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# **PUBLIC POLITICAL NARRATIVES: DEVELOPING A NEGLECTED SOURCE THROUGH THE EXPLORATORY CASE OF RUSSIA IN THE PUTIN-MEDVEDEV ERA**

The place of narrative in political science is one of those questions that resurfaces with regularity in debates over the nature of the discipline. In Mark Bevir's overview of the development of Anglo-American political studies from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, narrative stands as the other to science. Bevir charts the decline of narrative political studies to be replaced by the search for more generic, scientific, and predictive models, before positing a partial return of narrative, albeit sceptical narrative (Bevir 2006). Attempts to reconsider narrative as a valid political science approach indeed arose around the turn of the current century, sparking debates about the relationship between narrative and the questions of generalisability, evidence, and causality which lie at the heart of political science (Griffin 1993; Bates 1998; Patterson and Monroe 1998; Lynch 2005; Bevir 2006). It is striking though that such debates focus exclusively on the use of narrative by scholars. What they omit is the use of narrative by political actors themselves. Whilst scholars debate the relevance and rigour of narrative explanations, political actors employ them habitually in communicating with the public. A good story can boost popular support for a party, politician, or regime, touching the populace in a more elemental and powerful way than detailed, intellectually robust, but dry-as-dust policy proposals. Surprisingly, however, analyses of the public political narratives employed by political actors are rare, and where they do exist, their focus tends to be less on the narrative *per se*, and more on its performance and its impact on an audience (Ku 1999; Alexander 2011).

The central tenet of this article is that, given the wide use of public political narratives in the political world, the lack of analysis of these *as narratives* merits attention, representing a lacuna which can be addressed by the use of the tools of narrative analysis. Such an approach facilitates a focus not so much on the narrative's external reception, but rather on its essential nature and what it reveals about its narrators. To know someone's story is to more accurately make sense of, explain, even predict their actions (Somers and Gibson 1994: 61). The exploratory case presented here – the narrative employed by the present Russian regime – illustrates how narrative analysis contributes to an holistic understanding absent from overly atomised accounts of the regime's policies. My aim is therefore twofold: relatively narrowly, to analyse the public political narrative of the Putin-Medvedev regime in Russia in order to draw out its motivations, worldview, and inconsistencies; more broadly, to offer an example through this exploratory case of how the techniques of narrative analysis provide explanatory, critical, and predictive insights into a polity. The article concludes by returning to the question of generalisability.

## **Narrative Analysis in Politics**

There is a distinction to be drawn between the use of narrative explanations by political scientists and the study of narratives themselves as used by political actors. Clear as this distinction may appear when starkly stated, the movement away from narrative explanations on the part of political scientists over the past several decades appears to have adversely affected the study of narrative approaches more generally. Cecelia Lynch, in noting the

influence of narratives on how we perceive the world and construct moral norms 'about the way things were, are and should be', emphasises too that some scholars, especially in the United States, are suspicious of the role of narrative in positivist social science and objective analysis (Lynch 2005: 158). Mark Bevir's account of the development of political studies over the past century or so argues that an increasing focus on atomistic analytic approaches, 'broke up the continuities and gradual change of elder narratives by dividing the world into discrete, discontinuous units'. Instead of developmental stories and their tellers, ahistorical and impersonal typologies and constructs came to dominate. The modernist empiricist approach rejected the unfolding story in favour of classification, correlation, and functionalism (Bevir 2006: 588, 591). Without gainsaying the value or otherwise of this process as a whole, from the perspective of the study of narrative, the increasing minimisation of the role of historical development, contingency, and agency is unhelpful.

The 'Perestroika debate' in US political science in the early years of this century saw narrative discussed in terms of the quest for rigour and objectivity (Monroe 2005), with the question raised of whether an overly prescriptive approach to methodological rigour obscures the unexpected and unstable elements of politics which narrative more readily highlights (Migdal 2001: 24; Lynch 2005: 158). Again, the notion that for scholars to resort to narrative explanation is unscientific threatens to spill over into the idea that the identification and study of narratives in the political world similarly lacks the methodological capacity to deliver objective insight. Whilst the 'Perestroika debate' as a whole revolved around the alleged dominance of quantitative over qualitative approaches in the US political science establishment, others challenge the very notion of a dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative approaches where narrative sits firmly in the latter camp (Caporaso 2009). Robert Bates proposed a bridging of apparent paradigmatic gaps in his book *Analytic Narratives* (1998), which emphasised the place of 'coherence, logic, fit and full and appropriate evidence' in narrative (Lynch 2005: 160). In other words, he proposed a narrative approach which uses more positivist and empiricist methods to 'fill in the gaps' between stages of a narrative explanation by focusing on the mechanisms producing particular political outcomes, thereby marrying the specific and the generic (Bates 1998: 13; Caporaso 2009). The message was clearly that, scientifically speaking, it is legitimate to construct a story by joining a series of instances of empirical research, but that, absent so robust a base, narrative alone is insufficiently rigorous and analytical, leaving scientific gaps unfilled. Such a stance concerns itself with narrative explanation as a tool of the social scientist. The danger is that downplaying the role of narrative as an explanatory tool in the sphere of scientific explanation, however legitimate that may be, has the unintended consequence of diminishing the weight given to analysis of narrative content when political actors themselves employ this explanatory tool. The paucity of literature on the content of public political narratives suggests that this unintended consequence has indeed occurred.

