

# How Did Russia Use Anti-Western Narratives To Justify Intervening In Syria?

Written by Eleni Anagnostopoulou

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ELENI ANAGNOSTOPOULOU, APR 13 2024

The Syrian unrest is one of the manifestations of the Arab Spring, a series of pro-democracy uprisings that spread across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2011. On March 15 of the same year, protests demanding regime change and democratisation were initiated in Syria. The government responded by using repression and excessive violence. The opposition soon took arms and began to form militias, escalating the situation into a violent civil conflict in 2012 and then into a complicated internationalised conflict as multiple warring parties started receiving support from foreign actors. The armed conflict triggered the most severe refugee crisis since the Second World War, evolving into a regional crisis (UCDP, 2022a; Cengiz, 2020). A number of anti-government insurgent groups have participated in the conflict, including Jabhat al-Nusra and the Free Syrian Army (UCDP, 2022b).

The G8 summit in June 2013 arguably reaffirmed the alignment between the Russian government and the Assad regime. Moscow's support for Syria's President Bashar al-Assad has taken many forms. Russia vetoed resolutions and sanctions against the Syrian regime relating to violence against civilians, including but not limited to sieges and aerial bombardment as collective punishment tactics, constrained Western intervention by invoking Chapter VII of the United Nations (UN) Charter on the authorisation of military action for humanitarian purposes, and provided Assad with material support (Allison, 2013a; Charap, 2013; Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). My work focuses on Russia's overt and large-scale military intervention in the Syrian hostilities, which ensued in September 2015. The Syrian conflict is the first case of Russian military engagement outside the post-Soviet space (Rezvani, 2020).

The literature on the subject of Russia's longstanding military involvement in Syria is extensive. From a geostrategic standpoint, for example, the arms trade between Russia and Syria, Syria's energy production, and the Russian naval base on Tartus are presented as causal mechanisms for Russia's decision to defend the Assad regime militarily (Bellamy, 2014; Rezvani, 2020; Marten, 2015). Scholars have also focused on Moscow's diplomatic engagement in the MENA region, some underlining a regional power play between Russia and the US (Mason, 2019; Kozhanov, 2010; Dannreuther, 2014) and fewer claiming otherwise (Stepanova, 2018; Roberts, 2017). Others (Averre and Davies, 2015; Allison, 2013b; Sakwa, 2019) argue that Moscow's intervention in Syria reflects opposition to Western-led norms that govern humanitarian interventions following Moscow's preoccupation with non-interference and sovereignty.

Such explanations can, of course, be valid. However, there exists a noticeable gap in the literature surrounding Russia's military intervention in the Syrian conflict, given that scholars have not explored strategic narratives or how powerful actors use persuasive language to represent events and bestow a course of action as legitimate (Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2017). While an evolving body of scholarship has highlighted the use of narratives by Russian media and officials, principally in the context of the conflict in eastern Ukraine and the Chechen Wars (Szostek, 2018; Pupcenoks and Seltzer, 2020; Khaldarova, 2021; Dannreuther, 2012), literature on narratives projected as part of Russia's intervention in Syria remains limited in comparison. The existing narrative studies on Russia's military intervention in Syria (Khaldarova and Panti, 2021; Moulioukova and Kanet, 2020; Makhortykh, 2020; Notte, 2016; Allison, 2013a; Lewis, 2020) are insufficient because these scholars have not systematically deciphered official sources containing Russian narratives to interpret their strategic goals, rendering the topic underexamined.

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My thesis attempts to contribute to discussions on Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict by challenging official statements and treating such plotlines as strategic narratives. Neither do I claim causation, nor do I make a political statement. Having collected and micro-analysed my chosen textual data, which are official statements between August 2015 and December 2018, I argue that Russian narratives on Syria are a) anti-Western and comprise systematic claims to Russia's legitimate counterterrorism and adherence to international law particularly, and b) have been projected to justify Russia's military intervention. I additionally endeavour to argue that by comprising efforts of delegitimising Western assertions about conflict developments, Russian anti-Western narratives c) have contributed to restraining Western diplomatic pressure against Russia and the Syrian regime, which in turn enabled Russia's uninterrupted intervention and Assad's endurance. The last argument is rooted in the element that makes the narratives strategic, which is the power of the Russian government as a narrator to influence the behaviour of Western states.

Following this introduction, my dissertation continues with a review of the published literature relevant to my narrow topic where I situate my study within key debates. The methodological chapter substantiates my approach based on a strategic narrative framework and the analytical decisions I made to guide my project, including data collection, analysis, and research parameters. The chapter on findings reports the results of my data collection and analysis. The analytical chapter is dedicated to the interpretation of my results, segregated into two sections: one for the 'Legitimate Counterterrorism' narrative and the other for the 'International Law' narrative. The concluding chapter summarises my findings and accounts for the hypothetical strategic purpose of Russia's anti-Western narratives.

## Literature Review

Since the onset of Russia's military intervention in Syria, not least since the civil war itself ensued, there has been a growing body of academic work. My literature review starts by thematically evaluating key scholarship on the subject matter. After presenting the gap in existing studies, I demonstrate why it is valuable to investigate Russia's strategic narratives on Syria. I then introduce narrative studies on Russian foreign policy. After addressing the inadequacy of narrative research on the Syrian conflict, I present my dissertation's prospective scholarly contribution.

Scholars adopt a normative standpoint to argue that Russia's attitude towards humanitarian interventions rejects the solidarist and liberal Western-led norms surrounding the third pillar of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine entailing outside intervention in response to atrocity crimes. The Russian leadership claims that military interventions must be authorised by the UN Security Council (UNSC) under Chapter VII of the Charter, so, for instance, the mandate in Libya was unlawful because NATO exceeded the authority of the UNSC (Averre and Davies, 2015; Allison, 2013b). According to Sakwa (2019), Russia is a neo-revisionist state advocating for a universal and conservative application of legal principles subject to the UN Charter. Russia's criticism of Western-led interventionism and regime change is associated with the nexus Moscow has created between the loss of central state power, state disintegration, and political violence to promote non-interference in the internal affairs of states. Arguably, this anti-liberal ideological orientation manifested under Putin during the 2011-2012 electoral cycle, whose confrontational stance towards NATO's airstrikes in Libya consolidated popular and elite support away from Putin's predecessor, Dimitry Medvedev (Lewis, 2020; Dannreuther, 2014). Pieper (2019) associates Russia's contestation of Western norms with debates surrounding 'rising powers' as Moscow wants to co-define what are considered legitimate transgressions of state sovereignty. That being the case, Russia has vetoed Western-sponsored UNSC resolutions to undermine the normative basis of the R2P.

