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Perceptions of Germany in Russia: Evidence from Narrative Interviews with Moscow University Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of focus groups and narrative interviews conducted with Moscow university students regarding their perceptions of Germany. It focuses on narratives about German culture, economic strength, history, Europeanness, migration, and Russian-German relations. The paper also discusses which sources participants draw on for their narrative construction, whether narratives converge or diverge among participants, and possible reasons for this convergence or divergence. In each case, the analysis focuses on the kind of image created of Germany and how this relates to the Russian self-image, thereby contributing to an understanding of the degree to which Germany constitutes an Other for Russian national identity.

The paper argues that Russians see Germany as a positive Other with a close cultural connection to them, a status which is perceived as threatened by the recent refugee influx and Germany's ties to the US, since both Muslim migrants and the US are strongly regarded as negative Others in Russia. It thereby contributes to the debate about both the dividing lines and the connections between East and West in Europe and the impact of political transformations and changing international relations on issues of national identity.

Keywords: Russia, Germany, narratives, Othering, university students

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INTRODUCTION

As one of the central countries in the European Union, Germany's relations to Russia are frequently under scrutiny in both academic research and public discourse in Germany, Russia and beyond. Over the last decades, Germany has pursued a special partnership with Russia: it is Russia's leading business partner, has advocated taking Russian interests into account in international structures, such as NATO and EU, and has - since 2000 - formed first a "strategic partnership" and then a "modernisation partnership" with Russia (cf. Meister, 2014). However, since the beginning of the Ukraine Crisis in 2014, Germany and Russia have signalled tougher stances towards each other. Mass media portrayals of Germany in Russia appear to have become more negative. Opinion polls in Russia show a deteriorating perception of Western partners, most significantly of Germany. This paper explores the impact these transformations of public opinion and mass media portrayals – likely caused by the Ukraine Crisis - have had on narratives on Germany among Russian individuals.

Drawing on a recent series of focus groups and narrative interviews conducted with Moscow university students, the paper shows how these individuals construct narratives on Germany drawing on a variety of sources, but largely converging in their conclusions. It investigates how these narratives relate to Russian national identity, and what types of relations between the two countries are narratively constructed. In so doing, the paper contributes to the debate on dividing lines and connections between East and West in Europe, by exploring the extent to which new personal connections between Russia and Western Europe might challenge the traditional perceptions of the *Other*.

The analysis presented here is part of a PhD research project into perceptions of Germany in Poland and Russia, which compares and contrasts perceptions of Germany among university students in Warsaw and Moscow with media narratives in these two countries. The structure of this paper is as follows: First, it briefly presents the context of Russian-German relations and the significance of country perceptions for international relations, drawing on existing studies on the topic and discussing the novelty of the approach adopted here. Second, it discusses the methodological approach further, before – third - diving into the data analysis

presenting five connected narrative strands: (1) Germany as economically prosperous; (2) German culture; (3) the significance of fascism and World War II; (4) Germany as a partner of Russia in international relations; and (5) Migration Germany. The paper concludes that Germany is seen as a positive *Other* of Russia with a close cultural connection, a status threatened by the recent refugee influx and Germany's ties to the US, since both Muslim migrants and the US are strongly perceived as negative *Others* in Russia.

1. CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In the 20th century, World War II and the end of the Cold War can be seen as the two most defining moments in Russian-German relations: the first ended with the defeat and division of Germany, enduring in Russian memory through the Victory Day celebrations, the second with the break-up of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany. Russia lost the GDR as a satellite state, but gained an important ally in the reunited Germany, which has made greater efforts than any other EU member state to integrate Russia into the new geopolitical situation, and has become its leading business partner (Belov, 2015, p. 610). However, since 2007 relations have cooled noticeably, reaching their nadir in 2014 with the escalation of the Ukraine Crisis. This has led to a consolidation and hardening of Western foreign policy against Russia, including the introduction of anti-Russian sanctions, disrupting the special relationship between Moscow and Berlin as a result (Belov, 2015, p. 614). In this context, Russian public opinion of Germany also seems to have deteriorated. Indeed, polls show a dramatic decrease in the number of respondents considering Germany a friendly country from 2013 to 2014. Thus, Russian perceptions of Germany, which had been consistently more positive than of, e.g., the US, France, and Great Britain, increasingly aligned with those of other 'Western' countries in 2014.

