

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies

Pavel Shchelin

**RUSSIAN NARATIVE OF  
INTERVENTION IN SYRIAN CIVIL WAR**

**Critical examination of the Russian discourse  
describing Russian intervention in Syrian  
civil war from September 2015 to March  
2016**

MA thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Ammon Cheskin

Supervisor: Prof. Viatcheslav Morozov

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I have written this Master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis critically examines the Russian military intervention in Syria during the period of September 2015 – March 2016. It is a study that contributes to the analysis of the interrelation of two areas of political studies: media studies and foreign policy. In order to describe the logic behind Russian participation in the Syrian conflict, a social constructivist reading is suggested; according to which, the way the discourse of the Russian intervention has been presented in Russian media indicates the primary role of specific understanding of the ethical goals of Russian foreign policy. Specifically, the Russian military intervention in Syria is driven, according to the Russian discourse, by the need to present itself to the world as a “good actor” through a “just war.”

Applying the method of qualitative discourse analysis, the thesis deconstructs the Russian narrative of intervention in the Syrian civil war through the Russian perspective. The results indicate the particular importance of the social function of war in Russian foreign policy – the importance of its performative and communicative aspect. Moreover, the result is a perceived conflict between two logics of understanding of the International – transcendental and local-centered – is revealed as a potential driving force of the modern tensions in the relationship between Russian and the West.

As a result, a key problem in said relationship is the problem of communication: the lack of language both parties would understand. Without such a language, the actions of the opponent are continually interpreted, not from the perspective of the partner, but from the perspective of the viewer, which in the case of Russian-West discourse results in accusations of dishonesty and hypocrisy.

Finally, the research highlights how the discourse of Syrian intervention is constructed and reflects the social function of war in Russia in general. This function of a “just war” (and any war in Russia is ‘just’ by default) is to serve as the moral cornerstone of the country’s identity, as the mechanism of consolidation and purification. It appears that the historical origins of this discursive model of war can be traced back to the period of World War II.

In conclusion, this thesis suggests the need for the further studies of the connections between the ways identity is constructed linguistically in the narratives of foreign policy and decisions made by politicians. Another question of utmost importance is whether there is a substitution to war as a social mechanism of Russian

society to experience its moral appropriateness and adherence to moral standards of justice.

Key words: Russia, Syrian civil war, Russian media, social function of war, language in international relations, communication

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>CHAPTER I. THEORY AND METHOD.....</b>	<b>12</b>
THEORETICAL APPROACH OF THE RESEARCH .....	12
METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH.....	18
<b>CHAPTER II. RUSSIAN NARRATIVE OF ITS INTERVENTION IN SYRIAN CIVIL WAR ...</b>	<b>23</b>
PART I. "RATIONALIST NARRATIVES" .....	25
1.1 "Preventive measures" .....	25
1.2 "Military exercise".....	26
PART II. ETHICAL NARRATIVES. ....	28
2.1 "Evil against good" or "Those who cause destruction" and "Those who protect and restore".....	28
2.2 "Honesty and Truth" against "Lies and Fakes" .....	30
2.3 "Those who can" and "Those who can not" .....	32
PART III. "DIPLOMATIC NARRATIVE" .....	34
3.1 Russian openness towards cooperation .....	34
3.2 "Reasonable force" .....	37
SUMMARY.....	40
<b>CHAPTER III. RUSSIAN NARRATIVE IN CONTEXT .....</b>	<b>42</b>
REALIST CONSIDERATIONS .....	42
SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM ON THE RUSSIAN "SELF" AND "BEING RIGHT" IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS .....	44
FIGHT TO BE RIGHT? .....	48
<i>Rhetorical model of War</i> .....	48
TWO LOGICS OF INTERNATIONAL .....	51
<i>Social function of war</i> .....	56
<i>Context of war in Ukraine in the Russian narrative of intervention into Syrian civil war</i> .....	60
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>67</b>
REVIEW OF FINDINGS .....	67
CONTRIBUTIONS AND FURTHER DIRECTION OF THE RESEARCH .....	70
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>72</b>

## Introduction

Despite the fact that Russia is no longer a superpower, and doubtfully even a great power, Russian foreign policy continues to be in the center of debates in both academic and policy circles. One of central empirical puzzles about Russian foreign policy is the logic of its decision-making. Indeed, Russia has played – and continues to play – a high-profile role in most modern security crises, including North Korea's and Iran's nuclear programs, armed conflicts in the Southern Caucasus, and the continuing war in Ukraine which has provoked increased militarization of NATO's eastern borders and alliance security goals in general. During the last two years, two other topics have moved into the focus of discussion: alleged Russian interference in the elections in Western countries and the role Russia plays in Syria and the Middle East in general. What is more, the role of Russia in these conflicts is usually self-contradictory, unpredicted, and antagonistic towards the main actors of international security. Consequently, it is of no surprise that understanding Russian foreign policy and its security and military policy continues to attract the attention of scholars and publicists. Consequently, the question of how particular decisions are understood in Russia are relevant from both a theoretical perspective, which is addressed in a separate chapter, but more importantly on an empirical level. One particular question which still requires conceptualization is Russian interference in the Syrian civil war in September 2015.

The Russian military operation in Syria began on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015 after the government of Bashar Assad had made an official request for military help. At this point, Russian involvement mostly included air raids and bombings of all anti-Assad forces including the Syrian National Coalition, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), al-Nusra Front (al-Qaeda in the Levant), and the Army of Conquest. There was limited involvement of ground troops and special operation forces. On March 14, 2016 the "main body" of Russian forces were officially withdrawn from the country. However, low-intensity operations and occasional air strikes continued. No substantial changes in the number of territories securely controlled by pro-government forces had been achieved. The airstrikes had become the target of criticism of the Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Doctors Without Borders, since Russian fighters often targeted hospitals alongside military objects and caused thousands of civilian

causalities, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Allegedly, the Russian military used unguided bombs, cluster bombs, incendiaries similar to white phosphorus, and thermobaric weapons. According to independent estimates, the cost of damaged caused by Russian military involvement is around 38 billion rubles or \$546 million.

What is more, Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict continues into the present day, being one of the riskiest factors in the current international relations agenda, since it is in Syria where there is potential for a direct military confrontation between Russian and US troops. In February 2018, there was already one such confrontation in which hundreds of Russian mercenaries have allegedly been killed – at the battle of Khasham. Moreover, it appears that either the Russian elite in fact did not care at all about the ISIS threat, or it was genuinely committed to the salvation of the Bashar -Assad regime. During the first months of operation, the Russian political leadership exhibited signs of very limited understanding of the true configuration of the fighting parties in Syria.

To understand how Russian participation in the Syrian civil war can be addressed to contribute to global peace, rather than starting World War III, it is important to address the logic behind Russia's initial decision to interfere. Despite the fact that war has been raging for three years there remains a lack of comprehensible analysis of the Russian motivation to intervene that would explain the seemingly self-contradictory Russian behavior.

Firstly, there is a clear gap between alleged Russian goals in Syria and the results of its actions. Initially, Vladimir Putin claimed that the main goal of Russian intervention is to fight against the Islamic State. However, it was later revealed that the absolute majority of Russian airstrikes targeted armed Syrian opposition instead of ISIS. Second, a major paradox concerning Russia's operations in Syria is its intentions concerning possible cooperation with the Western-led anti-ISIS coalition. On the one hand, Russia wanted to befriend this coalition, while on the other hand actively opposing it.

The relevance of the question “what was the logic behind Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war” still remains urgent and, I would argue, yet unanswered. What is more, I would argue that it is impossible to answer this question following the logic of

utilitarianism which treats language and rhetoric exclusively as tools to achieve certain objective interests. Instead, I am going to address the problem of Russian intervention from a constructivist perspective, where the language, identity, and rhetoric are not factors of decisions made, but instead the very environment of the decision-making process. Following the general approach of post-positivism, the thesis focuses not on the material and causal explanations of a particular foreign policy phenomenon, but on the processes around how narratives of security are created (Lomagin 2007) or how identity influences the understanding of security and shapes security policies (Kassianova 2001; Hopf 2005; Williams & Neumann 2000). In the case of Russia, particular importance is attached to the narrative of ‘Great Power’ which, according to studies, simultaneously limits the range of available policies (Clunan 2009) as enables actions that would be incomprehensible for an ordinary country (Volgy et al., 2011, Ambrosio, 2005). They do not interfere with foreign policy but are foreign policy; and foreign policy, especially when full of self-contradictions, can only be understood through deep deconstruction of the narrative that reflects this policy. Thus, my research is connected with the general debate in international relations theory, the details of which I address in the theory chapter.

#### Aim of the research

The aim of the thesis is to deconstruct the security narrative and the logic of action behind the decision of Russian elite to intervene into the Syrian civil war. Following the post-positivist approach, the analysis of media data available will provide an insight into Russian understanding of security decision formation.

#### The object of the research

This thesis analyses a particular phenomenon of modern Russian foreign policy – the Russian decision to intervene into the Syrian civil war from the perspective of the security narrative which was built in Russian media to justify this decision. Apart from the security narrative, the logic of foreign policy action behind the security narrative is the focus of the study.

The period in the focus of this research is from the 30th of September 2015, with the actual beginning of Russian air forces operations in the country, and ends on March 14th, 2016 when, according to Vladimir Putin, “goals set in front of Russian Ministry of

Defense and Russian military are generally met.” However, since any decision is premediated, the analysis of Russian discourse begins earlier than September 2015 – in May 2015 when the pre-mediation campaign has begun.

### Research Hypothesis/Argument

The initial argument of this thesis is that the logic behind the Russian intervention, as well as the security narrative of this decision, cannot be understood in a separation from the rhetorical function of war phenomenon in Russian identity. This function is centered on the idea of war as a way of “being right” and therefore “being great.”

In particular, this thesis argues that within Russian discourse, the performative element of warfare as an opportunity to present itself in a way that would reflect Russian self-image, as well as to communicate with significant partners on the international arena, has been of utmost importance to the Russian leadership.

