



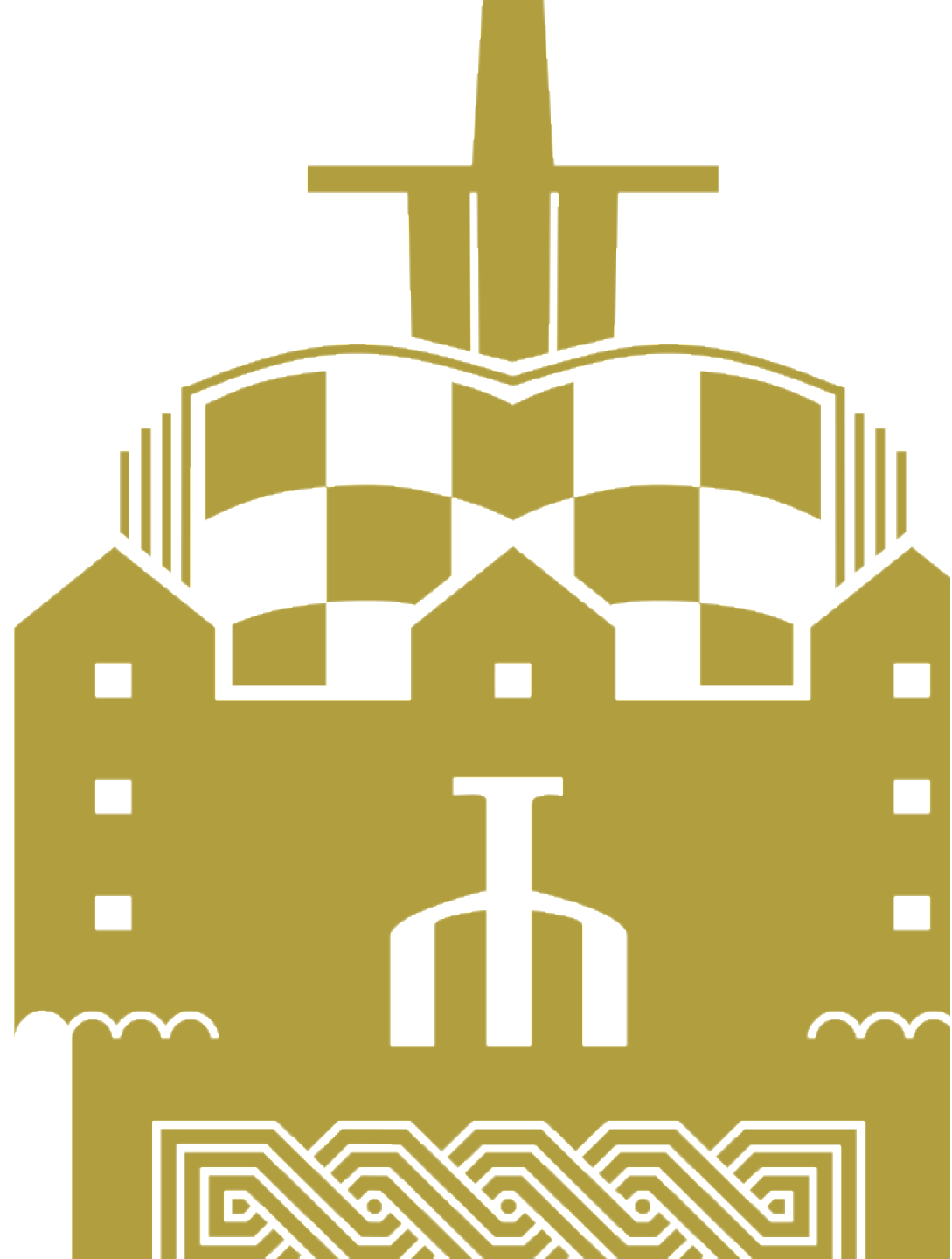
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## Between (beyond?) “Soft Power” and “Hard Power”

Strategic narratives of Russian foreign politics  
As tools in justifying aggression

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Between “Soft Power”  
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## What is beetwen soft and hard power? **Epistemic battle...**