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents counting Germany among the five closest friends of and among the five most unfriendly countries for Russia (Levada-Tsentr, 2015).

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Close friend	23	22	24	No data	17	24	20	17	14	4	2
Unfriendly	3	2	2	No data	3	1	4	3	3	18	19

Understanding such public perceptions of other countries and their impact is important for international relations scholars working from a constructivist perspective. This is because governments can only maintain legitimacy if their actions and discourse resonate with opinions held in the population. Established narratives of other countries thus delineate action opportunities towards them (Green and Bogard, 2012). Moreover, narratives about other countries are also relevant to a country's self-perception. *Othering* describes the construction of collective identity by reference to and dissociation from other collectives. A country's identity may be defined in contrast to other nations, that is, narratives about other countries provide "counter-narratives" to the own national identity (cf., e.g., Neumann, 1996; Prizel, 1998). For Russia, Germany has represented such a significant Other in the past – in the 18th century, as Belov (2012) has argued, as well as in the 20th century, when the fight against fascism was accompanied by a surge in nationalism. *Others* are not necessarily negative or radical – there can be partial or positive *Others*, as Gibbins (2012, pp. 60f.) has pointed out. The question thus arises what role Germany plays in Russian self-definition today, and it is of interest both for understanding how Russian-German relations may develop in the future, and for analysing Russian self-perception and positioning in the 21st century.

While a number of studies on country perceptions have been produced in the American and EU-European context (incl. classics such as Jervis, 1976, Koch-Hillebrecht, 1977, and more recent publications like Terracciano and McCrae, 2007, Green and Bogard, 2012, Witte, 2014), studies on public perceptions of other countries in Russia are rare. This may have to do both with the relative weakness of constructivism in international relations research inside Russia (cf. Krumm, 2012),

and with the idea that in a non-democratic country, public opinion is harder to measure or may be considered less important than in Western countries. While the first part of this idea – public opinion being hard to measure in Russia – has some validity, the second part – public opinion being less important – needs to be rejected. Non-democratic rulers – just as democratically elected governments - rely on public legitimacy to remain in power, in particular populist leaders such as Putin (cf. e.g. Guriev & Treisman, 2015). Nonetheless, existing studies on perceptions in Russia of other countries or the West in general tend to focus on the government and leading ideologists (e.g. Shlapentokh, 2014; Tsygankov, 2014). For the case of Germany, Belov (2002, 2012, 2015) has contributed a number of interesting studies, and Kasamara and Sobolev's (2012) study sheds some light on the image of Germany in the Russian press. For the wider public perception, Levada Centre's regular poll (cited above) remains the main source of knowledge. In the case of Germany, we can additionally draw on public opinion polls by the Koerber foundation (Koecher, 2008) and Gromadzki et al. (2012).

These public opinion polls offer valuable but insufficient insight into perceptions of Germany in Russia. Their independence has been questioned in the face of pressure from Russian government institutions (cf. Nechepurenko, 2016), but even if their independence can be maintained, they do little more than establish whether opinions are positive or negative overall. Therefore, understanding which narratives about Germany are present in the Russian population requires more in-depth studies. To this end, this paper uses focus groups and in-depth interviews, allowing participants to develop their own narratives, and letting their emic perspectives flow into the analysis.

2. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A narrative approach to country perceptions allows us to understand the complexity of individuals' perceptions as well as their interactions with the social environment, their genesis, inner logic and predictive potential. As Czarniawska (2004) and Spector-Mersel (2010) have argued, narrative "is the main device for making sense of social action" (Czarniawska 2004); narratives give meaning to events by connecting them in certain ways (ibid., p. 7), and they form our identities (Spector-Mersel 2010). We can conceptualize country perceptions as stories people

tell in order to make sense of other countries and to attach significance to events occurring in or by agency of other countries. A further advantage of a narrative approach is that it takes individuals seriously as 'producers' of country perceptions and allows them to present their emic perspectives, while also drawing attention to the tensions between individual and cultural stories ('meta-narratives') and between continuity and innovation shaping stories.