The strengths and weaknesses of the narrative approach to politics are bound up in these questions of generalisability and specificity. If the use of narrative by scholars represented a renunciation of scientific rigour, then why take seriously the narratives of political actors, mired in specific circumstances and unlikely to provide much in the way of generalisable insight? Patterson and Monroe, in their 1998 overview of the study of narrative in political science, noted this scepticism (Patterson and Monroe 1998: 320). It is notable that nowhere did they find examples of research on the sort of public political narrative which this exploratory case represents. I am not talking here about metanarratives, which work by 'erasing their own history and particularity' (Patterson and Monroe 1998: 326), and

displaying in their universal abstraction the paradoxical quality of 'denarrativization' (Somers and Gibson 1994: 63). My focus is rather on political actors' temporally and spatially defined narratives. As noted above, social science considerations of narrative rarely touch on these more formal and public political narratives, particularly the narratives of political regimes. In the field of social theory, Margaret Somers and Gloria Gibson have, for example, offered a four-fold typology – ontological narratives, public narratives, conceptual narratives, and metanarratives – which concerns itself primarily with the narratives of individuals and society, rather than with public political narratives. In their definition, an ontological narrative provides a sense of self and so links to agency, since understanding conceptualisations of self informs understanding of actions. Their second category, public narrative, refers back to the individual, and the way in which narratives of institutions and organisations inform how social actors understand themselves within a wider context (Somers and Gibson 1994: 61-63).

None of the four types of narrative identified by Somers and Gibson from a social theory perspective capture the element of public political narratives of interest to this article.<sup>1</sup> Public political narratives represent and provide self-conceptualisations of and for their narrators, the political actors, be they public individuals, parties, or regimes. They may or may not be widely understood or accepted by the public beyond the political actor-narrators, but the narrative itself informs our understanding of the motivations and actions of the political actors. My central concern here is not with the outward effect of narrative, such as its role in mythmaking, collective memory and nation-building (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Smith 2002), or in political performance (Alexander 2004; 2011), but with a more neglected question; in what ways does analysis of a public political narrative illuminate its narrators' norms, priorities, future intentions, concerns, incoherencies, and so on?

Patterson and Monroe's overview of the place of narrative analysis in political science confirms the paucity of academic engagement with public political narratives when it comes to using the techniques of narrative analysis. They note how narrative analysis has been used at the macro level to explore cultural contestation – for example, portrayals of the American dream in film – but again the narrative studied is not the formal narrative of a political actor. They review too structuralist and post-structuralist conceptualisations of narrative, though, as with discourse theory, this literature deals more with understanding and interpreting meanings (Howarth 2000: 128), rather than focusing on how analysis of narrative structures and their causal explanations provides insight into policy enactment and intentions. Similarly, approaching public political narrative from a communications theory perspective draws focus onto questions of interpretation, reception, and social power relations and away from the policy aspects with which narrative analysis deals.

On the rare occasions where narrative analysis is used in relation to official state-level political texts, the texts in question are not always what we would recognise as narratives. One recent analysis essayed a narrative approach to the Soviet and Russian constitutions since 1924 (Schmid 2010). Constitutions, however, are not explicit and straightforward narratives and nor are they written as such. A public political narrative consists of a sequential account given by dominant political actors connecting selected, specific developments so as to impose a desired order on them. So, the narrative of a state's development, such as that employed by the Putin project in Russia, seeks to impose order

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<sup>1</sup> The latter two narrative types have less relevance than the former two to the exceptionalist narratives of political actors; conceptual narratives are constructed by social researchers to show connections in society, metanarratives are generalised abstractions.

on disparate events by selecting, connecting, and interpreting them within the context of a developmental story, complete with causal links. At the orchestration of the narrator(s), particular events are placed in a particular context for a particular purpose (Griffin 1993: 1097). Such a process invokes stability, progress, and the important role of the narrative's authors. It creates too a normative conceptualisation of the world as the regime believes it is or *ought* to be, combining known facts with imagined wholes (Jenkins 1995: 134-35; Lynch 2005: 161).

The task of the narrative method consists primarily in analysing the elements of the story told. Somers and Gibson propose a useful, if a little overprescriptive, four-part definition of narrativity suited to social science, consisting of relationality of parts, causal emplotment, selective appropriation, and temporality-sequence-place (Somers and Gibson 1994: 59-60). Baker reduces the Somers and Gibson definition to three elements – relationality, causal emplotment, and selective appropriation – and adds a fourth from Jerome Bruner, namely narrative accrual (Bruner 1991; Baker 2005: 8-9). What do these mean? Relationality of parts refers to the combination of events or narrative elements into a whole. Such combinations gain significance through causal emplotment, which provides a normative interpretation, ostensibly explaining why events turned out the way the narrative suggests they turned out. Constructing a narrative requires the selective appropriation of events and other elements, omitting those occurrences which do not fit. Finally, narrative accrual refers to 'the process of repeated exposure to a narrative or set of narratives leading to the shaping of a culture, tradition, or history' (Baker 2005: 8-9). In the case of a state, the ruling regime repeatedly re-tells and adds to the narrative, since narratives are developmental and dynamic by nature. They retain relevance by being 'reactive to daily life' (Migdal 2001: 24; Lynch 2005: 158).

In sum, the present article argues for public political narratives used by political actors to be addressed more explicitly, using appropriate methodological tools, specifically, the techniques of narrative analysis. A study of the narrative employed by the Putin-Medvedev regime in Russia contributes as an exploratory case to a deeper understanding of how such interrogation of a state's public political narrative can provide an holistic and critical account of its development and intentions. The critical approach insists on a nuanced stance between the simple acceptance or rejection of a narrative. For example, recent scholarly discussion of the development and promulgation of Putinism's central themes in both western and Russian journals has focused on the concept of propaganda (Liñán 2009; Belousov 2010). Where narrative analysis talks of narrative accrual, Miguel Vázquez Liñán prefers 'the imposition of the monologue of power' and, using the Russian case, rails against the 'myths' promulgated over the past decade by Putin's 'propaganda of fear' (Liñán 2009: 138). Such a focus leads to analysis of the validity of content as truth, whereas the narrative approach, whilst not ignoring the notion of validity, privileges temporality, contingency, agency, and the normative. Methodological motivation comes here from a commitment to taking seriously what political actors say about themselves and their projects as a key source of insight into both worldview and policy direction, since understanding self-conceptualisation informs our understanding of motivations and actions. The exploratory case of the Putin-Medvedev narrative in Russia contributes an exemplum of how analysing a public political narrative provides insights into the narrator-actors' political priorities, making sense of policy choices and revealing future concerns.

