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FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE, EMOTION AND IDEOLOGY IN U.S. AND RUSSIAN GEOPOLITICAL NARRATIVES TOWARDS AFRICA

Abstract. This corpus-based study focuses on the revival of the geopolitical struggle in Africa between the U.S. and Russia (Stronski, 2019; Cohen, 2020). I investigate a corpus of speeches given by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and the U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken during their respective visits to Africa in July and August 2022. On the one hand, I examine to what extent the two antagonists combine figurative language with various discursive and psycho-cognitive strategies in order to sustain and convey their ideological standpoint and their geopolitical agenda in Africa. On the other hand, I analyze how they select and construe some particular lexical units and structures, literally or figuratively, for the sake of foregrounding or backgrounding events, participants, and the relationships between them. Finally, based on a sample of reactions to the narratives, section (2.5) deals with their socio-cognitive perceptions by the African leaders and people.

Keywords: discourse, figurativeness, ideology, narrative, emotion, Africa, the United States, Russia.

Introduction

Africa has historically been a battleground for geopolitical, ideological and economic competitions between great powers (Legvold, 1979; Weise and Macaulay, 1985; Stronski, 2019; Cohen, 2020, for example). According to Weise and Macaulay (1985), until the 1960s¹ the African continent was not considered an important area of concern in the United States' foreign policy. Nevertheless, as highlighted by Cohen² (2020: 28), a debate had been initiated in the early 1950s on "the importance of Africa in world affairs", which led to an official policy paper predicting, among other things, the increase of the geostrategic role of future independent African states because

of their abundant natural resources. Weise and Macaulay (1985: 32) observe that in 1955–56 an American policy misadventure in dealing with President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, and the mis-reading of the intentions of its British, French and Israeli allies, “opened the door for **the first important**³ Soviet entry into African affairs.” Subsequently, the Soviet Union gained considerable influence, mainly in military cooperation with many African states, Egypt, Sudan, Ghana and Uganda, for example. Having in mind the historical background (cf. Cohen, 2020) and relying on both Cognitive Linguistics and Critical Discourse Studies (see section 1.2), this corpus-based study focuses on the revival of the geopolitical struggle in Africa between the U.S. and Russia (Stronski, 2019; Cohen, 2020). This study focuses on these two great powers to analyze how they currently frame their competitive narratives towards Africa. In addition to the U.S. and Russia, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the geopolitical dynamics on the continent, it is important to bear in mind China’s growing influence (Maru, 2019). Future studies should incorporate discourses of this significant player, and of others such as India, Turkey, Iran, etc. Here, I investigate a corpus of speeches given by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and the U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken during their respective visits to Africa in July and August 2022. On the one hand, I examine to what extent the two antagonists combine figurative language with various discursive and psycho-cognitive strategies in order to sustain and convey their ideological standpoint and their geopolitical agenda in Africa. On the other hand, I analyze how they select and construct some particular lexical units and structures, literally or figuratively, for the sake of foregrounding or backgrounding events, participants, and the relationships between them. Finally, based on a sample of reactions to the narratives, section (2.5) deals with their socio-cognitive perceptions by African leaders and people.

1. The corpus and the theoretical framework

1.1. The corpus

The corpus of this study is a 27,651-word selection of speeches delivered by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, and the American Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken. The first sub-corpus, corpus-Lavrov⁴ (12,821 words), contains one press article, sent ahead of Sergey Lavrov’s four-country visit to the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram*, the Congolese *Dispatch de Brazzaville*, the Ugandan *New Vision*, and the *Ethiopia Herald*. It also includes five press conference remarks and answers to media questions

held from July 24 to 27, 2022 by Lavrov with the political and diplomatic leaders of these countries. The second one, corpus-Blinken⁵ (14,830 words), is composed of a speech given at the University of Pretoria in South Africa, and three press conference remarks and answers to media questions organized with the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of South Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda, which Anthony Blinken visited from August 8 to 11, 2022.

Corpus limitations and future research

A key limitation of this corpus-based investigation is the relatively small data sample (27,651 words). Yet the study serves as a foundational exploration of U.S. and Russian geopolitical discourses towards Africa. It also lays the groundwork for the next steps of my research program on geopolitical ideologies and narratives in Africa. Although the selected texts will help us to understand the underlying cognitive meanings and purposes of specific diplomatic discourses, they cannot be fully representative of the broader geopolitical narratives of the two countries. Future studies shall expand the data collection to include a wider range of sources, such as official statements, speeches, and documents from Russia-Africa and U.S.-Africa summits. Similarly, in order to effectively analyze how African leaders and people perceive these narratives, a larger corpus is needed to incorporate discourses from different African countries, political parties, and various ideological backgrounds. Such a larger data set would also enable the application of more robust statistical methods, which would strengthen the generalizability of the findings.

1.2. The theoretical framework

To carry out this study, I have adopted a critical discourse approach (Thompson, 1988; Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 2001, 2016; Reisigl and Wodak, 2016) and have relied on studies in metaphor and metonymy (Chilton and Lakoff, 1995; Radden and Kövecses, 1999; Chilton and Schäffner, 2002; Gibbs and Wilson, 2002; Lakoff, 2004; Deignan, 2005; Taiwo, 2010; Twardzisz, 2011; Charteris-Black, 2011; Lenard and Ćosić 2017, among others). The notion of ‘discourse’ is conceived here through Fairclough’s (1992: 72–93) three-dimensional conception: “discourse-as-text”, “discourse-as-social-practice” and “discursive practice”, i.e. processes of text production, distribution and consumption in society. In his sociocognitive discourse approach, van Dijk (2001: 97) follows similar principles in advocating “the necessity of a broad, diverse, multidisciplinary and problem-oriented CDA” (Critical Discourse Analysis), which involves the theoret-