A qualitative research design with narrative as basic unit of analysis thus promises to generate new insights into how Russian individuals see Germany. In a qualitative study such as this, it is essential to spend enough time with each participant to build a trusting relationship in which participants can talk about their ideas and perspectives. Faced with the consequential practical limitation to the number of study participants, I have decided to focus on one small subgroup of the Russian population to gain a deep understanding of the variety of narratives present in a relatively homogenous section of the population. The subgroup of the national population I chose for the study is university students from Moscow. As a result, this paper presents the analysis of five focus groups with 37 participants in total, as well as ten individual interviews, conducted in Moscow between September and November 2016. Study participants were students of various faculties at Moscow State University (MGU Lomonosov) and Russian State University for the Humanities (RGGU).

By comparison to the 'average' Russian, this subgroup is younger, more urban, and more highly educated. We can expect university students in the capitals to be relatively more connected internationally due to travel abroad and encounters with exchange students at their universities, and to be more reliant on the internet for information and social interaction than the statistical average of the population. Moreover, as the study participants were recruited through international student clubs and German language courses, and interviews were conducted in English or German, study participants are likely to have an above-average interest in international exchange and/or Germany. Their opinions should therefore not be regarded as representative of the wider population, but rather as particularly well-informed about and friendly towards Germany by comparison to other Russians and as potentially independent of Russian media narratives. Furthermore,

university students in the capital are considered particularly interesting as they are a new generation formed by different circumstances than older ones (Generation Putin rather than Homo Sovieticus) and which will influence the future development of Russian society, business and international relations.

Given the social construction of narratives as well as of all knowledge, including that gained from this research, it is necessary to take into account the role of the concrete context and audience in the focus groups and individual interviews. In particular, a post-positivist epistemology must acknowledge the researcher's influence on the study and the subjectivity of results, rather than claiming that study results are completely objective and reproducible by other researchers. Given the cross-cultural design of the study, it is especially significant that the researcher is German (albeit studying at a British university), which may influence the way study participants talk about Germany and Germans, for example in order to avoid giving offense. The narratives of focus groups and interviews may therefore be more positive than those produced in talking, for example, to other Russians. One positive effect of me being German was that some participants were excited to share their opinions with a 'real German', making them more enthusiastic to participate, and to explain things to me they might have been hesitant to share with compatriots, e.g. where their opinions deviated from the perceived national consensus. Nonetheless, the results presented below should be interpreted cautiously for the reasons listed above.

3. ECONOMIC PROSPERITY AND PRODUCTIVITY

Participants' narratives converge on portraying Germany as economically prosperous and productive: on this particular aspect different sources of information, such as media, personal experience, as well as stories from family members overlap and create a common impression. Indeed, the first associations with Germans or Germany often ascribe Germans industrious characteristics: above all, they are seen as hard working, serious, following rules, organized and punctual.

The fruits of German labour are considered to be of high quality: Many participants comment on the good reputation of Germany products, drawing also on stories of their parents and grandparents who have worked in Germany – a significant

number of them had been there during Soviet times or after the fall of the iron curtain.

> *On the whole Russian people trust in German quality, technology, and everything.*[1]

> *My grandad worked in Germany. And he bought nice things, nice clothes there that were not available in our country and brought them to my mother, and she always told me that clothes from Germany are so nice, they have a good quality.*[2]

Also today, Germany is still regarded as a country of economic opportunities.

> *It's a country where Russian people can find good work… if they have a good education of course.*[3]

Thus, participants feel they are likely to profit from being connected to Germany, as this gives them economic opportunities and access to nice products. In general, Germans are regarded as richer than Russians, and this is attributed both to their own work and the welfare system they profit from.

> *Germany is a very rich country, I guess. Because people who don't work get more money from your country than we get here when we work every day.*[4]

Interestingly, participants derive Germany's role in the world from this productivity and prosperity.