## **The content of the Putin-Medvedev narrative**

The public political narrative developed in 21<sup>st</sup> century Russia under Presidents Putin and Medvedev provides an exploratory case for the application of the techniques of narrative analysis. As with other political narratives, it has been analysed in different ways – for example, as propaganda (Liñán 2009; Belousov 2010), and as ideology (Evans 2008) – but not as what it primarily is, namely narrative. My contention here is that identifying narrative as such, and employing the tools of narrative analysis to study it, has an explanatory reach not present elsewhere. The story told by the political actors may be well known – after all, that is the purpose of public political narratives – but the application of the narrative approach reveals and highlights elements which are subordinate in other approaches, and offers an understanding based on taking seriously the accounts of the political actors concerned. The stories political actors tell about themselves matter. To identify the central elements of a narrative is to focus on those elements which bring consistency and constancy to a polity. For example, emphasising that national unity and stability are the non-negotiables of Putinism provides a nuance not found in the binary ‘democratic versus non-democratic’ accounts of approaches focused on propaganda and ideology, understanding – though by no means uncritically accepting – the narrators’ worldview in which stability and unity do not oppose but are essential to democratic development. The subjective nature of narrative facilitates the identification of actors’ self-conceptualisations and self-imposed limits of political actions and alternatives. Taken together, these insights from narrative analysis retain a predictive capacity drawing on narrative constancy and self-conceptualisation.

Russia’s ruling regime has repeatedly set out the content of Putinism in a narrative of Russia’s development. Vladimir Putin came to power, first as acting president, on millennium eve 1999, accompanied by the publication of his state-of-the-nation analysis, *Russia at the Turn of the Millennium*, which established the basis of the Putin narrative – a Russia wracked by a century of unprecedented upheaval, lagging behind the most advanced countries, relying on raw materials for wealth, with an impoverished people, desperate above all for stability and national unity, which could only be achieved by a strong state. *Russia at the Turn of the Millennium* has the key features of a public political narrative. In keeping with the Aristotelian notion that effective narratives have a beginning, a middle, and an end (Alexander 2004: 543), it provides a temporally sequential account, setting out Russia’s story in sections entitled ‘lessons to learn [from the past]’, ‘the modern situation in Russia’, and ‘a chance for a worthy future’. It is spatially specific, focusing on Russia and locating the more negative elements of the narrative to the west. It is selective in terms of the events and facts appropriated to build up the desired account. It also establishes central motifs, causal links, and clear temporal boundaries (Putin 1999).

Since that initial public statement, Russia’s leaders have repeated and developed the narrative of Putinism in annual presidential addresses, key speeches and articles, state symbols and public holidays, lengthy phone-in programmes on television, books designed to introduce first President Putin and then President Medvedev to the Russian people (Gevorkyan, Timakova et al. 2000; Svanidze and Svanidze 2008), and many other forms. For reasons of space and clarity, the analysis here draws from the narrative as set out by the

presidents, Putin and Medvedev, between 2000 and 2010. Their public political narrative, however, has been expounded in wider political circles, notably by Vladislav Surkov, a senior aide to both presidents credited with developing the key concepts of Russia's regime during these years. Surkov's own preference for the narrative mode allegedly took on a literal, and literary, form in 2009, when he was widely touted as the author of the pseudonymous Natan Dubovitsky's novel 'Okolonolya' ('Close to Zero'), a story of corruption and political intrigue in contemporary Russia.

The overarching narrative of the Putin project is well known in terms of content to those who follow Russian affairs, although it is seldom explicitly identified and analysed as a narrative *per se*. The narrative content can be built up from innumerable primary and secondary sources. For the sake of ease of reference, a consolidated account – Chadaev and Loginov's *Plan Putina: slovar' politicheskikh terminov* (*The Putin Plan: A Dictionary of Political Terms* (Moscow, 2007)) – provides the main source here. Chadaev and Loginov's book was published by Evropa Press, established in 2005 with the aim of 'specialising in the publication of political literature and fulfilling the direct propagandistic purposes of the Kremlin' (Belousov 2010: 85). Since it predates the Medvedev presidency, the Chadaev-Loginov volume is supplemented as a source in the account below by key speeches and interviews given by Dimitrii Medvedev.

The narrative of Putinism goes like this. At the end of the 1990s Russia was a country in chaos, with a broken economy and a fractured society (Chadaev and Loginov 2007: 78). Its federal nature was ineffective, as regions countermanded the writ of the centre (Chadaev and Loginov 2007: 99). The state manifested weakness in its failure to fulfil its most basic roles, unable to collect taxes in order to ensure adequate security, education, healthcare, and law and order (Chadaev and Loginov 2007: 140). Most people sank deeper into poverty, whilst the oligarchs squandered the nation's riches, bought political power, and, acting as an 'off-shore aristocracy', squirreled abroad anything of value, including their capital and their families (Chadaev and Loginov 2007: 71, 74-77). Internationally, the once great power of Russia enjoyed little influence or respect after a decade of kow-towing to the West, whose governments had at best disregarded, and at worst connived in, the weakening of Russia (Chadaev and Loginov 2007: 120-121). At the turn of the millennium Vladimir Putin came to power determined to rebuild a prosperous, stable, and influential Russia. He brought the regions back under central control by reforming the upper chamber of parliament, creating Federal Districts, and abolishing elections for regional heads. He put the oligarchs' resources at the service of the state. His political reforms resulted in a more effective parliament and a party system which represented national rather than sectoral and regional interests (Chadaev and Loginov 2007: 78-81). When the economy grew, the state took tax revenues and improved healthcare, education, and social services through general spending and the Medvedev-led National Projects (Chadaev and Loginov 2007: 57-64, 122-126). International debts were paid off. With increased investment in the armed forces and a foreign policy geared to the national interest, Russia once again became a major player on the world stage. As a 'great power' Russia would never be subject to the sort of 'pseudo-democratic demagogues, receiving help from abroad' (Chadaev and Loginov 2007: 114) who lay behind the 'colour revolutions' experienced in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. So Russia entered the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a position to embark on a programme of modernisation, based on democratic values and institutions, building a technologically smart economy (Pavlovskii and Glazychev 2008: 28-29, 40-41). Looking to the future, the role of leaders will decline as Russia becomes a society of free and responsible people. Nostalgia