ical triangle of “discourse-cognition-society”. Applying a cognitive analysis to figurativeness, many studies (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Chilton and Lakoff 1995; Chilton, 2004; among others) have shown that our experiences in society are often represented metaphorically, by mapping well-understood source domains of human experiences onto more schematic domains, in order to better understand one concept (the ‘target’) in terms of another notion (the ‘source’ domain). Defining metonymy in terms of contiguity, Twardzisz (2011: 27) describes it as “a conceptual projection whereby one experiential domain (the target) is partially understood in terms of another experiential domain (the source)”. This figurative projection is viewed in cognitive linguistics as a ‘reference point’ (a ‘source’) which activates a ‘target’ meaning within the same cognitive (matrix) domain (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Panther and Thornburg 2004; Ruiz de Mendoza and Galera-Masegosa, 2011), among others. In simpler terms, conceptual metonymy substitutes one entity for another one within the same matrix domain. This substitution serves various discourse-pragmatic functions, such as emphasizing certain aspects (foregrounding), downplaying others (backgrounding), or conveying positive/negative evaluations of the ‘target’ referent – for the sake of objectivity, euphemism, vagueness, etc. (Radden and Kövecses, 1999; Panther and Thornburg, 2004; Littlemore, 2015). This aligns with the analysis of metonymic conceptualizations by Ruiz de Mendoza and Diez Velasco (2004) and Ruiz de Mendoza and Galera-Masegosa (2011), who distinguish two types of domain-subdomain metonymic relationships. The first one is domain expansion (“source-in-target”), which occurs when the ‘source’ is a subdomain of the ‘target’ domain, as in the example *the ham sandwich is waiting for his check*, where the source, ‘the ham sandwich’ is a subdomain referring to a broader (matrix) domain ‘the customer’. The second one is domain reduction (“target-in-source”), in which the ‘target’ is a subdomain of the ‘source’ domain. For instance, in the sentence (*Nixon bombed Hanoi.*), the source ‘Nixon’, which represents the matrix domain, refers to a subdomain, the target ‘the air force under his control’. Furthermore, as Deignan (2005: 73–74) argues, metonyms can be divided into “nonconventional” and “conventional”. She explains that “nonconventional metonyms are not established meanings, they can be understood only with reference to context”, unlike conventional ones, which “can be understood readily without reference to a specific context”. As this study focuses on geopolitical discourse, the metonyms found in the corpus are merely conventional, such as the metonym *the United States and its allies* used by Sergey Lavrov in a press conference in Ethiopia: *We see that the attempts by the United States and its allies to impose their views...* (section 2.2 below).

As for metaphorical mappings, Chilton (2004: 52) argues that they are usually unconscious and are often used in politics for reasoning about ‘target’ domains that are ill-understood, vague or controversial. For example, Chilton and Lakoff (1995: 38–39) demonstrate how in foreign policy, but also in politics in general, THE NATION IS A PERSON metaphor is frequently used to transfer the mode of reasoning about human beings to issues about nations (see also Musolff, 2018 and Twardzisz, 2011). Gibbs and Wilson (2002) observe that the human body is frequently used as a source for metaphorical thought and language. Such metaphors provide “the resource to understand ideas, events, and objects in terms of what is most familiar and well-understood”. Beyond the use of metaphor itself, one of the crucial effects is that these conceptualizations can form the basis for positive or negative (re)actions in society. As Musolff (2018: 261) argues, the use and elaboration of the NATION-AS-PERSON metaphor, i.e. “nation-personifications” are useful in political discourse “to create an image of a unified social collective that is able to speak with one voice and act as a singular, independent agent”. The personification of nations often relies on ideological motivations, such as fostering the feeling of unity and patriotism, strengthening alliances or targeting enemies. If nations are considered as persons, they are then construable as having personal identities and social relationships with other nations, which will be seen as friends (see section 2.3 below), enemies, neighbors, strong, weak, etc. As van Dijk (1995: 29–30) demonstrates, in political discourse, metaphors can be used as ideological devices to downplay information that is unfavorable to *us* and emphasize negative aspects about *them*. The following subsection examines the interconnections between the notions of “ideology” and “narrative”.

1.3. Conceptual clarification

This section compares two pervasive and versatile concepts: “ideology” and “narrative”, which are interconnected but different. Reisigl and Wodak (2016: 25) define *ideology* as “a perspective (often one-sided), i.e. a world-view and a system composed of related mental representations, convictions, opinions, attitudes, values and evaluations, which is shared by members of a specific social group”. They observe that when ideologies are fully developed, such as communism, socialism, conservatism or liberalism, they are often labeled ‘grand narratives’ and include three interrelated imaginaries: representational, visionary and programmatic models. Another, slightly different, definition of “ideology” is given by Sargent (2009: 2), describing it

as “a system of values and beliefs regarding the various institutions and processes of society that is accepted as fact or truth by a group of people. An ideology provides the believer with a picture of the world both as it is and as it should be, and, in doing so, organizes the tremendous complexity of the world into something fairly simple and understandable.” These definitions agree on the idea that ideology is a system of *values, beliefs, mental representations, attitudes*, etc. shared by a social group. The second sentence of Sargent’s definition elaborates on another aspect of ideology, which somehow connects this concept to “narrative”, which Patterson and Monroe (1998: 315–316) describe as referring “to the ways in which we construct disparate facts in our own worlds and weave them together cognitively in order to make sense of our reality.” Shenhav (2006: 246) explains that political discourses rely extensively on the pattern of narrative, since it is “an effective means of simplifying complex situations into chains of events”. Therefore, the narrative plays a central role “in the formulation and maintenance of worldviews” and “as a way of understanding the world and endowing it with meaning” (*ibidem*). Interestingly, these characterizations of “narrative” somehow echo Sargent’s (2009) elaboration on ideology explained above, and are also consistent with Gerring’s (1997: 972) description of the latter as having an “action-oriented” function, which seeks not only to describe the world but also to mold it. These conceptual clarifications show the interconnections and differences between the two concepts.

