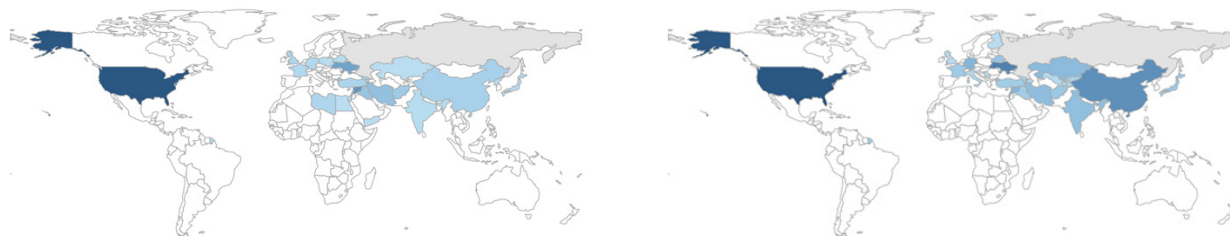




Measuring Russia's attention to Europe and the world

Kristian Lundby Gjerde



Left: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' 25 most-mentioned countries 2003–2019. Right: The Kremlin's 25 most-mentioned countries 2000–2019.

Introduction

Over the last twenty years, Russian foreign policy has gone through different phases. A rapprochement with the West during the early Putin years was followed by deteriorating relations and a war with Georgia. Attempts at 'resetting' US–Russian relations during the presidencies of Barack Obama and Dmitrii Medvedev did not succeed. After Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, much talk focused on a Russian 'turn to the East'. The years since have been marked by conflict and war in Ukraine an international 'sanctions war', a geopolitical stand-off in the Middle East, and increasing military tensions from the south to the high north of Europe.

Some questions have been repeatedly asked during this time, including: 'Is the West as central to Russia as it once was?', 'How important is the EU as an actor, compared with its member states?', and 'Is Russia "turning" to the East, and – in particular – to China?' This brief offers a specific take on these and other questions. Based on a mapping of mentions of country names in more than 30,000 Russian official speeches, press conferences, meeting transcripts, and official statements, this brief provides insights into changes to Russia's engagement with the world during the 21st century. Without disentangling the subtleties of relations – such as their security, economic, or cultural dimensions and their benign or adversarial features – this approach allows this brief to sketch answers to questions that would otherwise be left to guesswork.¹ As we will see, in many cases, there are interesting differences between where the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) and the Kremlin direct their attention. In particular, it appears that the United States has increasingly dominated Ministry of Foreign Affairs talk, while China is 'catching up' with the United States in receiving attention from the Kremlin.

The brief starts with examining the attention given to the Nordic countries, before zooming out and assessing attention towards other European countries, including contextualisation through comparisons with the United States and China. It then zooms yet further out: Of all countries in the world, which have received the most Russian attention in different phases over the last 20 years? A comparison over time of the attention given towards different regions follows before turning to a region with continued special significance to Russia – the countries that made up the former Soviet Union. Finally, the brief looks beyond countries and regions to provide insights into Russia's attention towards select international organisations.

Attention to the Nordic countries

Figure 1 conveys information about the development of Russia's attention towards the five Nordic countries. It displays the number of times each country was mentioned per 100.000 words in foreign-ministry and Kremlin documents, respectively. Thus, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' decreased attention towards the Nordic countries since 2012 is relative, compared to the total amount of official Russian talk during these years; in absolute terms, the countries are mentioned not less frequently than earlier.