and prejudice will give way to a modern, forward-looking nation able to take its place in the global economy (Neef, Mascolo et al. 2009).

### **The narrative parts of Putinism**

This is the story that Russia's leadership has told. Although the narrative is familiar to those who know Russia, it has – like other public political narratives – not been analysed as narrative. Such an approach requires identification and analysis of the narrative parts of Putinism, of its motifs, temporalities, symbols, characters and subplots. In this way, narrative analysis develops a detailed and holistic understanding of the politics of the Putin-Medvedev regime. Critical awareness of the regime's selective appropriation of narrative elements reveals priorities, policy choices, and future concerns. It should be noted that in discussing Putinism in Russia, the election of Dimitrii Medvedev to succeed Putin as president in March 2008 did not mark the end of what might be called the Putin project. Medvedev came to power with a manifesto called 'Russia 2020' but known also as 'Plan Putina' (the Putin Plan). His presidency slotted easily into the developmental story central to the Putin project. It required no new narrative.

#### *Central motifs*

A narrative's central motifs represent the priorities to which other elements take second place. The normative motifs of Putinism can be enumerated straightforwardly – stability, unity, social consensus, centralisation, a strong state, sovereignty, patriotism, a droit de regard over Russia's claimed geographical sphere of influence, evolution over revolution, belief in the appropriateness of Russian approaches rather than alien models of development, and the notion that context trumps abstract theory. Of these, national unity and long-term stability are paramount. 'National unity – the central idea and starting point of the Putin plan' (Chadaev and Loginov 2007: 41) sits alongside stability justifying a myriad of monocentric policy measures and being encapsulated in the name of the party of power, 'United Russia'. Putinism's stability is built on a monocentric conceptualisation of political life, a syncretic and reconciliatory approach to history, the promotion by various means of social consensus, and a commitment to Russia's own unique path of development. Monocentric measures have included: the Law on Political Parties of 2001, which Putin himself called 'the most significant event in the political arena' in that year (Bacon 2004: 40); the temporary increase in the threshold vote required to enter parliament; the replacement of gubernatorial elections with a system of presidential appointment; greater control by the state over the key broadcast media; the creation of political parties by the Kremlin; and the use of administrative resources in elections. The narrative has appropriated and accrued selected motifs, which trump 'lesser' values, such as democracy, and when identified and taken seriously, provide a reliable guide to policy priorities.

President Medvedev largely retained the central motifs of Putinism, though he brought forward a little the liberal notes always present in the project. In 2008 Medvedev put the foundation stone of his presidency in place in its first months, with the extension of the presidential term to six years. A narrative-centred analysis, noting the central motifs of Putinism, identifies this as a key event, despite the distractions of the unexpected and more transitory crises in that period, namely the August 2008 war with Georgia and the global economic crash. Stability lies at the core of Putinism, and Medvedev emphasised this stance

both before and after he became president. In an interview with the German magazine Stern in summer 2007, he declared, with his familiar overstatement of Putinism's possibilities, that 'we must secure such stability in our state that no one fears for the future' (Albes and Klare 2007; Medvedev 2008b).

Narrative analysis brings a focus on the choice of central motifs by the Putin-Medvedev regime. In doing so it serves to explain both the *consequences of* that choice in terms of policy priorities and future paths closed off or opened up, and also the *reasons for* that choice. As the following analysis of temporalities suggests, the narrative's 'back story' of territorial fragmentation, excessive regionalism, and a weak state offers explanatory context for its emphasis on unity and stability. The centrality of this emphasis endows it with a legitimating function, of particular importance in the context of the diminishing legitimating role of flawed elections which in turn the narrative of stability itself helps to explain. The narrative's agents benefit from identifying themselves with its central motifs and drawing on its legitimating role in a mutually reinforcing process. The connectedness of narrative elements reifies the narrative itself as an object of critical analysis, enhancing its properties of permanence and 'actorness' separate from its creator-narrators.

### *Temporalities*

The narrative method considers how, at the orchestration of the narrator(s), particular events are placed in a particular context for a particular purpose (Griffin 1993: 1097). Construction of a narrative requires the selective appropriation of events and elements, omitting what does not fit. The relationality of these parts is established in such a way as to construct a whole, and causal emplotment reveals their normative interpretation. Somers and Gibson argue that narrativity requires discerning the meaning of any single event 'only in temporal and spatial relationship to other events' (1994: 59). In considering the Putin-Medvedev narrative from this perspective, the temporal and the symbolic come to the fore.

