sharp power. While sharp power has typically been examined in political, institutional, normative, or economic contexts, this study calls for an ideational—or even ideological—approach. Third, it argues that Russia exploits the intellectual strengths of Western democratic societies, namely the knowledge field. In order to explain the last point, this study offers a discourse analysis of Vladimir Pozner and Fyodor Lukyanov, Russian intellectuals who frequently present themselves as independent commentators, alongside Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Foreign Minister. The aim is to demonstrate, both the similarities in their discursive strategies, and how they directly draw on concepts originating in the Western academic tradition. These concepts and theories, particularly those rooted in international relations and political science, are selectively appropriated, re-signified, and mobilized to 'speak the language' of Western audiences, with the intention of legitimizing Russia's foreign policy positions.

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Introduction

In the early 2000s, as the democratic world, led by the United States, celebrated the triumph of liberal democracy over the authoritarian rule of the Soviet Union and its satellite states, Western academia began to praise and universalise the liberal norms championed by the victors of the Cold War. In the 1990s, Francis Fukuyama famously framed liberal democracy as the pinnacle of governance, while a decade later Joseph Nye introduced the concept of *soft power* to highlight the universal appeal of Western liberal norms, which he argued contributed to US supremacy. Nye sought to demonstrate that American dominance on the international stage was not solely attributable to military strength but also to the values and principles upheld by US society and government.

Over time, the concept of soft power came to be understood as a *non-coercive*, and most importantly, a *non-kinetic* form of influence distinct from military or economic force, and largely reliant on *intangible* means of persuasion. This interpretation aligns with Gallarotti who, building on conventional International Relations (IR) scholarship, contrasts Nye's understanding of power with that of Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer, who associate power primarily with military capabilities (Gallarotti 2011: 26).

In 2017, Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig of the National Endowment for Democracy challenged the prevailing theoretical understanding of soft power, arguing that this conceptual limitation contributed to practical difficulties in countering authoritarian regimes, particularly Russia and China. They introduced the term *sharp power* to describe the methods of influence employed by authoritarian states, defining it as a strategy that seeks to 'pierce, penetrate, or perforate the political and information environments in targeted countries' (Walker & Ludwig 2017). Their central argument is that Russia exploits the very strengths of Western democratic societies – such as openness, civil liberties and individual freedoms – by weaponizing them against these very societies.

Following the logic of Walker and Ludwig, this article argues that as the Kremlin employs sharp power tactics – characterised primarily by manipulative methods – the Russian political leadership draws upon theories of international relations and debates rooted in Western academic traditions to justify the war in Ukraine. In other words, Russia exploits Western scholarly knowledge to manipulate and shape perceptions both domestically and internationally.

This paper has several aims. First, it argues that the notion of soft power is often misunderstood, which allows Russia and other authoritarian or dictatorial regimes to gain access to Western societies while simultaneously isolating themselves from external influence. Second, it introduces the concept of sharp power and contends that, in addition to commonly associated practices such as spreading disinformation, manipulating public opinion and censoring dissent, sharp power can be understood as the exploitation of features typically regarded as strengths of Western democratic systems. Finally, to illustrate this argument, the paper analyses the dominant discourse within the Russian political sphere, demonstrating how specific ideas originating in Western academic scholarship – particularly in the fields of international relations and political science – are appropriated, weaponised and projected onto the international stage.

The paper is structured as follows: after the introductory chapter, it continues with an outline of the main methodological considerations, followed by a brief conceptual discussion on the terms of *soft power* and *sharp power*. After the conceptual debate, the paper proceeds with a discourse analysis of public speeches, comments and written communications by President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, as well as by Vladimir Pozner and Fyodor Lukyanov – two influential figures in Russian intellectual circles who are often portrayed as independent voices, but are, in fact, closely associated with the Kremlin. Due to space constraints, the paper highlights how selected ideas from Western academic thought are referenced or appropriated in the analysed speeches, without providing comprehensive definitions or full contextualisation of each academic concept.

Methodology

As this study examines how the Russian political elite uses Western academic knowledge to engage Western audiences – at the governmental, academic and societal levels – it adopts discourse analysis to detect, trace and analyse how Western theories are appropriated to shape perceptions of the West. The paper follows the discourse-analytical approaches of Jennifer Milliken and David Campbell, grounded in the view that language is not merely reflective but constitutive of threats, identities, legitimacy and policies. In brief, Milliken addresses how to analyse discourse, while Campbell explains why it should be analysed.

David Campbell argues that the concept of security does not simply respond to pre-existing threats (Campbell 1998). Articulated through language, security is a discursive construction that generates the very threats it claims to address. Foreign policy, therefore, is not merely reactive but shaped by ongoing discursive practices centred on the invocation of threat. This is especially relevant for Russia, which often depicts itself as a victim of Western expansionism, invoking narratives of existential danger, neocolonialism and threats to the statehood of peaceful Orthodox Christian communities in Russia and Ukraine.

For Campbell, discourse not only articulates threats that shape foreign policy, but also constructs national identity. He contends that identities are largely formed through antagonism – by drawing boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. What is particularly relevant to this study is the idea that identities are fluid and can be reshaped through discourse. This is significant, as the Russian political elite frequently navigates across various ideological paradigms, often shifting the perception of the Russian state or people, and adopting ideas that are convenient at a given moment.

Milliken (1999) who – similarly to Campbell – draws on philosophical perspectives from Jacques Derrida and Ferdinand de Saussure, outlines three key premises for discourse analysis:

1. Discourses as systems of signification: Discourses are structured systems of meaning-making that work to normalise and legitimise specific ways of speaking or thinking by reproducing them over time. Here, Milliken draws on a social constructivist notion that meaning is not inherent in the material world but is constructed through linguistic and symbolic representation.
2. Discourse productivity: This refers to the productive power of discourse – its ability to shape what can be thought, said or known. In this process, some ideas are legitimised while others are marginalised or excluded. Discourses thus create boundaries of acceptable knowledge, empowering some actors or perspectives while disqualifying others.
3. The play of practice: This concerns how discourses move beyond abstract ideas and begin to inform policy, identity and practice. Through repeated use and institutionalisation, discourses can become hegemonic, shaping what is considered common sense or politically legitimate.

