

Who threatens whom? Framings of the “Munich Speech” in Norwegian print media.

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At the 43rd Munich International Conference on Security Policy, President Vladimir V. Putin of the Russian Federation delivered a speech that has been much commented upon in international media. An analysis of texts from the initial print media debate in Norway shows that framings of the Munich Speech clustered into two groups, here to be referred to as “discourses”. One discusses the speech as indicating a threat from Russia, and suggests deterrence. The other discusses the speech as an expression of Russian security fears, and argues for appeasement. The original selection of 34 texts was retrieved by the search engine *Atekst*,³³ and encompassed all mentioning of the event from February 10th to March 10th. I narrowed the selection down by applying the criteria that texts should explicitly position themselves regarding (i) why Putin/Russia sent this message, (ii) how one should react to it. The final selection included 16 texts, encompassing nearly all the editorials, commentaries and opinion pieces from the original selection.

³³ See: List of relevant literature and URLs.

The Munich Speech: A quick walkthrough³⁴

A main theme of Putin's speech was *unipolarity*, a world system that the President claimed would be harmful for all states in it - including the sovereign, who would be destroyed from within. He claimed that not only would it be impossible for one country to rule the world (it would take up too many resources) but such a system would also be deeply immoral as it runs counter to *democracy*. Democracy was defined as "the rule of the majority, taking into consideration the interests and opinions of the minority," and was lauded by President Putin on several occasions. At one point he commented that "for some reason, those who lecture us [about democracy] do not, themselves, want to learn." Putin claimed that the world is witnessing an attempt at unipolarity by the USA, who have "overstepped their national borders in every sphere," with "unilateral, illegitimate actions (...) functioning as generators for new human tragedies and centres of tension." The net result is that "nobody feels safe," as they cannot "hide behind international law." This leads to arms races, where countries seek WMD.

The President underlined that one cannot be indifferent to "authoritarian regimes, tyrants and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction," but the "peaceful transition to democracy in our country" served as a good example that there is no need to "shoot and bomb at every opportunity." He argued for the creation of international centres for enrichment of uranium under IAEA supervision, and said he was happy their "American friends" seemed to agree. He assured that Russia would continue to reduce their nuclear capabilities, and hoped that their partners would keep that promise also. Furthermore, Putin invited all other states to work with Russia in preventing "militarization of the Cosmos."

A part of Putin's speech that was much commented upon in the aftermath was his resistance against the planned extension of the US' NMD (National Missile Defence) to

the Czech Republic and Poland. He claimed that Europeans themselves do not need these systems, and interpreted them as a threat against Russia. Following this, he criticized NATO for putting "its frontline forces on our state borders" even as Russia was, he claimed, in the process of withdrawing their forces from Moldova and Georgia. He called this "a seriously provoking factor, reducing the level of mutual trust," and in breach with promises made by NATO after the fall of the Warsaw Pact. He compared NATO's activity with building a new "virtual" Berlin Wall, which could possibly take "generations of politicians" to dismantle. On the OSCE, Putin claimed that there is an attempt at turning the organization into a "vulgar instrument for safeguarding the foreign policy interests of one country or a group of countries." He claimed that the OSCE was fulfilling such a function at present, saying there was a difference between "observing" and "interfering," the latter making states "dependent" and "unstable." He also criticised the involvement of NGOs, who are "formally independent, but purposefully financed, and therefore controlled."

Regarding the global economic situation, Putin held that economic tendencies run counter to the US' attempt at unipolarity: China, India, Brazil and Russia are developing so well that they can compete economically with the USA and the EU. "There is no doubt," he said, that such economic power will be converted into political power, creating *multipolarity*. Concerning the battle against global poverty he accused donor countries of "with the one hand giving out charity while the other hand not only preserves economic backwardness, but also reaps the profits thereof." He said that the global economic system creates "radicalism, extremism," "terrorism and local conflicts" - in short, "global destabilisation" - and that for the sake of security, one needs a more "democratic, just system of economic relations in the world".

By way of conclusion, Putin said that Russia had "practically always" carried out "an independent foreign policy." This

³⁴ All direct quotes are my own translation, based on the speech as found on the Kremlin's homepage (see: List of relevant literature and URLs).

“tradition would not be changed,” but Russia has “a realistic view of her opportunities and potential” and would work with other states to create a “democratic world order that would ensure security and prosperity not only for a select few, but for all.”