The first act of selective appropriation in any story is to establish its beginning – 'in the beginning', 'once upon a time', the temporal framing matters. The narrative of the Putin project has had different starting points at different times. At the beginning of his presidency in 2000, Vladimir Putin's public focus was on dealing with the legacy of the Soviet Union, which had collapsed almost a decade earlier. Putin's narrative rejected the ideology of Communism without junking decades of Russian history. On the one hand he talked about the 'outrageous price our country and its people had to pay for that social experiment', and the 'historic futility' of Communism's 'blind alley'. On the other hand he refused to deny the 'unquestionable achievements of those times' (Putin 1999). Whereas the Yeltsin regime had sought to present Communism as the 'other' over which the newly democratic Russia must triumph in an elemental struggle for the future, Putinism instead sought a more nuanced stance of consensus and reconciliation.

By some time around the beginning of his second term in office in 2004, the temporal framework of Putin's narrative shifted to focus on the Yeltsin years as his starting point. A reluctance to criticise too strongly his immediate predecessor, who effectively placed him in office, was understandable in the early period of his presidency. However, favourable comparisons with predecessors frequently represent a valuable narrative tool in political life, as had been demonstrated in the late 1980s by Mikhail Gorbachev's powerful narrative of the Brezhnev years as a pre-crisis era of stagnation. An increasing focus by Putin on the

Yeltsin years as the starting point of the story facilitated by comparison an emphasis on stability, economic growth, improved standards of living and the restoration of national pride and international standing.

The Medvedev presidency brought a slightly different temporal approach to the Putin project. Whereas Putin's narrative habitually started from the Soviet years and then the 1990s, Medvedev instead reached further back and further forward to situate his more reformist emphasis. The Medvedev narrative effectively says – I believe a modern democratic Russia is being built, but its completion lies some way in the future, because we have inherited deep problems rooted in centuries of Russian history. Medvedev overtly distances himself from engagement with the recent past. He told *Der Spiegel* that he believed 'it would not be quite appropriate for me to assess my predecessors' (Neef, Mascolo et al. 2009). Similarly, in the book designed to introduce himself to the Russian people as their new president, Medvedev bizarrely claims that he cannot evaluate the Soviet period because he 'only caught the end of it' (Svanidze and Svanidze 2008: 9).

The dominant temporality in Medvedev's narrative is the long-term, be that historically or future-oriented. A typical example can be found in his interpretation of one of contemporary Russia's most debilitating problems, legal nihilism. Whilst Medvedev gains credit for acknowledging the problem, and indeed bringing it to the fore of his policy agenda, he framed it temporally as 'something that has roots deep in our distant past. Fifteen years is too short a time to eradicate such deeply rooted traditions' (Medvedev 2008a). In causal emplotment terms, the blame for the state of Russia's legal system today lies with the imprecise and impersonal 'distant past'. In his review of 2010, Medvedev likewise emphasised that Russia's 'disregard of legislation has been forming for quite a time, not at present, and not during the Soviet times, but many centuries ago ... Do I have a strong medicine against it? I will tell you the truth – I do not. The therapy is to be prolonged' (Medvedev 2010c). Similarly, in his narratively structured keynote article *Forward Russia! (Rossiya, vpered!)*, Russia is beset by 'centuries of economic backwardness' despite the efforts of Peter the Great, the later Tsars and the Bolsheviks to introduce innovation (Medvedev 2009). And when it comes to the country's social problems:

'... we only began changing our social system 20 years ago, and I want to stress to you that this system is deeply rooted in traditions that cannot be changed overnight. This system was shaped by traditions reaching back centuries. These traditions have become firmly entrenched in habit, and they are often a hindrance to our progress.'

(Medvedev 2010a)

When extending the presidential term in 2008, Medvedev likewise emphasised that 'the foundations of our constitutional order have been set for a long-term historical period' (Medvedev 2008a). Even the sympathetic interviewers and compilers of the Svanidze and Svanidze volume are moved to note that 'Medvedev is obviously a man of history, in the sense that he cannot perceive basic contemporary problems outside of the complex and undemocratic history of our state' (Svanidze and Svanidze 2008: 41).

In Medvedev's narrative, Russia's major problems have their roots deep in the past, the post-Soviet decades represent far too short a time to deal with them, and their resolution lies many years ahead. He was elected on a programme for Russia 2020. According to Igor Yurgens, the head of the Moscow think-tank, the Institute of Contemporary Development (INSOR), whose trustees' council Medvedev chairs, around President Medvedev people are 'constantly' thinking about what Russia will be like 20 years from now (Goble 2010). INSOR's

report, *21<sup>st</sup> Century Russia: The Shape of a Desirable Tomorrow*, looks so far into the future, and buys so readily into a long-termist lack of urgency, that it explicitly refuses to be drawn on whether the 'tomorrow' in question is '2020, 2030, or 2100' (INSOR 2010: 48).

The use of narrative analysis brings a focus on temporality which might otherwise be missed by more atomised approaches, and indeed the dominance of the long-term in Putinism, and particularly during Medvedev's presidency, has not otherwise been highlighted in the scholarly literature. Narrative seeks to capture time and apply it in the service of a political project. At the heart of the Putin project lies a tension between stability and democracy. We have seen that the central motifs of the narrative selectively appropriate stability. Its temporal choices confirm this priority, and explain – or excuse – the lack of progress toward democracy. Putinism presents itself as a long-term project. Vladimir Putin asserted in the opening phrases of his first presidential address that Russia faced 'long-term tasks' (Putin 2000b). In 2007, Putin, reviewing his two terms in office, declared that 'we are still only at the beginning of the difficult road to our country's full and genuine recovery' (Putin 2007). Medvedev likewise began his first presidential address by emphasising 'new plans for long-term economic and social development' (Medvedev 2008a). The focus of his annual address to parliament in 2010 was 'our youth and our children', again asking the Russian people to look ahead a generation to a resolution of economic and social problems (Medvedev 2010b). Both Putin and Medvedev use narrative to capture time. Medvedev's narrative pre-empts the frequent criticism that all his liberal-sounding speeches and proclamations amount to little of substance. Be it the campaign against corruption, support for a freer press, anguish at legal nihilism, his supposed desire to see more democracy – in all these cases and more, their temporal framing as ancient problems whose gradual resolution awaits future fulfillment attempts to rebut the criticism that nothing much has changed in the Medvedev years. The unified narrative masks policy failure by (re)defining temporality. Such a rebuttal lacks plausibility of course for many critics of the regime, but nonetheless carries a resonance for the less oppositionally inclined and – more importantly for the purpose of the argument advanced here – indicates how the Putin-Medvedev tandem leadership conceptualises itself.