Furthermore, Russia's intervention in Syria has been explained by the conflict's implication for domestic security. Dannreuther (2014) points out that the Kremlin considers the Arab Spring and the Syrian conflict as crises between moderate and radical Islam and that Western support for the Syrian opposition allegedly strengthens extremist groups like ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. Baev (2015) claims that Russian concerns about Islamic extremism are valid. Many militants from the Caucasus Emirate, which comprises the Islamist side of Chechnya's resistance movement (Cornell, 2003), are said to have joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq (Sinai, 2015). Stepanova (2021) notes that the relocation of militants of Russian and Eurasian origin to Syria and Iraq spiked exponentially following ISIS's 'caliphate' declaration on June 29, 2014. Still, this outflow started to involve militants with limited links to the conflict in the North Caucasus and whose radicalisation source entailed the ISIS-inspired 'global jihad' agenda.

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Russia's geostrategic interests in Syria, particularly the arms trade and energy relations between the two countries, are also noted by scholars (Marten, 2015; Bellamy, 2014). The Russian naval base in Tartus, Syria, is the only Mediterranean port outside post-Soviet Eurasia with access to the Black Sea (Rezvani, 2020). Yet, Allison (2013b) and Stepanova (2012) note that this strategic rationale should not be overemphasised. Russia's arms trade with Syria does not account for a significant proportion of Russia's total arms deliveries. Syria's oil production and gas reserves are additionally very modest and potentially not of any major value, especially compared to Russia's energy cooperation with Turkey. The Tartus naval base is not considered strategically significant. Instead, the facility was one of the military factors that enabled Russia's intervention in Syria, alongside overflight rights through Syrian, Iraqi, and Iranian airspace, coalition ground forces comprising Iranian troops, Hezbollah, and the Syrian military, and Russia's existing knowledge of the terrain due to on-the-ground intelligence sources (Charap et al., 2019).

As for regional politics, the Middle East is perceived as the only area beyond the vicinity of Russia's borders where Moscow can assert its status as an influential power to counter Western regional influence since 2012 (Mason, 2019; Kozhanov, 2016). Yet, Stepanova (2018) criticises those who highlight the role of the West in Russian foreign policy. She argues that Russia amplified its standing in the Middle East not necessarily with its intervention in Syria but by adjusting to the regionalisation of politics with a non-ideological, non-confrontational, and multi-vector cooperative approach. As per this line of argument, Moscow has distanced itself from intra-regional strife whilst, for instance, maintaining relations with both Iran and Israel, balancing its standing between Sunni and Shia states, and building a long-term relationship with Turkey via shared initiatives in Syria, like the co-brokering of the Astana ceasefire talks.

It is paramount to investigate strategic narratives in order to unpack how the Russian leadership has strategically narrated stories to justify the intervention in the Syrian conflict. A more comprehensive understanding of the Russian leadership requires a consideration of its articulated narratives. Instead of delegitimising Russia's rhetoric, it should be valued because it can partially explain its priorities and actions (Roberts, 2017). It is widely accepted that the concept of strategic narratives in international relations was coined by Freedman (2006), for whom narratives, or the communication of compelling storylines on events, are strategic because they are products of deliberation designed to structure the responses of others to events. Freedman amends that the synthesis between narrative and strategy had already existed because of the narrative's journey from a literary form to a postmodern construct to a vital component of a political campaign. Miskimmon et al. (2017) introduce the following threshold definition of strategic narratives: "Narratives are strategic if they have the purpose of assuring that the story predicted or ordered by the narrative will take place or threatening severe consequences to relevant actors if it does not" (p. 192). Thus, strategic narratives should coerce and bind policy behaviour. Roselle et al. (2014) propose that strategic narratives, as power resources, are associated with soft power regarding how influence does or does not take place.

There exists considerable scholarship on strategic narratives addressing Russia's foreign policy decisions during armed conflicts. To illustrate, Pupcenoks and Seltzer (2020) argue that unlike the traditional emphasis on non-intervention, like in the case of Serbia's territorial integrity during the 1999 Kosovo crisis, Russia intervened in Georgia and Ukraine by supporting separatist groups. Russian official statements regarding said intervention outlined the alleged international law violations of the Georgian government by narrating the R2P framework to legitimise Russia's alleged peacekeeping operations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia accused the Ukrainian government of atrocity crimes and claimed that the Crimean people requested Russia's humanitarian intervention. In both cases, the victims were notably co-ethnics and Russian speakers (Livingston and Nassetta, 2018).

When political contexts change, so do narratives. Khaldarova (2021) found that, before the Ukrainian crisis, Russian television portrayed Ukrainians as Russia's 'little brothers'. But following the Euromaidan protests, Channel One (Ch1), Russia's most popular media, started narrating the Ukrainians as threatening 'others', reinforced by the Russian threat discourse associating Euromaidan with Nazi riots and the EU-leaning Kyiv government as a 'fascist junta' (Livingston and Nassetta, 2018). Consequently, the tactical deployment of disinformation, also known as a type of hybrid warfare, is tied to strategic narratives in that they manipulate nationalist sentiments and legitimise constructed 'facts on the ground' (Richey, 2018; Livingston and Nassetta, 2018; Szostek, 2018). Scholars maintain that state media like Ch1 and RT, another prominent Russian state-controlled television network, have been propagating fabricated stories to frame individual events as part of Russia's influence campaign, with Russian speakers being the core target audience (Khaldarova and Pantti, 2016; Livingston and Nassetta, 2018; Hinck et al.,

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2018).

Another example is when, after the 9/11 attacks, Russia adopted the 'War on Terror' rhetoric to reduce Western criticisms for its indiscriminate military campaign in the Second Chechen War. But in light of increased Muslim sympathy towards the Chechen insurgency, Russia stopped conveying this rhetoric and started sponsoring Islamic activities, highlighting that Muslims in Russia, referencing the Tatarstan Republic, are 'co-constructors' of Russian statehood (Dannreuther, 2012). Thus far, these studies and their expositions place too much emphasis on Russian state media. They do not examine narratives emanating directly from the Russian leadership, thus failing to investigate the ways in which these narratives strategically influence Russia's role in these conflicts and its reception thereof.

Claessen (2021) identifies that whilst the Russian leadership narrated its regard for international law and non-intervention during the Euromaidan protests, it was during the Crimean referendum that they were more explicit in portraying the EU and the West as pressuring Ukraine into choosing a Western path, reinforcing the system narrative of an 'expansionist West' (Roselle, 2017; Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2017; Schmitt, 2018; Szostek, 2018). NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe arguably shaped an identity discourse that prescribes Russia to defend the shared historical experience with its Near Abroad (Roberts, 2017). Lewis (2020) similarly contends that Russia used messianist, nationalist, and Eurasianist narratives "to reinforce the concept of Slavonic civilisational unity via Russia's defence of 'brotherly' Ukrainians" (p. 559). A discourse presenting Russia as a saviour of state sovereignty can explain Moscow's assertive foreign policy, like the annexation of Crimea.