- Since the Cold War’s end, **strategic narratives** (Freedman, 2006) have become **the currency of influence** — shaping how nations remember the past and imagine the future.
- Russia mastered this art, turning discourse into a weaponized architecture of meaning.
- From occupation of Crimea to the COVID infodemic [and the aggression against Ukraine in 20224], information no longer supports power - it is power itself (Nye, 2004).
- Yet the battlefield is also epistemic: **the West seeks truth, Russia engineers perception.**



## Lets start from examples: playing temporal discourse

Past	Present	Future
<p><b>Vladimir Putin, Federal Assembly Address, 2005</b></p> <p>“The collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.” → (Frames loss as injustice that demands reversal.)</p>	<p><b>Vladimir Putin, February 24, 2022 (Invasion Address)</b></p> <p>“We had no other choice. The situation demanded decisive and immediate action. Russia could not feel safe, develop, or exist under a constant threat emanating from the territory of today’s Ukraine.” → (Transforms invasion into pre-emptive defense.)</p>	<p><b>Putin, Valdai Forum, October 2022</b></p> <p>“We are building a multipolar world — a world based on true sovereignty and respect for civilizations, not Western domination.” → (Projects long-term teleology: Russia as architect of a new order.)</p>
<p><b>Sergey Lavrov, Valdai Discussion Club, 2021</b></p> <p>“After the Cold War, our Western partners considered themselves victors and began to dictate rules of the game, ignoring Russia’s legitimate interests.” → (Constructs narrative of betrayal and exclusion.)</p>	<p><b>Maria Zakharova, MFA Briefing, March 2022</b></p> <p>“We are conducting a special military operation to stop genocide against the people of Donbas.” → (Uses humanitarian justification — “Responsibility to Protect” rhetoric.)</p>	<p><b>Patriarch Kirill, Easter Sermon, April 2022</b></p> <p>“We are a people of Holy Rus — united by faith, culture, and history. The Lord will not allow the dismemberment of our spiritual space.” → (Sanctifies geopolitical expansion as divine destiny.)</p>
<p><b>Dmitry Medvedev, Security Council Statement, 2023</b></p> <p>“For decades, the West mocked our weakness, imposed its models, and laughed at our values — but history has turned.” → (Invokes humiliation and cyclical retribution.)</p>	<p><b>Sergey Shoigu, Ministry of Defense Statement, April 2022</b></p> <p>“Our task is to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine — to prevent the emergence of an anti-Russia on our borders.” → (Moralizes and securitizes intervention simultaneously.)</p>	<p><b>Vladimir Putin, Crimea Annexation Speech, March 18, 2014</b></p> <p>“In people’s hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia. This faithfulness to historical truth and justice has finally returned home.” → (Frames annexation as sacred correction of history.)</p>



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## ii. Compelling storytelling to (re)create international order through **temporal manipulation discourse**

### Temporal Dimension

### Narrative Function

### Examples

**Past**

Construct historical  
injustice

“Collapse of the USSR –  
greatest geopolitical  
catastrophe”

**Present**

Define immediate threat

“NATO expansion leaves us  
no choice”

**Future**

Promise restored order

“Reunification with historic  
lands/ multipolar world”





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## WESTERN APPROACH in a nutshell. “Sapere aude!” - The Call to REASON!!!

Western thinking about information and truth grows from the Enlightenment project of rationality (Kant).

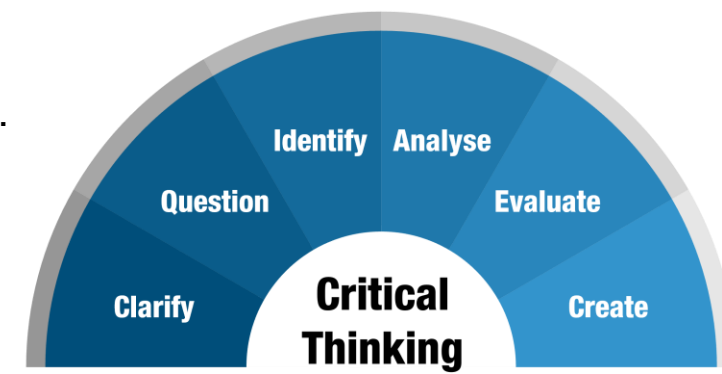
Foundational premises still active today where objective truth exists and can be discovered through correct methods (Locke’s *tabula rasa*, Kant’s *Ding an sich*).