### Research methods

Apart from secondary literature analysis in the theoretical chapter of the thesis, the empirical study of media data will be conducted following the discourse analysis approach. In a separate chapter, it is explained why both the method and the data selected are relevant to answer the research question of the thesis. To understand the discourse of war in modern Russia, an analysis of a total of 36 Sunday news reports via the program Vesti Nedeli is conducted.

### Limitations of the research

As with any interpretivist study there is a danger that the performed analysis gap is only a part of the complex discourse, with existing opportunities for yet deeper deconstruction. Moreover, the very theoretical background of the research avoids providing strong causal answers for the problem in question.

### Structure of the paper

The submitted thesis consists of the following structure. The first is this beginning introductory chapter and outline. The second chapter provides a theoretical overview of the foundation of the proposed thesis: the role of narratives and language in security policy formation. Additionally, the second chapter explains the methodology of

the research, relevance of selected data, as well as justification for why it is representation of the worldview behind Russian foreign policy. The third chapter is the actual discourse analysis of the selected data with no interpretations to this data given. The objective of the paper is to discern the structural elements of the Russian narrative as it was constructed. In the fourth and final chapter, the revealed narratives are analyzed against the background of other actions made by the Russian government and contextualized in the view of existing theories. In the conclusion, the argument developed in this introduction is further developed and potential practical implementations of the research are presented.

## Synopsis

Having identified the aim, relevance, object of the research, hypothesis, and methodology, this thesis will proceed according to the structure described above: from theoretical debate to the empirical analysis of media data.

During the literature review, theoretical justification for the approach used in the research will be given. In the following two chapters, empirical analysis of selected data will be conducted and then contextualized against the background of other approaches to examine the logics behind Russian foreign policy actions.

This thesis explores the complex relationship between the rhetorical function of war in the Russian political imaginary and the Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war. Then concluding with a summary of the findings and the practical importance of the thesis. Lists of references and media data used are provided at the end of the research.

## Chapter I. Theory and Method

### Theoretical approach of the research

In order to answer the research question of the thesis, the approach of social constructivism has been chosen. Its adherents put particular emphasis on the role of identities: “at the center of political activity is the construction of a link between policy and identity that makes the two appear consistent with each other” (Hansen, 2006, p.28). In the framework of this thesis, there is little space to for an in-depth look at the details of all aspects of the existing debate between the proponents of the different logics of social action. Instead, the research is focused on the one particular element of social action: the role language, identity, and discourse play in the international relations from the perspective of foreign policy shaping.

However, before moving any further with the thesis it is important to answer, as the researcher, if all the discourse and narratives spread by Russian officials and media will be treated the same way – exclusively as a set of rhetorical actions, or if it will assume that, apart from being a part of propaganda projects, these statements reflect deep normative and strategic beliefs of the Russian elite about Russia and its role in international relations. There is no right or wrong answer to this question, however, though there are strong reasons to deny the Russian statements any real meaning. After all, modern Russia is a trend-setter in terms of post-truth politics, including media and war.

Here it is important to point out that focus on language does not necessarily imply the choice of social constructivism as the theoretical foundation of the research. For example, one way of looking into the problem of the discourse and language’s function in international relations is an instrumentalist perspective which, more or less, fits into the logic of consequentialism’s approach. This tradition is represented in particular by the school of “rhetorical action,” for which discourse and values is an intervening variable in an actor’s behavior. It can be used to empower an otherwise weak side or to limit the range of possible politics. A good example of rhetorical power that can be found in the mechanisms of the security community is the expansion of the

EU in 2004, as it is presented in Schimmelfenning's piece "The Community trap: Liberal norms, Rhetorical Action" (Schimmelfenning, 2001). In his interpretation, those Eastern European countries that became EU members in 2004 managed to successfully exercise a "rhetorical action" strategy – the strategic use of a norms-based argument by weakly socialized actors in a community whose constitutive values and norms they share.

Here the research highlights that, on a theoretical level, studies of the school of "rhetorical action" are conducted in the same utilitarian tradition as those of the realist school. In other words, they treat identity politics, discourse, rhetoric, and norms as tools through which weak or strong political actors can achieve a pragmatic goal. Thus, we are dealing with essentially the same ontology as in political realism when symbolic politics have no value on their own and with the actors being completely free to refer to them, depending on political interests. This approach has certain merits as it allows one to look beyond mere language games, if one assumes that the real matter of international politics is exclusively one of power and force with everything else being only a recourse for power maximization.

In contrast to rhetorical action, social constructivism offers an epistemological approach for the analysis of foreign policy, being focused not on the event itself but on the interpretations of said event. For example, while investigating the meaning of 9/11 for American security policies, Krebs and Lobasz argue that: "We proceed rather from the presumption that September 11, like all political events, did not speak for itself. It required interpretation, and it did not have to lead to a War on Terror ... how it was publicly represented and by whom, how, and whether those representations were contested ... The world we lived in after September 11 was by no means inevitable, and alternative worlds could have emerged ... while the attacks were very real, the insecurity they generated was necessarily a cultural production" (Lobasz&Krebs, 2007, p. 413). Consequently, instead of power, ideas, or interests, in the center of Krebs and Lobasz' analysis lies language itself. This approach is more structured in the later book of Krebs – "Narrating foreign policy." He argues that the largest questions of national security require leaders to engage public audiences and thus to legitimate, or provide public justification for, the policies they prefer. Moreover, not all possible policies can be legitimated in the public sphere, with conceivable but non-legitimate policies being

impossible to pursue. As a result, much of national security politics is centered on the competition over the meaning of events. Once such a competition is temporally resolved, a dominant narrative emerges which shapes the national security policies that states pursue (Krebs, 2015, pp.2-3).

It is interesting that Krebs's approach often pays respect to the utilitarian usage of strategic narratives or what can be called a rhetorical action. However, for this approach language also appears to have more value on its own. In particular, the non-utilitarian role of narratives is important for Krebs when a new situation emerges – something previously unimaginable and inconceivable, for which no rules exist. In his other piece “Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric,” Krebs, in co-authorship with Patrick Jackson, defines his approach to foreign policy as **coercive constructivism**, arguing that: “the social identity has an effect on social and political outcomes, regardless of whether or not the actor internalizes the components constituting this identity” (Jackson, Krebs, 2007, p.57). This coercive constructivism placed the importance of language games beyond utilitarian rhetorical action as “elites, even brilliant and authoritative orators, do not stand outside or transcend social structures that they then manipulate at will” (Krebs, 2015, p.4). Moreover, “it is through narrative that human beings order disordered experience and impart meaning to themselves and their world. Insofar as any grand strategy rests on a coherent portrait of the global environment, it rests on narrative” (Krebs, 2015, p.2).

The coercive constructivist approach assumes that the analysis of the claims Russian foreign policy makes is important no matter if the country is capable of supporting them. From this perspective, claims help discern the strategic narrative that the country's foreign policy decision makers believe in since, “alleged facts acquire meaning only when people weave them into coherent stories” (Krebs, 2015, p. 4). Consequently, the stories told by the Russian elite reflect the world as it is seen by Russian foreign policy. However, “the existence of a public sphere ensures that actors have to regularly and routinely explain and justify their behavior” (Risse, 2000, p. 21), and there is no conditional link between justification and truth. In other words, if one wants to see inside Russian foreign policy, then one has to look into it from within; giving Russian messages the benefit of a doubt in a way that, no matter how Russian military, diplomatic, and economic capabilities are developed, the language used by the

Russian mainstream reflects the world as seen by the Russian decision-makers. Consequently, it is possible to assume that the foreign policy decisions made by the country during recent years are the result of the way the Russian elite sees itself and the country.

In the submitted thesis the approach of social constructivism is applied and, despite its limitations, addresses the same challenges and problems that make the claims of the “rhetorical action” model so appealing. First, however, it is necessary to explain what the key elements of this approach are and how, hypothetically, they can be applied to study the problem of the logic behind Russian foreign policy in general, and the decision to intervene in Syria in particular.

To begin with, instead of power or interests, social constructivism views language as the essence of politics. This ontological claim reflects the choice any researcher has to make while discussing either domestic or international politics. There are several arguments that strengthen such a huge role attached to language. Indeed, “only humans give voice to the moral sense; only they articulate, reason about and debate good and evil, noble and ignoble, beneficial and harmful” (Krebs, 2015, p.8). Without such articulations no interests can be recognized and no power plays can be performed. Moreover, human actions, including political aims, are inherently limited by what one perceives as undoubtedly true, right, and just. Additionally, these perceptions are not random but structured in discourses and narratives. Discourse, as Michel Foucault famously argues, “is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power to be seized” (Foucault, 1981, p. 52-53). While scholars of rational choice would argue that, “states have little choice but to adapt themselves to the dictates of an unforgiving international system, that narratives are the product of events whose meaning is clear to all, or that a narrative’s dominance simply reflects the interests of powerful groups and leaders” (Krebs, 2015, p.2), social constructivists will look into how narratives and discourses exist and evolve through revealing their assumptions, contradictions, and metaphors (Steele 2010; Jarvis and Holland, 2014). What is more, under the social constructivist approach the processes through which one can analyze these deep-rooted beliefs are inherently public and linguistic, and that is why the analysis of public communication including media is relevant.

Russian security policy is not an exception from a social constructivist analysis. There are two main arguments to why it is fruitful for this thesis. Firstly, the paper will defend the idea that security policy, as well as national interest, depends on political purpose (Clunan, 2009, p. 31). Though, as a social constructivist would argue, the political can be understood only through linguistic means within a particular narrative that gives sense to these means. It also makes sense to follow Threvor Thrall's argument, according to which a researcher should be less skeptical of the idea of "identity-based politics" in comparison with instrumentalism. In particular, Thrall argues that "threat framing provides a more useful explanatory tool than elite manipulation of information in understanding threat perceptions" (Thrall, 2007, p.484).