Evidently, most narrative studies on Russian foreign policy address the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Still, there exist a few narrative studies on the Syrian conflict. Moulioukova and Kanet (2020) argue that Moscow re-activated the identity narrative of Russia as a 'great power' opposing its ontological 'other' by highlighting that the West's excesses in Iraq and Libya prompted Russia to defend Syria's sovereignty. Khaldarova and Pantti (2021) found that 85% of Ch1's reports on the Syrian civil war advanced the narrative of Russia as a 'great power'. Arguably, the strategic purpose of this narrative was to improve Russia's image abroad whilst justifying military involvement to Russians experiencing the consequences of the sanctions related to the annexation of Crimea. Hinck et al. (2018) found contradictory narratives on Russia's allegedly legal air force flights of Russia in neutral waters and the illegal NATO bombing in Libya resulting in the overthrow of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Russian media also accused NATO and the US of not supporting Russia's 'efforts of stabilisation' because they would not wish Russia to be perceived as an influential regional actor (Schmitt, 2018). The US, EU, and Turkey's narrative of revolutionary change and the tyranny of Bashar al-Assad has been conflicted by the Russian and Iranian narratives characterising Syria as a 'Somalisation' process (Arsenault et al., 2017; Kozhanov, 2016).

Makhortykh's study (2020) suggests that Putin's use of historical references to the post-1991 Western military interventions and the Chechen Wars securitised the Syrian crisis as an existential threat to justify Russia's intervention. Still, Makhortykh's argument is framed more on constructivist than narrative grounds. Notte (2016) drew parallels between Russian threat narratives on Chechnya and Syria because Kremlin officials have conflated moderate and extremist opposition elements in both conflicts. Allison (2013a) attributes Russian narratives on Syria to domestic stability concerns. The 'Islamist threats' narrative created a nexus between Assad's overthrow by extremist groups and spillover from Syria, Sunni Islamist networks, and insurgency in the North Caucasus. The 'orchestrated regime change in Syria' narrative, reinforced by Moscow's grievances towards Libya, presents Western-led regime change as a challenge to authoritative structures.

Although a few studies focus on state narratives in the context of Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict, they are insufficient because lacking comprehensive methodological approaches and techniques to draw on systematic narrative research, their findings are largely too peripheral. They take Russia's mobilisation of rhetoric at face value without attempting to uncover their strategic purpose. Overall, the strategic narratives framework has not been applied extensively in studies on Russia's intervention in Syria, a gap this dissertation attempts to address using the following methodology and data collection and analysis strategy.

## Methodology and Research Design

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## *The Methodology of Strategic Narratives*

Considering the aforementioned objectives, this dissertation employs a qualitative methodology of strategic narratives. Strategic narratives are defined as: “means used by powerful political actors seeking to construct a shared meaning of past, present and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors” (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p. 7). Amongst the multitude of definitions, this one is fruitful because it expresses that the purpose of narratives is political persuasion via meaning construction around events. Strategic narratives can become coercive foreign policy instruments. Therefore, narrators can justify their preferred policy actions and shape the behaviour of domestic or international actors accordingly. Strategic narratives are always bound to policy positions. Narratives become strategic when the meanings they construct around political events shape the actions of actors/states in response to those events. If strategic narratives are to operate, political actors must shape interpretations of threats in international affairs based on their political objectives. Because strategic narratives cultivate what is considered ‘true’ and ‘right’, they are efficient so long as they mobilise a consensual understanding of “how things are, what must be done, and by whom” (Arsenault et al., 2017, p. 213; Bentley, 2013).

Narratives comprise the following components: the actors who construct them, a setting in which such narratives are disseminated, a conflict or action, an accompanied behaviour, and a purpose these narratives attempt to fulfil. An analytical framework explains the nexus between international relations and communication. Firstly, formation refers to the construction of strategic narratives by political actors and the institutions and procedures through which narratives are arranged. Secondly, projection is the process through which stories are narrated. Thirdly, reception entails how narratives are received by third parties (Miskimmon et al., 2017). Further research could explore how Russian strategic narratives are accepted or rejected across partisan or non-partisan media. However, given the limited word count, it is not viable to address the reception of Russian strategic narratives in this case. Instead, my thesis will focus on the formation and projection of strategic narratives in the context of Russia’s intervention in Syria.

An interpretivist logic of enquiry pursues a hermeneutic understanding of language, leading to value-laden knowledge (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2011; Halperin and Heath, 2017). Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) argue that “findings should not be taken at face value” (p. 129). That reflects the underlying objective of my thesis: that of challenging Russian official narratives and interpreting their explicit and implicit meanings, that is, their underlying strategic aims. What is more, there are four key types of strategic narratives. System narratives describe how the international system works, its structure, and key players. Identity narratives set forth a political actor’s story, values, and goals. Issue narratives explain what a policy challenge is about. Finally, policy narratives explain how an action plan will address a given issue and influence the development of policies (Miskimmon et al., 2017; Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2017). Miskimmon et al. (2017) notably say that “an actor able to align system, policy, and identity narratives has a greater chance of influence” (p. 3). As I will demonstrate, I identified different narratives through the data collection and analysis process across the system, identity, issue, and policy narrative categories.

## *Research Design: Data Collection and Analysis*

Given the complexity of the Syrian conflict and Russia’s military campaign, data are abundant for research purposes. To refine the number of gathered sources, I established that my data collection will concentrate on publications released from August 2015 to December 2018. This timeframe starts about a month before the Russian army started conducting airstrikes in Syria in September 2015 and ends around the time the Trump administration announced the withdrawal of US troops from Syria. To further limit the scope of data collection, documents have been selected around key conflict developments during this timeframe, including the onset of Russia’s military campaign in September 2015, the ceasefire devised by Russia and the US in February 2016, the events in Aleppo during autumn 2016, the Astana Process in January 2017, the Idlib demilitarisation agreement in autumn 2018, and the announcement of the withdrawal of US troops at the end of 2018.

The data analysis involved the observation of references, phrases, and words on a micro-level, or individual paragraphs, within my selected sources that confirm different categories of Russian anti-Western narratives. Put differently, the coding of my qualitative data involved the identification of patterns, that is, similar and connecting elements, across the information I collected. My coding was inductive and data-driven, meaning data observation

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preceded conceptual development. My preoccupation is with official, state-level narratives. Subsequently, I decided to consider information from publications released on the 'Kremlin/President of Russia' and 'The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation' websites. Given the author's limited Russian language skills, the data collection pertained to the English translations. Though the existence of translated publications brings about convenience, it can limit data immersiveness because it does not capture all language nuances responsible for subtle differences in meaning. Still, it was beyond the scope of this dissertation to identify such nuances because my data collection and analysis purported to repetitive patterns the Russian leadership narrated between 2015 and 2018 across different venues to justify the military intervention in Syria. Speeches by Russian officials were additionally interpreted as noteworthy sources of strategic narratives. I specifically collected information from the 70<sup>th</sup> to the 73<sup>rd</sup> UN General Assembly (UNGA) Debates, during which Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and President Vladimir Putin made statements on the Syrian conflict.