Reason as arbiter of truth - through open, rational dialogue (Habermas’s *communicative rationality*), consensus becomes possible.

Epistemic autonomy - individuals must think independently (media literacy, fact-checking, critical thinking).

Ideal outcome - a “marketplace of ideas” where valid arguments prevail over manipulation.

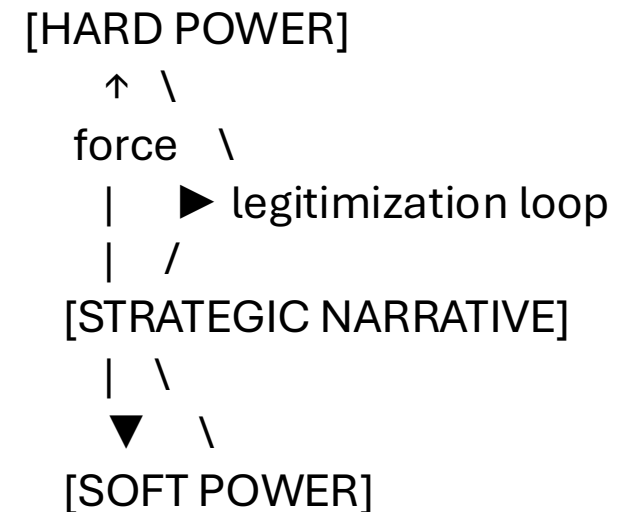
**Truth is attainable through reason — and reason belongs to everyone.**





## i. How (West believes) Russia’s strategic narratives justify aggression

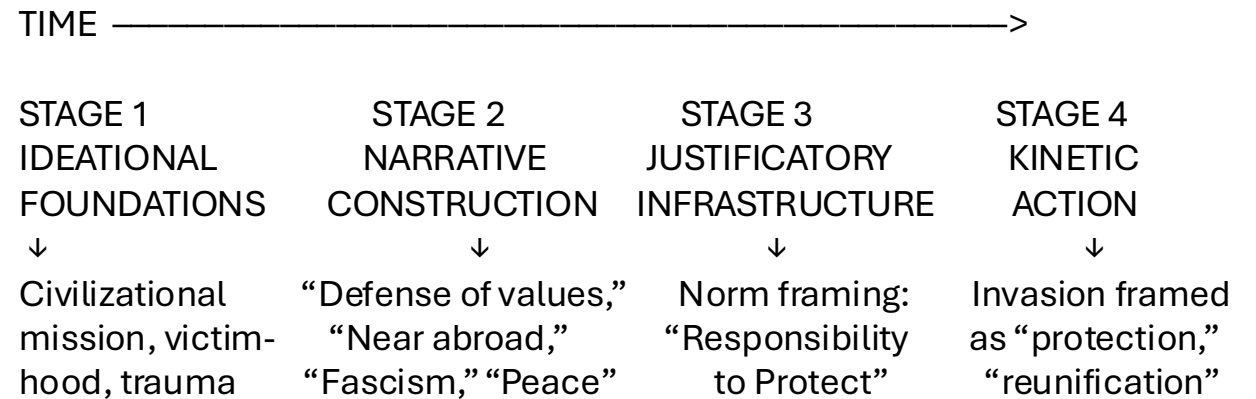
- Joseph Nye's (1990, 2004) distinction between "hard power" (military and economic coercion) and "soft power",
- The concept relies on attraction and persuasion through culture, values, and policies,
- The approach has been dominating scholarly discourse on international influence for three decades.





## ii. AND this is working perspective: How (West believes) Russia’s strategic narratives justify aggression

- Russian strategic narratives function as what might be termed "justificatory infrastructure" — discursive frameworks constructed well in advance of military action that pre-emptively legitimize aggression.
- It functions by establishing particular interpretations of international norms, historical trajectories, and threat environments (past, present, future).
- These narratives are not merely post-hoc rationalizations but constitutive elements of Russian grand strategy that shape the perceived viability and acceptability of using force.