Secondly, social constructivism addresses the problem of looking into Russian logic from the perspective of this logic and not from an outsider's assumptions of it. Indeed, no matter how Russian discourse is seen from the outside, it still reflects assumptions, contradictions, and metaphors regarding how Russian decision makers think about foreign policy. And since this discourse is important for those who set up the agenda for Russian foreign policy, it is also important for those who study it. In fact, narrative is not necessarily underpinned by the utilitarian interests of political actors, but rather by the intrinsic value of the established frames that enable the non-contradictory worldview. After all, as Krebs and Jackson argue, "arguments can prove powerful only when the commonplaces on which they draw are already present in the rhetorical field" (Jakson&Krebs, 2007, p.46). Politicians are rarely completely free or instrumental while creating security narratives or making sense out of a new security event. Neither can they be purely utilitarian. They have to follow and modify frames that were already present in the public discourse, with the public being influenced by rhetoric created decades prior to the matter in question.

As an interim conclusion, it is possible to argue that identity and symbolic power influence the development of security-related decisions. All schools of international relations agree with this statement one way or another. The main debate is whether such an effect is a result of utilitarian calculations. or whether identity and beliefs affect foreign policy on a deeper level by pre-mediating the security-related decisions through maintaining the worldview decision-makers consider worth defending or promoting. Ultimately, an answer to this question is the choice of a researcher.

In this thesis, I agree with those scholars who look into the questions of identity and rhetoric in a less instrumental way. Instead, one can view language games and security frames as phenomena that form the preferences of an actor before the need to act has even emerge. It appears that, prior to making a security decision, one must determine “who am I” and “how does the world look?” This is precisely the moment when identity and values become extremely important since they essentially provide the ability to act to make any decision in principle. Following this approach, while conducting a security analysis, the scholar himself must deliberate what the worldview of an actor was, in what frames was it described, how these frames have emerged etc. Moreover, it would be necessary to lower skepticism and any initial inclination to treat rhetoric as a manipulative tool, and to treat it as indication of certain beliefs or outcome of historical practices instead. This is especially difficult after 2014, in the so-called post-truth epoch when the borderline between trolling, fake, and genuine belief became nearly unintelligible. Although, for those who are interested in identity, values, language, and narratives in their relations to security subjects, it appears that there is no better choice.

## Methodology of the research

Qualitative discourse analysis is the foundational methodology of this research. Discourse analysis assumes that "...political thought and behaviour... cannot be understood without references to the distinctive vocabularies used by agents in given context..." (Richter, 1995, 124). In other words, the primary analysis of this method is that the way people communicate is the key to understand the decisions they make. Generally speaking, discourse can be understood in two ways. It can be seen as the coherent whole of certain rules that operate on a macro level and structure the way people think. Consequently, there can be several discursive fields that deal with different problems. The second understanding is narrower – discourse is meant to be a coherent set of statements. At the same time, as it was mentioned in the previous chapter, in the framework of this research discourse is understood, not as aspects of language, but as a system of meanings assigned to objects through linguistic means. This system reflects shared beliefs and common values (Fisher, Gottweis, 2012). Within this system, multiple narratives can exist, with narrative being conceptualized as structures linking the various elements of the discourse into a coherent, portrayable, and communicable form.

Since the character of the data which is used for this research is both visual and textual, instead of computational discourse analysis such as spatial models (Medzihorsky, Popovich, Jenne, 2017), the approach chosen in this thesis is manual deconstruction of the text with particular importance being attached to unclear references and indirect notions that the discourse is often constructed of. The goal is not to calculate Russian foreign policy utility functions but instead to figure out what worldview it operates in, and whether this worldview is understood as a hegemonic or dominant narrative. A hegemonic narrative is not a new idea for international relations theory. As Stuart Hall points out, hegemonic projects aspire to the remaking of common sense (Hall, Du Gay, 1996). Moreover, security can also be understood in this framework: "a dominant narrative of national security is a realized hegemonic project. It is a social fact, not an object of active political challenge. During such routine times, there is political contest, sometimes even intense, but it is usually takes place within the terms of the dominant narrative" (Krebs, 2015, 5). For this research, the narrative of

Russian foreign policy is understood as a hegemonic narrative in which importance goes beyond rhetoric, being the means of structuring the social order.

#### Justification of the type of data selection

To answer the research question, apart from the official statements of the Russian officials, the main data type consists of weekly 1-hour long Sunday news programs from the most popular Russian TV show “Vesti Nedeli.” There are several reasons why pro-governmental Sunday news reports provide this research with representative material on Russian elite’s understanding of foreign policy.

To begin with, the unique character of Russian pro-governmental media allows consideration of them as the voice of power that represents its worldview. The Russian government also has an absolute control over federal television which remains very influential in today’s Russia. The majority of the Russian population still treat federal TV news broadcasts to be the primary source of information. As polls conducted in December 2015 indicate (Levada–Tsentr, 2015): only 21% of Russian citizens acquire its information about the world from the Internet, only 13% from social networks, and 85% from TV. Moreover, around two-thirds of the population have no access to a source of information that is independent from the government (Levada–Tsentr, 2015). Maria Lipman (2009) describes the situation in Russian federal television as ‘national channels are mostly aimed at those Russians who constitute the reliable electoral base of Putin’s regime: the more provincial, the elderly, the less educated’.

Vladimir Putin managed to create a complex system of control over media both traditional and digital (Belin, 2002, 21). In other words, “the Russian media ecology today is characterized by an abundance of information, but also by a set of mechanisms which limit the accessibility of that information. In these circumstances, the Russian elite – as with Putin, above – is able to use the saturation of media as a means to obfuscate the extent to which it has realigned the media ecology to its own ends” (Hoskings, Shchelin, 2018). On praxis, it means that the modern Russian authoritarian government has, to a certain extent, limitless opportunities to frame media coverage of an any event, compared to authorities in a democracy. In particular, Russian mainstream media does not face elasticity constraints explored by (Baum&Groeling, 2010) who

argue: “Early in a conflict, elites, especially the president, have an informational advantage that renders public perceptions of ‘reality’ very elastic. As events unfold and as the public gathers more information, this elasticity recedes, allowing alternative frames to challenge the administration’s preferred frame” (Baum & Groeling, 2010, 443).

In contrast to democratic regimes, the Russian media is an example of an “arrested one.” From a media studies perspective, this means the following: the 2000s were a time of optimism and belief in the possibilities of new media to not only combat the production of fakes, but also overcome the problem of agenda-setting and gatekeeping by large national news organizations. It appeared that modern technologies had opened a window of opportunities for journalists to provide their viewers with dozens of competing narratives in a digitized environment. These opportunities included, for instance, networked communication (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008), citizen journalism (Allan & Thorsen, 2009) and citizen witnessing (Allan, 2013). In the world of transparent media, fake production should have become impossible. However, in the 2010s, old concerns about the role of mass media in conflict depiction returned. According to the framework designed by Andrew Hoskings & Ben O’Loughlin (Hoskings, O’Loughlin 2015), war and media relations have entered the third phase—“the arrested warfare.” This phase has brought the return of questions that were considered to have been settled during the previous years.

The process of adaptation of news institutions and governmental organizations has taken place. The very multitude of information available has paved the way towards a principle change in the nature of media production. There is no problem for a viewer to get information; on the contrary, one is overloaded with hundreds of thousands of facts including thousands of fakes. As a result, the goal of modern media has shifted from information production to information verification. Rather than collecting information, which can be exercised by networks of independent bloggers and journalists, mainstream media enjoys the power of agenda setting. Dominant media possesses a kind of authority to produce a particular report or image making it “fair” and recognizable for the massive audience. Against the background of millions of information pieces, “any content that is acclaimed as alternative, oppositional, or

outside only acquires significant value when acknowledged and remediated by the mainstream” (Hoskings, O’Loughlin , 2015, 1323).

All the descriptions of the character of the Russian media environment is necessary to indicate the often-undervalued element of Russian propaganda. Having no uncontrolled competitors for the hegemonic narrative in media, the authority can afford to ignore the contestation element of any news message. As the result, the Russian government enjoys a unique kind of recourse – the power to create a TV reality, which will dominate the popular discourse. What is more, this kind of reality does not have to comply with actual events in the country or around the globe. In other words, because domestic media ecology is so comfortable for the Russian elite, it can be used as the means of retranslating foreign policy principles and worldviews to fit their beliefs. Counter-intuitively, precisely because mainstream media is not independent in Russia and has no agency of its own, as well as having its audience consist of a population who takes its messages at face value, pro-governmental media discourse can be treated as the reflection of the deep-rooted beliefs and principles of Russian foreign-policy decision-makers.

At the same time, there is a lack of studies that genuinely attempt to deconstruct the message of Russian pro-governmental media. Most are focused on treating media exclusively as an instrument of state policy (Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014; Van Herpen 2016) based on the frameworks of "agenda setting" (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) and "gatekeeping" (White, 1997). For this research, such an approach of the data treatment is too narrow. Instead, this thesis applies an alternative to the instrumental approach that treats media as the “spaces of appearances” (Silverstone, 2007; Arendt, 1998), places where political practices are played out (Livingstone, 2009). From this standpoint Russian pro-governmental media can be treated as a reliable source of data on Russian foreign policy hegemonic discourse, and that can provide an insight into the logic behind Russian foreign policy formation processes.

#### Data Timeline Justification

The main body of data consists of every, roughly 1-hour long, “Vesti Nedeli” issued from May 2015 to March 2016 – the period from the beginning of the

legitimation campaign for the intervention in Syria in Russian media until the first official “withdrawal” of Russian troops from Syria. This timeline is established empirically. Using the media analytic platform of Medialogia (<http://www.mlg.ru/>), it became possible to collect the data on the intensity of the presence of certain themes on Russian federal TV channels, including the war in Syria. The Medialogia database is usually used by PR-specialists and, unfortunately, does not provide free access to its files for the average user. However, upon my request, I was provided with short-term access (3 days) to the database and managed to collect all necessary data, which can be presented in raw format upon request. The results of the data collection are presented in Table 1 and indicate that, in as early as the first month, one can observe the trend of the increased presence of the “Syria” problem in the media— precisely in May 2015. Following this timeline, the research performs qualitative discourse analysis of all Sunday news programmes of Vesti Nedeli with Dmitrii Kiselev. Fortunately, all data on this news program is available online on the official you-tube channel of Vesti media:

([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMLaYWKvM0Q&list=PL6MnxjOjSRsRzsISAIU-JcbTi7\\_a5wB\\_v](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMLaYWKvM0Q&list=PL6MnxjOjSRsRzsISAIU-JcbTi7_a5wB_v)). In total 36 news programs were analyzed.