For Milliken, discourse analysis is not simply a method for interpreting language; it is a way of understanding how ideas, theories and knowledge shape political realities. Discourses do not merely reflect the world – they actively constitute it. In this view, tracing how the Russian elite appropriates Western academic knowledge is not just a matter of translation or adaptation, but a process of re-signification and strategic use of theory for political ends.

Drawing on the main arguments and principles proposed by Milliken and Campbell, this paper analyses the discourse of the contemporary Russian political elite, which heavily relies on Western academic knowledge, especially on authors such as Mearsheimer, Chomsky, Said, Harvey, etc. In terms of material, the study draws extensively on notable and relevant speeches not only by Putin and Lavrov – who directly represent the Russian state – but also by modern Russian intellectuals such as Pozner and Lukyanov, who hold the status of independent commentators. These figures either engage directly with Western, primarily English-speaking audiences, or are frequently cited in international discourse.

This study covers the period from 2017 onward, encompassing the war in Ukraine. This time frame follows the consolidation of Russia's post-Crimea for-

eign policy discourse and coincides with the expanded role of the digital sphere in information warfare, particularly after the 2016 US presidential election. During this period, Russian officials and intellectuals increasingly engaged Western academic concepts and critical frameworks as tools of international persuasion. The analysis draws on a purposive selection of speeches, interviews, public lectures and media appearances that explicitly address Western audiences or circulate widely in international media and expert communities.

Methodologically, rather than adopting a positivist approach or formal coding procedures, this study employs an interpretive and theory-driven discourse analysis. Following Milliken and Campbell, the analysis relies on close reading and contextual interpretation to trace how Western academic ideas are appropriated, re-signified and strategically mobilised within Russian political discourse. Particular attention is paid to patterns of argumentation, moral equivalence, analogies and appeals to authoritative Western thinkers. This approach allows the study to capture how similar discursive logics circulate across official state discourse and quasi-independent commentary, while sustaining the appearance of pluralism and intellectual openness.

Theoretical misconception: What is soft power?

Walker and Ludwig argue that a theoretical misconception about *soft power* has led to direct threats faced by democracies. This misconception can be explained through two key arguments. The first, though only *implicitly* addressed by Walker and Ludwig, is that the *intangible nature of soft power* has created significant confusion, leading to the assumption that anything falling outside conventional warfare or hard power must necessarily be categorised as soft power. The second argument, *explicitly* outlined by Walker and Ludwig, suggests that the openness of democratic societies, closely linked to Western soft power, became so highly valued that policymakers and intellectuals grew hesitant to reassess authoritarian influence. They feared that imposing restrictions on this influence might compromise democratic integrity.

As the aim of this paper is not to challenge the core assumptions of soft power or to extend the concept with additional theoretical insights, but rather to illustrate how Joseph Nye's formulation transformed the understanding of non-kinetic and intangible forms of influence, the analysis focuses exclusively on his most influential work, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Despite the extensive discussion and application of soft power by scholars, policymakers, journalists and commentators alike, this book remains the most cited and influential contribution to the conceptualisation of soft power.

Nye developed this notion with two primary objectives: *to offer an alternative understanding of power and to highlight the appeal of liberal democratic norms.* Let us briefly examine both. First, he sought to offer an alternative perspective on

power in international relations. During the Cold War, realist scholars dominated IR theory, emphasising military force and economic strength as the most significant factors in global politics, often ranking them above diplomatic efforts. Nye, writing just over a decade after the dissolution of the Soviet Union – a period still largely shaped by conventional, rationalist IR approaches – challenged this view by proposing a broader conceptualisation of power. He argued that hard power was not the only influential force in international relations (Nye 2004). Instead, he suggested that beyond military might and coercion, states and leaders could exert influence through attraction and persuasion.

By incorporating the human dimension – both at societal and individual levels – that was largely overlooked by realist scholars, and by emphasising the role of norms and culture, Nye positioned himself as an intellectual counterpoint to the realist worldview. His intention was not to reject realism outright but rather to expand its scope. Coercive methods, he suggested, frequently generated resistance and resentment, leading to unintended counterproductive outcomes. By contrast, promoting one's own norms and values could shape those of others, fostering influence without direct coercion.

Nye defined soft power as the ability to shape others' preferences through attraction and persuasion (Nye 2004). The emphasis on *ability* is particularly important, as soft power is often misinterpreted as a term synonymous with influence operations. In reality, Nye conceived of soft power as an inherent characteristic of a state – its cultural appeal, political values and foreign policy – that generates attraction. While political and cultural factors can shape a country's soft power, Nye argued that governments have limited direct control over it. Rather than being an instrument wielded by the state, soft power exists as an overarching capacity to influence others through non-coercive means.

This very association of soft power with non-military and, by extension, non-kinetic or non-tangible forms of influence led to a widespread misinterpretation: Any form of influence that did not involve military force or economic coercion was mistakenly classified as soft power. As a result, ideational influence – particularly methods such as disinformation – was erroneously considered a part of soft power. Walker and Ludwig specifically challenged this misconception, arguing that practices such as information censorship, restrictions on free speech, misinformation or disinformation campaigns should no longer be categorised under soft power.

When revisiting contemporary IR literature on either soft or sharp power, most authors tend to adopt Nye's conception, associating soft power primarily with non-kinetic influence. While there is nothing inherently problematic about understanding soft power as ideational or knowledge-based, it becomes evident that its intangible nature often leads to confusion. This confusion, in turn, results in the mistaken tendency to group together fundamentally different practices – such as cultural appeal and disinformation or censorship – under the same

conceptual umbrella. For example, an academic study titled *Soft Power of TikTok: The Social Network That Conquered the World* argues that the social media platform TikTok constitutes a tool of Chinese soft power because it removes content critical of either the Kremlin or the Chinese Communist Party (Podosokorsky 2022). While such a practice is indeed concerning, it exemplifies precisely what Walker and Ludwig warned against: Censorship, the restriction of information, content removal, should not be mistaken for manifestations of soft power, but rather of sharp power.