> *I guess the German economy is one of the strongest in Europe, and that's why it can influence the decisions that are made.*[5]

> *[I]n Europe, when it comes to politics, Germany is the most influential country. I think that they are powerful in technical aspects, they produce machinery,*

[1] MGU German Class (footnotes indicate sources either from focus groups, with the specification of the group and university given, or individual interviews, with names of participants given. All participants' names are pseudonyms for reasons of confidentiality).
[2] RGGU BA.
[3] MGU Student Club I.
[4] Dmitry.
[5] Tanya.

cars, they sell technology to other countries. They produce goods, products … everyone listens to what the German government says.[6]

This is evidence of putting economic matters above politics, and more particularly of regarding international relations as shaped more by economics than by politics.

Finally, although Germany's productivity and prosperity are not questioned, it should be mentioned that a few participants criticize what they see as disruptions of traditional ways of life that come with the focus on productivity:

So I see that the German economy is quite a dynamic force, but I think that it really deprives people from a traditional way of living, somehow. Because I know that a lot of people in Germany, they don't live together, for example couples they live in different cities and they meet only during weekends, and even in terms of families, just for example, a father he goes to like, 100 kilometres or I don't know, 150 kilometres to work. So for us in Russia this is, we don't understand this. But it's the new economic reality in Germany.[7]

Overall, however, German productivity and prosperity is portrayed positively and Germany is seen as a role-model, a positive Other that Russians might aspire to adapt to. As we will see below, this narrative on Germany is also used for interpreting current events and predicting future developments, such as German-Russian relations and the migration crisis.

4. HIGH CULTURE AND CULTURAL PROXIMITY

It is already evident from the last quote above that traditions are highly valued by participants, and they also converge on the value of German traditional or 'high' culture. In one focus group, several participants together constructed a narrative of cultural connections between Germany and Russia:

- *… in our history almost every Russian emperor came from Germany. There were marriages between Germans and Russian emperors…*
- *Our literature is based on German literature.*

[6] Svetlana.
[7] Sergey.

- *The times of Peter the First. He-*
- *He invited them, invited the Germans to Russia, so that they-*
- *To develop our country. Our culture. Our science and so on.*[8]

This creates a setting of century-old positive connections between Russia and Germany against which more recent relations are judged, and also characterizes Germans as bearers of culture and development. This impression is also echoed by participants of other interviews:

> *These two countries, Russia and Germany, must improve their cultural relations because our cultures are very closely connected. That's why we – we have a lot of similarities with German literature and we have taken over many things. We must re-establish that.*[9]

In this quote, it is clear that this narrative of a shared past serves as a basis for developing visions for the future. It narratively constructs sameness between Germany and Russia, positing them as more closely connected than many other countries. It also regards cultures as relatively unchangeable – if Russia and Germany were culturally close in the past, they still are in the present and will remain so in the future.

Indeed, present-day education and science in Germany is still regarded very positively:

> *Many people in Russia value German education and dream about sending their children to Germany. Because the education has a good quality and everywhere in the world, I think, German education is highly valued.*[10]

In this and similar quotes, there is a construction of difference between Germany and Russia which is positively connoted: Germany provides more opportunities for individual development making it once more a potential role-model. This can be

[8] RGGU BA.
[9] RGGU BA.
[10] MGU German class.

seen as a continuation of and variation on the narrative of Germany as bringing culture and science to Russia in the past.

Participants generally have a high level of knowledge about German classical culture, such as music, literature, arts, etc., which they have learned about in German or literature classes in school and university. Regarding the meaning attributed to German culture by participants, the following quote is enlightening:

> *I know that Munich is a centre of Moderne in Germany and this Jugend[stil]... I respect Germany for this because I think it's really, it tells us something about the people and the way of understanding art, if some important new style is appearing in this country.*[11]

The 'respect for Germany' derived from certain cultural products makes it clear that 'high' culture is perceived as a national characteristic that at least partly defines Germanness, with an assumption that not much has changed in this regard since the beginning of the 20th century. Thus, there is an image of Germany as a highly cultured place which has been intimately connected to Russia throughout its history, and which largely remains the same kind of place culturally today that it was in the past. Participants converge on this narrative: There is no questioning of German cultural achievements or level of education – on the contrary, it is something that is referred to in one way or another in every focus group and interview. This idea of German cultural excellence and connection to Russia is also used to interpret current events and make predictions about the future, as will be seen below.