The Deterrence Discourse (4/16)³⁵

In the deterrence discourse, the Munich Speech is discussed as an attack on (or at least a manifestation of strength against) the USA, NATO and/or “the West”. It is not presented as a reaction to actions by the West, but as a rhetorical first strike. The suggested reply to Russia is to deter it by demonstrating military capabilities. Half of the deterrence-focused texts came from the newspaper *Aftenposten*: A commentary by former Moscow correspondent Kjell Dragnes (13.02) and an editorial by political science professor, former Christian People’s Party (KrF) politician and member of the National Defence Commission Janne Haaland Matlary (16.02). The other texts were an editorial from Norway’s main financial daily *Dagens Næringsliv* (13.02) by Brussels correspondent Kjetil Wiedswang and an editorial in Norway’s best-selling daily newspaper *VG* (24.02).

Matlary claims the Munich Speech’ message was “that Russia is a great power with economic and military means to demand more influence in the world.” Throughout the text, Russia and Putin is constantly paired with Iran and its negotiator-in-chief Ali A. Larijani. These states are “democratic only in name,” in opposition to states that have “democratic pluralism.” They also have in common that they aspire to “great power status.” Matlary argues that security politics increasingly revolves around “values” – ours versus theirs, the “us” in this text being “the EU/NATO,” or “the EU, the USA or other countries with liberal democracy.” In sum, the text positions Russia, Iran and also China against “the western countries” in a battle over “threatened values.” Having securitized this system of values, the author claims that “peaceful conflict solution, which characterizes democracies, may not only be promoted by peaceful means” and calls for

political will to use “hard power” to “counter realists with *realpolitik*.” The author does regret this state of affairs, but as the West confronts a realist enemy, she sees it as necessary to answer in kind.

Wiedswang claims much of the same, and accuses Putin’s speech for opening “the possibility of a new ‘cold war’.” “Democracy” is presented as what Russia fears most from the West. The Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves is quoted as saying that Russia considers “democracy by its borders a threat, and despotism within these borders a source of stability,” while NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer is “disappointed” that Russia grows fearful as “democracy and *rechtstaat* approaches its borders.” While Matlary calls for “European *realpolitik*”, Wiedswang argues that Norway – having an unclarified border situation with Russia in the north - may one day need help from those “friends” now asking us for help in Afghanistan. He ponders that the main threat may not be “neo-aggressive Russia” but the Socialist Left Party (SV), a party in government he fears will block support for the war in Afghanistan and seek “conversation therapy” with Moscow.

Dragnes’ editorial suggests a purely Norwegian military deterrence, saying that no matter what kind of foreign policy Russia currently leads, Norway should be prepared for military conflict. Drawing a comparison between Gorbachev anno 1993 and Putin anno 2007, he concludes that Russia will always be a threat in the long run. He does modify his hard line, though, by arguing that one should still seek “low tension” in the region. The most moderate representation of the deterrence discourse is *VG*’s editorial, which supports the Minister of Defence in that Russia is not a threat to Norway but also claims that due to the northern border issue we should “build up a strong defence.” The editorial claims that since the Cold War is over, we might end up “standing alone” in a conflict with Russia, and therefore warns against the attitude held by many “in the political community” that “the military isn’t important anymore.”

³⁵The numbers indicate that the discourse is represented in four texts out of the selection of sixteen.

The Diplomacy Discourse (12/16)

The basic agreement between the texts in this category is their insistence that Russia should be met with diplomacy rather than deterrence. Also, all texts except for the *Bergens Tidende* 16.02 editorial claim that the Munich Speech indicates genuine Russian security fears. Despite these commonalities the discourse is internally diverse enough that one may further divide it into four sub-discourses or “versions”.

Version 1: “Aggressive Russia must be appeased” (2/12)

This sub-discourse has some common traits with the deterrence discourse, but still falls on the diplomatic side of the fence. It is represented in two texts: The above mentioned *Bergens Tidende* editorial, and a *Stavanger Aftenblad* commentary by journalist Harald Maaland (17.02). What sets these texts apart from other representations of the diplomacy discourse, is their claim that the Munich Speech is a manifestation of strength.

Bergens Tidende claims that the Munich Speech indicates Russian “ambition” and “irritation” over US’ dominance, and compares it with Soviet era rhetoric. Maaland agrees, saying that one is “clearly reminded that Putin has his roots in the KGB and the Soviet Union.” The speech, Maaland claims, signals the start of Moscow’s “re-conquering of the great power position that has always been the goal of Putin’s policy.” Both texts do, however normalize the content of the Munich Speech by comparing it to standard “international” (*Bergens Tidende*) or “European” (*Stavanger Aftenblad*) criticism of the Bush administration. *Bergens Tidende* also points out that Putin’s criticism of the USA is less radical than the criticism from Norway’s own Socialist Left Party. Both of the texts claim that despite demonstrating outer strength, Russia is inherently unstable due to the structure of its economy and its authoritarian political system. Maaland argues that it is in “nobody’s interest” that Russia is weakened, as this will make the country “more dangerous.” Thus, all states need to be diplomatic in their relationships with Russia. *Bergens Tidende* expresses hope that the Bush administration

will work more closely with Russia to solve issues like the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programmes – thereby giving the role of potential problem-solver to the USA.