## Findings

The data collection process resulted in the observation of 49 primary sources. I found that Russia projected the following narratives in the context of its military participation in the Syrian conflict: a policy narrative of 'Legitimate Counterterrorism', a second policy narrative of 'International Law', a system narrative of 'Unipolar West and Multipolar Russia', and an identity narrative of 'Russia's Status'. These selective storylines overlap, are mutually reinforcing, and form an overarching anti-Western discourse. I present the main elements confining each narrative below, which helped me distinguish the narratives within the publications for analytical purposes and organise them into distinct categories.

The most widely referenced strategic narrative is that of 'Legitimate Counterterrorism', which has been formulated and projected as a just cause for Russia's military intervention in Syria. Most of my data seem to support that Russia presents its involvement in Syria as a conflict resolution policy effort that tackles terrorist violence. Non-state or oppositional terrorism is an exceedingly contested concept, but this is an analytically useful definition: "Terrorism is the strategic use of violence and threats of violence by an oppositional political group against civilians or non-combatants" (Goodwin, 2006, p. 2028). A few days before Russian airstrikes started hitting Syria, President Putin was already claiming that the Syrian people were not fleeing from Assad's forces but from ISIS violence (Kremlin, 04/09/2015). What makes this an anti-Western narrative is the criminalisation of opposition groups, specifically those sponsored by the US-led Coalition. Another tenet of this narrative is Russia's parallel support for a political process in Syria that includes opposition actors Moscow regards as non-terrorist and excludes terrorist groups that should only be tackled through the use of force.

Secondly, the 'International Law' narrative relates to the law of armed conflict. The cornerstone of the prohibition of the use of force between states is as follows: "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state..." (United Nations, 1945, p. 3). The Russian leadership has denoted *jus ad bellum*, the component of international law that regulates a state's resort to use force in another state's territory. I found a consistent assertion that Russia abides by international law because its "military assistance is provided upon Syria's consent" (Kremlin, 03/12/2015). Russia's intervention is legitimised under the premise that legal principles, particularly 'sovereignty' and 'non-interference', are respected by Moscow, whilst the US-led intervention is delegitimised because the West refused to recognise the Assad regime's legitimacy. Also, the Russian leadership has narrated UNSC resolutions and other UN-facilitated conflict resolution initiatives, including the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), to indicate that Russia's policies on Syria have a legal basis.

The Russian leadership has also made references pertaining to notions of a 'Unipolar West and Multipolar Russia'. Though this narrative does not frequently appear in publications, Russia's direct intervention in Syria is legitimated by being based on multilateral considerations where Russia is presented as an influential player regionally and internationally. That is usually framed in terms of Russia preserving state institutions and preventing Syria's disintegration whilst delegitimising Western "unilateral" and "forced" interventions that seemingly result in the loss of central state power (Kremlin, 16/10/2016). The least referenced narrative is that of 'Russia's Status'. In my data, there was often an implicit mention of Russia's supposed struggle for influence against the West, particularly the US. Putin, for instance, says that the purpose of Western sanctions on Syria is to "contain the strengthening of Russia" in

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the international community (Kremlin, 16/10/2016).

## Discussion and Analysis

The information I collected overwhelmingly confirms the narrative categories of 'Legitimate Counterterrorism' and 'International Law'. The 'Unipolar West and Multipolar Russia' and 'Russia's Status' narratives are explicitly referenced in very few publications (the 'Russia's Status' narrative only appears in 4 publications) and always in a complementary way alongside themes of counterterrorism and international law. Hence, there are no separate sections for the system and identity narratives as they are discussed and interpreted in conjunction with the 'Legitimate Counterterrorism' and 'International Law' policy narratives.

### *'Legitimate Counterterrorism'*

The Russian leadership's narration of 'Legitimate Counterterrorism' themes in the context of the Syrian conflict is based upon a dichotomy between Russian and Western interventions. Approximately a month before Russia began carrying out airstrikes from its airbase in Syria, Foreign Minister Lavrov (09/08/2015) claims that organisations such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra were joined by "people armed by the West". That set the ground for a recurrent official theme of demonising Western military interference. Lavrov (13/09/2015) distinguishes between Russia's "ideology-free and coordinated fight against terrorism without double standards" and an "ideology-driven" US-led anti-ISIS Coalition. By accusing the Coalition of backing terrorist forces that are threatening the survival of the Syrian regime, he adds that such "illegitimate actions [...] turned Libya into a blackhole used by terrorists". As seen in official anti-Western statements about conflict situations like in Iraq or Ukraine, Putin and Lavrov correlated the 2011 Western military intervention in Libya with the US-led Coalition in Syria so as to condemn the West as responsible for the political and security turmoil in these countries, with an emphasis on the West's sponsoring of terrorist groups.

To further illustrate this, Lavrov (16/09/2015) claims that the US-led Coalition not only refused to coordinate with the Syrian army but also supplied money and arms to anti-government factions. In the 70<sup>th</sup> UNGA session, Putin similarly remarks (28/09/2016) that instead of "reforming Government institutions" following the "so-called democratic revolutions", meaning the Arab Spring, "aggressive foreign interference resulted in [...] areas of anarchy that immediately began to fill with terrorists". He claims that the "Syrian opposition, supported by the West, are joining radical ranks". By referring to the US-led anti-ISIS Coalition, Putin denounces "any attempt to flirt with terrorists, let alone arm them". He also comments that the creation of an international counterterrorism coalition "should be guided by our shared values rather than ambitions", implying that the Coalition covertly attempted the overthrow of the Assad regime via terrorist groups acting as agents of the West. Putin accordingly says that "we (Russia) know who decided to oust the unwanted regimes and brutally impose their own rules" (03/12/2015). To legitimate Russia's involvement vis-à-vis Western military aggression, Putin (29/09/2015) claims that the role of Russia's military presence in Syria was to prevent the country's disintegration into "a power vacuum [...] filled with terrorists".