### *Symbols*

The techniques of narrative analysis bring a focus on narrative as a 'constructed configuration', bringing together central themes within a temporal relationship and composed of symbolic practices (Somers and Gibson 1994: 59). In a speech to the State Council in December 2000, the story Putin told of the Soviet years had both temporal and symbolic aspects:

If we accept the fact that in no way could we use the symbols of the previous epochs including the Soviet one, then we must admit that our mothers and fathers lived useless and senseless lives, that they lived in vain. I can't accept it either with my mind or my heart. There was already a period of time in our history when we rewrote everything anew. We can act in the same way today, too. We can change the flag, the anthem and the coat of arms. But in that case it would certainly be right to call us rootless creatures. (Putin 2000a).

The symbols which were adopted by Putin – the Soviet anthem but with new words, the coat of arms from the pre-imperial era, and the flag from the imperial period – demonstrated that he recognised 'the complexity of the Russian historical experience and the need to seek

inspiration from the entire Russian past' (Godzimirski 2008: 26). They sit well within a narrative of national unity and stability. These emphases come together too in the major symbolic statement of the Putin presidency, the creation of a new national holiday, National Unity Day, to effectively replace the major Bolshevik holiday, Revolution Day. Under Yeltsin, Revolution Day – that is, 7 November – remained on the list of national holidays, although in 1996 Yeltsin downgraded it and renamed it the Day of Reconciliation and Accord. Putin removed 7 November from the list of official holidays. In its place he introduced National Unity Day on 4 November. National Unity Day commemorates the liberation of Moscow from the Poles in 1612. This event ended the civil war and foreign intervention of the 'time of troubles' and ushered in the Romanov dynasty, which remained in power until the revolution of 1917.

When National Unity Day was first celebrated in 2005, films and television documentaries set out the symbolic narrative (Kraus 2005; Krylov 2005; Skoblin 2005; Butgurlin 2006). They drew parallels between the civil conflict of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century 'time of troubles', and the 'time of troubles' experienced by Russia in the 1990s, a decade described by the memoirist Owen Matthews as 'a story without a narrative' (Matthews 2008: 5). The implication was that just as the Romanov dynasty brought long-term stability in 1612, so the Putin regime brought long-term stability after the chaos of the Yeltsin years. Other elements were woven into the narrative around National Unity Day: it celebrates a Russian victory over western domination; Orthodox Russia beating Catholic Poland promotes the messianic, Russian nationalist notion of Moscow as the 'Third Rome'; and the 'seven boyars' who sought personal wealth and power in league with Russia's enemies abroad in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, uncannily represent the 'seven bankers', major oligarchs of the Yeltsin era, broadly accused of the same.

Again, analysing the stories told by the regime facilitates an understanding of political identity, policy stances, and priorities. Symbols enhance the narrative and encapsulate political positions. In 2005, for example, the mortal remains of the émigré philosopher Ivan Il'in and the Civil War General Anton Denikin were laid to rest at last in their homeland in a ceremony presided over by the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Aleksei II, and attended by President Putin (Yablokova 2005). This honour bestowed on two men who dedicated themselves to fighting the Soviet regime received very little attention in the West, whereas positive references to Stalin in Russia tend to provoke headlines suggesting Soviet revanchism (Applebaum 2008). A regime which removes Revolution Day from the holiday schedules and honours the White General Denikin does not easily fit such a conceptualisation, and the focus on symbols within narrative analysis contributes to an holistic understanding of the regime's self-conceptualisation and political position.

### *Agency*

A relationship exists between temporal frameworks, agency and causality. Narrative requires agency. As Patterson and Monroe set out in their overview of the narrative method in political science, narrative 'involves human beings as characters or actors. These human beings have a place in the plot, a role in the story' (Patterson and Monroe 1998: 316). The place of agency in personal narratives is axiomatic. In public political narratives the personal agent is less self-evident as the story is of a more impersonal system or regime (Somers and Gibson 1994: 63). However, the temporality deployed in a public political narrative can serve to define a more personal agent by focusing on, for example, reigns or periods in office, with

the decisive dates being the borders between the influence of individuals. In the Russian case, the regime's narrative, as shown by analysis of temporality and symbols, readily takes Putin's election to the presidency in 2000 as the dividing line between the 'economic and political crises of the 1990s' and the 'significant successes' of the Putin era during which 'the population's income grew by more than two times' (Chadaev and Loginov 2007: 78). The story told by the regime imposes a temporality which draws attention to the agency of its leaders, thereby imputing to them causality for policy successes. In fact official data show that economic recovery began in 1999, during the Yeltsin presidency and after the financial crisis of 1998.