2. Discussion

2.1. A historical geopolitical opposition

Since the mid-1940s, the U.S. and Russia (formerly in the Soviet Union) have had opposing ‘grand narratives’ and geopolitical interests. To outline the issue briefly, the American doctrine – the “Truman Doctrine” – advocated that the United States would provide political, military and economic support to all “democratic nations” if they were threatened by external or internal authoritarian forces (meaning by communism)⁶. The creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949, designed to be a defensive military alliance between the Western-Bloc countries, is one of the concrete demonstrations of this doctrine. In response, the Soviet Union initiated the Warsaw Pact in 1955 to establish military cooperation and mutual assistance within the European Eastern-Bloc countries. In the late 1960s, the “Brezhnev doctrine”⁷ on foreign policy stated that the

Soviet Union would intervene in countries where “socialist rule” was under threat. Starting in the mid-1940s, the U.S. and Russia had an ideological and geopolitical debate within the Trusteeship Council of the United Nations about the colonial system and non-self-governing territories, most of which were in Africa (see Cohen, 2020: 20–29). For example, from 1975 to the late 1980s in Angola, but also elsewhere, the ideological debate turned into a military confrontation between the two doctrines – for more detail see Legvold (1979), Weise and Macaulay (1985: 34–40), and Cohen (2020: 100–104).

The following sections explore how these developments have shaped the constructions of the current opposing geopolitical narratives in Africa. The historical legacies of ideological struggles within the UN Trusteeship Council and the intense military and economic competition and alliances during the Cold War continue to influence the dynamics between the U.S. and Russia towards African nations. For example, Anthony Blinken emphasizes that they should no longer be “treated as instruments of other nations” (see extract 3a in section 2.4.2). He implicitly criticizes past and present external imperialistic attitudes towards African countries. Conversely, Sergey Lavrov frequently focuses on Russia’s historic support for “Africans in their struggle for liberation from colonial oppression” (extract 4a), positioning Russia as a steady “old friend” (see section 2.3). The analysis in section 2.4.2 demonstrates how each leader strategically recalls history to highlight his country’s positive role or a potential shift in its attitude towards African nations.

2.2. The geopolitical struggle through the ‘game’ frame

Despite diplomatic language (extract 1 below), in Africa there is a revival of the ancient ideological, economic and geostrategic struggles between superpowers. To win the battle or at least maintain the *status quo*, the diplomatic leaders need to be physically present in Africa⁸ to convey their narratives, using different discursive and psycho-cognitive strategies, including emotional figurative language and lexico-grammatical constructions. During their visits, both Sergey Lavrov and Anthony Blinken have particularly used metaphorical and metonymic mappings of NATION-AS-PERSON and NATION-FOR-PERSON. As Musolff (2018: 261) posits, the use and elaboration of the nation-as-person metaphor, or ‘nation-personifications’, are utilized in political discourse “to create an image of a unified social collective that is able to *speak with one voice* and *act* as a singular, independent *agent*” (original italics). In the corpus, this metaphor leads to other metaphorical mappings in which NATIONS ARE PLAYERS (the ‘game’ frame) or FIGHTERS

(the ‘war’ frame). For example, in the extracts below the two diplomats present INTERNATIONAL-AFFAIRS-AS-A-GAME in which the African CONTINENT is mapped AS-A-PLAYING-FIELD and powerful NATIONS ARE PLAYERS.

- (1) We don’t want an imbalanced or transactional relationship. And our commitment to a stronger partnership with Africa is not about trying to outdo anyone else. We’ve all heard that narrative, that South Africa and the continent as a whole are the latest **playing field in the competition** between great powers. That is fundamentally not how we see it. It’s not how we’ll advance our engagement. (A. Blinken, Press conference in South Africa)

The ‘game’ frame is evoked here by the U.S. Secretary of State to deny the idea that there is a geopolitical confrontation in Africa. Despite the denial, the mere fact of mentioning the GAME metaphor activates the frame in the listeners’ mind, and reinforces the suspicion that superpowers definitely consider AFRICA AS A PLAYING FIELD and GEOPOLITICAL RELATIONS AS A COMPETITION. This interpretation is sustained by one of Lakoff’s basic principles of framing: “Don’t Think of an Elephant”, because when “we negate a frame, we evoke the frame” (Lakoff, 2004: 3). The basic principle is when you are debating against the other side, do not use their language (*ibidem*). Using the other side’s language is what Anthony Blinken has done in starting his denial with: “We’ve all heard that narrative”.

The Russian Foreign Minister also uses the ‘game’ frame, but for a different discourse-pragmatic purpose.

- (2) Our positions on key regional and international issues have traditionally been identical or close because they rely on Russia and Ethiopia’s firm commitments to international law, primarily, the principles of the UN Charter, especially including respect for the sovereign equality of states. We see that the attempts by **the United States and its allies to impose their views** and development models on other nations and to promote their **geopolitical zero-sum games** run counter to these principles. (S. Lavrov, Press conference in Ethiopia)

The GAME metaphor (“geopolitical zero-sum games”) is evoked to achieve two main argumentative goals. Firstly, using the metonym *the United States and its allies*, Sergey Lavrov wants to pinpoint to the African audience that the U.S. and its allies are hegemonic, since they try to impose their views and models on other nations. In doing so, he eventually aims at activating a reproach which is often heard on the African continent and elsewhere against the U.S. and former European colonial powers. Secondly, he combines the metonymic mapping COUNTRY FOR THE GOVERNMENT with

the metaphor NATIONS ARE PLAYERS to criticize the U.S. and its allies for playing an unfair geopolitical game (i.e. “zero-sum games”). In addition to the conceptual operations discussed above, the two leaders also combine them with clusters of specific lexical choices presenting African nations as PARTNERS OR FRIENDS.

2.3. Figurative language and lexical clusters⁹

Throughout his discourses, Anthony Blinken presents AFRICAN-NATIONS AS **PARTNERS**, while Sergey Lavrov mainly refers to them AS **FRIENDS**. It is important to note that the notion of “friendship” has a particular significance in African societies (and elsewhere). Friendship and kinship are often interconnected, although there are differences and subtleties according to sociocultural or ethnic groups (for a detailed anthropological analysis of these issues, see Guichard, Grätz and Diallo, 2014). For example, in Africa (at least in many societies in West Africa that I know more), a friend’s parents or siblings are like your parents and siblings, and vice versa. Even if the concept of friendship is employed figuratively in inter-states relationships, its recurrence in the Russian narrative towards Africa has a greater resonance in the subconscious or mental representations of many people. As shown by the three-word clusters in the table below, the Russian discourse tends to use affective terms (*friends*, *friendship*, (*un*)*friendly*, *colleagues*) to talk to and about Africa, while the American one rather utilizes non-affective expressions such as *partners*, *partnership* as illustrated in the table.