5. MEMORIES OF WAR AND FASCISM

In contrast to the common expectation that the Nazis and World War II play an overwhelming role in the perception of Germany, in particular of its history, focus group and interview participants presented more multifaceted narratives on German history, which often highlighted the importance of connections to Germany for Russia, as seen above. Nonetheless, Victory Day is often mentioned as forming early impressions of Germany, e.g.,

[11] MGU Student Club I.

before we learned to read we experienced the 9th of May and we asked our parents why there is such a holiday… that's why maybe the Second World War is formative.[12]

Thus, the Russian victory in World War II is celebrated from childhood, and it is also an important part of the history curriculum. By contrast, the holocaust, or generally stories of victims of Germans, are discussed only by a few participants, referring to their (great) grandparents' experiences or stays in Germany where they experienced commemoration events.

And it's very interesting that in German cities there are little plaques in the street about Jews… who lived in these houses, and were killed in the Second World War. Or were in concentration camps. And I think that's a very good idea and this idea shows that they are tolerant…[13]

This latter quote also shows that Germans of today are often contrasted to Nazis rather than conflated with them. It is also interesting to note, however, that while most participants, when asked directly, responded that Hitler and the Nazis were unquestionably negative, some also find positive aspects, e.g.,

I heard a story from my great grandmother who lived in a place that was occupied - not occupied no. No there stood Germans during the Second World War. And she loved Germans before that and after that. Because they behaved … very good, to her. And in the village nearby were standing SS divisions. And Wehrmacht soldiers told this grand grandmother to dress her son into a girl, because SS soldiers took boys from Russia to Germany. So I think it was good of Germans to do that, to tell that to her.[14]

Thus, even in narrating an extreme conflict situation such as World War II, this narrative maintains a setting of German-Russian cooperation.

Participants do not seem to see much continuity between the war period and Germany today. Some point out explicitly that Germans of today have nothing to do with the Nazis, thus underlining the difference between 'good' and 'bad' Germans

[12] RGGU MA.
[13] MGU German class.
[14] MGU Student Club I.

and relegating the bad Germans to the past. For others, the question of the role of the war for today's relations between Russia and Germany misses the point, because the history of communism and the German division after the war is regarded as more significant. For example, asked about the impact of the Second World War on German-Russian relations today, a participant answered:

> *Yes of course [there is an impact] because there was the GDR [created after the war]. In the GDR there was a lot of Russian learnt in schools, and so on. So also today some people can speak Russian.*[15]

Again, this narrative takes up the setting of cultural proximity and friendly cooperation between Germany and Russia. Due to this important more recent as well as to earlier reference points, such as positive royal and cultural relations before the 20th century, the Nazis and the war do not play a significant role for interpreting current-day Germany, although the war figures frequently in associations. Childhood memories and education seem to contribute mainly to the war victory narrative, which participants converge on, whereas the victim narratives are only transported in isolated cases through family stories and personal experience.

The overall lesson drawn from these historical narratives seems to be that the war was an exception, and that if Russian-German relations are not going well for some time, they will nonetheless recover in the end, as the usual state of affairs is one of close positive relations built on cultural proximity. Another interpretation may be that while culture is considered largely unchangeable, politics are regarded as easily changed, and the Nazis are seen as a political rather than as a cultural phenomenon. In general, the explanatory power of this historical period for current-day Germany is thus low, although it is sometimes drawn on to explain the perceived tolerance of Germans towards migrants.

6. GERMANY AND RUSSIA IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

When asked about German-Russian relations, participants converge on presenting them as generally positive, drawing mainly on the cultural and economic narratives presented above, but also on interpersonal relations between Germans and Russians.