In sum, the proposed methodology is adequate for the research question of the paper. The thesis has a reliable data source, with the data itself being representative of the problem analyzed. The selected research method allows the deconstruction of the existing hegemonic narrative and addresses the implicit problem of the logic of foreign policy actions hidden behind the words of Russian propaganda makers. In the following chapter of the thesis, the findings of this qualitative analysis – the detailed deconstruction of the legitimation of the Russian intervention into the Syrian civil war as it can be seen in Russian mainstream media – are presented.

## Chapter II. Russian Narrative of its intervention in Syrian civil war

To begin the analysis of Russian military operations one has to start with the analysis of the exact goals and tasks set by the Russian military leadership in front of the Russian troops and its allies. It is not an easy assignment as, even during the first period of intervention, official goals have been changed several times. Initially Vladimir Putin claimed that the main goal of Russian intervention is to fight against the Islamic State. What is more, officially the upper house of the Russian Parliament issued a mandate to Putin on September 30th to provide “exclusively air support for Syrian government forces in their operation against ISIS.” During his speech at the UN headquarters on the second day of the Russian intervention (September 28, 2015) Putin argued for the creation of an international coalition of "all forces that resist the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations." Two weeks later, the fight against ISIS suddenly turned into the stabilization of the legitimate regime of Bashar Assad.

In February 2016, Sergey Lavrov returned to the counter-terrorism narrative as justification of Russian air strikes: "Russian airstrikes won't be terminated until we actually annihilate terrorist organizations: ISIL, Jabhat an-Nusra and the like. I see no reasons to terminate these strikes." This, among other goals, claimed to be the rationale behind Russian intervention as mentioned by the Russian commander-in-chief: "to clear Syria from the terrorist fighters and protect Russia from possible terrorist attacks" and "stabilising the legitimate power in Syria and creating the conditions for political compromise" (Levada, 2015).

As the result, the narrative of Russian intervention into the Syrian civil war has never been exactly structured within the statements of Russian officials. In contrast, from the very beginning the intervention consisted of multiple ideas, which were complexly intertwined during TV shows. Consequently, to investigate the narrative of

the Russian intervention from the Russian perspective, one has to deconstruct it first to its elements and then reveal how they were connected.

Therefore, the structure of this part of the thesis is as follows. The first chapter is mostly descriptive and divided into three parts: Part One will present what can be called the “rationalist narrative” of intervention; Part Two will reveal the “ethical narrative,” and Part Three will be concerning the “diplomatic narrative” of the conflict. In the second chapter the collected data and revealed narratives will be analyzed in the context of existing literature on Russian identity and its connection with foreign policy.

## Part I. “Rationalist narratives”

### 1.1 “Preventive measures”

The intervention in Syria has been justified in the Russian state narrative in multiple ways. This thesis begins with an analysis of the narrative that can be considered the “most official,” since it was used by the Russian president during the first days of intervention. In particular, the purpose of Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war has been proclaimed necessary to protect Russia against the terrorist threat of ISIS. To be more precise, Russian media claimed that, “should the government of Bashar Assad fall, terrorists will get resources to move toward our borders: in Central Asia, the Caucasus and Russia. Therefore, it is better to stop the barbarians there” (VN, 27/09/2015, 3:39)<sup>1</sup>. However, in contrast to other narratives, the idea of “preventive measures” serves as a background for more important Russian propaganda theses. There are several reasons to claim this.

To begin with, the first references to this narrative appear not long before the intervention began – on September the 13<sup>th</sup>, when the show runner announced that the direct threat for Damascus posed during the offense of terrorist forces creates a new challenge to Russia (VN, 13/09/2015, 8:51).

Secondly the “preventive measures” narrative has been highlighted only during four issues of the TV program: on September 20<sup>th</sup> “barbaric Caliphate is crawling towards Russia” (VN, 20/09/2015, 16:29), on September 27<sup>th</sup> and repeated October 4<sup>th</sup> “active defense against closing enemy” (VN, 4/10/2015, 3:23), later on December 27<sup>th</sup> “we must not let the hordes of terrorists from there come to us” (VN, 27/12/2015, 6:57), and finally referring to it on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 2016 “had we not interfered the barbarians would have already been here” (VN, 20/03/2015, 3:39). In contrast to the screen time devoted to the promotion and discussion of other elements of war in Syria, the idea of “preventive measures” was referred to only during the launch of the

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<sup>1</sup> The way references to video-data are presented is following: VN stands for “Vesti Nedel” - the name of the program, than comes the day the program was aired and finally the exact timing of the citation on the respected video. Since all programs are taken from the official channels in the list of references only references to the databases are given.

operation in its first “completion” and before the New Year when the general narrative of Russian intervention in Syria was re-affirmed.

In sum, a detailed analysis of the TV news report puts “preventive measures” justification of the intervention in a delicate position. On the one hand it is an integral part of the general narrative of the Russian operation in Syria. It marks its beginning and its end. On the other hand its importance in contrast to other narratives is relatively small, as if the Russian media itself does not fully believe in the potential of this idea to justify the operation in the eyes of the domestic audience.

## 1.2 “Military exercise”

The second rationalist narrative of the intervention in Syria is the demonstration of Russian military might and military exercise of Russian pilots in a real war environment. For example, on October the 11<sup>th</sup>, Russian television has been praising “first combat experience of the newest Russian ballistic missile” (VN, 10/10/2015, 5:28). Moreover, for the following ten minutes, Dmitrii Kisiliov had been comparing the Russian missile “Kalibr” to the American “Tomahawk.” Later the narrative of “military might demonstration” was repeated on December 27<sup>th</sup>.

A key difference in this narrative is that it has never been announced, but rather presented in a purely visual way for direct TV-reports from the battlegrounds. In fact, often the “Syria-part” of Sunday news broadcasts had been constructed from two parts – which in this thesis I define as “preaching” and “war porn.” “Preaching” involves the show-runner explaining the logic, goal, and meaning of the event to the audience. Whereas “war porn” intends to entertain the viewers using computer-game type videos. The former is essentially textual, and it is the “preaching” which will be the focus of the analysis of this thesis. The latter is mostly visual. This thesis won’t analyze this element of Russian media coverage of the Syrian civil war in detail however, it is important to point out that 5-10 minutes of TV reports from Syrian battlefronts have become essential parts of all Sunday news reports from the begging of the time intervention to the end of the period of observation. This also explains why preference during the military operation was given towards air strikes of different kinds (the newest Su-34

strike fighters, KA-52 attacks helicopters, Buk-M2 missile systems) – they look attractive in federal television reports and helped build an image of power.

What is more, the results of air strikes can be interpreted rather freely in media. In particular, during the first two months of Russian intervention (October –November), Russian military officials reported thousands of destroyed objects of ISIS infrastructure including dozens of headquarters. From a media perspective such a claim does not require validation – it is enough to show images and videos of landing planes and explosions on the ground. Based on these reports already in October, Russians were informed by the federal TV that decisive victory in Syria had already been achieved.

#### Pragmatic narrative summary

Despite being repeated in times of critical junctures, pragmatic justifications for Russian intervention in Syria seem to be the least important for the Russian narrative of intervention into the Syrian civil war. It appears that the discussed arguments of the prevention of the terrorist threat to Russia and the “military exercise” idea are used in order to avoid the need to define the exact goal of Russian intervention.

Consequently, since the pragmatic narrative is so non-central, other justifications for intervention must be analyzed. In particular those that are connected with the problem of the Russian self and Russian understanding of what enemy threatens this self. In the following part, the thesis discusses “ethical” and “moral” segments of the general narrative of the war in Syria that were present on Russian television during the period of observation.

## **Part II. Ethical narratives.**

Though it has never been part of the narrative as announced by top Russian officials of the intervention into the Syrian civil war, ethical considerations have proven to be the central part of the war narrative on Russian television. What is more, in contrast to rationalist elements of the war narrative, “ethical discourse” is constantly re-affirmed and follows the structure proposed by Ernesto Laclau (Laclau, 2014) and Shantal Mouffe (Mouffe, 2000), who developed the concept of the “constitutive other.” This 'other' creates meaningful context for the nation self's development which, in its turn, is possible only through such an interaction with other members of international society. In the context of war it also means that, before a nation resorts to violence in order to protect certain values or defend certain interests, it has to build an image of what these interests are. And such an understanding emerges only as a result of interaction with others or reflections on the previous experiences of such an interaction.

Consequently, in the following parts of the chapter, the thesis will discuss ethical oppositions proposed by the Russian media and what they can mean as a representation of the Russian-self in the context of the war in Syria.

### **2.1 “Evil against good” or “Those who cause destruction” and “Those who protect and restore”**

From the very beginning of its coverage of potential Russian intervention into Syria, the Russian media has been promoting the story according to which the fight in Syria is nothing less than a clash between good and evil.

The first and most obvious evil is ISIS. ISIS is always presented in Russian media as a violent force which seeks to destroy civilization itself: “they perform the unthinkable: kill innocent children for not fasting” (VN, 28/06/2015, 1:09:22). “In Summer 2015, barbarians of the pseudo-islamic Caliphate have been spreading across Syria and Iraq, they slaughtered Christians, slaughtered army officers, sunk cages full of people, destroyed the monuments of cultural heritage” (VN, 21/02/2016, 3:02). Moreover, religious motives are directly integrated into the narrative on several occasions, for example: “they [ISIS] seek to kill all Christians” (VN, 27/09/2015, 1:28:10). Therefore, the “barbaric Caliphate is the challenge for Russia and the world”

(VN, 27/12/2015, 4:31). Consequently, Russian actions in Syria are nothing less than a “fight to save people’s lives, to save the future of civilization” (VN, 06/12/2015, 6:59), the “fight of good against evil in Syria ... good prevails” (VN, 13/03/2016, 0:47). Thus, the first layer of the ethical dimension of Russian actions in Syria is a global fight between forces of order and forces of chaos. And this fight, according to the Russian president, is “just and right” (VN, 20/03/2016, 19:04) with Vladimir Putin acting in Syria “with the generosity of a Russian and efficiency of a German” (VN, 01/11/2015, 20:32).