The story around the onset of Russia's intervention in Syria was that terrorist organisations challenged Assad. As Putin (04/09/2015; 29/09/2015; 30/09/2015) constantly stresses, the sole perpetrator of atrocities in Syria and Russia's opponent was ISIS and other terrorist organisations. To reinforce this narrative, the Russian leadership dichotomised the Syrian opposition, despite that Putin and Lavrov repeatedly accused the US-led anti-ISIS Coalition of doing the same using "double standards". On the one hand, Russian officials narrated an illegitimate, anti-Assad, and terrorist US-sponsored faction. On the other hand, they narrated a legitimate opposition faction vaguely referred to as "healthy" or "constructive" opposition. As such, the moderate Syrian opposition was not only confused with the more extremist elements, as Notte (2016) argues, but also, Russia projected a heuristic and biased notion of the opposition, consisting of a generalised narration of anti-Assad groups being a threat to the very survival of the Syrian government. In other words, the Russian leadership did not differentiate between groups and organisations that used, *inter alia*, terrorist violence, including ISIS, with anti-government pro-democratic insurgents that did not target civilians and other non-combatants but rather engaged in rebellion against government armed forces and state-sanctioned paramilitaries (Goodwin, 2006).

Moreover, the narrated goal of Russia's fight against terrorist organisations, besides allegedly preventing the

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disintegration of the Syrian state, was, as Putin (30/09/2015) claims, to combat terrorist organisations and groups operating globally. International terrorism is presented as a matter of Russia's security as, according to Putin, the approximately 4,000 Russians who joined terrorist groups in Syria to fight against government forces could return to Russia to carry out operations (21/10/2015). Following the cessation of hostilities agreement between Russia and the US in February 2016, Putin (26/02/2016) states that "it is important to effectively seal off Russia's territory from these terrorists trying to enter from the Middle East". Putin (03/12/2015) forecasts that these militants "will return to their home countries and sow fear and hatred, to blow up, kill and torture people". He stresses that Russia decided to launch a military operation in Syria in line with the request of legitimate Syrian authorities to fight for the security of Russian citizens. He presents Russia as a leading actor in the fight against international terrorism, a stance stemming from "a thorough understanding of the absolute danger of terrorism, from patriotism [...] and a firm belief that we must defend our national interests". By highlighting the transnational diffusion of the threat, terrorism was narrated as a policy problem for Russia's domestic integrity to justify counterterrorism operations in Syria by referring to Russian, or probably North Caucasian, militants who joined the ranks of terrorist groups, especially ISIS, to participate in the hostilities. This threat discourse mobilisation is similar to the 'War on Terror' threat rhetoric during the Second Chechen War as it seeks to reduce outside criticism of Russia's military campaign.

References to a Syrian "healthy opposition" are evident when the Russian leadership recounted a two-fold approach to the Syrian crisis. Putin (04/09/2015) makes the case that combating ISIS should be accompanied by a Syrian internal dialogue that includes "healthy opposition" actors. After the Vienna peace talks of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), co-chaired by the US and Russia, Lavrov (14/11/2015) remarks that "only the Syrian people will decide on the future of Syria", and the negotiation process must include opposition delegation members. Concurrently, Putin (16/11/2015) stresses that the US and Russian foreign ministers should decide which groups are terrorists like ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, meaning legitimate targets for the Russian military, and which are "simply armed but a part of Syria's healthy opposition". He adds that Russia managed to establish contacts with some "uncompromising, even armed Syrian opposition groups" in its efforts to assist with the internal Syrian dialogue. Apparently, Russia narrated a counterterrorism strategy that incorporated accommodative and repressive tactics. Yet, while Russia allegedly supported the inclusion of the so-called moderate Syrian opposition in the negotiations, Russian forces were not only using force against terrorist groups as designated by the UNSC, as Moscow claimed, but analysts support that Russia often targeted several non-state rebel groups, some of them backed by the US-led Coalition (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). Using the terrorist label simultaneously with narrating the Russian leadership's diplomatic efforts with the "healthy opposition" reinforced the dichotomy of Syrian opposition actors.

The Russian leadership used such narratives to imply that, unlike Russia, the US failed to properly distinguish between moderate opposition elements, particularly those included in the negotiations, with more radical elements consisting of legitimate targets for military operations. Upon reaffirming the deal between Russia and the US on the cessation of hostilities in Syria, endorsed by UNSC Resolution 2268, Putin (26/02/2016) clarifies that Russia would continue to combat terrorist organisations recognised by the UNSC, hoping that "our (Russia's) American partners will take the same position". Deputy Foreign Minister Gatilov (27/02/2016) emphasises that external support for "radical groups" endangers the cessation of hostilities. A few months later, Lavrov (16/07/2016) declares that the opposition forces that did not dissociate from "radical" groups "cannot be counted as belonging to the constructive opposition". Referring to the Libya intervention by "those obsessed with overthrowing Muammar Gaddafi", he condemns the West for collaborating with "extremists and terrorists". During his speech at the 71<sup>st</sup> UNGA session, Lavrov (23/09/2016) once more stresses that "the tragedies in Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Syria have proved the need to stop opportunistic attempts to use extremists [...] to advance geopolitical intentions" and remove "double standards in fighting terrorism". He claims that owing to Russia's military actions prevented the collapse of the Syrian state "under the onslaught of terrorists". Still, Lavrov (10/09/2016) states that the US was not working with terrorist groups as a means to overthrow the Syrian government. Even though there was a lack of common ground between Russia and the US as to which non-state Syrian groups were considered moderate opposition and which were considered terrorists, the US-led Coalition was not yet presented as a direct threat to the integrity of the Assad regime.

Soon, however, a turn of events led to the Syrian peace process based on the agreement between Russia and the US to break down. In September 2016, warplanes from the US-led anti-ISIS Coalition entered Syrian airspace and



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Syrian government positions near Deir Ez-Zor airport. The airstrikes were followed by an attack against Syrian army units by, as per the Russian Foreign Ministry, “US-patronised illegal paramilitary units”, presenting this incident as “the predictable result of the persistent US refusal to cooperate closely with Russia” (18/09/2016). A couple of days later, an attack against a humanitarian convoy occurred southwest of Aleppo. The Foreign Ministry (20/09/2016) again attributes the attack to “illegal paramilitary units” and rejects “attempts by some foreign sponsors” to blame Russian or Syrian aviation units for the attack. Such “questionable accusations” against Russia allegedly aimed to divert attention from the previous incident near Deir-Ez-Zor airport. Putin claims (16/10/2016) that US-Russian relations deteriorated because of the US imposing its “unilateral decisions”, which led to “hotbeds of terrorism”. The Foreign Ministry (03/10/2016) states that “we (Russia) increasingly believe that Washington, seeking to bring about regime change in Damascus, is ready [...] to join forces with outright terrorists” after accusing the US of having supplied Jabhat al-Nusra with weapons and ammunition to overthrow Assad. The attacks took place around the time that the Joint Implementation Group was supposed to operate based on the ceasefire agreement, which would allow intelligence-sharing between Russia and the US to coordinate attacks against non-state actors in Syria (The Washington Post, 2016). Indeed, Russian official narratives explicitly expressed a disagreement with the US on who the terrorists were.