The second factor contributing to misconceptions about soft power stems from its association with democratic policies, a link closely tied to the empiricist nature of Nye's thesis. Many positivist scholars in international relations at the time – whether realists or liberals, such as Mearsheimer, Walt, Layne, Posen, Moravcsik, Keohane, Ikenberry and Fukuyama – grounded their arguments in empirical observations of US foreign policy. Fukuyama, for example, developed his thesis on the triumph of liberal democracy before the Soviet Union's collapse, but this event was later seen as empirical proof of his argument. Similarly, following the positivist tradition, Nye introduced soft power to highlight what he saw as the success of American socio-political norms at home and abroad. In *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, he challenged claims of US decline, arguing that its dominance rested not only on military and economic strength – what he termed hard power – but also on its ability to attract and persuade (Nye 1990: 260). Over a decade later, he expanded this into a more developed theoretical framework, formalising soft power as a key dimension of international relations.

Nye (2004: 10–14) identified three primary sources of American soft power. First, its culture, including classical literature, popular culture such as film and music, and the broader academic and knowledge sectors. Second, its political values, which fostered an economically attractive environment, upheld democratic governance, the rule of law, human rights and civil liberties, projecting the United States as an ideal liberal-democratic model. Third, its foreign policy, which, when aligned with legitimacy, moral responsibility and international norms, enhanced its global image. Combined with military and economic strength, these elements made the US arguably the most influential state in modern history. Nye argued that the post–Cold War goal of spreading democracy could be achieved more effectively through soft power, since coercion and military interventions often bred resentment. While governments can implement policies to strengthen democratic institutions and economic growth, Nye stressed that soft power is largely generated by civil society and develops gradually. It is not a short-term policy tool, but a long-term process shaped by societal norms, cultural appeal and consistent values.

For Nye, soft power is associated with notions such as appeal, attraction, culture, democracy, the rule of law, various liberties, shared values of justice, civil society and education. However, he argues that a country's soft power can be

significantly undermined by its government for several reasons. First, if a government pursues a foreign policy devoid of moral commitments, it can severely damage the country's reputation on the international stage. More importantly, given Nye's strong emphasis on democratic norms, he asserts that if a government fails to uphold or protect civil and individual liberties domestically, its soft power – rooted in these very norms – diminishes.

In response to Walker and Ludwig's concerns about democratic governments' reluctance to counter Chinese and Russian influence, Nye warned that combating authoritarian sharp power could unintentionally weaken the soft power of democracies. He cautioned that 'openness remains the best defense: faced with this challenge, the press, academics, civic organizations, government, and the private sector should focus on exposing information warfare techniques, inoculating the public by exposure' (Nye 2018). In other words, measures against authoritarian influence risk eroding media and academic freedoms – key achievements of democratic societies. This mirrors Walker and Ludwig's central point: They argued that the openness Nye championed was precisely what regimes like Russia and China were exploiting.

Building on the approaches of Fukuyama and Nye, and drawing from Cold War experiences, Western democracies assumed that the same strategies that successfully projected their norms onto the closed societies of the Soviet Union – through outlets such as Radio Liberty, Voice of America and Western rock music – could be replicated. By opening themselves to engagement with the successors of communist regimes and other authoritarian systems, they anticipated once again disseminating their universally appealing norms (Walker et al. 2020).

Contrary to Western expectations, authoritarian regimes used censorship, restrictions on free speech, internet controls and curtailed media freedoms to monopolise their domestic information space, making it difficult for Western media and other actors to reach these societies. At the same time, these regimes saw the West's openness and liberal norms as vulnerabilities to exploit. Scholars have described this dynamic – characterised by extreme information closure on one side and strategic exploitation of openness on the other – as *glaring asymmetry* (Walker & Ludwig 2017).

To sum up, the above logic suggests two main reasons why the West misunderstood soft power, causing practical complications. First, due to the intangible nature of soft power, as described by Nye, it was seen as an alternative to hard power, which involves tangible, measurable assets. This caused confusion, leading to the assumption that anything outside military and economic means was soft power. Consequently, two opposing approaches – democratic soft power and authoritarian sharp power – were wrongly equated. That is, promoting democratic norms, cultural values and institutional strengths was conflated with disinformation, censorship, manipulation and Soviet-style influence. Second, this

confusion was worsened by the West's fear that weakening aspects of its own soft power – like media freedom, academic freedom and civil liberties – could harm it. These were increasingly exploited by authoritarian regimes. The West feared that responding to Russia's intangible influence with Russian-style restrictions would cost it moral superiority.

When the soft becomes sharp: Reconceptualising Russian manipulative methods of influence

Due to this very misconception, in 2017 Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig of the National Endowment for Democracy published an article in *Foreign Affairs* introducing the concept of *sharp power*. Their primary intention was to illustrate the inadequacy of the well-established concept of *soft power* in capturing certain forms of non-kinetic influence. However, amid the renewed momentum of Russian and Chinese efforts to influence democratic societies, as well as the intensification of information warfare, the newly coined concept of sharp power proved to be exceptionally timely. As a result, it quickly became a widely adopted buzzword, embraced by scholars and practitioners who were puzzled by the absence of a conceptual counterpart to soft power capable of describing the malign nature of authoritarian influence.

Consequently, the notion of sharp power – which remains a neologism rather than a full-fledged theory – has increasingly been used as an analytical tool despite the absence of sustained theoretical scrutiny. This theoretical deficiency appears to have accompanied the concept since its introduction. For instance, Hungarian, Czech and Slovak experts examining Russian disinformation campaigns and producing valuable empirical research rely almost exclusively on Walker and Ludwig for their brief theoretical frameworks (Political Capital 2022). A similar pattern can be observed in the work of scholars from Masaryk University in Brno, who analyse Russian strategic influence in Central Europe (Kleiner et al. 2023). Glazunova et al. (2023) link Russian sharp power to RT (formerly *Russia Today*) and its attempts to manipulate Western societies, while leaving the conceptual debate largely unaddressed. Fitzgerald (2024), following the logic of Walker and Ludwig, interprets sharp power as a consequence of failed soft power. Marin (2024) associates sharp power with Soviet-style psychological operations yet likewise refrains from challenging or extending the original conceptual framework proposed by Walker and Ludwig.