It is important to note that nothing is said about the political or economic motives of either side of the conflict. Instead, the Russian media presents the picture of an apocalyptic struggle in which Russia fights on the side of the “good guys.” What is more, this narrative of fighting on the side of justice is constantly reaffirmed during the whole period of observation. It appears that moral elements in Russian logic behind the decision to intervene into the Syrian civil war are far more important to Russian media than any utilitarian motive; and the result of Russian actions in Syria as it was summarized in March 2016 is that they “stopped a global, terrifying evil” (VN, 13/03/2016, 19:28).

However, ISIS is not the only destructive force the Russian narrative was focused on. If anything, ISIS is only at the forefront of a bigger fight between the forces that promote the destruction of state institutions and Russia who keeps peace and balance. Behind the self-evident evil of ISIS there is a hidden puppet master – the USA, in particular, and the West in general.

The first reference to the USA in the context of a global fight between good and evil can be found in a broadcast from June 28, 2015. While discussing the consequences of terrorist attacks in Tunisia, the Russian media claimed the United States was responsible for the chaos ruining the region: “The Arab spring, orchestrated by the USA without any feeling of responsibility, has destroyed the traditional way of life in the region and moved millions of people out of balance” (VN, 28/06/2015, 16:45). Consequently, according to the same report, ISIS “has been brought up by the USA ... after they **destroyed** the state in Iraq” (VN, 28/06/2015, 1:07:41, 1:07:50), with the USA losing control over it (VN, 28/06/2015, 17:50) and “ISIS has been created by the USA to fight against Assad in Syria” (VN, 12/07/2015, 1:36:55).

In contrast to the “rationalist” narrative, references to the narrative of “destructive force” have been repeated one way or another during the period of observation: “Damascus has been fighting against terrorists supported by the might of the USA and the West” (VN, 13/09/2015, 11:04), “In Syria the USA has been fighting on the same side with the terrorist Caliphate and trying to **destroy** Syria” (VN, 20/09/2015, 10:19), “due to the US interventions, state institutions and way of life has been **destroyed** globally ... instead of the triumph of democracy and progress, the USA brought violence, poverty and social **catastrophe**” (VN, 4/10/2015, 28:00), “the USA interfered [in countries] – **left chaos** behind them – left – who should clean it?” (VN, 4/10/2015, 34:48), “the USA acts with no sense of responsibility **destroying** countries” (VN, 13/12/2015, 13:16) etc.

Following the logic of linguistic opposition, Russian actions and motivation has been described using the following metaphor of restoration and peace: “Russia will keep supporting the government of Bashar Assad as the **healthy** force in its fight against terrorism” (VN, 13/09/2015, 09:59); “Russia **saves** Obama from the consequences of the failure of his policy in Syria” (VV, 27/09/2015, 14:19); “[The Russian goal is] to **strengthen** governmental institutions wherever they survived” (VV, 4/10/2015, 32:24); “Russia **protects** its allies” (VN, 11/10/2015, 11:11); “The Russian goal is to **support** the legitimate government” (VN, 18/10/2015, 12:28); and “**Putin is an obstacle for those who want to destroy countries**” (VN, 31/01/2015, 14:55).

Anti-Americanism has long been the cornerstone of Russian foreign policy discourse. What is important for further analysis is the fact that the USA is not criticized through interests-based arguments, but as ethically flawed. This pattern is developed even stronger in the next opposition that seems to be central for Russian propaganda: “truth” against “fakes”

## 2.2 “Honesty and Truth” against “Lies and Fakes”

As the thesis discussed previously, Russian actions in Syria have been presented as the fight between good and evil. However, the civil war in Syria was not just between the government of Bashar Assad and ISIS. By the moment of Russian intervention, the US-led coalition had been performing air strikes **against ISIS for 5 months**. What is more, since ISIS and the USA were nothing else but different sides of evil, the Russian

narrative had to provide its audience with an explanation of why one evil force is fighting against the other. In the following part, this thesis discusses another central opposition in the Syrian civil war discourse on Russian television, which seems to provide an answer to this paradox – “truth against lies”.

Adjectives used most frequently on Russian television, while talking about Russian actions in Syria and events surrounding them, are “honest” and “real” – “Russia is ready to participate in a **real** anti-terrorist coalition with an **honest** purpose and **real** coordination of the actions of all healthy forces involved” (VN, 13/09/2015, 10:10), “Russia is open to ally with all powers who **honestly** fight against terrorism” (VN, 11/10/2015, 30:21), “we must **honestly** unite our efforts, we must **honestly** stop tearing the planet apart” (VN, 24/01/2016, 4:02), “Russia has no hidden intentions, it is **honest**” (VN, 14/02/2016, 15:51), “due to powerful and **honest** airstrikes terrorists are retreating” (VN, 21/02/2016, 5:30), “truly grateful Syrians who kept telling me: ‘Russians are **honest**’” (VN, 13/03/2016, 0:47).

Accordingly, while discussing the character of two anti-terrorist coalitions, the Russian narrative usually followed the binary opposition “real” and “fake.” Discounting, in fact, the sincerity of the international fight against ISIS which had begun before the decision of the Russian government to intervene in the Syrian civil war was announced. Already as of the 28<sup>th</sup> of June, the following narrative had been presented to the Russian audience: “Americans and the West, following them, **claim** to fight against terrorist Caliphate and it appears they bomb someone, somewhere. **In reality though** ISIS is now acting not as a terrorist group but as a state, with its own foreign trade ... selling it to buyers in the West” (VN, 28/06/2018, 1:10:43).

During the first months of Russian intervention, nearly every Sunday news report from Syria reaffirmed this idea: “Americans and their **fake ATC** dare to blame Assad for hypocrisy” (VN, 20/09/2015, 12:53), “there are two coalitions – **fake one**, that allowed terrorist to advance and **effective one**, led by Putin, whether Americans like its action or not” (VN, 27/09/2015, 4:15), “the USA failed to achieve any visible results, may be because they bomb wrong side, in a wrong place and time?” (VN, 27/09/2015, 33:55), “if the coalition **really wants to fight** against ISIS?” (VN, 11/10/15, 31:15), “The American goal is to get rid of Assad, ours is to get rid of

terrorists” (VN, 25/10/2015, 39:56), and “nobody wanted to fight with terrorists **for real**” (VN, 21/02/2016, 3:56).

It is clear that for the Russian narrative, the issue of “truth” against “lie” is one at the very heart. It appears that, for the Russian leadership, it was important to present Russia not just as another force or great power projecting its interests but as a party to a conflict which acts based on a higher moral standard than its rivals. The following chapter of the thesis will discuss the potential logic behind such a particular way to treat the conflict. However, before this, one has to uncover other elements of the Russian narrative

### 2.3 “Those who can” and “Those who can not”

Another opposition between the Russian self and the ‘other’ is connect with the “truth against lie” problem but differs in its conclusions. As it was discussed before in the Russian frame, key attention has been attached to the problem of the difference between Russian and Western actions against ISIS. The first half of the Russian argument presumes that Western coalition simply only pretends to fight ISIS, however its second half implies that the West is also incapable of completing the mission to defeat terrorists and therefore it needs the help of Russia.

In particular, this discourse can be observed in the statements such as: “there are no efficient actions against ISIS yet” (VN, 13/09/15, 10:20), the “fate of both Russia and Europe depends on Russian actions in Syria” (VN, 13/09/15, 25:31), “Europe can not see the true picture in Syria” (VN, 20/09/15, 10:19), “Europe is standing in front of the problem it cannot solve” (VN, 4/10/2015, 3:23), “for the 4<sup>th</sup> time in its history Russia saves Europe” (VN, 4/10/2015, 31:08), “the USA fails to do the job [winning against ISIS]” (VN, 4/10/2015, 33:55) etc. Or, as was stated by the Russian president, “it is with the participation of the Russian military men that the Syrian Army and the patriotic forces of Syria managed to cardinaly stem the tide in the fight against international terrorism and gain momentum in all directions” (Izvestia, 2016).

Connected with this part of the narrative is the depiction of the migration crisis in Europe. Though this depiction is subject for separate research, there are several points to be made concerning the image of Europe as an actor, incapable of dealing with its problems. First, reports regarding the migration crisis are usually followed, or

preceded, by reports from Syria and were often as long. For example, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September, a week before Russian intervention began, a report about the refugee threat was 20 minutes long – only 4 minutes longer than a report about Syria. Secondly, migrants are always presented as forces of chaos, destruction and panic. Thirdly, within the Russian narrative this chaos is exclusively the result of US activity in the Middle East: “Refugees flee to Europe not from Assad but from terrorists who are encouraged by the USA to fight against the legitimate government in Damascus” (VN, 13/09/2015, 13:04) “Obama pushes the lines of refugees towards Europe” (VN, 13/09/2015, 13:40).

In contrast to the “truth-fake” opposition, the idea of an incompetent West is different from the perspective of potential actions morally available to Russia. First and foremost, it has allowed Russia to make room for dialog and cooperation with the West within its discourse. Being completely out of the question before the intervention has launched this call for unity with the West has become integral part of the Russian narrative after the operation has been launched. How this idea has become integrated in the discussed oppositions is the subject of the next part of the chapter.

### **Ethical narratives summary**

After the reconstruction of the ethical elements in the Russian narrative of its intervention in the Syrian civil war, a general image of the Russian self can be created. This thesis summarizes it in the following way: **“we are those who can prevail over evil because we are honest and just and therefore good”**. In contrast to pragmatic narratives, this image of self has been present during the entire period of observation and could be considered a central pillar of the Russian intervention narrative as a whole. Therefore, the operation in Syria from the perspective of the Russian narrative is clearly not about pragmatism, but rather an area where the Russian self can present itself to the world.

However, as in any system of discourse, it is not enough to determine what is “self” and who is the significant ‘other,’ especially when the ‘other’ is not homogeneous. It is equally important how communication between the two is possible. Consequently, the next question for analysis is how the Russian “self” is connected with the international environment and what it wants from its partners within the Russian narrative.