In public political narratives, political actor-narrators provide positive accounts of themselves as 'heroes or victims' and their opponents as 'evildoers or fools' (Alexander 2004: 551). In the Russian narrative, the Putin regime – and particularly Putin himself – is the hero. The regular summer Putin photoshoot illustrates: Putin bare-chested riding a horse; Putin crouching in the front of a dinghy, crossbow in hand, ready to loose a tracking device into a whale; Putin shooting a tranquiliser dart into a tiger; Putin playing beach-volleyball with young bikini-clad women; in all these situations and more he has been photographed, interviewed and filmed as action man, concerned 'father of the people', determined leader, moderniser, and *muzhik* (a real 'Russian man'). The victims in this narrative are the Russian people in the 1990s, left floundering in poverty as the real villains of the piece – the so-called oligarchs – plundered the nation's wealth and gave nothing back. Complex explanations are rolled into a simple narrative by a process of personalised selective appropriation. The identification of heroes, victims, and villains brings particularity and works against generalisability (Caporaso 2009). It enables the regime to identify itself as a particular case which justifies particular policy choices over others. The narrative emphasises the regime's conceptualisation of itself as central to Russia's development and of a strong state as the way to protect the Russian people. Its focus on the oligarchs as the villains of the piece similarly facilitates a reading of the regime's normative priorities. For example, analysts and political actors alike widely acknowledge that UK-Russian relations have been at an unusually low ebb for a number of years. The identification in Russia's narrative of the oligarchs as villains-in-chief, when set against the residency of a number of them in the United Kingdom and the failure of Russia's extradition requests, contributes to a fuller understanding of this situation. Wicked oligarchs are key characters in the Russian narrative, and fighting them matters more than maintaining good UK-Russian relations.

### *Plots and Subplots*

Narratives, in the definition of Lawrence Stone, writing in the 1970s about a return to narrative in historical scholarship, focus material into a single coherent story albeit with subplots (Stone 1979: 3). Russia's public political narrative particularly demands the existence of subplots since its emphasis on unity and stability requires that a relatively wide range of opinion can fit within it. Subplots sit within the narrative; they are not alternative stories told by those opposed to the regime, but are told by the regime itself. Just as the novel 'Okolonolya', allegedly written by the 'Kremlin conceptualist' Vladislav Surkov, 'contains several stories within the story, playing back onto each other' (NATO Defense College 2009), so a successful public political narrative contains plot and subplot, providing the developmental flexibility essential to its usefulness and longevity. As such, subplots within an approved narrative fit well with analogous elements in Russia's centrally managed

political system. Putin's United Russia party, for example, contains three political 'clubs' – liberal-democratic, social-conservative, and state-patriotic – which have divergent political views and yet all sit within the single party. Analysts likewise distinguish between genuine opposition in Russia, and cosmetic or semi-opposition, which happily sits within the regime-approved political system (March 2009). In a similar way, the 'tandem' leadership of President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin from 2008 onwards allowed more liberal and more statist subplots to exist within the overarching narrative of Putinism.

From the perspective of narrative analysis, subplots facilitate the development of a dynamic narrative and keep potential political pathways open. Russia's public political narrative of incremental progress, stability and unity contains a measure of irresolution, with subplots of democratisation and normality present within the central narrative of stability and Russian exceptionalism. Narrative analysis, however, distinguishes plots from subplots. Medvedev's apparently liberal storyline subordinates itself to stability, long-termism and Russian exceptionalism, for example, in his view that 'the development of democracy here follows its own laws' (Svanidze and Svanidze 2008: 19). As noted earlier, the narrative retains relevance by being 'reactive to daily life' (Migdal 2001: 24; Lynch 2005: 158), and its continued dominance benefits from different subplots appealing to different audiences at different times. Clearly though, diverging policy preferences also contain the potential for instability. There are real policy issues at stake here, where slight differences can be identified within the ruling regime, to do with, for example, the role of the state in the economy, the independence of the judiciary, and the place of political opposition.

### **Alternative Narratives, Alternative Futures**

Subplots serve a narrative by widening its appeal and keeping potential political pathways open. At the same time, their subordination to the plot acknowledges the danger that they may themselves become alternative narratives. Drawing on the Weberian notion of counterfactual reasoning as a means of interrogating the importance of particular facts to our understanding of causal relationships, it is relatively straightforward to isolate specific events and construct alternative narratives (Griffin 1993: 1101). A critical reading of public political narrative requires an awareness of selective appropriation, and the ability to construct such alternative narratives. In the case of Russia's public political narrative, for example, Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004 stands for political instability and the manipulation of a sovereign state by western intervention, with Vladimir Putin warning against a process of 'Ukrainisation' in Russia (Bratersky and Abdullaev 2010). Were the more liberal subplot of the Russian narrative to become dominant, the Orange Revolution could just as easily stand for the spread of genuine democracy, the influence of civil society, and a successful struggle against corruption and electoral manipulation.

The notion of differing interpretations of isolated events is of course a commonplace, but the strength of narrative lies in the causal emplotment gained from linking events together. Linkages in a narrative make problematic the reinterpretation of isolated elements without undermining the narrative as whole. As this article argues, analysis of public political narratives provides insight into the worldview of political actors. This in turn has a predictive element in providing a framework within which the reactions of these political actors to particular events can be expected to fit. So, for example, in a choice between stability and democracy in Russia, stability will win. A more specific example is provided by the August war with Georgia in 2008, when many commentators speculated about Russian troops

occupying Tblisi and overthrowing the Saakashvili regime. Familiarity with the Russian public political narrative indicated correctly that such a move was highly unlikely, since the narrative always couches talk of an internationally resurgent Russia in terms of international law and the responsibilities of a 'great power' (Chadaev and Loginov 2007: 120-121).

In a world where many political actors appear reluctant to believe in universal metanarratives, the public political narrative provides a sub-universal, exceptionalist account of a regime's beliefs about the past, present and future. Such an account paradoxically contains elements of the ideological metanarrative, particularly in its future orientation, providing a goal beyond the horizon which justifies political choices in the present. Although the public political narrative rarely contains eschatological grand theory, analysis of its putative ending nevertheless reveals much. The narrative of Putinism explicitly disavows ideological metanarratives and in doing so validates an exceptionalist approach. Russia's future, according to its public political narrative, will be as a fair democratic society, where political freedoms and private property are defended, and a forward-looking young nation takes its place in the global economy (Pavlovskii and Glazychev 2008: 29). As noted earlier, however, Russia's narrative places this future at some distance from the present by means of a dominant long-termism. Why hasn't Russia become a democratic liberal market state? Because, goes the argument made explicit by both Putin and Medvedev, Russia is exceptional. It has its own deep-rooted problems requiring its own steady solutions. Whilst the Putin project has constructed a narrative of 'progressive development within a determinate institutional, ideological and symbolic order' (Prozorov 2008: 219), the future orientation of the narrative seeks to excuse policy failure and to justify élite continuity. It also enables the incoherences within Putinism to be held together: stability and a strong state now in order to enable democracy and individual freedoms later.