Most authors conceptualise sharp power through the political dichotomy of democracy versus authoritarianism, which subsequently gives rise to institutional and normative arguments. This approach is conveniently summarised in Richter's (2022) work. His normative argument suggests that freedom of speech, media freedom, and other individual and civic liberties constrain democratic governments from adopting sharp power tactics. In parallel, the institutional argument

emphasises that democratic structures – such as checks and balances, media plurality and transparency – limit the further development of sharp power. Conversely, the absence of these institutional and normative features renders authoritarian systems more prone to the deployment of sharp power methods. While analysing sharp power through this political, institutional and normative lens is analytically sound, the broader sharp power literature largely neglects the ideational and ideological dimensions through which Western ideas themselves may be mobilised against Western political orders.

Taken together, these and many other studies indicate that the original contributions of Walker and Ludwig remain the most influential, most cited and most authoritative references in discussions of sharp power. Although much of the existing scholarship offers highly valuable empirical insights, the theoretical and conceptual debate surrounding sharp power remains relatively underdeveloped. This is not to suggest any deficiency in the original formulation advanced by Walker and Ludwig – quite the contrary – but rather to highlight that the absence of sustained conceptual engagement may ultimately undermine the analytical and theoretical rigor of sharp power scholarship.

The original piece of Walker and Ludwig published in *Foreign Affairs* that the soft power framework is significantly flawed. The authors claim democratic systems, at both governmental and academic levels, have become complacent by wrongly labelling authoritarian influence methods as soft power (Walker & Ludwig 2017). They warn that as long as Western academia embraces this framework, scholars and policymakers will fail to identify manipulative tactics used by Russia and China. These strategies focus less on 'winning hearts and minds' and more on manipulating public opinion via disinformation – methods that contradict the attraction and persuasion principles of soft power.

In their much lengthier report, Walker and Ludwig suggest that the authoritarian regimes of Russia and China were no longer capable of telling persuasive national stories to the international community that would enhance their global image (Walker & Ludwig 2017). Due to entrenched kleptocracy, systemic corruption, suppression of various freedoms, deteriorating human rights records and other shortcomings, Russia and China were no longer able to 'win hearts and minds', to borrow Nye's expression.

Walker and Ludwig argued that *sharp power* represented a form of exported authoritarianism: Just as Russia and China monopolised power domestically – especially in the field of information – they pursued the same objectives internationally. These regimes employed tactics such as censoring information, restricting freedom of speech, undermining the integrity of academic freedom in democratic societies, spreading disinformation and manipulating public opinion. Such efforts, the authors contend, pose a significant threat to younger democracies with relatively weaker democratic institutions, especially in the age of the internet and social media.

Walker argues that even mature democracies with strong institutions face threats from authoritarian sharp power. He identifies three main channels for sharp power in democratic systems: culture, academia and publishing (Walker 2018). The threat to academic integrity – especially through restrictions on academic freedom – is a major concern. Walker notes several cases of Russian and Chinese interference in American and British university libraries, where many articles critical of those governments were reportedly removed. Rachel Peterson provides a detailed investigation, done with the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the Canadian Association of University Professors (CAUP), into how Confucius Institutes and their parent organisation, Hanban, censored topics on American campuses. This included restricting discussions, removing content sensitive to the Chinese Communist Party, exploiting scholars' financial dependence and intimidating Chinese academics (Peterson 2017).

Between 2018 and 2021, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the Forum for Democratic Studies published a series of reports analysing Russian and Chinese sharp power. These reports provided valuable empirical insights but often overlooked ideological or ideational dimensions. For example, Hoffman (2021) and Wright (2020) focus on how China uses technology and AI for surveillance, posing threats to civil liberties. Cole (2018), however, shifts the emphasis toward ideological goals, arguing that authoritarian sharp power seeks to erode faith in democratic principles. Cook (2021) similarly highlights disinformation campaigns targeting democracies. Other studies examine influence through funding and institutional control. Stefanov & Vladimirov (2020) reveal Latin American media's financial dependence on Russia and China, while Tiffert (2020) analyses CCP efforts to shape Western academic agendas. Rolland (2020) notes authoritarian think tanks designed to mimic democratic institutions, and Lucas (2020) underscores how free speech vulnerabilities are exploited by authoritarian regimes for disinformation. Richter (2022) summarises that while soft power enhances a country's image, sharp power aims to discredit democratic institutions, targeting media, academia and public trust. Walker & Ludwig (2021) concur, emphasising that sharp power extends beyond censorship to the manipulation of narratives across civil society.

A reverse operationalisation of multiple investigative works on Russian sharp power, specifically focusing on its ideational (non-institutional) dimensions, reveals the following recurring themes and indicators that illustrate the Kremlin's intentions, methods and narratives: the strategic dissemination of information to intensify ideological conflicts; efforts to divide targeted societies; attempts to discredit democratic principles and sow distrust in the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic governments; and fostering scepticism toward mainstream media. Additionally, Russian sharp power supports left-wing, right-wing and anti-establishment movements that seek to undermine social and political cohesion in Western societies.

Among its many forms, sharp power tactics typically aim to depict Western governments as equally flawed, morally corrupt, or degenerate, thereby eroding their credibility. For example, two months after the war began, Lavrov suggested that those who 'lose sleep' over the conflict in Ukraine should imagine Ukraine as Palestine and Russia as the United States (Dutton 2022), clearly implying a parallel between American and Russian policies. This and similar statements exemplify the Russian political elite's use of a mirroring technique – framing their actions through analogies familiar to Western audiences – in an effort to engage with ideological frameworks deeply embedded in the consciousness of Western intellectuals and broader audiences.

Drawing extensively on the sharp power literature – as it is not always explicitly communicated but rather implicitly referenced (see the above-mentioned glaring asymmetry) – this paper argues that sharp power, among its various interpretations, can be understood as Russia's attempt to exploit the very strengths of democratic societies. While this has been discussed at the institutional and normative levels by numerous sharp power scholars (e.g. taking advantage of media plurality, freedom of speech, public debate, societal scepticism toward the establishment, etc.), this paper suggests that the same tactic is evident at the ideational or ideological level. Specifically*, Russia seeks to capitalise on the strengths of Western academia by appropriating knowledge produced within academic scholarship and weaponising ideas, theories and intellectual debates for use against Western audiences.*

Ignoring this ideological appropriation – especially considering how flexibly and effectively the Kremlin navigates and deploys ideologies – represents a significant oversight. The following chapters seek to address this gap by focusing specifically on the discourse propagated by key figures within the Russian leadership.