Table 1
Cluster search results of [Partner_] and [-Friend_] ¹⁰ in the corpus

[Partner_] clusters in Blinken's speeches, Cluster size = 3, Search Term Position on Right, Cluster types = 34 Cluster Tokens = 38						[Friend_] clusters in Lavrov's speeches, Search Term Position on Right, Cluster size = 3, Cluster types = 20, Cluster Tokens = 30					
Cluster	Rank	Freq	Range	NormFreq	NormRange	Cluster	Rank	Freq	Range	NormFreq	NormRange
1 a true partnership	1	2	1	0.053	1.000	1 our African friends	1	5	1	0.167	1.000
2 for the partnership	1	2	1	0.053	1.000	2 our Ethiopian friends	2	3	1	0.100	1.000
3 to this partnership	1	2	1	0.053	1.000	3 our Congolese friends	3	2	1	0.067	1.000
4 with African partners	1	2	1	0.053	1.000	4 our Egyptian friends	3	2	1	0.067	1.000
5 a stronger partnership	5	1	1	0.026	1.000	5 their old friends	3	2	1	0.067	1.000
6 and vital partners	5	1	1	0.026	1.000	6 with our friends	3	2	1	0.067	1.000
7 arms research partnerships	5	1	1	0.026	1.000	7 bonds of friendship	7	1	1	0.033	1.000
8 as equal partners	5	1	1	0.026	1.000	8 brought our friends	7	1	1	0.033	1.000
9 being a partner	5	1	1	0.026	1.000	9 from the unfriendly	7	1	1	0.033	1.000
10 demands of partners	5	1	1	0.026	1.000	10 history of friendship	7	1	1	0.033	1.000
11 economy in partnership	5	1	1	0.026	1.000	11 its African friends	7	1	1	0.033	1.000
12 help our partnership	5	1	1	0.026	1.000	12 my good friend	7	1	1	0.033	1.000
13 it in partners	5	1	1	0.026	1.000	13 our Arab friends	7	1	1	0.033	1.000
14 launching the partnership	5	1	1	0.026	1.000	14 our relations friendly	7	1	1	0.033	1.000
15 meanwhile our partnerships	5	1	1	0.026	1.000	15 our Turkish friends	7	1	1	0.033	1.000
16 of the partnership	5	1	1	0.026	1.000	16 our Ugandan friends	7	1	1	0.033	1.000
17 of this partnership	5	1	1	0.026	1.000	17 our Western friends	7	1	1	0.033	1.000
18 our local partners	5	1	1	0.026	1.000	18 record of friendship	7	1	1	0.033	1.000
19 s what partners	5	1	1	0.026	1.000	19 to our friends	7	1	1	0.033	1.000
20 states is partnering	5	1	1	0.026	1.000	20 usual with friends	7	1	1	0.033	1.000
... ..	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...

The analysis of these clusters in the two sub-corpora reveals a significant difference in how the two diplomats frame their relationships to Africa. Anthony Blinken heavily emphasizes “partnership”, using the term “partner” (and its derivatives) 38 times compared to only 13 occurrences in Sergey Lavrov’s speeches. The latter leans towards “friendlier” language, and frequently utilizes figuratively and literally the term “friend” and its derivatives 30 times. Anthony Blinken uses the term “friend”, in its literal meaning, only three times in the whole corpus. In addition to equating the affective *versus* non-affective difference to the collocations around *friend*- and *partner*-, a similar opposition can also be seen in the two-word clusters involving the adjective *African*, as shown in the next table.

Table 2

Two-word clusters [African—], sorted by frequency

[African] clusters in corpus-Blinken, Cluster size = 2, Search Term Position on Left, Cluster types = 22, Cluster Tokens = 57						[African] clusters in corpus-Lavrov, Cluster size = 2, Search Term Position on Left, Cluster types = 21, Cluster Tokens = 54					
Cluster	Rank	Freq	Range	NormFreq	NormRange	Cluster	Rank	Freq	Range	NormFreq	NormRange
1 African nations	1	11	1	0.193	1.000	1 African countries	1	14	1	0.259	1.000
2 African countries	2	9	1	0.158	1.000	2 African friends	2	6	1	0.111	1.000
3 African led	3	7	1	0.123	1.000	3 African Union	2	6	1	0.111	1.000
4 African Union	4	5	1	0.088	1.000	4 African colleagues	4	4	1	0.074	1.000
5 African leaders	5	4	1	0.070	1.000	5 African problems	5	3	1	0.056	1.000
6 African citizens	6	3	1	0.053	1.000	6 African solutions	5	3	1	0.056	1.000
7 African governments	7	2	1	0.035	1.000	7 African states	5	3	1	0.056	1.000
8 African partners	7	2	1	0.035	1.000	8 African republic	8	2	1	0.037	1.000
...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...

In this table, the most frequent collocations with the adjective (*African*) are *countries*, *nations*, *friends*, *colleagues* (at least 5 occurrences each). A close look at the two sub-corpora shows that through this adjective, the Russian Foreign Minister keeps foregrounding his country’s *friendship* or *closeness* with Africa by frequently associating with the adjective *African* affective and appreciative-evaluative notions such as *friends*, *colleagues*, *problems*, *solutions*. Contrary to this Russian strategy, Anthony Blinken mainly uses the term *African* with non-affective nominals, for example *countries*, *leaders*, *citizens*, *governments*, *partners*. The data in tables (1 and 2) indicate that in order to sustain the American diplomatic narrative and position towards Africa, he metaphorically and metonymically conceptualizes his country’s relationship with Africa in terms of *partnership* and *collaboration*, presenting the U.S. as a strong and “sympathetic” PARTNER (see the next section). In contrast, Sergey Lavrov relies differently on figurative conceptualizations to characterize the relationship between Africa and his country in terms of *friendship* and *solidarity*, figuratively portraying Russia as an “empathetic” FRIEND of AFRICA. To further elaborate on these issues, I postulate in the next section that the two diplomats, consciously

or unconsciously, rely on two distinct psycho-cognitive discursive strategies in order to sustain their ideological visions and advance their geopolitical agenda in Africa.