Version 2: “Europe could be the middleman” (4/12)

This sub-discourse discusses the Munich Speech as an indicator of Russian security fears vis-à-vis the USA, arguing that the EU states is are best placed to solve the tense situation. The discourse is represented by two commentaries written by Morten Strand in *Dagbladet* (12.02 and 09.03), editorials in *Aftenposten* (13.02) and the leftist daily *Klassekampen* (15.02), plus a commentary in the latter newspaper by journalist Petter M. Johansen (07.03).

Strand normalizes the Munich Speech in both his texts, saying that it constitutes an analysis of global affairs “not only found on the European political left, but also in its centre and right.” (09.03) The situation in global politics is that “Lex USA” is coming to an end because of the Bush administration’s foreign policy, and Russia has set out to “counterweight (...) American global dominance” together with China and India (09.03). It is interesting that while Strand in both texts explains why the USA is to be considered an undesirable partner, it is never explained why Russia is no good. It seems to be presupposed that the reader will agree without further ado that “thinking Europeans” ought to feel as “uncomfortable” with Russia as with the USA. (12.02) This presupposition on the side of the journalist may serve to indicate that negative ideas about Russia is more institutionalised in Norwegian debate than negative ideas about the USA. Strand’s suggested solution in both texts are focused on the European Union: In times like these we should have had a “strong Europe” (12.01) and the only one seemingly working to stop the NMD from being established in Central-Eastern Europe is the German EU chairmanship (09.03).

The *Klassekampen* editorial explicitly agrees with the Munich Speech, calling it a “completely correct” analysis of the situation. It accuses Norway of being “uncritical (...) cannon fodder for American neo-expansionism” despite the fact that most other European countries are “detaching themselves from the American

death train.” Johansen does problematize the concept of a unitary Europe by highlighting the fact that the UK and Denmark are with the USA on this one, while there is great popular resistance to the NMD in Poland and the Czech Republic. His conclusion, though, is that the course of Germany is the best one. Johansen is dissatisfied with the Norwegian government for not joining forces with Germany, and charges the Socialist Left Party with the responsibility to achieve this.

Aftenposten's 13.01 editorial is the most moderate representation of this subdiscourse. It starts off by praising the USA for being “careful” in their reaction to the Munich Speech, but then explains the incident with Russia feeling “under hard pressure from a unilateralist USA.” Also, the editorial asks if NATO is right to extend its influence into “a traditionally Russian region” (Ukraine and Georgia). In its conclusion, the editorial appeals to “the European cooperation” that they should “not push Russia into a corner.”

Version 3: “Norwegian-Russian détente” (5/12)

All the texts in this subdiscourse equate “us” with Norway and nobody else, at times articulating scepticism towards not only the USA but also the EU. The discourse was represented by *Klassekampen* commentaries by Johansen (21.02) and Hallvard Bakke (02.03), plus a letter to the editor by Ivan Kristoffersen that was published three times: First in the Northern regional dailies *Nordlys* and *Bladet Tromsø* (22.02), then in the pastoral daily *Nationen* (28.02). Bakke is a former member of Labour Party (AP) cabinets, first as Minister of Trade and Shipping, then as Minister of Culture and Science. Kristoffersen is a Labour Party politician, *Nordlys's* former editor-in-chief and was an important activist and organizer during the campaigns against Norwegian EU membership.

Kristoffersen argues that many in Europe would have agreed with the Munich Speech had it not been so “putinesque” in its style and rhetoric, which he compares with Soviet leader Nikita S. Hruščëv’s behaviour in the UN General Assembly. He explicitly criticises the deterrence discourse and accuses its spokespeople for having hidden agendas

– working for more military investment in certain regions of the country, or trying to convince people that Norway needs to be an EU member for security reasons. He admits that Russia is “poor on democracy” and invokes the murder of Anna S. Politkovskaja when discussing this. However, he claims that one needs to hold foreign policy “analytically separate” from such concerns. Although Russia is a potential threat in the north, he says, so are other of “Europe’s energy hungry nations.” Therefore the role of Norway should be given: “An alliance builder (...) both in the east and the south.”

Bakke argues against the suggestion of the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI) that Russia should be defined as a military threat. He claims that Russia’s increased military spending does not constitute a threat to Norway, it is simply a necessary move on Russia’s side due to their army’s long decay. The Munich Speech is explained as an expression of Russian dissatisfaction with the US’ and NATO’s “broken agreements and promises.” The USA is criticised for provoking Russia by “expanding NATO” to states that are “not threatened by Russia anymore.” It is suggested that Norway should have a “good relationship and close cooperation” with Russia, and not stoop to “cold war rhetoric.” Johansen points his finger at certain Norwegian officials for “turning the issue on its head” when saying that Russia is a potential future threat. He claims that the USA is the real security threat, as it creates dangerous international tension. Norway, he argues, has an interest in low tensions vis-à-vis Russia due to the northern situation, and should therefore act diplomatically.