Weaponising the knowledge field

While much has been said about Vladimir Putin's speeches prior to the Ukrainian invasion – particularly his infamous essay 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians' – very few, if any, have discussed Russia's attempts to hijack Western academic discourse to manipulate not only public opinion in Western societies but also the perspectives of world leaders and influential opinion-makers. Recent tendencies within the Trump administration to adopt a more conservative, isolationist approach characteristic of the realist worldview when discussing the war in Ukraine – often leading to outcomes favourable to the Russian perspective – have become increasingly evident. Whether it is President Trump himself, Secretary of State Rubio, public figures such as Elon Musk, or popular podcasters who have no formal background in political science or international relations, but who wield a significant influence over public opinion both in the US and globally have been adopting the logic of the realist school of international relations (both classical and neorealist traditions). This logic, which has long been dominant in Russian

propaganda before and after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, demonstrates how effective and far-reaching Russian sharp power efforts have been.

Although this paper does not offer a full critical analysis of the theories appropriated by the Russian political elite, it is important to address the nature of the realist perspective – the most frequently detected element in Russian propaganda. Scholars such as Richard Ashley (1984), Robert Cox (1981), Alexander Wendt, Robert Campbell (1998) and others from social constructivist and critical traditions have all underscored a major weakness of the realist tradition: its tendency to oversimplify reality and ignore other aspects of international politics, including historical, cultural, normative and even psychological dimensions. This point is crucial as realism's commonsensical and intuitive appeal has led to its widespread acceptance by mass audiences, ultimately making it one of the most frequently employed instruments of Russian proponents.

The incorporation of the realist agenda not only in Russian but also in the global discourse and wider attempts to normalise the discussion of the Russo-Ukrainian War within the paradigm of the realist tradition is becoming increasingly evident. For example, recently, Al Arabiya's *Counterpoint* programme hosted John Mearsheimer – one of the founding figures of the neo-realist tradition – and Sergey Karaganov, the Kremlin's advisor on foreign affairs (Al Arabiya 2025). To witness a discussion titled 'Ukraine Will Be Eliminated', featuring one of the most prominent names in contemporary Western academia and Putin's close ally, both largely agreeing on most aspects, is, if not alarming, then certainly deserving of attention.

For Putin and the Russian leadership, ideas and knowledge serve as tools to justify their intentions and geopolitical goals. This instrumental use of ideology is clear in the ideological ambivalence of Russian-backed political actors in Europe. Although Russia is often seen as aligned mainly with right-wing populists, reports show it supports both left-wing and right-wing politicians, as well as various anti-establishment groups, aiming to undermine targeted governments (Richter 2022). Right-wing parties usually claim the war in Ukraine stems from NATO expansion, while left-wing parties – known for anti-American views – blame the West for neocolonialism (Zavershinskaia 2024). For example, in Italy, the right-wing Lega opposes arms deliveries to Ukraine, while the left-wing Five Star Movement (M5S) accuses the US of instigating global wars. In Germany, similar views come from the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and the left-wing Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) (Pfeifer 2024).

As veteran Kremlinologist Lilia Shevtsova puts it, 'for the Kremlin, ideas are instrumental. If an action is deemed necessary, ideas will be found to justify it' (Shevtsova 2015: 25). Indeed, Vladimir Putin has long shown interest in various non-conventional ideas. For instance, he has endorsed the concept of the *Golden Billion* – a conspiracy theory originated in 1970s Russia with Anatoly Tsikunov and

later popularised by nationalist thinker and writer Sergey Kara-Murza (Maynes 2022). The theory claims that a global ruling class of one billion people exploits both human and natural resources to the detriment of the rest of the world's population. Echoing this idea, during his first year in office, Putin referenced the *Golden Billion* at the Asia-Pacific Economic Summit while addressing global inequalities: 'As we know, in terms of development, the world is divided into the North and South, into the so-called *golden billion* and the rest of humanity' (Putin 2000). The concept is also embraced by Nikolai Patrushev, who argues that behind the rhetoric of liberal democracy and human rights, the West is actually advancing a *Golden Billion* agenda (Ivanov 2022).

The case of Vladimir Pozner

Russian sharp power is seen in its efforts to frame reality using language that resonates with Western audiences. Communicating in terms familiar to Western logic is more effective than promoting a distinct Russian geopolitical view. A striking example of this appropriation of Western academic thought since Crimea's annexation is found in Vladimir Pozner's speeches. Though Pozner's background isn't suited for linguistic analysis, his significance lies in his reach among Western intellectuals, academics and the public, and as one of the few Russians allowed to openly criticise the government.

Russian political culture has a long tradition of *systemic opposition*, where a political entity formally opposes the ruling power but aligns with the state in practice – creating an illusion of democracy, competition and debate. Harley Blazer (2003) calls this *managed pluralism*, a practice originating in Soviet Russia and perfected during the Yeltsin era. Managed pluralism extends beyond politics into public life, allowing actors to engage socially and economically within Kremlin-controlled limits. Genuine opposition figures like Boris Nemtsov and Alexei Navalny were targeted or killed for opposing the government, while formal opposition consists of actors who fade away or align their rhetoric with the regime. Examples include Sergei Mironov and Ksenia Sobchak, presidential candidates who later supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine and other government policies (Roth 2024). Billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, who also ran against Putin in 2012, left politics soon after to focus on business.

Pozner can certainly be seen as a part of Russia's managed pluralism. While he is a vocal critic of the state nomenklatura and the country's systemic corruption, he consistently refrains from criticising the Russian government's foreign policy – particularly when addressing non-Russian audiences. A trilingual Russian intellectual holding Russian, American and French citizenship, Pozner could be described as one of the first direct Soviet influencers targeting Western – especially English-speaking – societies. During the Cold War, alongside various positions within Soviet foreign propaganda institutions, Pozner hosted the *Voice of Mos-*

cow, a state-controlled TV and radio network. He frequently appeared on *The Phil Donahue Show* in the 1980s, where he openly criticised both the Soviet and American governments (Yale University 2018b). These appearances, combined with his fluency in English, earned him the reputation of being the 'English voice of the Soviet Union'.