[15] RGGU MA.

Germany and Russia would also profit from even closer relations – above all, economically.

> *I think that Germany and Russia, their relationship really has a great future. Because our economies are entwined somehow, we provide Germany with oil, with gas, with natural resources, and Germany gives us in return the technologies, and built plants here.*[16]

When participants are pressed to talk about political relations, they do not all agree on the current state of relations between Russia and Germany. Some present them as going well, e.g.,

> *I have such an idea that Germany wants to have good relations with all its neighbouring countries, and also with Russia. … Germany is sometimes a mediator in world politics, between different countries, in different conflicts.*[17]

The main problem that is identified in current relations are the sanctions imposed on Russia, which are described as "dramatic" by one participant.[18] The reasons behind these sanctions are hardly discussed, and not all participants are aware that Germany takes a position contrary to the Russian one on Crimea or Syria.

> *I don't know which advantage you have because of sanctions. Which advantage do you have? I guess it's not so good for both us and Germany. It could be better if we do some things together against terrorism, against war in Syria and something like this. We must cooperate.*[19]

> *Researcher: And what do you think about Germany's behaviour in the Ukraine crisis?*
> *Maxim: I don't think they are involved so much. Because Germans are now having their own problems, for example with refugees. So the German government just has no time to solve Ukrainian problems because they have their own.*[20]

[16] Sergey.
[17] RGGU MA.
[18] MGU Student Club I.
[19] Dmitry.
[20] Maxim.

Participants generally do not talk about any positions Germany has in international relations, beyond keeping peace and solving conflicts. It is moreover often assumed that Germany's interests overlap with Russian ones – Germany would thus profit from lifting the sanctions and cooperating more closely with Russia. The fact that it does not do this is ascribed to US influence, which is blamed for putting Germany into a disadvantageous situation, and even connected to Hitler by one participant.

> *I don't know why you depend on the USA so much… I don't know exactly what would happen if you denied all American influence. I guess it would be better if you were not depending on the USA.*[21]

> *I think the US play a major role, as we know, in world politics. And … this situation in the Second World War comes to my mind. I think that somehow, maybe it is a prejudice, but somehow Hitler was supported by the US. With money or so. The US are like a main character, and Europe for the US is like a toy and they sponsor wars… for me the US are actually a bit dangerous.*[22]

Thus, it is the US, rather than Germany, that is Othered. The problem these narratives identify is that Germany acts as a pawn of the US, while a more independent Germany would be better for both Germans and for Russia.

To sum up, study participants tend to talk about economic, cultural and personal relations between Germany and Russia before talking about politics and appear to think that, on the whole, politics should follow from economics and personal relations. In this setting, both the economy and culture take primacy over politics, whereas institutions, such as parliaments and international organisations, are not part of the narrative on bilateral relations. It is assumed that because Germany and Russia have positive cultural and economic relations, their political relations would also be positive were it not for the US – an Othering of Germany is rarely taking place in the participants' narratives.

[21] Dmitry.
[22] Alina.

7. MIGRATION GERMANY

In the field of domestic German politics, participants most frequently commented on refugees and migration. Most participants remember discussions about refugees, and they tend to be quite critical of them, roughly following the Russian mainstream media's lines:

> *I'm afraid of this process of migrants in German. Well actually it's all Europe, but also German. I hope that Germans will find a way to stop this process, because I think that it will damage their culture, of Europe. And I think that, Germans with their tendency to foresee, they will do something because it's a really dangerous thing.*[23]

Here, we find a feeling of insecurity and fear of immigrants destroying German cultural distinctiveness. In this narrative, culture is intensely securitized, with immigration posing a threat to the very existence of Germany and Europe. Germany is considered a victim of migration, while German tolerance of migrants is thought to place Germany into a vulnerable position – and is thus regarded negatively.