A critical reading of a narrative's ending interrogates issues such as the ending's relationship to current policies, to plot and subplot, to narrative temporalities, and to agency. As normative constructs, narratives to some extent represent an imagined present, and their endings a dreamt future. Interrogation of the ending in terms of its relationship to the present and to the narrative as a whole facilitates a deeper questioning of the narrative's purpose. Does the ending match the story? Would the main characters act in that way? Is the ending set in the near future, or in some distant never-never time? The Russian narrative places its vision of a democratic, law-governed country with robust political freedoms at a temporal distance from its current leaders, whose policies apparently do little to achieve their stated aim.

## **Conclusion**

A public political narrative consists of a sequential account given by dominant political actors, choosing and connecting specific developments so as to impose a desired order on them. Its recurring motifs and symbols identify the narrator-actors' political priorities, making sense of policy choices and revealing future concerns. Where unexpected events arise, the narrative provides a guide to likely policy responses. Narratives capture time, and shifts in narrative temporalities indicate changes in self-conceptualisation and political priorities. When political actors choose the start of their narrative, they reject other beginnings, and so other causal factors. Temporal appropriations likewise include or exclude agents. In the same way, the relationship between plots and subplots provides an indicator of priorities, policy options, and likely policy choices. The dynamic nature of a public political narrative benefits from the

flexibility present in subplots, and their introduction, downplaying, or re-emphasis represents a political signalling process. Nonetheless, limits exist with regard to how much narrators can manipulate a narrative. If its strength lies in the causal emplotment gained from linking elements together, then manipulating too many elements too much risks unravelling the narrative, with potential catastrophic results for narrators with regard to their legitimacy. The connectedness of a narrative then strengthens the case for it to serve as the object of critical analysis, since it possesses properties of permanence and 'actorness' separate from its creator-narrators.

Taking contemporary Russia as an exploratory case contributes to a deeper understanding of how the tools of narrative analysis can be used to shed light on the nature of a public political narrative, providing an holistic understanding of its narrators' politics. The use of narrative by political scientists has featured in debates about the discipline for many years (Bevir 2006), whereas the use of narrative by political actors has been less prominent in the literature. A recent revival of interest in the narratives of political actors has focused on the interaction between narrator and audience (Alexander 2004; 2011). The argument of this article is that critical analysis of the narrative parts and their construction into a whole has explanatory and predictive merit, establishing the framework within which political choices are made. What I am concerned with here is taking seriously the stories political actors tell as a key source of insight into their motivations and intentions. The tools of narrative analysis exploit this source. Whether the narrative is widely accepted or derided is a secondary matter so far as this argument is concerned, as is the objective validity of the narrative. The exploratory case studied here represents a narrative much contested by western scholars and analysts, indeed this article similarly casts doubts on the Russian regime's genuine commitment to elements of the story which it tells. If my contention holds up, then narrative analysis provides a useful tool for understanding the polity in question – contemporary Russia in this case – and the self-conceptualisation of its political actors.

Questions still remain, however, around the issue of generalisability. Robert Bates' work on 'analytic narratives' sprang partly from his well known reservations about the value to political science of exceptionalist accounts in the form of area studies. Bates argued that area studies had 'failed to generate scientific knowledge' (Hanson 2009: 159), and his reservations about the value of spatially specific accounts is apparent in the idea that appropriately scientific methods must be employed to create analytic narratives (Bates 1998). The generalisability question throws up clear challenges in relation to public political narratives, which represent temporally and spatially defined exceptionalist accounts. For now that challenge can be answered in four ways, and with varying degrees of tentativeness since there clearly exists scope for further work. First, the approach of this article offers methodological generalisability. It identifies a neglected element of political discourse – the public political narrative – and sets out through an exploratory case the potential explanatory and even predictive power of narrative analysis. Taking the narratives of political actors seriously as narratives offers a fruitful approach of wider applicability. Second, in public political narratives the choice of the narrative form lies with the political actor, not the political scientist. The existence of public political narratives validates their analysis as such.

Third, when metanarratives dominated political discourse more than they do today, polities more readily owned them for themselves, for example, subordinating their temporally and spatially specific stories to the Marxist-Leninist metanarrative. However, even with the use of metanarratives in public political discourse declining in recent decades, the narratives of specific polities are still combined into larger wholes which facilitate comparative analysis.

For example, Russia's narrative of economic revival and growing international status has been joined together with similar stories in Brazil, China, and India to create the concept of the BRIC states. What began as a neat acronym coined by a Goldman Sachs analyst (O'Neill 2001), became within 8 years a formal international grouping with its own summits. Narratives have a combinatory quality stemming from their constitutive parts, be that common motifs, common villains, or common futures.

Fourth, and finally, generalisability is a function of the appropriate level of abstraction. I have argued that narrative analysis provides an holistic approach to the study of a spatially and temporally defined polity, more holistic than might be gained from the comparatively atomised focus on elements of that polity by the application of generalisable theory. It is not this article's task to decry the latter. Rather I support Hanson and Kopstein's view that there always exist 'temporal and spatial bounds on the validity of causal generalizations'. It remains the case that the task of holding together historical particularity and theoretical generalisability stands at the heart of comparative politics (Hanson and Kopstein 2005: 93-94).

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