Pozner's positioning within Russia's tightly controlled media landscape became particularly evident during a televised exchange with the late Alexei Navalny. When asked why he had never invited Navalny onto his show, Pozner admitted, 'Of course, I would invite you [Navalny] on my show . . . There are a number of other people I would invite. But I can't. I say that completely openly' (Moller-Nielsen 2024). Responding to Navalny's claim that this amounted to state censorship, Pozner argued that, since he had never seen a physical list of banned guests, it could not be called censorship – an example of what in Russian is often referred to as *zheleznaia logika* (iron logic).

While being openly critical of government efforts to control the media, Pozner simultaneously promoted ideas that have since become integral to Russian state propaganda. He was one of the first – if not the first – figures outside the Kremlin to advance the argument that Russia's aggressive foreign policy in its near abroad was a response to NATO's eastward expansion. His 2018 public lecture at Yale University serves as a vivid example of Russian sharp power: a Russian journalist addressing a Western – specifically American – audience, while incorporating familiar ideas, values and even names to subtly manipulate opinion and distort reality through strategic use of language.

In the lecture, which has garnered nearly 10 million views on YouTube, Pozner presents Russia as a reactionary power – one compelled by external forces to behave in a certain way. Even the title, 'How the US Created Vladimir Putin', frames the West as the primary agent responsible for Russia's actions. Several aspects of Pozner's speech are noteworthy. First, he opens by identifying himself as an impartial observer who is 'not representing anybody or anything' (Yale University 2018a). This is a clear rhetorical strategy aimed at establishing credibility by presenting himself as an independent commentator – despite the fact that he hosts one of the most popular political talk shows on Russia's most influential state-controlled television channel.

The central point of Pozner's speech is the classical security dilemma, a key concept in realist international relations. He presents NATO enlargement as a threat to Russia's security. Ignoring that many NATO aspirants have faced Russian aggression and overlooking NATO's defensive nature aligns with Campbell's and Milliken's view that threats are constructed through discourse, not always based on real dangers. Pozner seeks to legitimise NATO expansion as an American concern, citing George Kennan, who in 1998 called it 'the beginning of a new Cold War'.

Pozner portrays the United States not only as an untrustworthy partner in the post–Cold War era, but as an audacious actor that dismissed the pride of the Russian people, thereby exacerbating national wide grievances. This narrative aligns with Campbell's paradigm, which suggests that national identities are often constructed through antagonism – by establishing a binary of 'us versus them'. Russia is depicted as a historically misunderstood and humiliated actor, eager for partnership but consistently ignored by the West. Pozner's victimisation narrative is evident in his claim that between 1985 (the Gorbachev era) and 2007 (the Putin era), Russia allegedly did nothing – domestically or internationally – that could have disappointed the United States. He further describes Putin as a pro-Western politician who offered assistance to the US on several occasions, only to be unjustly dismissed, while NATO expanded to include former Warsaw Pact countries.

To fully understand Pozner's rhetorical strategy, it is crucial to examine not only what is said, but also what is deliberately omitted. He entirely ignores Russia's involvement in suppressing peaceful protesters in Kazakhstan, Georgia, Lithuania, Latvia and Azerbaijan; its participation in proxy wars and civil wars in former Soviet republics; its military support for secessionist movements in Moldova, Georgia and Nagorno-Karabakh; the two brutal Chechen wars; systemic human rights abuses based on ethnic and religious identity; the assassination of journalists; and numerous other actions that have contributed to Russia's undemocratic image. Pozner's decision to exclude these events exemplifies a classic propaganda technique. As Lendvai (2024) argues, propaganda involves the dissemination of selective information – presenting only favourable elements while concealing those that may undermine the argument – in order to shape public perception.

In the 2010s, Pozner described Russia as a reactionary power compelled by the West to act in certain ways. However, prior to the 2022 invasion, he explicitly accused the West of provoking Russia to invade Ukraine. In a February 2022 interview, Pozner suggested:

> Russia attacking Ukraine is something that the West is interested in and that Russia doesn't want because Russia can win nothing by invading Ukraine . . . It would be total destruction of any kind of respect for Russia. There's nothing to win and a lot to lose. And there are people who say that's exactly what the West wants (Kelly 2022).

Another important theme in Pozner's rhetorical arsenal, which he has employed for years, is the Cuban Missile Crisis (CMC) of 1962. This event is widely regarded as one of the most discussed and illustrative case studies within the realist tradition of international relations, alongside Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*, the Cold War-era technological rivalry and arms race, the Persian Gulf War and others. Pozner, however, invokes this case with a specific objective: to equate Russia and

the United States as great powers that occasionally resort to unethical means for the sake of survival. In his February 2022 pre-war interview, Pozner stated:

> This is not about the Russia and Ukraine border . . . should Ukraine become a member of NATO, that would present an existential threat to Russia. It's very much like 1962 and the issue of Soviet missiles on Cuban soil, which they had the right to do. They had agreed, the two independent countries. And the United States – quite correctly, in my opinion – saw this as an existential threat and said, we will not allow it. And if we have to sink your ships and bomb Cuba, we will do it. And whether that leads to World War III or not doesn't really matter (Kelly 2022).

This framing is a clear embodiment of sharp power for several reasons. First, as described by many scholars of sharp power, a core objective of Russian misinformation (as distinct from disinformation) is to draw moral equivalence between Russia and the United States. Pozner attempts to persuade viewers that Russia is not fundamentally different from the US, and that great powers operating on a 'realist chessboard' pursue similar – if not identical – interests, primarily survival, and will use whatever means are necessary, regardless of their ethical implications. Moreover, not only does he once again depict Russia as a reactionary power, but by praising the US response during the Cuban crisis, Pozner once again assumes the role of an objective observer – someone who can adequately assess the actions of a Russian antagonist and recognise America's right to defend itself. By doing so, he implicitly invites Western audiences to extend the same legitimacy to Russia's actions.

While Pozner clearly adopts ideas rooted in the realist tradition – most notably those recently popularised by John Mearsheimer – he simultaneously criticises American hegemony by highlighting the inconsistency between US foreign policy behaviour and the liberal norms it professes to uphold. This type of critique is not exclusive to realist scholars like Mearsheimer (see *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*) but is also prevalent among postcolonial and critical scholars such as Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, David Harvey and others.