### Part III. “Diplomatic narrative”

The Russian intervention in Syria has happened not in vacuum, but in an international context. As it was discussed in the previous part, this context from the Russian narrative perspective is filled with fakes, insincerity, evil powers that spread chaos around the world, or incompetent partners. However, in such a context, the Russian narrative of its interaction with this world proves to not be based exclusively on conflict. Instead, two main elements of the diplomatic narrative Russian media and officials have been advocating since the very beginning of operation are “openness to cooperation” and “return to international norms of law.” In the following part, these narratives will be presented and analyzed in terms of their connection with the Russian self – revealed previously.

#### 3.1 Russian openness towards cooperation

For a country that considers itself to be the bearer of truth in a world of fakes, Russia has been, to a certain extent, counter intuitively open towards cooperation in Syria and eager to emphasize that even the decision to intervene has not been taken in a context of isolation.

The first part in a “Russian openness” narrative regards Russian diplomatic activity. During September 27<sup>th</sup>, a broadcast show runner listed the diplomatic activity of the Russian president for 5 minutes straight, which might have been connected with the Russian decision to intervene. The way it was presented, one event quickly after another, leaves no doubt that it was important to show how Russian intervention is connected with diplomatic influence and connectedness with other countries that Russia has. Characteristic of this is the interpretation of one of the calls between Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama: “Obama calls Putin, again, - **done with the isolation**” (VN, 27/09/2015, 6:41). Further, in the same report, Russian-American contact has been highlighted again: “meeting with Obama, whom **we did not have to ask for it**, is in Putin’s schedule” (VN, 27/09/2015, 16:05).

The second element of an “openness narrative” has been a repeating theme throughout the period of observation – Russian eagerness to cooperate with the USA in

particular. On October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015 it was claimed that “our [Russian] and American positions became closer – this is good” (VN, 4/10/2015, 14:01). The following week, the Russian deputy minister of defense was cited as saying: “let us [Russian and US military] stop talking through media, **let us sit together** and solve the problem that we are facing” (VN, 4/10/2015, 20:50) with a show runner lamenting, “we invite Americans **to coordinate our efforts**, however they refuse and risk finding themselves in isolation” (20:50), “we are **open for coordinated work** and it is **time to join us**” (VN, 4/10/2015, 31:04). The week after this, the main report from Syria had a title “Russia and the USA – moment of truth” reiterating that “Russia calls the USA **to unite the efforts** in order to find the political solution to conflict in Syria” (VN, 11/10/2015, 13:49). Later, Dmitrii Kisilev claimed, “Syria can become a model for cooperation in other cases” (VN, 11/10/2015, 43:11). On the 15<sup>th</sup> of November, the same hope was expressed, “can we do it [defeat ISIS] together?” (VN, 15/11/2015, 15:59), and the same on November 22<sup>nd</sup>, “will a joint response to ISIS threat emerge?” (VN, 22/11/2015:11). However, for the following two months this narrative had altogether disappeared. It seemed that what Russia wanted the most was an alliance, or at least friendly cooperation with the USA. However, it was not happening, and the explanation for the failure of this cooperation is of a very particular kind, according to Russian media.

As it was discussed previously, the general image of the USA in the Russian narrative is one of the “chaotic force that spreads destruction.” With such a force it would be unreasonable to seek cooperation, but not according to Russian media. What is blocking cooperation at this time is not the spread of chaos on its own, but the way these actions are performed – from the position of an actor that has a moral right to do so without considering the Russian opinion on matters in question. In fact, parallel to the calls for cooperation, the Russian narrative highlights what is wrong in American behavior. Some of the most characteristic examples are as such: “we cannot accept the ‘**chosen**’ character of American politics” (VN, 4/10/2015, 28:39), “Obama, who once called Americans the **chosen** nation, now is not even able to formulate the goals of his policy” (VN, 18/10/15, 16:35), “we cannot have a dialog with the politics based on the idea of being chosen” (VN, 25/10/2015, 43:11).

According to Russian interpretation, such exclusiveness means the ability to act with no constraints; to act by breaking the “rules of the game.” Instead, Russia must act in the world where there is a need to “return in the framework of international law those actors who are used to the fact that **only they** create the rules” (VN, 25/10/2015, 20:88). Before Russia interfered in Syria, “Americans were used to the world where they can afford to break agreements without any consequences, refuse to negotiate, destroy countries, lie in the Security Council” (VN, 25/10/2015, 21:11). This is the main reason behind any Russian-American conflict according to Russian media, “Putin does not allow [the USA] to destroy countries ... prevents the USA from controlling the world, because he himself is not giving up” (VN, 31/01/16, 14:55).

Within Russian discourse, the “rules of the game” are connected with international law, or at least with the way Russia understands it: “[we support] the idea of the common rules of the game, commitment to what international law is” (VN, 4/10/2015, 28:55). It was highlighted on several occasions in Russian media that, in contrast to the US-led coalition, the one lead by Russia acts within legal constraints For example: “Putin’s actions are in perfect compliance with Russian and international law” (VN, 4/10/2015, 9:22); “the **moral and legal purity** of our decisions” (VN, 4/10/2015, 11:29); “[Americans can join us] in order **to make their actions legal**” (VN, 11/10/2015, 31:04).

A clear direction toward dialog with the USA in the Russian narrative returned with new strength in February 2016, a month before the first “end” of Russian intervention occurred. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of February, a primary report from Syria was titled “Russia – the USA: looking for solution.” According to Russian media, it became possible because Russian status in the eyes of the USA had changed. In particular, the “[Americans] themselves decided to interact with Russia as with a real power, because all other alternatives have failed” (VN, 14/02/2016, 13:59). A status changed occurred at this time, though not because the USA believed in Russia’s superior moral position, but because Russian actions were effective. “We [Russia] achieved progress both in the fight against terrorist and in finding common ground with the USA ... **obviously these two things are connected** with each other” (VN, 14/02/2016, 13:59:16:11), “already in October, right after the launch of Russian operations in Syria, Putin suggested coordination between the Russian and American militaries – the American side has

been resisting, but now **in view of the risk of a big war and clear successes of Russia**, they had to sit with us in front of the military maps” (VN, 28/02/2016, 12:46). But Russian success was not only on the battle ground and, for the following three minutes, the report presented a non-stop stream of phone calls and negotiations on Syria matter happened with Russian participation, which a show-runner labeling it as a “diplomatic **push**” and “diplomatic marathon.” Summarizing this push, the Russian media claims: “we had to **achieve** the moment when joint actions with the USA become possible ... we had to persuade Americans not only through negotiations” (VN, 28/02/2016, 21:21). Moreover, while discussing joint Russian-American action, the Russian narrative goes as far as labeling “American crimes” in Iraq, Libya as calmly for Russian narrative as possible, as “deeds of the past – experience” (VN, 14/02/2016, 15:51).

While summarizing the role and place of the USA in the Russian narrative of Syrian intervention, the following logic emerges. From the very beginning, Russia wanted common rules that would guide the policies of all countries, however the existing rules would not work due to the American exceptionalism. In such a world, the only thing left for Russia is to support its position by force and, instead of good will, “force” is working.

### 3.2 “Reasonable force”

The idea of “working force” in its connection with international norms is the final constitutive part of the “diplomatic” portion of the Russian narrative regarding the Syrian civil war. Such a force is the continuation of Russian understanding of itself, as discussed previously. Being the power that protects, is honest, and is capable of dealing with global threats, Russia offers rules for the game, which, from its perspective, are alternative to American.

The key difference is the supposed inclusion of all parties interested in a problem – not through actions themselves but through way of acting. In fact, the conflict “inclusion” vs. “exclusion” can be traced through most of the reports. The Russian intervention happened after “we listened to everybody and took into account the interests of all parties involved” (VN, 4/10/2015, 9:30). In contrast to the USA,

according to the Russian president, “we were not warned by anybody [about the start of anti-ISIS operations of the US], but we did it” (VN, 11/10/2015, 30:55). As the result of Russian actions, “the world, which was slipping into chaos, became more balanced and therefore safe” (VN, 25/10/2015, 21:35).

Here, one can find reference to the oppositions of “honesty vs. hypocrisy” and “chaos vs. order,” both crucial for defining the Russian self. Indeed, while investigating the Russian narrative, one can often create an image that Russia is against any global and international element of modern world. However, it appears to be more complicated. Russia is not against global trends, rather it is only against those that ignore what is called within its narrative the “traditional way of life.” In that respect, the Russian approach resists such global processes as democratization (Arab spring) and rapid social changes connected with it (progressive agenda of LGBT-rights, etc) while instead seeking a more dispersed global community where different “way of lives” can coexist with no one being given moral superiority. Attempts to promote the first approach are never fruitful and only lead to chaos and are therefore “irresponsible” and evil. The only alternative to it, from a Russian perspective, is communication between different ways of thinking, and this approach is the one Russia offers to the world.

Furthermore, according to the Russian narrative, the only way to defeat ISIS is through genuine international cooperation. This narrative can also be traced through the entire period of observation: “humanitarian catastrophe can be stopped only if the whole world unites” (VN, 13/09/2015, 28:31), “our goal is to unite efforts in the fight against a common enemy” (VN, 27/09/2015, 11:41) etc. What is clear from these calls is the way Russian leadership understands conflict and terrorism – as an opportunity to cooperate.

In sum, the “diplomatic narratives” of Russian intervention in Syria are essentially connected with “ethical” ones. These narratives show how the Russian “self” is capable of communicating with the others. What is crucial, from the perspective of the thesis, is the element of supposed openness in the narrative. A desire to be talked to and desire to be seen is not typically the goal of a nation that seeks to become domestically as closed from Western influence as possible. In the concluding part of this chapter, the revealed narrative and oppositions will be summarized to enable easier analysis of the revealed narrative, not just from the perspective observed in Russian

media, but in a broader context of other events that happened before and after Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war.

## Summary

The table below presents the results of primary data analysis. In this chapter, this information has been addressed in a purely descriptive manner, in order to understand the narrative as it is.