2.4. The persuasive function of slogans and emotions

2.4.1. The strategy of slogans in rival narratives

In the geopolitical opposition between the U.S. and Russia in Africa, each side has framed its new narrative in a slogan. Russian diplomacy insists on the principle of “African solutions to African problems” (see extract 4a below). This catchphrase was initially coined by George B. N. Ayittey, a Ghanaian Professor and political economist. Ayittey (2005) explains that in 1993, as the \$3.5 billion international peace mission failed miserably in Somalia, he coined the expression¹¹ “African solutions for African problems”. One of his claims is that “African solutions are less expensive, and, further, reform that is *internally generated*¹² endures. Only Africans can save Africa” (pp. 417–418). To the best of my knowledge, since the first Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, 24 October 2019, the Russian president and diplomacy have fully integrated Ayittey’s expression into their geopolitical narrative towards Africa. In his address¹³ at the summit, President Vladimir Putin stressed “the principle stipulating African solutions for African problems”, which then appeared in the final declarations of the first and second Russia-Africa Summits¹⁴ (the second one was held in Saint Petersburg, 28 July 2023). The widespread use of this expression in the current Russian geopolitical narrative illustrates their discursive strategy of appropriating African discourses to address Africa.

In an attempt to find an alternative to the Russian pro-African slogan, the American Secretary of State has also forged a similar but reframed one. Instead of openly taking over the notions of *problems* and *solutions*, he rather focuses on the issue of *choices* for Africans. In his speech in South Africa (August 2022) and in his address¹⁵ at the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington D.C. (December 2022), Secretary Blinken underlined that “the United States will not dictate Africa’s choices”. He firstly constructed the slogan metonymically (STATES/CONTINENT FOR THE PEOPLE/LEADERS), before literally elaborating it into a second catchphrase: the “right to make these choices belongs to Africans, and Africans alone” (see extract 3a below). As Blinken’s sentences are more or less a rephrasing of Ayittey’s expression discussed above, one can conclude that both the Russian and American narratives have directly or indirectly appropriated African concepts in order to get a more receptive audience. Yet the question, for both sides and

for future studies, is whether it is a genuine appropriation of African aspirations or simply an attempt at discursive manipulation to achieve their own geopolitical goals. As for now, my analysis will focus on the discursive strategies and the overall emotional¹⁶ tone of the geopolitical discourses of the two diplomats.

2.4.2. The strategy of sympathy *versus* empathy

Studying the combination of figurative language with specific lexicogrammatical constructions in the diplomats' discourses, I postulate that the U.S. narrative adopts an attitude of *sympathy* towards Africa, while the Russian one relies on the strategy of *empathy*. The Cambridge online Dictionary defines *empathy* as "the ability to **share** someone else's feelings or experiences **by imagining** what it would be like to be in that person's situation"; and *sympathy* is defined as "(an expression of) **understanding** and **care** for someone else's suffering"¹⁷ – with the author's highlighting. In his book on *Emotional diplomacy*, Hall (2015: 81) notes that "sympathy often involves a form of empathy or role taking, whereby one feels 'for someone else's misery'" (p. 89). He explains that the different expressions of emotional behavior between nations may be relatively subtle or loudly strident, expressed at the level of rhetoric and symbolic gestures or incorporate military actions (p. 31). Adopting a social psychological approach to emotion and insisting on its interpersonal functions, Parkinson (1996: 671) points out that "attempts at persuasion often involve the deliberate expression of emotion in order to evoke a particular kind of audience reaction concerning some topic of concern". In what follows, I will focus on the rhetorical and linguistic expressions of emotion, and demonstrate how the psycho-cognitive strategies of the two diplomats can be equated with these two connected but different concepts, *sympathy* and *empathy* as defined above.

- (3a) And yet too often African nations have been treated as instruments of other nations' progress rather than the authors of their own. Time and again they have been told to pick a side in great power contests that feel far removed from [*sic*] daily struggles of their people. The United States will not dictate Africa's choices. Neither should anyone else. The right to make these choices belongs to Africans, and Africans alone. At the same time, the United States and the world will look to African nations to defend the rules of the international system that they've done so much to shape. These include the right of every country to have its independence, its sovereignty, is [*sic*] territorial integrity respected, a principle at stake now in Ukraine. (A. Blinken, Speech at the University of Pretoria, South Africa)

- (3b) A few days ago in South Africa, I set out our administration's new Strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa, a strategy that recognizes African nations and peoples as equal and vital partners in advancing our shared priorities, tackling together global challenges, and being able to deliver for our citizens. (A. Blinken Press conference, DRC)

In these examples, the U.S. sympathetic narrative is characterized by the selection of specific lexical units referring to *African nations* as *equal and vital partners* with whom the U.S. is said to have *shared priorities*. Secretary Blinken also emphasizes his country's commitment to respect the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of all nations, thereby pointing out that Russia doesn't respect that principle in Ukraine. One of the American rhetorical strategies is to persuade African nations that now the U.S. recognizes that they have been exploited by other nations and manipulated by great powers (extract 3a). Implying that such practices should be terminated, Anthony Blinken expresses sympathy for Africa. He shows understanding and support for Africans' aspirations to make their own choices. Another sympathetic attitude is what he calls his "administration's new Strategy" to consider Sub-Saharan African nations and peoples "as equal and vital partners" (3b). Although this expression suggests a certain level of emotional engagement, it is still more sympathy than empathy compared to Lavrov's expressive references in the following extracts.