> *I hope that tolerance will not be the only way to treat this situation [the migration crisis]. Because actually I think it's a weak position.*[24]

There are, however, also a few voices which contradict this narrative, in particular of participants who have been in Germany recently or have discussed the situation with Germans:

> *But almost all [German] students who we made friends with during the conference… A. went with them somewhere and asked them about this problem with the refugees, what do they think about it, and they all said, yeah, that's all normal and we're happy with this situation. So [they're] not against it and that was like a miracle to me.*[25]

[23] MGU Student Club I.
[24] MGU Student Club I.
[25] MGU Student Club II.

The significance of the migration threat narrative is such that it also strongly informs narratives on other fields of internal politics in Germany:

> *I think I have seen Angela Merkel many times on Russian TV…with Vladimir Putin. But an opinion about Angela Merkel - I have heard that not all Germans agree with the politics of Angela Merkel. They're not happy because she invite[d] many migrants.*[26]

> *Well you know, of course [the welfare system in Germany] is positive, but also it's a really attractive theme because you don't have to work and well, the country will help you. So I think that it's one of the reasons why there are so many immigrants in Germany.*[27]

In this latter quote, the migration crisis is explained through German prosperity, harking back to the economic narrative discussed in the first section of this paper.

On the whole, it seems that media portray migration as a threat to Germany, and this narrative is picked up by participants, as it is easily connected to the narrative of high culture: It appears that precisely because German culture is admired to such an extent, the influx of refugees, which threatens to destroy the narrative of this old, classical culture that the study participants have learned so much about, is regarded as such a tragedy. When participants inform themselves via other means such as talking to Germans or going to Germany, this narrative can become weakened or contradicted; however, that is not always the case: some participants also draw on German social media or stories from Germans they have met to support the 'migration as a threat' narrative.

8. CONCLUSION

Regarding the convergence and divergence of narratives among participants, the narrative on German economic strength and productivity appears to be the most established one that is not questioned by any participant, although some see its current strength threatened by migration and the sanctions imposed on Russia. Everyone also agrees that Russia and Germany are natural partners and should

[26] Andrey.
[27] MGU Student Club I.

entertain close relations, but there is a lack of consensus on whether current relations are positive or negative. Participants tend to converge on seeing present-day Germans as very different from the Nazi period, but the narratives about fascism itself diverge: some regard it as absolutely evil, whereas a few identify positive sides such as strong leadership and good Wehrmacht soldiers. Importantly, the narratives on cultural excellence and economic productivity, established through education and parents' or grandparents' stories, are drawn on in the interpretation of current events, such as the migration crisis and Russian-German relations. By contrast, stories about Nazi Germany (or Germany as a European power, another topic explored in the interviews) are hardly drawn on to make sense of current events.

This emphasis makes it easy to portray Germany as a partner of Russia, rather than as an *Other*. Indeed, the role of the negative *Other* is much more clearly assigned to the United States and to Muslim immigrants in the narratives under analysis. In the dominant economic and cultural narratives, Germany is portrayed as a partner and also as a potential role-model, although this is rarely formulated openly, but admiration for its economic prosperity and level of culture and education is common. It thus mainly plays the role of a positive *Other*. Criticism is addressed to Germany mainly for cooperating with or giving in to the negative *Others* of the US and migrants. There is a discernible fear that Germany might be taken over by these *Others* and therefore 'lost' to Russians.

Regarding Russia's own positioning and national identity construction flowing from these narratives, Russians are portrayed as less prosperous than Germans, but holding on to their traditions. They are also presented as highly cultured and better able to defend their own national identity than Germans, as they are determined to fight influence from the US or Muslim immigrants. Russia is also portrayed as a strong and important player in international relations through the victory narrative over fascism. Finally, participants present themselves as able to look beyond Russian borders and connect with Germans or other internationals. They often state their distrust of Russian media and emphasize that they draw their knowledge on Germany from German media and German friends, and also see themselves as highly educated and therefore able to work in or trade with Germany and draw personal profits from this cooperation. They do not consider themselves political, most stating

their lack of interest in politics. At the same time, they largely follow the narratives presented to them by the Russian state media, repeating its narratives more often and presenting less alternative narratives than they openly admit. Hence, these young, highly-educated, self-professed cosmopolitans are very much still part of the Russian nation and its hegemonic discourse.

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