With respect to the situation in Aleppo and Western rhetoric accusing Russia of war crimes, Putin (12/10/2016) counter-accuses Western countries of the escalation. The Foreign Ministry (29/10/2016) also narrates the “anti-Russian” rhetoric as an attempt to “diminish Russia’s role and depict our country as the prime cause of all the troubles in Syria” and “conceal the true culprits of the failure of the cessation of hostilities”. Having conducted a “fact-based comparative analysis of the implementation of the Russia-US agreements”, the Foreign Ministry (29/10/2016) reveals that armed groups under the US-led Coalition committed more than 2,000 violations, whereas Russia “responsibly fulfilled all of its obligations”, and the US list of groups which confirmed their commitment to the cessation of hostilities deal included “cutthroats”. After condemning the “enablers of extremists”, Lavrov (28/10/2016) states that Russia has no other choice but to intensify its counterterrorism efforts. Although the initial priority in Aleppo was not to protect the civilian population, or as Putin says (16/10/2016): “We will not build hype about this like our Western partners because we understand that we have to fight terrorists”, Putin (23/12/2016) presents the evacuation by Russia of “100,000 people” from Aleppo as “the biggest international humanitarian action in the modern world”. The Russo-Syrian bombing campaign on September 19 against opposition-controlled territory in eastern Aleppo reportedly consisted of indiscriminate attacks against civilian targets, killing more than 440 people (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

The Russian leadership projected very similar rhetoric about Eastern Ghouta, a city held by anti-Assad forces since 2012 and besieged by the Syrian government since 2013 (Amnesty International, 2018). Lavrov (16/03/2018) claims the West used Jabhat al-Nusra in eastern Ghouta against the “interests of the Syrian nation”. Putin (04/04/2018) declares that Russian efforts saved thousands of civilian lives in eastern Ghouta by “removing militants that refuse to lay down their arms”. Similarly, Vladimir Chizhov, the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the EU, distinguishes (28/04/2018) Russia’s efforts in eastern Ghouta and Aleppo from Western actions in Raqqa “where virtually no building was left intact after the air and artillery attacks by the US-led Coalition”. The Russian leadership was challenging Western anti-Russian rhetoric by assigning violence perpetrated by supposed agents of the US-led Coalition as the source of insecurity in Aleppo and Ghouta whilst glorifying Russia’s aid delivery. That is paradoxical, considering that Russia and its Syrian allies contributed significantly to the humanitarian catastrophes by engaging in unlawful attacks. Russian officials blamed anti-Assad insurgents for atrocities for which the Russian military also shared responsibility. The offensive that the Syrian government launched in February 2018 in Eastern Ghouta, backed by Russia, violated the principle of distinction between civilian and military targets and reportedly left hundreds of civilians dead. The 30-day UNSC ceasefire was not fully implemented, and Russia used its veto again to shield Assad from accountability (Human Rights Watch, 2018).

On January 23, 2017, Russia brokered the Astana peace talks with Iran and Turkey, kickstarting a new strategic cooperation on Syria. Even though the Astana process was, in theory, a peace initiative to achieve a cessation of violence and solve humanitarian issues through de-escalation zones, the focus was also on counterterrorism (Cengiz, 2020). According to a joint statement published by the Russian Foreign Ministry, the guarantor governments agreed to “fight jointly against ISIL/DAESH and Al-Nusra and to separate from them armed opposition groups”

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(26/01/2017). In the 72<sup>nd</sup> UNGA debate session, Lavrov (21/09/2017) remarks that, even though the US-led Coalition tolerates Jabhat al-Nusra, Russia still fights this group alongside ISIS. Putin (22/11/2017) declares that Russia's cooperation with Iran and Turkey based on the Astana format prevented Syria's disintegration and "capture by international terrorists". Putin (11/12/2017) congratulates the Russian Armed Forces and the Syrian army for having liberated Syria from international terrorists. The "liberation of all Syrian territory" from terrorists is put forward again in a joint statement by Iran, Russia, and Turkey (22/12/2017). The Foreign Ministry (25/02/2018) states that Russia's fight against terrorist organisations continues "despite of attempts of certain players to use [...] opposition militants [...] plotted to topple the legitimate government". Likewise, Putin (07/09/2018) presents the Idlib demilitarisation agreement between Russia and Turkey as a means of eliminating terrorism by expelling militants from Idlib, a province in north-western Syria. In the 73<sup>rd</sup> UNGA session, Lavrov (28/09/2018) emphasises that Russia's efforts based on the 2017 Astana process and the 2018 Syrian National Dialogue Congress contributed to the failure of "orchestrated regime change", which "relied on extremists". After the US administration announced the withdrawal of American troops from Syria, Putin (20/12/2018) states that the "illegitimate" presence of these troops was unnecessary to make his point that Russia and not the US countered terrorist violence in Syria.

## *'International Law'*

The second most widely referenced narrative I observed within the sources I collected relates to 'International Law' themes. The most common reference is an antithesis between the legal basis of the Russian and Western interventions in the Syrian conflict. To delegitimise the US-led anti-ISIS Coalition, Lavrov comments (09/08/2015) that if the UNSC discussed the purpose of the Coalition, "there would be no ambiguities as to who is bombing whom" and the Coalition would "respect the UN Charter and international law". He later adds (13/09/2015) that the countries comprising the US-led Coalition do not recognise Assad's legitimacy because "no one is asking Damascus for permission". By contrast to Western alleged violations of the UNSC in the region, including in but not limited to Syria, Russia approves "coercive measures only if they are strictly regulated and set out in every detail in the resolution, leaving no space for any equivocal interpretation". Putin (28/09/2015) similarly articulates Russia's conservative expression of international law during his speech at the 70<sup>th</sup> UNGA session by saying that all legal principles "should be clear and transparent and possess uniformly understood criteria".

To further narrate the legitimacy of Russia's intervention in Syria, Putin (29/09/2015) clarifies that it abides by the "UN Charter and fundamental principles of international law", given that Russia's assistance is provided upon the "consent and request" of the Syrian government. A further argument he puts forward is that as opposed to the US-led Coalition's "illegal" support for Syrian opposition forces, or as differently put: "mainly terrorist organisations [...] to overthrow Assad", Russia's legitimate assistance prevents the destruction of state institutions. Putin repeats (30/09/2015) that Western counterterrorism operations in Syria are not based on "the official request from the President of the Syrian Arab Republic". The Foreign Ministry comments (15/09/2015) that the increased terrorist activity in Syria requires "coordinated efforts based on international law", inferring that the US-led Coalition should coordinate its efforts with Syria's authorities instead of refusing to cooperate with Assad. By projecting a narrative of international law in the context of counterterrorism, Moscow tried to delegitimise the Western consensus over leadership change in Syria by narrating that Western policies in Syria did not abide by international law.