- (4a) Russia-Africa ties are based on the time-tested bonds of friendship and cooperation. Our country who [*sic*] has not stained itself with the bloody crimes of colonialism, has always sincerely supported Africans in their struggle for liberation from colonial oppression, provided practical and often gratuitous assistance to the peoples of the continent in the formation of their statehood, creation of the foundations of national economies, defense capabilities build up, and training of qualified personnel. Today we stand in solidarity with the African demands to complete the process of decolonization and support relevant initiatives on the UN platform. (S. Lavrov, Press article ahead of his African visit)
- (4b) At the same time, I would specially emphasize: our country does not impose anything on anyone or tells [*sic*] others how to live. We treat with great respect the sovereignty of the States of Africa, and their inalienable right to determine the path of their development for themselves. We are firmly committed to the "African solutions to African problems" principle. Such an approach to developing inter-State ties dramatically differs from the "master-slave" logic imposed by former metropolitan countries, which reproduces the obsolete colonial model. We know that the African colleagues does [*sic*] not approve of the undisguised attempts of the US and their European satellites to gain the upper hand, and to impose a unipolar world order to the international community. (*idem*)

Based on the general tone of Lavrov's discourses, it is arguable that the Russian narrative is designed to be empathetic towards Africa. This can be seen not only in the use of emotional figurative language (*time-tested bonds, stained with the bloody crimes, master-slave logic*), but also in the multiplication of evaluative adjectives (*gratuitous assistance, great respect*, etc.) and adverbs of intensity (*I would specially emphasize, we are firmly committed, such an approach... dramatically differs from*, and so on). Contrary to Anthony Blinken, Sergey Lavrov utilizes more emotional expressions to foreground Russia's closeness to Africa, either through the metaphor of FRIENDSHIP BONDS considering NATIONS-AS-PERSONS (analyzed above), or by adopting the striking metaphor of MASTER-SLAVE to describe the patronizing attitude of former colonial powers in Africa. The Russian Foreign Minister also underscores his point that his country has not colonized *any African* nation. He uses the BLOOD metaphor along with the figurative sense of the verb STAIN to strengthen the emotional effect and the pathos. He highlights Russia's will to "stand in solidarity with the African demands to complete the process of decolonization", thereby tugging at Africa's heartstrings and activating the (neo)colonial resentment still alive in many African countries. Pursuing his "diplomacy of empathy" (Hall, 2015), Lavrov underlines the role Russia (the Soviet Union) played in the Africans' struggles for independence. In extract (4b), turning to the ideological struggle for moral and traditional values, he claims that his country "does not impose anything on anyone or tells [*sic*] others how to live". Then the slogan "African solutions to African problems" is reaffirmed not only to express Russia's commitment to this principle, but also to criticize the U.S. and its allies for trying to impose a unipolar world order, which he expresses through the body part metaphor ("to gain the upper hand"), highlighting their tendency towards domination.

Beyond the attitudes of sympathy or empathy for Africa, these geopolitical discourses encode the conceptualization and expression of two hegemonic narratives in competition, each one trying to advance its countries' agenda and ideologies. Russia accuses the U.S. of having a patronizing and hegemonic attitude towards other nations¹⁸ (extract 4b), while the U.S. blames Russia of disregarding "the rules of the international system", such as the respect of every country's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity¹⁹ (see extract 3a). In reminding Africans that Russia has supported their liberation movements (4a and 4b), Sergey Lavrov attempts to revive a historical ideological opposition of the 1950s and 1960s about the then colonized African peoples. Yet his discourses overlook the historical fact that it was the Soviet Union and its allies (more importantly Cuba) that supported

the African independence struggles. He also backgrounds the fact that it was not just “sincere and friendly support” for Africans in their struggle for decolonization, but mainly to advance and strengthen the Soviet Union’s geopolitical and ideological positions in the Cold War era. Similarly, when the U.S. collaborated with the apartheid regime of South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s in the Angolan war, it was because the American government was pursuing its own Cold War agenda (Cohen, 2020). Of particular interest concerning these issues is the degree of epistemic awareness of African leaders and people, which I addressed through some reactions in the last section.

2.5. Africa’s perceptions of the geopolitical narratives

2.5.1. Resentment towards U.S. foreign interventions

In the press conference held in South Africa by the U.S. Secretary of State and the South African Foreign Minister, the diplomatic correspondent of *The New York Times*, Edward Wong²⁰, asked the following questions:

- (5a) QUESTION: Hello. Secretary Blinken, our understanding is that the Blinken [*sic*] administration’s approach to Africa and its Africa strategy is predicated on democracy promotion and a promotion of open society as the underpinning for its priorities here. There’s been **a history of many American projects that are done under the name of democracy promotion ending poorly or with disastrous outcomes**, whether it’s during the Cold War or more recently in Iraq and Afghanistan. How will that approach be different here in Africa and lead to different outcomes? And **why is the approach seemingly different in a place like the Middle East**, where you don’t have the same demands of partners like the UAE or Saudi Arabia compared to your approach in Africa? [...]

The answer (or rather the silence) of Anthony Blinken on these questions is particularly noteworthy.

- (5b) SECRETARY BLINKEN: Thanks, Ed, very much. I’m tempted to say stay tuned because we’ll talk about this in a couple of hours, I think at the minister’s alma mater, which I’m really looking forward to. And this – the question you raised is part and parcel of what I’ll be talking about, but maybe for now just a couple of things. [...]

The debate on foreign interventions as well as the difference in treatment made by the U.S. between “partners like the UAE or Saudi Arabia” and African nations are questionable issues that need to be tackled genuinely if the American government and its allies want to be more credible in Africa

and elsewhere. The fact that Anthony Blinken did not address these questions can be analyzed as a geopolitical gap in his discursive strategy, if not a misfiring.

The American journalist also asked the following question to the Foreign Minister of South Africa, Naledi Pandor.

- (6a) QUESTION: And for Minister Pandor, do you think that this emphasis on democracy will be well received across all of Africa given the different political systems and traditions here on the continent, or do you think there will be some pushback against this? [...]

Contrary to Blinken, Naledi Pandor immediately addressed the questions on both foreign interventions in Africa (see extract 6c) and the need for the U.S. and other partners of Africa to change their approach of “democracy promotion”.

- (6b) MINISTER PANDOR: Thank you very much for the question. I think that when you approach a strategy you need to think very carefully about the kinds of tactics that you would utilize. So your overall strategic intention might be to advocate for democracy and support its presence on the African continent. However, if your tactic is to approach African countries and say that, listen, you must be democratic either and use our model, it works, I think it’s bound to lead to some failure. I do agree with Tony that all countries and peoples deserve the right to exercise their civil and political rights, but I think given history the approach has to be somewhat different. I do agree with Tony that all countries and peoples deserve the right to exercise their civil and political rights, but I think given history the approach has to be somewhat different. [...]