Table 1. The official narrative of Russian Intervention in Syria

Type of Considerations	Russian “Self”	Russian opponent/ enemy	Russian goal, derived from the logic
Pragmatic	Protector of Homeland	ISIS	To defeat ISIS before it becomes capable of attacking Russia
	Strong military power	Those who do not believe in it	To train Russian army, to make those who do not believe it see it
Ethical	Honesty	Hypocrisy	<b>To be (?)</b>
	Order, Good	Chaos, Evil, ISIS, USA	
	Capable power	Weak hypocrites	To protect the weak, who suffer from hypocrisy (?)
Diplomatic	Openness, compliance with rules and norms	US Exceptionalism	To break diplomatic isolation, to become accepted as equal by the USA
	Dialog	Actions without considerations of others’ interests	To demonstrate the need to change the rules of the game to make them more inclusive

As it follows from the table, it is difficult to define one purpose of Russian intervention in Syria even from within the Russian narrative. The dispersion between

the goals and the possibility to achieve them in principle is striking. However, it is important to point out that within this discourse, any Russian actions can be explained as a step towards one goal or the other.

What is the most difficult to define is the potential ethical goals of Russian intervention. Therefore, in the table there are question marks next to each suggested aim. A certain paradox appears. On the one hand, based on the frequency of references towards ethical considerations, as well as its central place in the narrative, it is clearly a crucial element in the Russian narrative of intervention in Syria. On the other hand, based on the data openly presented in Russian media, it is hard to tell what Russia wants from its action. What could be a tangible result that would satisfy Russian leadership?

Finally, it is clear even from the Russian narrative itself that intervention in Syria was, for the most part, not about Syria. One can accept that Russia genuinely wanted to stop ISIS and help Bashar Assad, though several times Russian leadership expressed readiness to accept free democratic elections in Syria after the terrorist threat will be eradicated –most notably in the statement on this account made in 2012 by Russian Foreign minister Sergei Lavrov (which was never revoked). However, even in that case, other considerations of its relationship with the West are more important to Russian leadership. From that perspective, problems in Syria serve as context for more general arguments that Russia has with the current system.

Consequently, to get a deeper understanding of what meaning the intervention in Syria had for Russian leadership in 2015, one has to go deeper into descriptive analysis. In the next chapter, the revealed findings will be analyzed in the context of existing literature on Russian foreign policy and Russian identity in its relations to foreign policy decisions.

## Chapter III. Russian Narrative in context

In the previous chapter, the Russian narrative of intervention in the Syrian civil war has been analyzed exclusively from its own perspective. In this part of the thesis, the same narrative will be considered in the context of existing literature as well as theories of international relations. The ultimate goal of this chapter is to understand what the conducted analysis can add to the existing research and, consequently, how it can broaden understanding of the motivation behind Russian foreign policy.

### Realist considerations

In terms of international relations theories, one potential interpretation of the revealed narrative is the treatment of a Russian legitimization campaign as a rhetorical action. The Institute for the Study of War – a nongovernmental American think tank – has been tracking all Russian airstrikes in Syria and have revealed that the absolute majority of them was directed, not against ISIS, but against the armed Syrian opposition. From the perspective of the Institute, this gap between claimed policies and real actions can be explained in the following way: “The Kremlin framed its intervention in Syria as a response to the growing threat posed by ISIS, recognizing that the terrorist group posed a joint threat to Russia and the West. This false yet plausible narrative allowed Russia to curtail the West’s ability to unite against Russia’s efforts to bolster President Assad and project military force in the Middle East...Moscow’s decision to disguise its intervention in Syria as a response to ISIS is an example of the Russian doctrine of reflexive control: the use of disinformation to alter an opponent’s perception of events and lead the adversary to respond in a manner that ultimately favors Russia” (Institute for the Study of War, 2015). Another realist explanation suggests: “Russia’s deployment of military might to Syria is a tactical move to protect its client and ally, Syrian President Bashar Assad” (Covington, 2015). What is more, the demonstration of power in Syria is nothing else but an attempt to deter western influence in the Middle East and impede the security system that has been built in the region by the USA and its allies – an idea that has been expressed by Angela Stent, for

example, “The Syrian gambit is thus part of a broader move to recoup Russian influence in the Middle East” (Stent, 2016).

It is hard to argue, based on the revealed narrative, that Russia intended to save Bashar Assad. However, it is equally important that the motivation behind this protection was to save Russia’s client. In the Russian framework, Assad’s regime was worth saving only because it was fighting against absolute evil, supported by Western puppet masters. Consequently, this reasoning is based more on ethical considerations and not just on geo-political gambits. Moreover, should one remain within the realist logic, even more questions emerge. For example, if, for Russia, the support of Bashar Assad’s regime is so important, then why did Russia not voice any concrete commitment towards keeping Assad in power should the pro-governmental forces win the war in Syria?

At the same time, if fighting against ISIS was so important to Russia as it claimed, then the level of its unpreparedness during the first six months of the operation puts the sincerity of these claims into question. For example, once, right after the start of military operation, Vladimir Putin claimed "we make no difference between Sunnies and Shias" (BBC, 2015). Additionally, a second statement was made during a press-conference in December 2015, a month after Turkey shot down a Russian jet that violated its airspace while bombing the positions of local militia supported by Turkey (since they were Turcoman people – ethnically related to Turks). The Russian president had only the comment, “you know, *we did not know a thing about so-called Turcoman*. I know about Turkmen people, our dear Turkmen people, living in Turkmenistan, and here we do not understand a thing [PS] nobody told us a thing” (Putin, 2015).

It proves even more complicated within the realist paradigm to explain the element of “openness for cooperation with the West and the USA,” while also portraying the USA as the reason behind the emergence of this global evil – ISIS. Moreover, this duality is a re-occurring theme in the relationship between Russia and the West: “why does Russia use such strong language as presenting Western nations at one time as “brothers” and “friends,” while at other times castigating them for “betraying” the established principles and agreements?” (Tsygankov, 2014, 347). From a data perspective, while analyzing the Syrian intervention narrative present in media, it is revealed that this duality is the crucial element of the Russian understanding of the

conflict in Syria and global politics in general. Therefore, it cannot be dismissed as a mere propaganda tool as political realism would suggest. Alternative explanations must be found, particularly within other approaches to international relations which analyze the importance of “identity” and “self” and how it correlates with the image discovered previously through the analysis of primary data.

### **Social constructivism on the Russian “self” and “being right” in international relations**

The most common premise concerning Russian foreign policy post-cold war is the assumption that its primary focus has been the restoration of the country’s influence and status in international affairs (Kanet, 2007; Trenin, 2011; Tsygankov, 2005, Stent, 2014). However, any issue of status is an issue of symbolic communication, and Russia is a paradox from this perspective. According to Volgy et al., Russia constitutes a unique category, being a country that believes itself to be a great power without all the capacities of one. What is special about Russia is that, in contrast to other over-achieving status-inconsistent countries that are afraid of losing this status and tend not to take high-risk action (Volgy et al., 2011, p.11-12), Russia clearly conducts highly confrontational foreign policy, being constantly involved in armed conflicts as of 2014, and having previous involvement even in 2008.

To begin with, under Vladimir Putin, symbolic politics in Russia’s foreign policy agenda have become a central pillar, putting issues of security or the economy aside (Forseberg, Heller, Wolf, 2013). Moreover, many scholars consider the lack of status recognition and respect from the partner-countries to be one of the main reasons of crisis in Russia-West relations, which results in the current crisis of trust (Monaghan, 2008; Sakwa, 2008; Stent, 2014; Tsygankov, 2012). Before the crisis in Ukraine, Vincent Pouliot proposed that “if NATO wants Russia to play by the rules of the security-from-the-inside-out game, it should provide enough cultural-symbolic resources to have a minimally successful hand in the game” (Pouliot, 2010, p. 239). Furthermore, as Jeffrey Mankoff argues “a Russia that is sure of itself and its standing in the world is likely to make a more stable, predictable partner for the West” (Mankoff, 2007, p. 133). Such an importance attached to the West is not coincidental. As Ted

Hopf argues, identities are always relational and “the Self and the Other are mutually necessary...identities can only be understood relationally, we can not know what an identity is without relating it to another” (Hopf, 2002). In the context of war this also means that, before a nation resorts to violence in order to protect certain values or defend certain interests, it has to build an image of what those interests are. And such an understanding emerges only as a result of interaction with others or reflections on the previous experiences of such an interaction.

Generally in agreement with the statement of Amrosio (“Russia seeks to be respected as a great power because of deep seated beliefs about its own identity and its place in the world” (Ambrosio, 2005, p. viii)), this thesis also suggest looking deeper into the meaning of “being a great power.” Indeed the notion of Great Power is not self-explanatory, especially in the context of the Russian intervention into the Syrian civil war, and must be conceptualized.

One instrumental definition of a great power is provided by Ivar Neumann: “on the one hand, [great powers] are simply greater in terms of relative resources ... and, on the other hand, they are prestigious due to some superior moral quality.” (Neumann, 2008, 131). But, “what is special about modern Russia is that, in contrast to other over-achieving status-inconsistent countries that are afraid of losing this status and tend not to take high-risk action,” (Volgy et al., 2011, p.11-12) the “Russian Federation is an overachiever, enjoying a Great power status without having the capabilities of a Great power” (Freire, 2011, p. 74). Therefore, one has to investigate what being a Great Power means to Russia. As noted by Anatoliy Reshetnikov, “if the ideological undertone of the Soviet “great projects” was rather explicit, the current ones seem to be anything but ideologically coherent” (Reshetnikov, 2011, 152). The content of a particular discourse of the Russian “self” in the context of war in Syria, as discussed in the previous chapter, suggests that “honor” is not the best way to define Russian understanding of the “great power” as an element of its identity. Instead, one can see a clear emphasis on what is labeled as “being right/good/honest” and therefore “being great”.

Perhaps the most established, theoretical way to approach the phenomenon of the desire of “being right” can be found in the so-called “logic of appropriateness.” A classical study of the logics of action in international relations can be found in the

article of Thomas Risse “‘Let’s Argue!’: Communicative action in World Politics” (Risse, 2000). In his, research Risse defines three logics of action. The first one is the logic of consequence, which “treats the interests, and the preferences of actors as mostly fixed during the process of interaction” (Risse, 2000, 3). Consequently, in this logic of action, “agents participate on the basis of their given identities and interests and try to realize their preferences through strategic behavior” (Risse, 2000, 3). In contrast to the logic of consequences, the logic of appropriateness presumes that: “human actors are imagined to follow rules that associate particular identities to particular situations, approaching individual opportunities for action by asserting similarities between current identities and choice dilemmas and more general concepts of self and situations” (Risse, 2000, 4). In terms of the logic of international relations, appropriateness would also imply following the norms of the international community. And indeed, in the Russian narrative of the intervention in Syria, the importance attached to the idea of “global rules of the game,” as well as anger and disdain towards powers that destroy these rules, is strongly traceable.