During the 70<sup>th</sup> UNGA session (28/09/2015), Putin similarly declares that a draft UNSC resolution must support the coordination of counterterrorism efforts in Syria. He remarks that restoring statehood, strengthening government institutions, and aiding sovereign states "must be offered rather than imposed" and "anything contravening the Charter must be rejected". Putin associated sovereignty with the "freedom of every State to choose their own destiny", and this conceptualisation will play into subsequent Russian statements regarding the inter-Syrian negotiations. Moreover, he deplores "selfish" efforts that attempt to undermine the UN by legitimising "unauthorised actions", referring to the US-led anti-ISIS Coalition. Following a joint statement by the US and Russia as co-chairs of the ISSG on cessation of hostilities in Syria, Putin (22/02/2016) comments that against a background of "one-sided actions not sanctioned by the UN, which favour short-term political or opportunistic interests", Russian-American agreements are under international law and UN principles and would reverse the Syrian crisis. When UNSC Resolution 2268 on Syria endorsed the cessation of hostilities deal, Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov (27/02/2016) reaffirms Russia's commitment to Syria's "sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity". He adds

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new conditions for a political process should be created “under UN auspices”. Putin presented the ISSG, and particularly Russia’s role, as a legally permitted alternative to previous Western actions, which are responsible for the crises in Somalia, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen as they violated the sovereignty and territorial integrity of these countries, probably implying that the West was planning to authorise a Libya-like military intervention in Syria.

A few months later, Lavrov (16/07/2016) denounces the roadmap contained in the June 2012 Geneva Communiqué, UNSC Resolutions and decisions of the ISSG as being allegedly unsuccessful in seating all Syrian parties to the negotiating table, or as he previously called it, a “nationwide dialogue [...] to reach a mutually acceptable agreement between the opposition and the Syrian government” (31/08/2015). He emphasises that only a process of direct talks, which depends on the UN Charter proclaiming the sovereignty of nations, can ensure the implementation of previous agreements. By referring to UNSC Resolution 2254 and the principle of sovereignty, Lavrov (28/09/2016) remarks that an intra-Syrian dialogue should be launched “without outside interference”, and the talks “must be inclusive and must involve all Syrian parties” (10/09/2016). These statements reflected, as seen in the ‘Legitimate Counterterrorism’ section, the disagreements between Russia and the US as to which groups were terrorists and which belonged to the so-called constructive opposition. The Russian leadership put forth a story that the US was interfering in the government-opposition talks by supporting the more radical anti-Assad groups.

In response to Western accusations that Syrian and Russian forces were escalating violence in Aleppo, the Foreign Ministry (15/12/2016) counter accuses UN personnel of not sufficiently abiding by the “principles underlying the provision of humanitarian aid, including respect for sovereignty, neutrality, and impartiality” because they purportedly participated in a Western “propaganda campaign” aimed at “smearing” Russia’s humanitarian efforts in Aleppo. When the UK, France, and the US voted for a draft UNSC resolution to impose sanctions on Syria, the Foreign Ministry responds (01/03/2017) that Western countries used the Joint Investigative Mechanism in Syria (JIM) to blame the Syrian government for chemical attacks “and pave the way for regime change in Damascus”. On a similar note, the Foreign Ministry (28/06/2017) comments that Western “politically motivated” allegations ascribing the April 4 chemical attack to the Syrian Government and allegations against the Syrian authorities’ preparations for a chemical attack “without any evidence”. It seems that there was a struggle of rhetoric in which Russia was routinely trying to reconstruct Western narratives surrounding individual events and replace them with its own narratives. Still, a report published by the OPCW concluded that the Syrian air force used chemical weapons in three separate attacks in March 2017, departing from Shayrat airbase in two of these attacks (OPCW, 2020), even though Russia had brokered the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile, declared complete in 2014. Human Rights Watch (2017) also documented evidence of systematic chemical attacks by the Syrian government, including that on April 4 in Khan Sheikhoun, Idlib, where 92 civilians lost their lives.

The Astana peace process was repeatedly presented as having led to Government-opposition talks. Lavrov states in the 72<sup>nd</sup> UNGA session (21/09/2017) that those who desire peace for Syria should help the Syrian government and opposition engage in direct talks “under the leadership of the United Nations and without any preconditions”. He criticises those who did not vote in favour of General Assembly resolution 71/190, stipulating “the inadmissibility of interference in the internal affairs of States and coups d’état as a method of transferring power”. Joint statements by Russia, Iran, and Turkey, the Astana guarantor states, consistently refer to UNSC Resolutions 2336 and 2254 and a commitment to the “sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic” (26/01/2017; 22/12/2017). Putin (22/11/2017) claims that the Astana process underpinned the responsibility of Russia and its new partners for implementing existing UN agreements to help Syria “consolidate its sovereignty and territorial integrity”. “Syria has been preserved as a sovereign and independent state”, he states a few days later (11/12/2017). To expand the mandate of the Astana talks, Russia hosted the so-called National Dialogue Congress on Syria in Sochi from January 29 to 30, 2018, even though the Syrian opposition boycotted the conference (Scharf et al., 2020). The rhetoric that “only the Syrians themselves shall decide the fate of their country” was re-emphasised. Lavrov (30/01/2018) presents the Sochi Congress as a means to practically implement Resolution 2254, which is mainly a dialogue about “what country Syrians want Syria to be”.

Legal facts do not support these claims. The Russian government arguably set out the Astana peace process and the Sochi Congress in competition with the Geneva Communiqué and Resolution 2254 relating to regime transition through a Transitional Governing Body (TGB). Had this UN-led legal framework been implemented, the Syrian

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people would have been able to influence the direction of Syria's future with constitutional drafting and multiparty elections subject to popular approval (Scharf et al., 2020). But, besides creating a geopolitical move from the UN-led talks heavily supported by the US to a framework directed by Russia (Balanche, 2017), the Astana and Sochi processes, with the latter intentionally framed as National Dialogue Congress, redirected the focus of the talks from Assad's removal and designing a new constitution towards mere constitutional drafting. This shift mattered to the Syrian opposition because not replacing the Assad regime with an interim government raised the possibility that the regime would co-opt the constitutional process rather than allow for a democratic change (Scharf et al., 2020). As Scharf et al. (2020) express: "The constitutional reform that is indicated in the Sochi Statement is a significant step back from the drafting of a new constitution as part of a political transition that is indicated in Resolution 2254" (p. 155). In other words, the Astana and Sochi legal frameworks were made favourable to the Assad regime (Cengiz, 2020), contingent on Russia's strategic interest in preventing Assad's ousting from power.