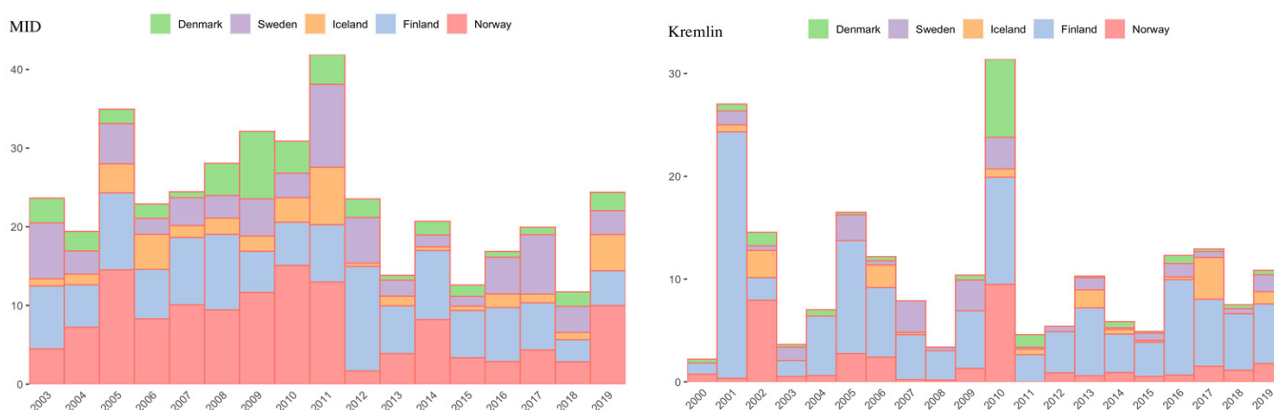


Figure 1

The numbers in Figure 1 reveal a clear difference between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Kremlin. Norway has received significant amounts of attention from MID compared to the Kremlin, while Finland dominates the attention in Kremlin transcripts. Finland, sharing a long border with Russia, can be expected to have a rather more diverse relationship with Russia, and, therefore, appear in a wider range of contexts – both in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs's agenda and at Kremlin meetings. Some years' data may be explained by extraordinary events. The Kremlin's increased attention to Norway in 2002 and 2010 can be explained with President Putin's visit to Oslo in 2002 and the Russian-Norwegian delimitation treaty of 2010. The increased MID attention to Norway in 2019 was largely due to Foreign Minister Lavrov's visit to Kirkenes in October that year to mark the 75th anniversary of the Soviet liberation of Northern Norway in World War II – a visit that also provided an opportunity to voice discontent with changes to Norway's defence policy regarding US and NATO activity in the High North.

Russia looking at Europe

If we look at all European Union (EU) and European Economic Area (EEA) countries, we see that Kremlin documents clearly focus the most on Germany, followed by France, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Finland – that is, on the four largest EU member states and neighbouring Finland (Norway ranks at 15th place in these mentions). In MID documents, the top five countries are the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Poland, and Latvia (Norway ranks at 11th place).

Figure 2 displays the development of attention towards the the four biggest Western European countries as well as Poland – the most frequently mentioned country that joined the EU after 2000. Attention towards these five countries is again measured as their number of mentions per 100,000 words in the data.

The United Kingdom and Poland received considerably more attention from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

than from the Kremlin. One reason why these countries have appeared frequently in MID talk is conflicts in bilateral relations; for example, Russia and Poland frequently engage in public disputes about World War II history in particular, while the spike in attention towards the United Kingdom in 2018 can largely be attributed to the falling-out over the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter. Germany and Italy exhibit opposite dynamics: they appear relatively far more often in Kremlin documents than in MID documents. Kremlin agendas are more diverse, so we can expect countries with more substantial relations with Russia to receive relatively more frequent mentions in Kremlin documents.