Version 4: “Peace for the sake of the planet” (1/12)

The deterrence discourse and 11/12 of the diplomacy discourse texts focus on security in a rather traditionalist sense: No matter who the discourse positions as a threat to whom, the threats under discussion are of a military nature. Journalist Kari Gåsvatn’s editorial in *Nationen* (02.03) represents a unique deviation from this pattern. Gåsvatn approaches the issue from more of a “human security” angle, focusing on the environmental aspects of a

new arms race.³⁶ Russia, the USA and Iran all get criticised for threatening the environment with their bellicose policies. The “us” of the text is the entire human race – “even the arms investors,” because “we are all in the same, vulnerable boat.” The text, then, does not construct Russia and the USA as having contradictory interests, but rather claims that the peoples of these states have common interests that the behaviour of state leaders and big business are in conflict with. That only 1/16 texts brought environmentalist discourse into the debate on the Munich Speech demonstrates clearly how marginalized it was in this context. Evidently, for most of the debaters it seemed irrelevant to invoke environmental concerns when discussing the Munich Speech.

Conclusion: The Debate on the Munich Speech.

The first conclusion one may draw from this analysis is that the diplomacy discourse in its many guises dominated over the deterrence discourse: Being represented in twelve texts out of sixteen is quite a victory. These numbers indicate that in the initial print media debate on the Munich Speech, Russia was generally being talked about as anxious rather than ambitious and diplomacy was favoured over deterrence as a response to the event under discussion. This does not mean, however, that one can write the deterrence discourse completely off: It is represented in important newspapers and some of its spokespeople are influential people. Dragnes has since writing his commentary advanced to the position of foreign policy editor in *Aftenposten*, and Matlary is an active participant in Norwegian security politics.

Turning to the common traits of the texts here analyzed, one may point out that none of them paid attention to the fact that this kind of speech from a top-level politician of the Russian Federation is not really all that novel. There were plenty of comparisons with Soviet Union politicians like Brežnev, Hruščev or Gorbačev - a trend one may say started with

US' Secretary of State Robert Gates' invocation of the Cold War in his response to the Munich Speech. None, however, mentioned Jevgenyj M. Primakov, Minister of Foreign Affairs 1996-1998 and Prime Minister 1998-1999. The Munich Speech basically repeated what the “Primakov School”³⁷ had to say about Russia's position vis-à-vis NATO and the USA, and one can hardly say that Primakov's foreign policy meant a return to Soviet times.

The main commonality, however, was that all texts focused on the Munich Speech as either a defensive or aggressive move. The Munich Speech was never discussed as a critique of US' unipolarity and the global economic system from a *democratic* standpoint, a framing which is perfectly imaginable as Putin used exactly this kind of rhetoric. However, not even the leftist *Klassekampen* found it worth mentioning that the leader of a great power had called for a more democratic and just global economic system. What this probably means is that the image of Russia when it comes to democracy is so poor that Russia's leaders cannot successfully play the democracy card. (It does sound somewhat hypocritical when Vladimir V. Putin laments the existence of a system that has “one centre of power, one centre of force and one centre of decision-making”). It is perhaps impossible for Russia to succeed in the game of “more democratic than thou” until Western audiences see some real changes in Russian domestic politics.

While the Munich Speech' attempts at applying democracy discourse as a tool are consistently left out, Russia's opposite numbers are often quoted when invoking democratic values. Particularly interesting is the fact that Estonia is taken unconditionally seriously when using democracy as a sharp stick against Russia, despite the fact that Amnesty International criticizes this country severely for treating a quarter of their population (the Russian-speaking minority) in ways that impede them “from the full enjoyment of their economic, social and cultural rights” – even making it difficult for

³⁶ For more on human security, see Javier Fabra Mata's article in this journal.

³⁷ As defined by Jurij E. Fedorov in *Russia and its Foreign Policy* (Kikumora Publications 2005, ed. Hannah Smith), p. 17.

ethnic Russians born in Estonia during Soviet times to obtain Estonian citizenship.³⁸ One may wonder what kind of message such press coverage sends to Russian decision makers. Perhaps they will conclude that your ability to use the democracy card has nothing to do with the degree to which domestic politics are democratic, and that who you are matters more than what you do.

³⁸ See Amnesty International's December 2006 rapport on Estonia: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGEUR510022006?open&of=ENG-EST>