

Constructing ‘the West’ in Russian Foreign Policy Discourse¹

Tatiana Dubrovskaya

The West: Concept, Narrative and Politics

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In this study, the West is viewed as a discursive phenomenon, whose meaning is constructed and re-constructed by verbal resources in various discourses. I concentrate on a few aspects of the concept of the West, which emerges recurrently in Russian foreign policy discourse, and aim to identify: 1. the political actors that are covered by the umbrella term ‘the West’; 2. the axiological charge that the concept obtains in the speeches; and 3. the pragmatic strategies that are employed to construct the West.

The approach taken in this paper is informed by social constructionism and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This work is part of a bigger project intending to disclose the mechanisms of the discursive construction of international relations. The concept of the West, being one of the most principal in Russian foreign policy discourse, is employed to construct a wider category of international relations. Both the West and international relations are social constructs, that is they are actualised through discourse and discourse practices. The constructionist approach to international relations has been discussed in more detail previously².

In my analysis of speech data I use the tools of CDA, more specifically, – the theory of representation of social actors³ and the classification of strategies developed in previous studies⁴.

The data used for this study include recent speeches of the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (2014-2016), given on various occasions and retrieved from the archives of the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (www.mid.ru). The

² Tatiana Dubrovskaya, Evgeniy Kozhemyakin, “Media construction of Russia’s international relations: specifics of representations,” *Critical Discourse Studies* (2016) (in print) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2016.1196228>

³ Theo van Leeuwen, “The representation of social actors,” in *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. Carmen. R. Caldas-Coulthard et al. (London: Routledge, 2003), 32–70.

⁴ Agnieszka Sowińska, Tatiana Dubrovskaya, “Discursive Strategies in the Media Construction of Poland, Russia and the USA in the Context of the Debate on the US Anti-Ballistic Missile Defense Shield in Polish and Russian Quality Papers,” in *Exploring Language through Contrast*, ed. Waldemar Skrzypczak et al. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 268-288.

translations from Russian into English are the official translations offered on the Ministry's website. We take them to be the equivalents of the original speeches in Russian and quote verbatim.

'The West' as an umbrella term. The findings of the study indicate that the West as a discursive construct has indeterminate and heterogeneous constituents, i.e. the combination of actors belonging to the category is not absolutely systematic or stable. I have identified three different ways of referring to the West in Russian foreign policy discourse.

First, the category 'the West' can be used as self-explanatory, without any further specifying of what actors it incorporates. Second, 'the West' is used as a direct equivalent of Europe and the European Union and, therefore, includes EU member states, various bodies and institutions within the EU as well as individual actors who have the officially granted authority to represent the interests of the EU. It is important to note that representations of the West as a purely European construct do not lack ambiguity either. For instance, NATO is recurrently mentioned in the context of Russian-European relations; however, this actor includes not only European states but also the USA and Canada. Mentions of NATO indicate that the West reaches out of the geographical and political borders of Europe to embrace non-European actors. The third type of representation involves explicit signalling of a close association between Europe (the EU) and the USA, which are grouped under the label 'the West' and ascribed similar qualities.

Opposition 'the West vs. the East'. The West is constructed discursively as a category that is related to the concept of the East, while the latter is strongly and unambiguously associated with Russia. In many contexts the West and the East come into an opposition, which can be viewed as a specific realisation of 'Us and Them'-opposition. One of the discursive

techniques employed to construct the opposition ‘the West vs. the East’ is through references to the actors’ attempts to group with other actors that do not belong to either category:

(1) <...> The European Union decided to tear Ukraine away from Russia for all times, to force it make an artificial choice, which was formulated on public many times – the West or Russia. (Lavrov 6.05.2014)

The opposition is also actualised through the discursive strategy of juxtaposition.

Axiological charge of ‘the West’. Foreign policy discourse is a locus of the fight for power and influence in the international arena. This fact and also the current geopolitical situation predetermines a negative axiological charge of the West in Russian foreign policy discourse. The specific axiological charge, positive or negative, ascribed to the West as an actor in the world arena depends on a given pragmatic context and is constructed by discursive strategies. The strategies of negative representation include negative evaluation and negative emotionalisation. These strategies often surface in the context of the debate of NATO’s expansion in the East. However, specific actors within the category ‘the West’ and the actors’ particular qualities may also receive a positive axiological charge. For instance, among positively evaluated aspects of the West are the activities of the Council of Europe and the legally established principle of equality:

(2) The Council of Europe is a perspective organisation, the only general European organisation, which is based on universal common European conventions, which impose legal obligations upon states. Such approach is ensured at the account of equality of all the states, which are members of the Council of Europe<..> (Lavrov 6.05.2014)

In Russian foreign policy discourse, the West as a social construct receives ambiguous representations and interpretations, which are predetermined by a wider political context and

more specific pragmatic factors. Depending on the speaker's goals, the West is ascribed positive or negative qualities, which are constructed through various discursive strategies.