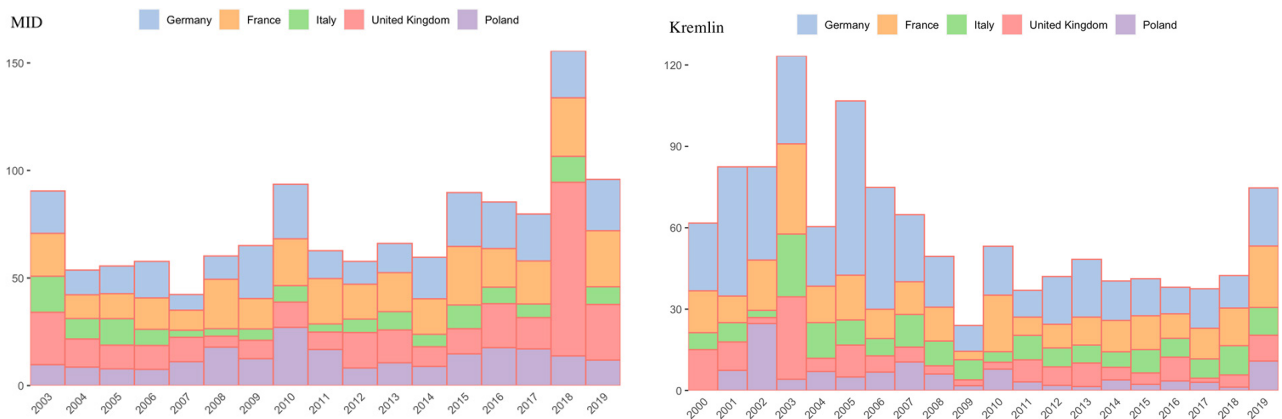


Figure 2

Europe versus the United States and China

How has Russia’s attention to the ‘old’ Western European EU member states (countries that joined the EU in the 20th century, including the UK), the ‘new’ member states (Central and Eastern European countries which joined in the 21st century), and the EU itself developed over time? Moreover, how does this attention compare to Russia’s attention towards the United States and China? Since these questions focus on comparison, Figure 3 presents relative changes in this attention.² The total for each year add up to 100%.

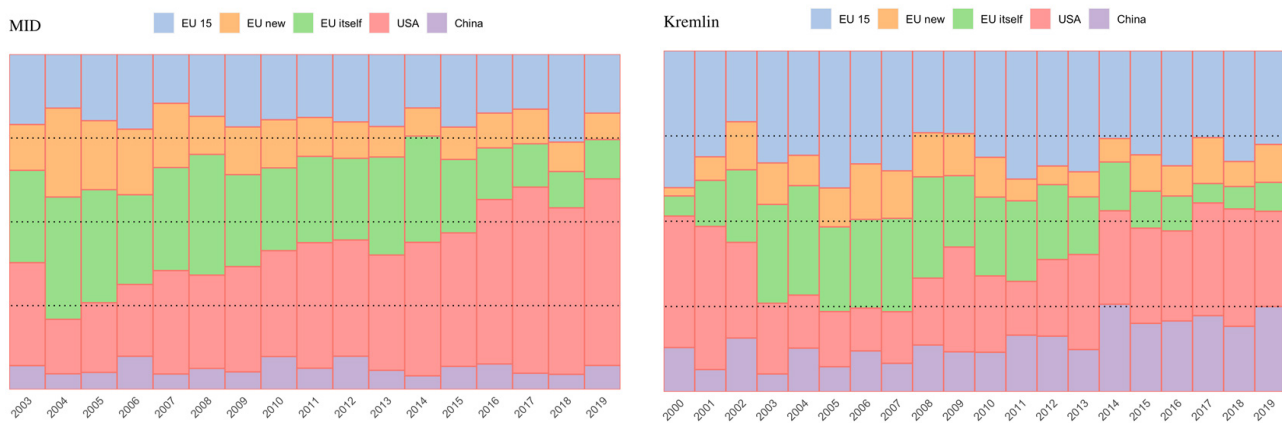


Figure 3

The most notable aspect of Figure 3 is how much more a focus on the United States has dominated MID talk compared to Kremlin talk, while China is discussed relatively much more frequently in Kremlin documents than MID documents, as are the ‘old’ EU member states. Additionally, several trends emerge. First, USA has received an increasing amount of attention – particularly by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Second, the EU itself seems to be mentioned with decreasing frequency by both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Kremlin. By this measure, Russian–US interaction continues to carry more weight than Russia’s relations with Europe in Russian foreign policy. Third, China has shown clear growth over time in mentions by the Kremlin but not by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. China’s

importance to Russia certainly seems to have grown – albeit somewhat in the shadows of the conflictual relations with the West that are at the centre of the MID’s attention.

‘Top 8’ over 20 years

Even among the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) member states, Western countries are not Moscow’s main preoccupation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) has discussed Ukraine, Georgia, and Turkey more than any Western European country. The Kremlin’s top four most discussed countries (apart from the United States) are Ukraine, Germany, Kazakhstan, and Belarus, indicating the continued importance of the former Soviet space in Russian foreign policy.