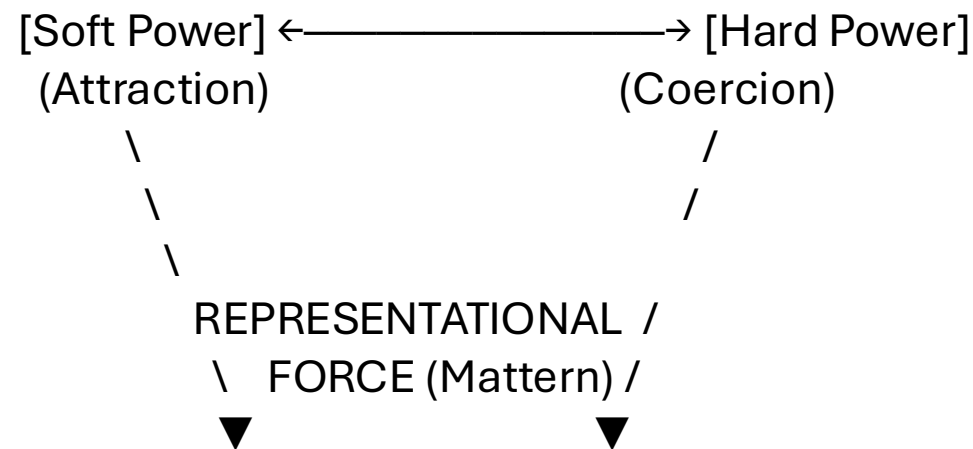


## i. Beyond the **Hard/Soft Power dichotomy**

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- Russian Nye's conceptualization of soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (2004: x) has been both influential and contested.
- Critics have noted the framework's analytical limitations, particularly its inability to account for hybrid strategies that combine coercive and attractive elements (Mattern 2005; Hayden 2012).
- As Lukes (2005) argues in his three-dimensional model of power, the most effective forms of power shape preferences and perceptions themselves, making subjects want what the powerful want them to want.



Perception Management

(Shape what others see as truth, good, inevitable)



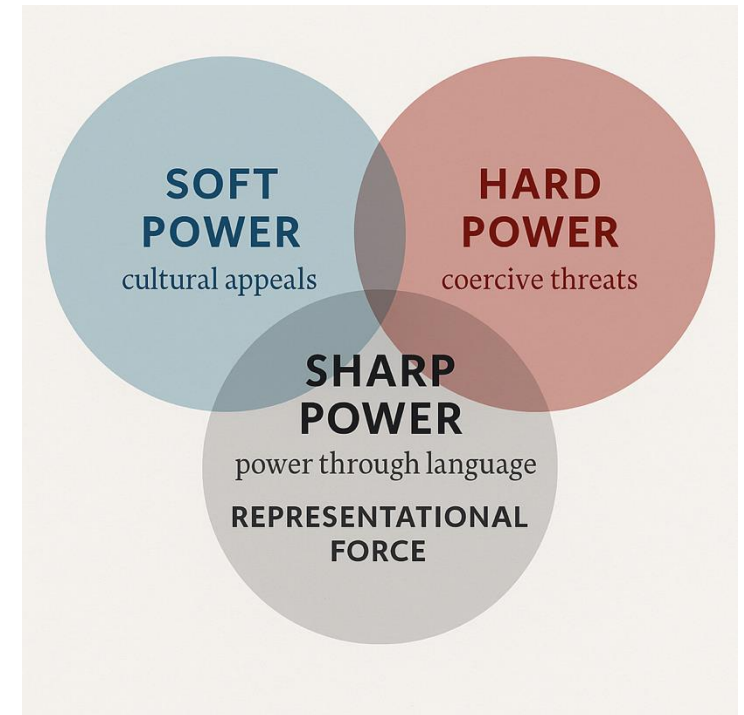
## ii. Beyond the **Hard/Soft Power Dichotomy**