Here, we can detect a similarity between Pozner's tactic and the above-mentioned reports suggesting that Russia exploits both left and right-leaning political parties in Europe. While the realist tradition is typically associated with a somewhat conservative worldview, Pozner's depiction of US-Ukraine relations – which removes agency from Ukraine – clearly resonates with Noam Chomsky's interpretation of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Chomsky, whose views are rooted in radical critical theory, Marxist-influenced socialism and a longstanding critique of Western imperialism and capitalism, offers a perspective that, while distinct from Mearsheimer's, converges with it in key ways that lend support to

the Russian narrative. For example, like Mearsheimer, he frequently references the alleged promise made by James Baker and President George H. W. Bush to the Soviet Union not to expand NATO eastward (Chomsky 2022) a narrative widely appropriated by Pozner and other Russian intellectuals.

What further aligns Chomsky's ontology with Mearsheimer's is his portrayal of Ukraine not as an independent actor defending itself from aggression, but as an American puppet-state seeking to weaken Russia. Chomsky's position is not surprising given his long-standing and harsh criticism of the United States. He has even suggested that 'Russia is fighting more humanely in Ukraine than the US did in Iraq' (Vock 2023), citing the fact that Russia has not turned Kyiv into an unliveable city, as the US did to Baghdad – though, in his view, it easily could have. In response to his statements, Ukrainian academics published an open letter to Chomsky, correcting his claims about Ukrainian agency, the sovereignty of the Ukrainian state, the verbal promise by Baker concerning NATO enlargement and his apparent whitewashing of Putin's intentions and views on Ukraine (Kukharskyy et al. 2022).

To summarise the Pozner case: He is portrayed as an independent, impartial journalist – even one willing to criticise the Kremlin. He was among the first, if not the first, prominent Russian intellectuals to successfully communicate and disseminate the Russian narrative to Western audiences using their own discursive frameworks – not only linguistically, but ideologically. What is most important for this analysis is that Pozner clearly adopts ideas originating within the Western academic tradition – both from conservative and progressive perspectives – and projects these very ideas back onto Western societies, implicitly inviting them to tolerate Russia's aggressive actions toward Ukraine. He does not simply justify Russia's aggressive foreign policy; through discursive representation, he renders Russia's actions thinkable – and thus, in Campbell's terms, 'doable'.

Lukyanov's case

Alongside Pozner, another relatively influential figure not directly associated with the Russian state nomenklatura, but falling into the category of what Blazer describes as 'managed pluralism', is Fyodor Lukyanov. He is the editor-in-chief of *Russia in Global Affairs* – a Russian journal modelled on *Foreign Affairs* – as well as the research director of the Valdai International Discussion Club, a think tank that frequently hosts President Putin. Lukyanov is also a regular guest at the Munich Security Conference, among other international forums. He is known for fluently deploying international relations (IR) theory, aligning himself primarily with the realist tradition, and often criticising the West while warning it of its own strategic missteps.

Lukyanov was one of the first prominent commentators to not only deny agency to the Ukrainian people, but to claim that there was, in fact, no such entity

as a unified Ukrainian nation. In 2014, just days before Russia annexed Crimea, *The New York Times* published an article by Lukyanov in which he asserted:

> The truth is that the Ukrainian nation, accidentally composed of different parts with very different backgrounds, does not exist as an entity . . . Ukraine would need another couple of decades to emerge as a consolidated nation, able to formulate a national interest. Until then, the country should be left alone to peacefully develop its identity without forcing Kiev to decide its future orientation (Lukyanov 2014).

This episode is significant because, through *The New York Times*, Lukyanov presents the perspective of an intellectual who is not officially affiliated with the state apparatus yet speaks directly to the English-speaking – and thus international – audience. His attempt to deny the existence of a Ukrainian national identity – one of the central justifications later invoked for the invasion – and to advance this claim to American and European audiences under the guise of an independent researcher, serves as a clear example of Russian sharp power in action.

If today's Russian political discourse tends to frame Ukraine as divided between two great powers – Russia and the United States – then back in 2014, Lukyanov ascribed a similar role to the European Union: 'This country [Ukraine] is spoiled by self-perception as an enormously attractive trophy in a geopolitical battle between big powers—Russia and the E.U.—while those powers continue this fight out of inertia' (Lukyanov 2014). Here, Lukyanov offers a realist interpretation of what was then referred to as the 'Ukrainian crisis', portraying it as little more than a continuation of the Cold War–era rivalry between the EU and Russia.

Fast forward to 2025, Lukyanov claims that Russia's primary concern regarding Ukraine is not territorial acquisition, but security. When discussing the potential de facto recognition of the Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories by the United States, Lukyanov emphasised that the war was never about territorial expansion, but rather about the demilitarisation of Ukraine and its neutrality, which he argues are essential to ensuring Russia's security (Lukyanov 2025a). While this implicitly draws on a realist perspective, Lukyanov explicitly references Stephen Walt, one of the leading neorealist theorists. He asserts that 'Russia's military operation . . . was not merely about Ukraine. It was about Moscow's broader struggle against the entire so-called Western bloc' (Lukyanov 2025b).

In an interview with the Swiss magazine *Die Weltwoche*, Lukyanov described the war with Ukraine as a necessary step, arguing that Russia had no other choice but to defend itself (Weltwoche 2025). Similar to Pozner, he portrays Russia as a reactionary power compelled to act in response to Western provocations, while also criticising Moscow for its failure to diplomatically resolve the post–Cold War tensions. In doing so, Lukyanov positions himself as an ostensibly objective

observer – critical of Russia, when necessary, yet ultimately sympathetic to its strategic rationale. Echoing Chomsky, he draws a parallel with the US war in Iraq, using it to underscore the precision of Russian missile strikes and to emphasise Russia's restraint in avoiding civilian casualties in Ukraine.

Lavrov's case

While Pozner and Lukyanov represent Russia's perspective without formal state ties, similar narratives are prominent in Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's official discourse. Like them, Lavrov often invokes NATO expansion, a persistent theme in his rhetoric. He began using this narrative consistently after the 2014 Euromaidan events and Russia's annexation of Crimea. Since then, deterring NATO enlargement has become a central, if not primary, pillar of Russia's foreign policy rhetoric.