Looking at the world as a whole, we find that the countries which have received the most Russian attention are mainly non-Western. The Foreign Ministry’s most-discussed countries since 2003 have been the United States, Syria, Ukraine, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, China, Georgia, Turkey, and Libya. The Kremlin’s most-discussed countries over the last 20 years have been the United States, Ukraine, China, Germany, Syria, Kazakhstan, Iran, India, Belarus, and Afghanistan. The changes over time have been significant, however, in line with the changing landscape of international conflicts.

Figure 4 displays the eight most-often-mentioned countries for each presidential term, sorted for each year with the most-mentioned country at the bottom of the respective column. MID findings are to the left in the figure, and the Kremlin data are to the right. The cumulative y-axis shows the relative share of all mentions of countries during each term.³

Of Western European countries, only Germany makes the list, and only for the Kremlin. The Middle East received a large amount of attention. Iraq has given way to Syria as the most-talked-about conflict area. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs even mentioned Syria more often than Ukraine during Putin’s third term (2012–2018).

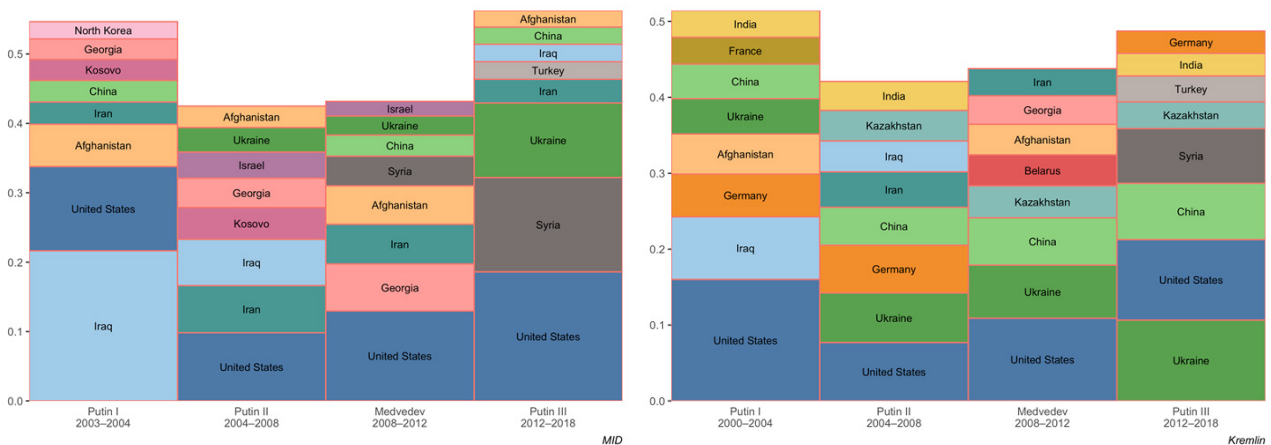


Figure 4

Comparing regions

To detect larger trends, looking beyond individual countries is helpful. For example, how does Russian attention to Western countries compare with Russian attention to all non-Western countries? Defining, for these purposes, ‘the West’ narrowly as the European Union (EU), the European Economic Area (EEA), Switzerland, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, Figure 5 shows the answer to this question. The y-axis represents the percentage of attention given towards ‘the West’ during each year.

The Foreign Ministry and the Kremlin appear to be somewhat diverging. MID has in recent years devoted relatively more attention to Western countries than the Kremlin has.