Power Type	Mechanism	Signature Command	
Hard Power	Coercion through force or payment	“Do as I say”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Russian strategic narratives exemplify what Bially Mattern (2005) terms "representational force"—a form of power that operates through language but carries coercive implications.</li></ul>
Representational Force	Control of meaning and framing ( <i>Mattern, 2005</i> )	“Believe as I frame”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>When Russian officials invoke narratives of protecting Russian-speakers abroad or defending against NATO encirclement, they are simultaneously making cultural appeals (soft power) and implicit threats of intervention (hard power).</li></ul>
Sharp Power	Manipulation of perception ( <i>Rawnsley, 2015</i> )	!!! “Feel as I program”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>This synthesis creates what Rawnsley (2015) identifies as "sharp power"—influence that penetrates, subverts, and manipulates information environments rather than merely attracting or coercing.</li></ul>



## And here is where “sharp” power comes? (NO!)

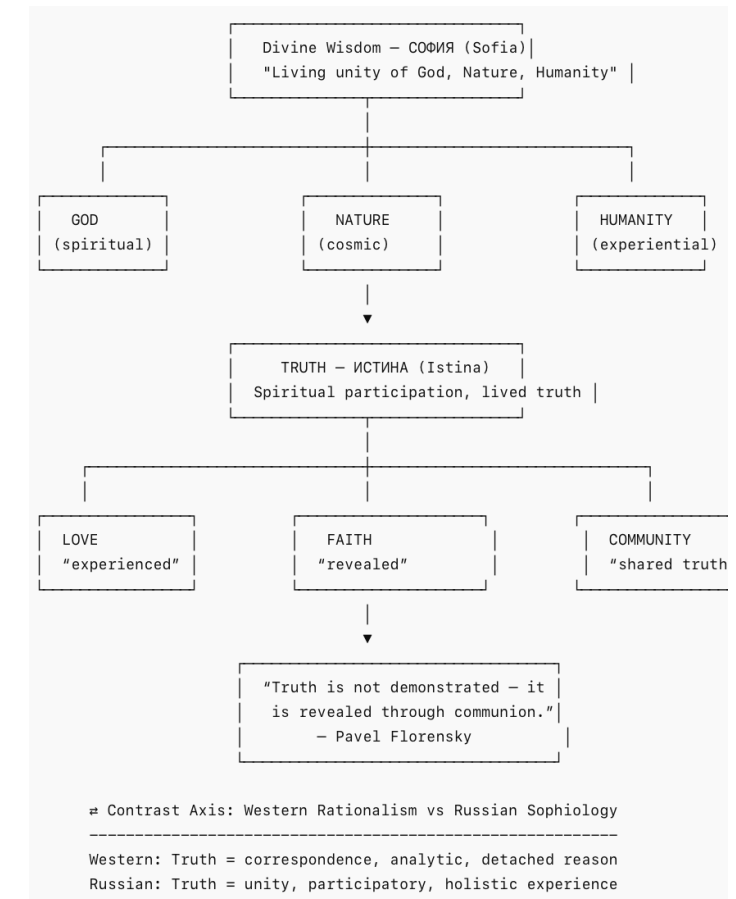
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## i. RUSSIAN APPROACH in a nutshell. From *Sofia* to Reflexive Control