From this period onward, Lavrov's interviews and speeches – delivered at international conferences, forums and the United Nations – demonstrate that he has consistently maintained a position similar to that of Pozner and Lukyanov, often employing analogous rhetorical strategies, particularly the technique of equating Russia with the United States. For instance, in May 2022, several months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Lavrov addressed English-speaking audiences in English and made a controversial comparison that ultimately compelled Vladimir Putin to issue an apology to then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Lavrov stated: 'if you "cannot sleep" because of the Russian conflict, there are some *advices* [sic] to calm you down. First, imagine this is happening in Africa. Imagine this is happening in the Middle East. Imagine Ukraine is Palestine, imagine Russia is the United States' (Dutton 2022).

This commentary contains several allusions likely intended to evoke specific emotional responses from the audience. First, by referencing Africa and the Middle East, Lavrov implicitly critiques the West's historical indifference toward its former colonies – a recurring theme in postcolonial studies and left-leaning scholarship. He suggests that if Western societies can remain untroubled by conflicts in those regions, they might adopt a similar indifference toward Ukraine. This framing seeks to expose what Lavrov portrays as the West's selective moral engagement with global crises. Second, by drawing a parallel between Russia and the United States, Lavrov invokes a central tenet of realist international relations theory: that great powers behave similarly, regardless of their ideological orientation, political system or the era in which they operate.

Lavrov conveniently draws not only on academic knowledge but also on conspiracy theories. For example, when criticising the United States and the unipolar model of world order, he explicitly referenced the previously mentioned *golden billion* conspiracy theory and accused Europe and America of exploiting the resources of Asia, Africa and Latin America (United Nations 2022). The overall tone of Lavrov's 2022 speech can be described as an incrimination of the West.

He accused Western powers not only of attempting to defeat Russia militarily but also of seeking to fracture Russian statehood – an ambition he described as an unprecedented level of Russophobia. While this speech targeted the West, a year earlier he had referred to Russophobia in Ukraine and the Baltic states (MFA of the Russian Federation 2021). Russophobia is a recurring theme not only in Lavrov's rhetoric but in Russian political discourse more broadly. It draws on liberal norms such as tolerance, inclusiveness and victimhood – key elements of the increasingly mainstream discourse of identity politics that is familiar to democratic societies.

Secondly, he accused the West of disrespecting and undermining Ukraine's sovereignty: 'let other members of the international community decide for themselves what their positions would be – on the side of one, on the side of the other, or neutral – that's what happens in democracy' (United Nations 2022). Westphalian sovereignty – non-interference, legal equality and self-determination – is deeply important to Western governments and societies. However, Lavrov and the Russian elite's use of sovereignty predates the Ukraine war by nearly a decade. The concept of sovereign democracy, introduced by Vladislav Surkov in the mid-2000s, is often described as Kremlin ideology, conveying that Russia is a democracy and that no external actor can question its political model (Shekhovtsov 2019). Thus, Lavrov frames Ukraine's sovereignty as a Western interference accusation, alleging attempts to stage colour revolutions or meddle in Ukraine's affairs.

The third line of Lavrov's accusations referred to the Western powers' disregard for Russia's security concerns, particularly regarding NATO expansion. Similar to Pozner and Lukyanov, Lavrov portrayed Russia as a reactionary power that had no choice but to defend itself – and the Russian populations in Donetsk and Luhansk – against threats allegedly created by NATO (United Nations 2022).

Conclusion

This paper has offered, on the one hand, a conceptual debate and, on the other, an analysis of Russian political discourse as empirical data to complement the theoretical discussion. The conceptual section makes three key arguments.

First, the concept of soft power has often been misunderstood due to its intangible, non-kinetic nature. Anything that did not fall under military or economic tools was frequently labelled as soft power, without sufficient scrutiny.

Second, Western – primarily American – scholars and policymakers tended to believe that methods of influence categorised as soft power should remain unchecked. Their rationale was that regulating such influence could undermine the core values of liberal democratic systems, such as individual and public liberties, openness, media plurality and freedom of speech. In other words, challenging Russia's supposed soft power risked backfiring by undermining Western soft power itself.

Third – and arguably most importantly – this paper offers a refined interpretation of sharp power. While sharp power has typically been discussed in political, institutional or economic contexts, this paper calls for an ideational or even ideological inquiry. Building on Walker and Ludwig's initial understanding that sharp power exploits the openness and freedoms of democratic systems, this study argues that Russia also exploits what can be considered the intellectual strengths of these societies – namely, the knowledge field.

The theoretical argument is extended through a discourse analysis aimed at identifying and interpreting how, and to what end, Russia appropriates Western academic knowledge. The analysis of Russian political discourse reveals several key patterns. First, Russia heavily relies on the knowledge domain – drawing from both academic scholarship and conspiracy theories. In both cases, the goal is either to justify Russia's aggressive foreign policy or to discredit and morally challenge the West.

Importantly, Russia mimics the norms of democratic societies by promoting commentators who are not officially affiliated with the state. This creates the illusion of independent and open debate, intended to persuade Western audiences that these perspectives come from independent observers, not from the government. The cases of Vladimir Pozner and Fyodor Lukyanov illustrate how such figures, who are both scientifically literate and highly effective communicators, use Western academic knowledge to influence opinion abroad.

Both Pozner and Lukyanov heavily project a neorealist worldview in which all states behave similarly, and Russia is portrayed as a reactive power forced to act due to Western provocations – particularly NATO expansion. This incorporation of neorealist ideas serves another purpose: It presents Russia, the United States and its allies as morally equivalent actors in international relations – self-interested, amoral and unbound by ethical constraints. These narratives are echoed by Russia's top leadership, particularly Vladimir Putin and Sergey Lavrov.

In addition to neorealist themes, the Russian discourse includes ideas more typically associated with leftist Western critiques. These include references to American colonialism, the legacy of Western imperialism, and critiques of modern foreign policy as neo-colonialism. Russian rhetoric often echoes or directly cites left-leaning Western thinkers such as Chomsky, Said or Harvey, as well as public debates around identity politics. Concepts such as 'Russophobia', Western indifference to non-Western regions and even the extreme 'Golden Billion' conspiracy theory are used to build this narrative.

These and other examples demonstrate that beyond targeting the institutional and normative foundations of Western societies, Russia strategically exploits Western academic knowledge. By 'speaking the language' of Western audiences – through ideas, theories and intellectual frameworks – Russia aims to extend its influence, gain moral or political advantage, and discredit democratic systems and institutions.

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