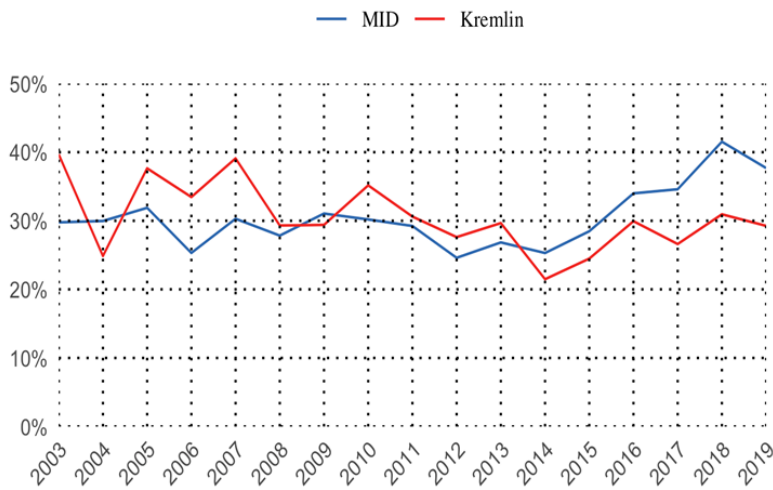


Figure 5

Figure 6 displays the changing attention towards different regions over the last two decades (MID to the left, the Kremlin to the right).⁴ This figure highlights relative changes in attention, and the total for each year adds up to 100%.

A noteworthy difference is that compared to the Kremlin, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs pays more attention to North America (i.e. the United States) and to the Middle East and North Africa, and less to the four other regions. In particular, the Kremlin

focused a larger share of its attention on East Asia (particularly China, but also Japan and India) and the former Soviet republics. Thus, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has, overall, focused somewhat more on Western countries, this difference largely resulted from the United States' dominant role in MID talk. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has focused more on conflicts and geopolitics, in which the United States is the key actor and the Middle East is a central region.

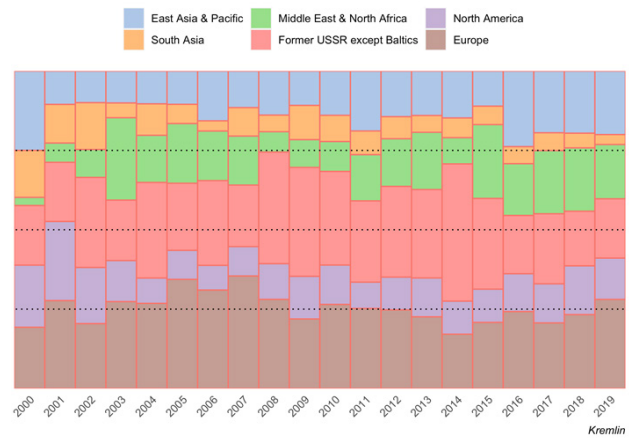
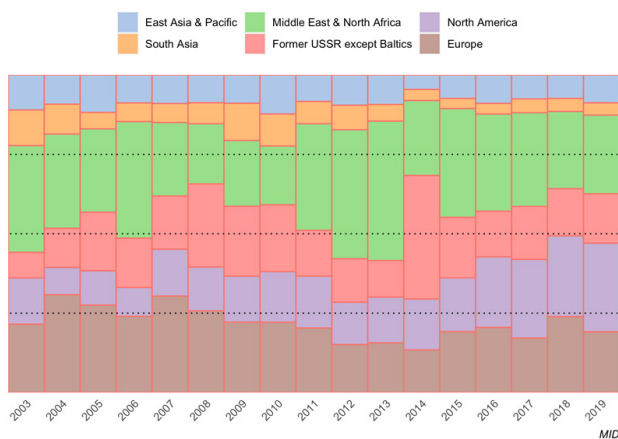


Figure 6

The former Soviet Union

The countries that together with Russia previously made up the Soviet Union remain central to Russian foreign policy. Overall, the 11 former Soviet republics (excluding Russia) that are not part of the EU were mentioned about as often as the 28 EU countries. Among these countries in Russia's 'near abroad', significant shifts have occurred over time. Figure 7 displays the amount of attention towards three groups of post-Soviet countries: the most Western (Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine), the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), and Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), measured as the number of times the countries in a group were mentioned per 100,000 words in the data.

In addition to the visible impact of crises (Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014), there are noteworthy differences between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Kremlin. The Central Asian countries received a much larger share of Kremlin documents' attention than in MID documents. Again, one explanation is likely that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs agenda to a larger extent focuses on more high-profile and conflictual relations, since 2014 not least in Ukraine. Kremlin talk, meanwhile, may to a larger degree reflect the depth of relations with a given country.

