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Russian Identity Narratives in a post-West World Order

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Delivering his speech at the Munich Security Conference last February, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claimed that "The post-Cold War order has ended" and called for a "post-West world order", where new centres of global influence will play a greater role. How does Russia envisage its role in this new world order? In light of the current climate of increasing normative contestation towards Western liberal values, what alternative narratives does Russia propose in its neighbourhood and beyond?

This contribution seeks to answer these pressing questions. Using discourse analysis and drawing on the author's fieldwork in Russia and other post-Soviet countries, the paper delineates three main identity narratives ('Russia as a champion of multilateralism and multipolarity', 'Russia as a conservative power', and 'Russia as an elder brother') that Russia strives to project outside of its borders. The paper also argues that these narratives have very different effects depending on where they are employed. In Russia's neighbourhood, they tend to appeal to like-minded political elites and those segments of the society more refractory to change (such as those nostalgic of Soviet Union), and they can also give way to hard policies, as the crisis in Ukraine shows. In the West, on the other hand, these narratives tend to appeal to forces that challenge the existing order. In the EU, for instance, the basis of support for Russian President Vladimir Putin encompasses both far-left and far-right movements, parties and leaders. While this might seem a contradiction in terms, the paper argues that in fact this diverse basis of support mirrors a reality where the two extremes of the political spectrum seem to be converging; indeed these populist parties, both left- and right-wing, share Eurosceptic views, and find in Russia a valid source of political and, in some cases, even allegedly financial support.