In this extract, the South African Foreign Minister warns U.S. diplomacy that if they continue with their historical foreign policy approach (as in Iraq, Afghanistan, and in Libya), “it’s bound to lead to some failure”. Similarly, in the next extract, she strongly recommends that the geopolitical approach towards Africa should change.

- (6c) MINISTER PANDOR: I also think that one of the lessons we also need to learn and perhaps draw lessons from – one of the experiences we should draw lessons from is the reality that there has been a lot of external interference in Africa. And a lot of that external interference has fueled conflict in many African countries, has fueled instability and supported opposition groups against liberation fighters and so on. You know the history perhaps better than myself. This is a reality. [...]

These statements of Naledi Pandor illustrate how African leaders, who are aware of the positions of their national opinions, try to change the *status*

quo of the geopolitical relationships between African nations and external great powers. To further understand the complexity and diversity of the reception of the Russian geopolitical narratives in Africa, the next subsection examines a few reactions from African political leaders, activists, commentators, and journalists.

2.5.2. Mixed perceptions of the Russian narrative

The reactions to the Russian narrative in Africa which I gathered can be categorized into four main positions. The first one is *the acceptance that Russia is a historical “friend” of Africa*. Such a position is taken by Julius Malema, the leader of the South African political party Economic Freedom Fighters, and member of the National Assembly, who made the following statement on March 21, 2022, at a rally commemorating the Sharpeville Massacre²¹.

- (7) “We are here to say to NATO we are here to say to America we are not with you, we are with Russia and today we want to say to Russia thank you for being there when it was not fashionable to be there and do not doubt our support Russia. Teach them a lesson, we need a new world order, we are tired of being dictated to by America. Russia equipped us with weapons and gave us money to fight apartheid.”²² (J. Malema)

The main argument of those who support this position is that Russia, through the Soviet Union, helped directly or indirectly most African countries to gain their independence from Western European colonization, and that Russia, in a “win-win” relationship, will help Africa to eventually get rid of the neo-colonialists. Yet the questions are: Do they consider Russia itself as an imperialist power? And in the so-called “win-win” cooperation between Africa and Russia (or China, to which the expression is often applied, too), which side, or which groups of people, will actually win?

The second type of perception of the Russian narrative is that *Africa and Russia have common enemies*, as illustrated in example (8a). The proponents of this position argue that Africa needs a strategic alliance with Russia to fight against Western imperialism, as in the following statement by Kemi Seba, a French-Beninese Pan-Africanist and anti-colonialist militant.

- (8a) “Against the West, other partners come to Africa presenting themselves as friends, Russia in particular, China as well and other countries, declaring that they want to help us fight against this neo-colonialism. So, we thank them. But because friends must tell the truth without taboos, we must be honest in the way we interact with each other. Fighting against Western imperialism is a necessity, but it does not mean that Africans want to change one colonist for another.”²³ (Kemi Seba, March 2023)

In this speech, given at the 2nd International Parliamentary Conference “Russia-Africa” in Moscow, Kemi Seba explained that Africa and Russia have a common goal in the fight against neo-colonialism and Western imperialism. Nevertheless, he warned the Russian government not to behave like the former colonial powers. As the geopolitical *status quo* is rapidly changing in Africa²⁴, voices such as Kemi Seba, who is often presented in the French media as “pro-Russian or pro-Kremlin” (cf. Le Cam, 2023), try to raise awareness about the temptation by some Africans to naively replace one imperialist or colonist with another one:

- (8b) We want a multipolar world, we want a world where Africa, Russia, China, India, Iran and the others will effectively resist Western imperialism. But we will fight with all our strength against any entity, any political power that thinks that Africa is a place where they can take advantage of the resources without respecting the people. The twenty-first century is the century of a new African generation who requires the right to self-determination, and who will never accept to change one colonist for the other. Free Africa or death, we will win!²⁵ (Kemi Seba, Moscow, March 2023)

The third type of African reaction to the Russian narrative, and at the same time to the American one, is *to let Africans choose their own friends or enemies*. This position seems to temper the one I have just discussed. As exemplified below, many African leaders remind the superpowers that Africans are increasingly rejecting their patronizing behaviors.

- (9) “We don’t believe in being enemies of somebody’s enemy, no, we want to make our own enemies, not fight other people’s enemies, this is our doctrine. When there was the cold war, one day they asked me a question: ‘Are you pro-East or pro-West?’ I said you must think I am an idiot. Why do you think my main job is to be pro-somebody? I am pro-myself; and I deal with all the other people according to how they relate to my own interests...”²⁶ (President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, press conference with Sergey Lavrov)
- (10) “I’m glad that Secretary Blinken has confirmed that America is not asking us to choose. [...] in terms of our interaction with some of our partners in Europe and elsewhere, there has been a sense of patronizing bullying toward you choose this or else.” (Naledi Pandor, July 2022, press conference with Anthony Blinken)
- (11) “We should not be told by anyone who we associate with and we should never be put in positions where we have to choose who our friends are.”²⁷ (President Cyril Ramaphosa, South Africa, September 2022)

What these reactions have in common is that the African nations have often been patronized by external actors, who tell them what to do, not

on the basis of the Africans' own aspirations, but in the interests of those external actors. This perception derives from the fact that historically the two blocs (West and East) have coerced Africans to choose one side or the other. This practice is what President Museveni ironically challenges in extract (9) above. In a different way, but with the same aim, the South African President and Foreign Minister adopt a similar standpoint²⁸.

Finally, the fourth type of reaction to the Russian geopolitical strategy in Africa is to view it *as a new imperialist and neo-colonial project*. Such a critical position is expressed by Alain Nzilo, a Central African Republic journalist, who points out what he calls "the new Russian colonization in Africa"²⁹, particularly through the Wagner Group, which is suggested implicitly through the cover image of the article.

- (13) "Colonization is the act of transforming a territory to put it under one's dependence. Today, Russia seems to be colonizing the Central African Republic by placing it under its political, economic and media dependence. By exploiting the country's natural resources, Russia is increasingly impoverishing the Central African population in order to enrich itself."³⁰ (*Corbeau News Centrafrique*, April 16, 2023, by Alain Nzilo, Director of publications)

Another example of a critical position is expressed by Tafi Mhaka (2022), a Johannesburg-based social and political commentator, in his article on al-jazeera.com. The title, "Russia (just like the West) is no true friend to Africa", is explicit and opposes the two first positions explained above.