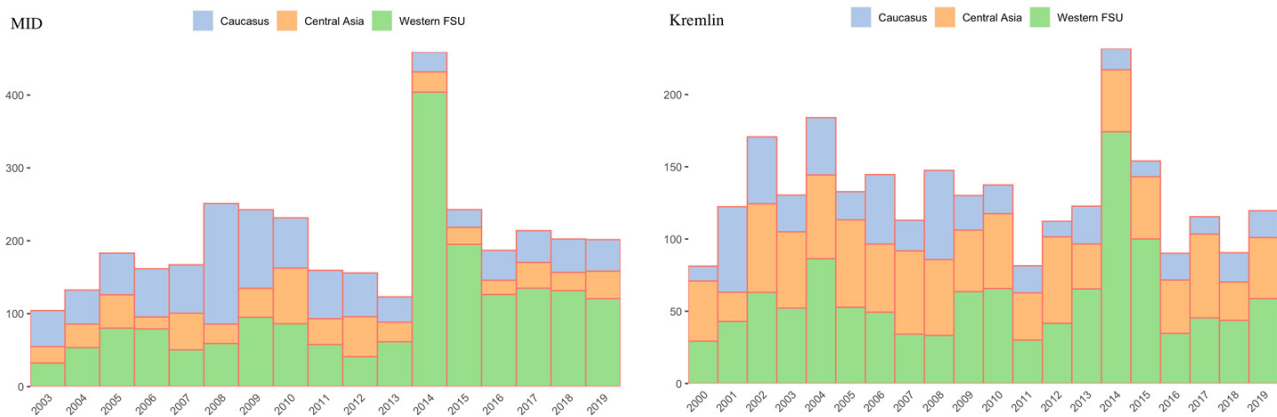


Figure 7

Within the Western group, Ukraine received by far the most attention, but Belarus received relatively much more attention amongst Kremlin transcripts than in MID documents. In the South Caucasus, Georgia used to be mentioned by far the most often, but since roughly 2012 this trend has changed.⁵ MID has mentioned Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia at approximately the same frequency since 2012, while the Kremlin has mentioned Georgia distinctly less than Armenia and Azerbaijan. Among Central Asian countries, both MID and the Kremlin have paid the most attention to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and the least attention to Turkmenistan.

International organisations

Finally, we look beyond discussions of countries. Intergovernmental organisations are also an important part of international politics. Of these organisations, Russian officials mentioned the United Nations (UN) far more frequently than any other. Indeed, Moscow regards the UN, where Russia plays a central role as one of the five permanent Security , with the power to veto any resolution – as the only international organisation with legitimate decision-making power in matters of peace and war. Figure 8 compares a selection of four other organisations which include Russia as a member – BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), CSTO (the Collective Security Treaty Organization), EAEU (the Eurasian Economic Union), and the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) – as well as NATO. The figure represents the number of mentions per 100,000 words in the data material.