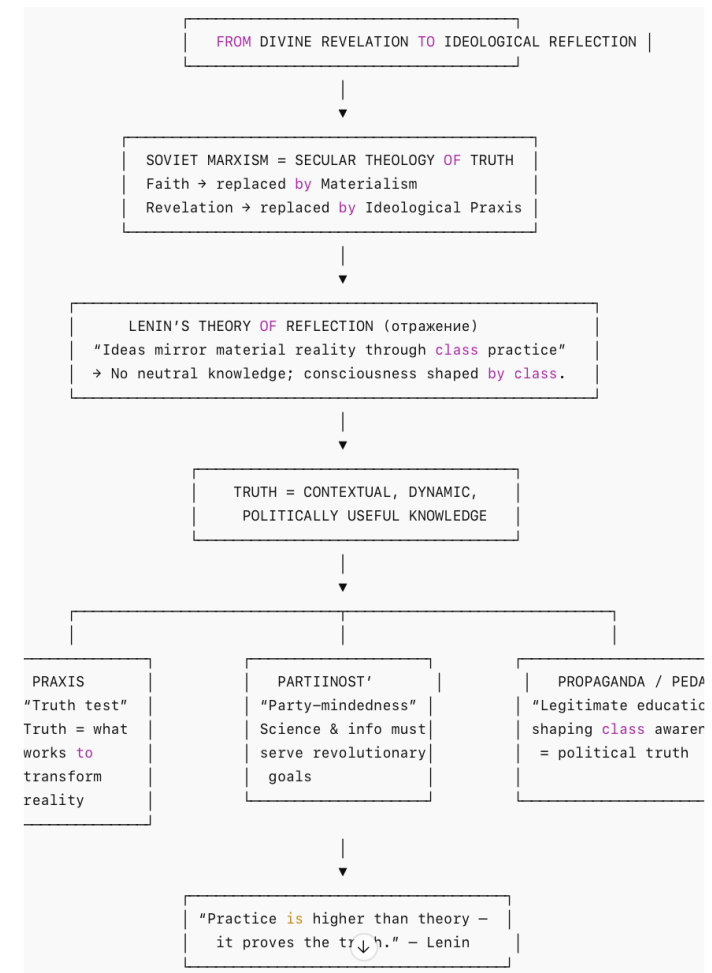
- Divine Wisdom and Holistic Truth: Sofia (София = Wisdom) in Russian religious philosophy — Divine Wisdom, the living unity of God, nature, and humanity.
- Truth (истина — istina) is not analytic correspondence but spiritual participation— truth as being lived, not stated (Soloviev, Florensky, Berdyaev)
- Istina vs Pravda: spiritual and moral truth vs factual correctness — experience is more than evidence.
- Knowledge arises through “love”, “faith”, and “community” rather than detached rationality.
- Western rationalism seeks facts while Russian Sophiology seeks unity of soul, reason, and cosmos.
- “Truth is not demonstrated — it is revealed through communion.” (Florensky)





## ii. RUSSIAN APPROACH in a nutshell. From *Sofia* to Reflexive Control

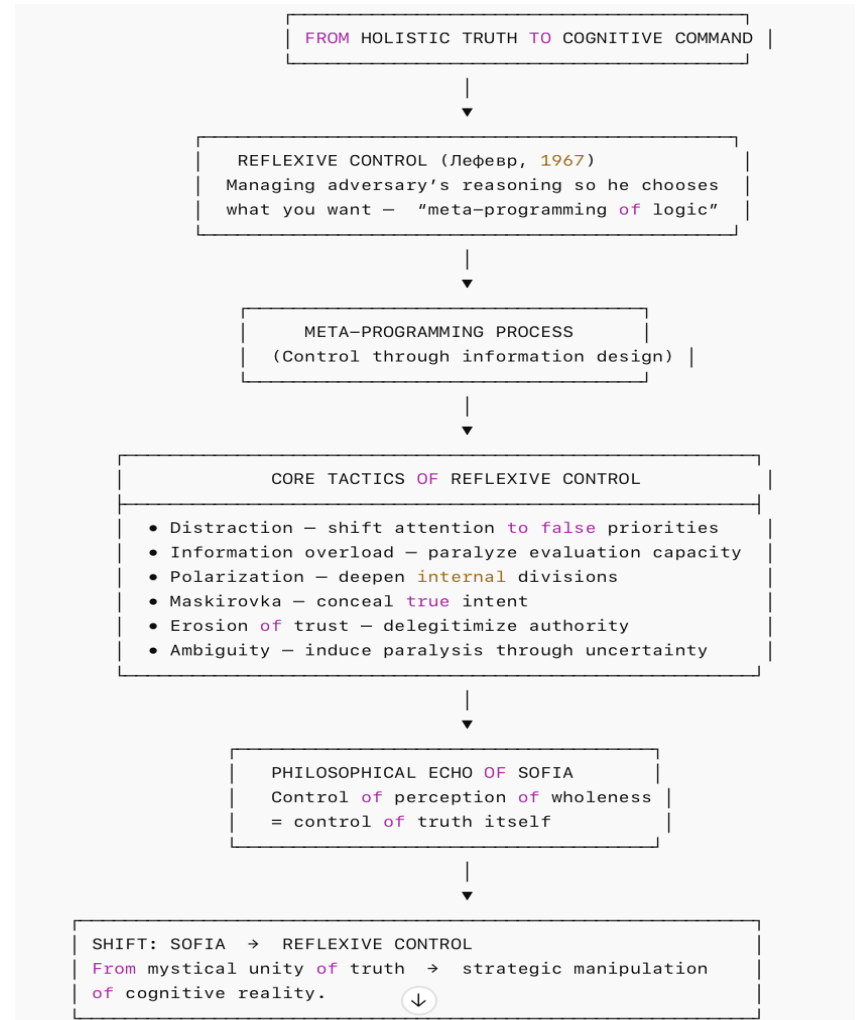
- From Divine Revelation to Ideological Reflection: Soviet Marxism replaces faith with materialism, yet retains the fusion of truth and power.
- Lenin’s reflection theory: ideas mirror material reality through class practice — there is no neutral knowledge.
- Truth - is what contextual, dynamic, politically useful.
- Praxis as truth test: what is “true” is what works to transform society.
- Partiinost’ (party-mindedness) - science and information must serve the revolutionary class — propaganda = legitimate pedagogy.
- “Practice is higher than theory — it proves the truth” (Lenin)