- (12) "Russia is doubling down on its neo-colonial ambitions in Africa. As it expands its economic and political influence over the continent, there is little reason to expect it would behave differently here than it does in its traditional zone of influence. Just as it did in Ukraine, Georgia and many other nations in its periphery, it will not refrain from interfering in the domestic affairs of African nations to further its interests. It is already heavily involved in domestic politics in Sudan, CAR, DRC and Mali." (Mhaka, 2022)

Mhaka suggests that in Africa, Russia may not behave differently from what it has done in many nations on its periphery. The underlying argument of his article is that 'nations do not have friends but interests', and therefore, Russia, the U.S. or other great powers go to Africa or elsewhere with hegemonic ambitions. Before concluding, he emphasizes that it is not "only Russian propaganda which poses a threat to Africa. Western propaganda and manipulation have been a major source of grievance for many African nations since independence".

Conclusion

Undertaking a corpus-based analysis of the discourses given by two geopolitical leaders representing antagonistic ideologies and interests, this paper has argued that their visits to Africa are a clear indication of the revival of a historical geopolitical struggle between Russia and the U.S. Their discourses aim at encoding a positive characterization of African nations in order to have them as *friends* or *partners*. To achieve their goals, both diplomats employ various discursive and psycho-cognitive strategies, among which is the frequent combination of figurative language (metaphor and metonymy) with neatly selected lexical and grammatical constructions. The paper has demonstrated that although the two leaders often use similar discursive constructions and figurative conceptualizations (the GAME metaphor for example), they construct their narratives within different discursive, psychological and political strategies. In order to sound more empathetic during his visit to Africa, Sergey Lavrov expressed his narrative in affective and emotional language, constructed figuratively or non-figuratively to show empathy to Africans. And to challenge the Russian discursive strategy, Anthony Blinken, visiting three African countries in July 2022, adopted a rather sympathetic attitude.

The paper has also shown to what extent the two narratives are not merely accepted but have also met with resistance in Africa. The analysis of some reactions shows that for ideological reasons or political interests, some African opinions idealize the Russian narrative more than the American one, while others are cautious about and critical of both discourses. The challenge for the Russian geopolitical narrative is, on the one hand, the apprehension of its approach in its “traditional zone of influence”, and on the other hand, a cautious appraisal of its new way of dealing with certain African nations through the Wagner Group (Stronski, 2019; Bonnier and Hedenskog, 2020; Mhaka, 2022). The main difficulty for the American geopolitical narrative in Africa is how to reconcile the controversial foreign interventions and their new promise to deal with Africa on a more egalitarian basis. Further studies are needed to determine how the foreign policy actors of the two countries, and others, will consider these issues and appropriately assess the growing geopolitical awareness in Africa.

NOTES

¹ From the 1880s to the 1960s, the African continent was largely dominated by European colonial powers.

² Herman J. Cohen served for thirty-eight years in the U.S. Foreign Service, holding diplomatic posts in France, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. He was also the U.S. ambassador to Senegal and Gambia, and assistant Secretary of State for Africa under President George H. W. Bush. (Cohen, 2020: 279)

³ I highlight.

⁴ Source: the website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (<https://mid.ru/en/press-service/vizity-ministra/> accessed in December 2022).

⁵ Source: the U.S. State Department website (<https://www.state.gov/press-releases/> accessed in December 2022).

⁶ Cf. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/truman-doctrine> (accessed in February 2023).

⁷ Cf. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Brezhnev-Doctrine> (*idem*).

⁸ In addition to the 2022 diplomatic visits dealt with in this study, in 2023 Sergey Lavrov revisited South Africa, then went to Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), Angola, and Eritrea (January 23–26), Mali, Mauritania, and Sudan (February 7–9), while Anthony Blinken visited Egypt (January 29–30), Ethiopia and Niger (March 14–17).

⁹ I used TagAnt and AntConc (respectively Version 2.0.4 for Part-Of-Speech tagging, and Version 4.2.0 for its Cluster and the KWIC tools, Anthony, 2022). The Cluster tool shows contiguous word patterns, two or more words together in a sequence depending on the search conditions.

¹⁰ The underscore ‘_’ represents the slots for affixes and inflections.

¹¹ The phrase is also the name of a non-profit organisation in South Africa, ASAP (cf. <https://www.africansolutions.org/> accessed in July 2023).

¹² Italics in the original text.

¹³ Cf. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61893> (accessed in August 2023).

¹⁴ Cf. <https://summitafrica.ru/en/about-summit/declaration/> and <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5972> (accessed in August 2023).

¹⁵ Cf. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-a-press-availability-26/> (accessed in August 2023).

¹⁶ For more detail on “emotional diplomacy” and a brief account of studies on “emotions in International Relations”, see Hall (2015).

¹⁷ Source: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/empathy>, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sympathy> (accessed in March 2023).

¹⁸ What about the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine?

¹⁹ And what about the United States’ invasion of Iraq (2003–2011)?

²⁰ Cf. <https://www.nytimes.com/by/edward-wong> (accessed in August 2023).

²¹ Cf. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/sharpeville-massacre-21-march-1960> (accessed in April 2023).

²² Source: <https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/malema-reiterates-support-for-russia/> (*idem*).

²³ My translation from French.

²⁴ For example, in central Africa and in the Sahel region (see Bonnier and Heden-skog, 2020).

²⁵ My translation from French.

²⁶ Transcribed from a video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdtDYN9GEZY> (*idem*).

²⁷ Source: <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-set-talk-ukraine-russia-with-safricas-ramaphosa-2022-09-16/> (accessed in July 2023).

²⁸ The three reactions, particularly Yoweri Museveni's, somehow paraphrase Nelson Mandela's famous answer in June 1990 during an interview, stating: "One of the mistakes some political analysts make is to think that their enemies should be our enemies". (cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rkcbODygOV8>).

²⁹ Source: <https://corbeaunews-centrafrique.org/la-centrafrique-un-pays-pauvre-mais-riche-convoitee-par-la-russie/> (*idem*).

³⁰ My translation from French.

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