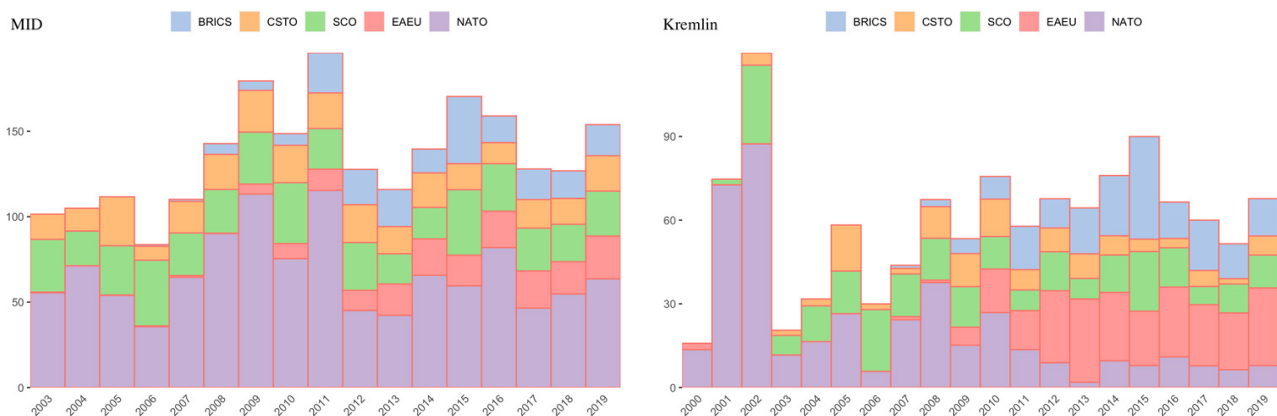


Figure 8

Conclusion

The quantitative mapping in this brief has painted a picture of a Russian attention to the world that has changed over time. It has also highlighted notable differences between the two institutions analysed. In general, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs appears more United States-centric than the Kremlin. Moreover, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has devoted increasing amounts of attention to the United States, while China has received relatively more – and increasing – attention in Kremlin documents. ‘The West’ certainly remains central to Russia. Still, the data presented in this brief serve as a reminder that Russia’s foreign relations involve much more than ‘Russian–Western relations’ and that they are continuously evolving – even in divergent directions within different domains. This suggests a more general point: the need to look beyond foreign ministry megaphones and look at more dimensions of Russia’s evolving relations with the world.

Endnotes

1. These analyses are based on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Kremlin’s English-language websites: 23,360 Ministry of Foreign Affairs documents, dated 2003–2019, and 8,541 Kremlin documents, dated 2000–2019. I have focused on country names only, excluding other representations such as ‘the Americans’, ‘Washington’, and ‘Gaza’. Country names were extracted using the spaCy Python library’s named entity recognition (NER) feature (Honnibal, M., and I. Montani. 2017. ‘Spacy 2: Natural Language Understanding with Bloom Embeddings, Convolutional Neural Networks and Incremental Parsing’, <https://spacy.io/>, Version 2.3.0) and further processed and normalised with help from the countrycode R package (Arel-Bundock, V., N. Enevoldsen, and C. J. Yetman. 2018. ‘countrycode: An R Package to Convert Country Names and Country Codes’. *Journal of Open Source Software* 3, no. 28: 848, Version 1.2.0). In order to minimise the risk of systematic errors occurring in either of these steps, I have conducted a series of manual full-text searches to validate the results where feasible, i.e. for the comparisons of specific countries in Figures 1, 2, and 7. The charts based on NER and on full-text searches turned out to be highly similar, and I have used the NER-based charts for consistency purposes (including the maps above, the exception being Figure 8, which is not about countries and for which I did not produce NER data, and ‘countrycode: An R Package to Convert Country Names and Country Codes’). In order to validate Figure 4, I have conducted full-text searches for all 17 countries that are part of the two charts. The (very) few differences between the two approaches are detailed in endnote 3. Also, I have conducted independent full-text searches that confirm the trends for the United States and China. The main point of the aggregated charts (Figures 3, 5 and 6) are the relative trends over time, not any year taken in isolation. Finally, I have not conducted systematic comparisons with the Russian-language websites, but select searches in the somewhat larger Russian-language text collections do support the trends presented here.

2. The data for ‘EU itself’ was generated through full-text searches.

3. The full-text search ranking order (see endnote 1) differed from Figure 4 (produced with NER) with the following countries in higher positions. For the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Putin I: Kosovo at fourth place (switching places with Iran). Putin II: Iraq at second place. Medvedev: China at sixth place. Putin III: Syria at first place, Iraq at fifth place, and China at sixth place. For the Kremlin: Putin II: Ukraine at first place, Germany at second place, and Uzbekistan at sixth place

4. The regions are based on the definition used by the World Bank Development Indicators (see <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/images/figures-png/world-by-region-map.pdf>), with the following adjustments: ‘Sub-Saharan Africa’ and ‘Latin America and Caribbean’ were not included, and the 11 former Soviet republics excluding the Baltic states were moved from ‘Europe & Central Asia’ (renamed ‘Europe’) to the ‘Former USSR except Baltics’ region.

5. For a related analysis, see Julie Wilhelmsen. 2020. ‘Russia’s view of Georgia: A NATO proxy yet again?’ NUPI Policy Brief 15/2020.

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