Following the adoption of Resolution 2401 on the 30-day cessation of hostilities in Syria, the Foreign Ministry (25/02/2018) claims that Western aid provision was "partial and political", unlike Russia's impartial humanitarian efforts in adherence to UNSC Resolutions. This statement refers to the humanitarian catastrophe in Raqqa, which was allegedly a "direct consequence of combat operations by the US-led so-called coalition that is in Syria illegally". Russia is presented as a "responsible member of the international community" by working towards resolving the conflict as a guarantor country of the Astana process. Lavrov (16/03/2018) confirms during a joint conference with his Iranian and Turkish counterparts that the three Astana guarantor countries "remain committed to the fundamental principles that are formalised in the UN Security Council's resolutions". He repeats that it is not up to external imposition but through a common accord between the government and the opposition to reach any agreement about Syria's political future. Lavrov also implies that there had been Western-led attempts to undermine the Astana process by those who "do not want to preserve Syria as an integral state and want to turn this vitally important country into another chaos-ridden territory where it would be convenient to play geopolitical games". Putin (04/04/2018) comments that politicising humanitarian issues was unacceptable and that it was "necessary to comply" with the UN Security Council Resolution 2401.

As part of Russia's efforts to continuously shield the Syrian government against accusations and evidence of chemical attacks, the Foreign Ministry (08/04/2018) declares that the goal of Western "misinformation" and "unsubstantiated lies" was to justify "military interference in Syria under false pretexts" contrary to Russia's legitimate involvement. Similarly, Putin (14/04/2018) maintains, after the US-led Coalition conducted a series of airstrikes "against military and civilian targets" in Syria, that this "act of aggression against a sovereign state [...] was committed without a mandate from the UN Security Council and in violation of the UN Charter". He references a similar "aggressive action" that was undertaken by the US-led Coalition the previous year in the Shayrat Airbase, where the US "staged" a chemical attack against civilians by Syrian government forces "as a pretext" without waiting for the results of the investigation by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). The incident at Shayrat Airbase is narrated again as an "unlawful attack against Syria [...] on an invented pretext", justified using "the controversial notion of humanitarian interventions" (28/04/2018). Putin (07/09/2018) claims Russia was working alongside the UNSC and the OPCW to supply evidence that terrorists were preparing chemical attacks against Syrian government troops. The Foreign Ministry (05/07/2018) condemns "unlawful unilateral sanctions" against the Syrian government for the chemical attacks and narrates them as obstacles to a political settlement.

Concerning Coalition airstrikes against Syria on April 6, 2017, and April 14, 2018, which arguably comprised responses to the April 4, 2017, and April 7, 2018, chemical attacks (Scharf et al., 2020), Lavrov (28/09/2018) once again declares that the airstrikes were based on "invented pretexts" the same way the West justified its previous interventions in Yugoslavia in 1999, Iraq in 2003, and Libya in 2011. He proclaims that these "illegal" actions "prioritise self-serving unilateral approaches over decisions made within the United Nations" to "replace the supremacy of law in world affairs" by handing down "verdicts without bothering with charges or trials". Lavrov makes the assertion (30/08/2018) that the West's military presence in Syria is illegitimate and that the US "finds excuses to stay". In response to the US announcing plans to withdraw American troops from Syria, Putin (20/12/2018) comments that this decision "is the right one" and repeats that the US presence in Syria "was not approved by the UN Security Council" whilst "Russian troops were invited by the Syrian government". Normative scholarship (Averre and Davies, 2015; Sakwa, 2019; Allison, 2013b) is applicable here. Russian legal narratives on non-interference

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were challenging the more morally held debates surrounding the R2P doctrine, according to which states can violate another state's sovereignty and use force to protect the civilian population from large-scale human rights violations. So, Russia was delegitimising the West's military response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria by narrating such humanitarian interventionism as an attack against the regime itself.

## Conclusion

My dissertation examined official narratives amidst the scarcity of methodological narrative studies on Russia's direct military intervention in the Syrian conflict. I treated Russia's mobilisation of ideas as strategic narratives, having collected 49 official statements between August 2015 and December 2018 around relevant conflict developments to ask how the Russian leadership projected anti-Western narratives. Following the collection and micro-analysis of my chosen textual data, whose coding was based on identifying repeated references, phrases, or words, I ascertained that the Russian leadership narrated claims pertaining to 'Legitimate Counterterrorism' and 'International Law'. These are policy narratives since they entail Russia's conceptualisation of how the issues of counterterrorism and international law compliance should be addressed. I argue that these narratives justify Russia's military involvement in Syria's protracted civil war. References to Russia's multipolar concerns and contested regional influence reinforce these two narrative categories.

The 'Legitimate Counterterrorism' narrative category concerns Russia's resolve to solidify that its approach to combating terrorism was more legitimate compared to an unlawful US-led anti-ISIS Coalition. But Russia was fighting anti-government rebels too, including some supported by the Coalition, by consistently deeming them as terrorists. Radical Islamic forces in Syria can indeed threaten Russia's domestic security. However, Moscow mobilised ideas of counterterrorism to narrate that the Syrian people and the Syrian government were facing terrorist threats alone whilst convicting the West's eagerness to recognise the principal source of insecurity: the Assad regime. The 'International Law' narrative category underscores Russia's narration of its intervention as law-abiding, compared to the Coalition's alleged disregard for conservative legal frameworks. This narrative served to legitimise Russia's military actions in Syria and delegitimise the West's policies, especially that of indirect confrontation with Assad through the sponsoring of opposition agents, this time by invoking the principles of 'sovereignty' and 'non-interference'. The claim that Russia was acting in extension to the UN was also consistent, even though the Russian leadership took Syria's political matters into its own hands by initiating the Astana peace process, effectively ensuring that Assad's participation in the allegedly inclusive negotiations meant that he will not be dethroned.

In conclusion, the combined projection of the anti-Western narratives I detected has strategically silenced the West by selectively representing events and normalising Russia's and the Syrian regime's actions during the hostilities. Indeed, the level of diplomatic pressure on Moscow and the Syrian regime is significantly less prominent when compared to, for example, the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. Assad's legitimacy was preserved, whereas Western aspirations for regime change lost their capacity. But what if Russia's projection of anti-Western narratives has not served to prevent foreign-imposed regime change in Syria alone? Western involvement in Syria can indirectly threaten Russia because Moscow can experience the same violation of sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity. By delegitimising liberal interventionist policies involving regime change via externally sponsored opposition forces, strategic narratives can have a broader constraining impact as far as Western influence on Russia's political integrity goes. In any case, Assad's endurance is one success story for Moscow since the international community has widely accepted Russia's intervention in Syria.

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