## ii. RUSSIAN APPROACH in a nutshell. From *Sofia* to Reflexive Control

- From Holistic Truth to Cognitive Command: Reflexive Control (Lefebvre): managing an adversary’s reasoning so they choose what you want.
- Not persuasion but meta-programming: shaping the opponent’s decision logic through information design.
- Core tactics: distraction, information overload, polarization, maskirovka, erosion of trust, paralysis through ambiguity.
- Philosophical echo of Sofia: controlling perception of wholeness = controlling truth itself.
- Shift: From Sofia to Reflexive Control = from mystical unity of truth - strategic manipulation of cognitive reality.
- “He believes he decides freely — yet he acts within your design.”





## But Strategic narrative’s concept can bridge it, but why?

The concept of strategic narrative (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle, 2013) is epistemically agnostic — it focuses on **how meaning is constructed and aligned with power, not on whether that meaning is “true.”**

Therefore, it can serve as the **epistemological translator** between the two systems.

Core logic:

- Western narratives use **storytelling** to legitimize (convince audiences through reason and values).
- Russian narratives use **storytelling** to govern cognition (shape perception and pre-empt reasoning).

Both are performative truth-systems — one discursive, one reflexive.



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## Strategic Narratives as Instruments of Statecraft and connection with IR reality

Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2013) define strategic narratives as "a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors." These narratives operate at three analytical levels:

**System-level narratives** concern the nature of the international system itself—whether it is unipolar, multipolar, rule-based, or anarchic. Russian foreign policy has consistently promoted narratives of multipolarity and the illegitimacy of Western-dominated liberal internationalism.

“The so-called rules-based order is nothing but an instrument of neo-colonial control serving U.S. interests.” — *Sergey Lavrov, UN General Assembly, 2023*

**National-level narratives** project particular identities and roles for states. Russia's self-positioning as a "civilization-state" (Jackson 2003) and defender of traditional values against Western decadence exemplifies this level.

“We will defend traditional family, genuine human life, and the moral foundations of civilization.” — *Putin, 2022*

“They have abandoned God; we are defending humanity itself.” — *Patriarch Kirill, 2022*

**Issue-level narratives** frame specific conflicts or policies. Russian narratives around each military intervention construct particular interpretations of causation, responsibility, and necessity.

“We are fighting neo-Nazis — we are completing what our grandfathers began.” — *Putin, 2022*



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## Hybrid Analytica Grammar: Whose truth?

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The “battle for truth” is a battle of epistemic architectures — one seeks truth through verification, the other through performative coherence.

Narrative Function	Western Model	Soviet/Russian Model	Hybrid Analytical Interpretation
Legitimation	Facts validate action	Action validates facts	Competing logics of justification
Authority	Truth emerges from open dialogue	Truth imposed through command	Competing truth-production hierarchies
Reality Construction	Narrative reflects real events	Narrative constitutes reality	Truth as a performative process



**Thanks for your attention**

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