Another possible answer to this question is one of honor: “the concept of honor is often at the heart of how a nation expresses its historical experience and formulates a moral purpose in world politics. Honor defines what is a “good” and “virtuous” course of action for a state vis-à-vis other members of international society” (Tsygankov, 2012,20). Ted Hopf highlighted the dependency of “great power” identity on international recognition and hierarchical identity structures (Hopf, 2002, 190).

However, as we’ve seen before, for Russia the norms of international law are valid only as long as Russia is involved in the process of its creation. It is clear that the Russian “desire to be right” cannot be explained by the logic of appropriateness on a level of formal rules-following behavior. What is more, within “being right” in the Russian discourse, morality and legality goes hand in hand. Such a correlation in regards to foreign policy, as well as such a strong belief in what Ivar Neuman would call “superior moral quality” (Neumann, 2008, 131), could not exist within the traditional logic of appropriateness. There should have been a rhetorical model to support such a belief, and this thesis would argue that such a model is the model of a “just war” or even a “holy war.” In the following part of the thesis, the origins of this

model will be demonstrated, as well as the parallels and references between the model and the discourse of Russian intervention in Syria.

## Fight to be right?

### Rhetorical model of War

War has always been an integral part of Russian identity, but in the 20th century the historical myth of the Great Patriotic War has become “the most important component in defining the identity of the Soviet peoples” (Uldricks, 2009, 60). This war can be considered an equivalent to moral purpose and is essential for a community’s existence (Reus-Smit, 2009). What is more, the way the Great Patriotic war is constructed in modern Russia differs from other countries.

In particular, the Russian mainstream avoids talking about the period of 1939-1941 before the German invasion due to the problematic issue of Soviet-German cooperation during this period. Therefore, the main adjective for the German invasion is “sudden” and “traitorous” as if it appeared out of nothing as a force of nature. Moreover, WWII is basically considered in Russian society (its mainstream) as a "sacred value" (Baron, Spranca, 1997; Atran, 2010; Durkheim, 1912, 1995), the acceptance of which by the third party constitutes clear distinction in the "friend-enemy" dichotomy in which Russian people conceptualize modern internal and external political life. Furthermore, WWII possesses absolute moral value precisely because of its essence – the salvation of millions of lives of innocent people from extermination in concentration camps.

At the same time, civilian suffering during WWII allowed the Russian Great Patriotic War narrative to label any attempt to discuss the problem of post-war occupation of Eastern Europe, or Soviet Union responsibility for the conflict, as a means to rehabilitate Nazism. In that sense, Eastern European nations existed only to be saved by the red army, with no agency of its own. In a summarized way, the chain of metaphors of the Great Patriotic War are: *“an evil force has come out of nowhere from outside into some territory – civilians are suffering in this territory – Russia appears and saves the day no matter how much the West damages its efforts”*.

From this discourse a very particular image of war can be derived. First and foremost, the language of war in Russia is not the language of national interest discourse that follows a utilitarian logic of consequence, but instead is the language of justice and truth – the language of the logic of appropriateness. Furthermore, war, the way Russia interprets it, has a very particular value – it allows the country to do

something that is morally good and right. And, finally, by being good in a “holy war,” the Russian discursive model manages to prevent the discussion or criticism of the “dark pages” of Russian history and politics.

In many ways the revealed discursive model of the Russian intervention in Syria correlates with the model of a “holy war” as discussed above. Russia acts as a savior of innocent Syrian people, who are threatened by the force of chaos – terrorism. Such behavior is of “unprecedented moral and legal purity” (VN, 4/10/2015, 9:44). Moreover, there were direct references to the experience of WWII in the reports: the “current coalition is an anti-Hitler one” (VN, 4/10/2015, 30:50). Russian actions in Syria have repeatedly been described as just, honest, and pure with Russia being “good” fighting against “evil”. And following this discursive framework of a “holy war,” evil simply must exist so that Russia can fight it and to be praised for it.

Again, it is easy to label the Russian war narrative as a mere disinformation method, however the Russian elite and society may in fact share the belief that it is through a “just war” that Russia manifests its moral superiority. If a “just war” narrative and desire to be morally strong is what stands behind Russian aggressive behavior, then it is possible to make several conclusions about the way Russia sees itself in the international system and the system itself.

The narrative of a just war being considered as having real value beyond simple propaganda can provide an alternative insight into the objectives of Russian foreign policy. One crucial problem for Russia is international recognition in a form that Russia considers acceptable. Further investigation is required to understand what was missing in Russian-West relations during the first two of Putin’s presidencies. It is clear that Russia does not necessarily want to follow the rules, and instead wants to set them. However, this desire to be constitutive of the post-cold war order as a whole is precisely one of the properties of the Great power that Russia considers itself to be.

Ted Hopf has pointed out that, on the international level, to be a great power means to comply with a “set of oughts and ought nots” while dealing with other countries. And from the Russian perspective, this set of rules may include the right to wage “just wars” even against a background of condemnation from the international community. In fact, going beyond the established set of rules and having the ability to establish and interpret them in a convenient way is the definitive feature of great power

in the current international order, as the only true great power (from the Russian perspective), the USA, did in Iraq, Kosovo, and Ukraine. Even in 2002 Hopf argued that “the only external force capable of affecting Russian discourse in the nearest future after 1999 is US unilateralism” (Hopf, 2002, 269), and apparently such an effect did take place.

What can help to understand the mechanism of the problem between Russia and the West is the work of Janice Mattern, which is focused on the mechanisms that enable the functioning of a security community – a group of states that can trust each other to not use force to settle disputes between them (Mattern, 2001, p.349). In contrast to other security community theorists, like Karl Deutsch and Adler and Barnett, who were interested in whether or not security communities exist, Mattern is focused on the question of how they work. She is not satisfied with an explanation that power plays a minor role in a security community, being substituted by a “we-identity”. For Mattern, one the key properties of a security community is still power and force – not physical, but rather representational. Mattern points out that security communities function through language, with the power to define the content of “we-identity” being no less strong than that of physical force. Identity formation entails oppression and power: the “authority to determine what to include and exclude from the “we” by conferring, deterring or denying the relevance of certain knowledge to the community” (Mattern, 2001, p.354). This representational force is no less powerful or mentally painful for an object who is threatened to be excluded from such a “we-community.” In other words, “the forceful power is not excluded from the security community – nor by extension from any regime dependent upon identity” (Mattern, 2001, p. 387).

## Two logics of international

As revealed in the previous chapter, throughout all discourse of the intervention in Syria, Russian media has been emphasizing the honesty of Russian politics in contrast to Western politics. Consequently, one can interpret the key problem in Russia's relationship with the West, from the Russian perspective, as the problem of dialog. In short, Russia seeks to be understood by the West for what it is, and to get what it deserves. The discursive model of a "just war" helps to understand what kind of dialogue Russia seeks with the West.

Indeed, if praise and acceptance is what Russia seeks to achieve, there should be a non-evil "other" that could praise Russia for its noble deeds. Within the Russian narrative of the intervention in Syria such an "other" exists – Europe. A Europe that is incapable of solving its problems on its own; incapable of protecting itself. As Dmitrii Kisiliov claimed in October 2015, right after the operation began, "for the fourth time in its history Russia saves Europe from enslavement and barbarism: Mongols, Napoleon, Hitler, ISIS" (VN, 4/10/2015, 31:08). Consequently, Russian foreign politics is narratively rooted in the desire to be praised by the international community in general and the West in particular. However, what the analysis of the Syrian intervention discourse reveals is that Russian leadership understands this praise and respect in a very particular way.

As part of the "order against chaos" narrative, the collocation of a "traditional way of life" has been used multiple times: the "Arab spring has destroyed the traditional way of life in the region" (VN, 28/06/2015, 16:50); "the USA has acted without responsibility, destroying countries and the way of life of entire regions" (VN, 13/12/15, 13:16) etc. In the framework of the discussed narrative this "way of life" should be read as Russian opposition towards a globalist understanding of "international," which Russian discourse traditionally has associated with the USA, European Union, and the whole discourse around "human rights."

The rejection of any revolution against a legitimate government has been the cornerstone of Russian arguments with its Western partners for a decade. In fact, "the consequences of Color Revolutions were regarded by the Russian elite as the result of the United States' and the EU's foreign policies" (Gretskiy et al., 2014, 382). In February 2011, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev talking about the Arab Spring

revolutions explained them as being “instigated by outside forces” and warned: “Let's face the truth. They [the West] have been preparing such a scenario for us [Russia], and now they will try even harder to implement it” (Freedman, 2011). In 2014, during a meeting with his advisory Security Council, Vladimir Putin stated: "We see what tragic consequences the wave of so-called color revolutions led to... for us, this is a lesson and a warning. We should do everything necessary so that nothing similar ever happens in Russia" (Reuters. 2014).

Here lies a certain paradox. Within its own discourse, and while talking to an international audience, Russia always presents itself as a true proponent of international cooperation and international law, while strongly resisting any unilateralism. As it was revealed before, Russia highlights the legality of its presence in Syria, and through it Russian loyalty to the system of international law. However, within the very same discourse, Russia strongly opposes any truly global and transnational processes. From the Russian perspective, this logic is strongly associated with the idea of liberal values, which Russia regards as hypocrisy. One characteristic example that helps to illustrate this idea is the Russian media's reaction towards Barack Obama's speech to the United Nation Security council on September 29<sup>th</sup>. In particular, the American president expressed a dream of a world in which any girl anywhere can go to school. This quite innocent proposition had provoked an outbreak of nothing short of rage from Dmitrii Kisiliev: “the USA has entered the Middle East, destabilized it [Arab spring], left chaos and left ... but Obama tells us about girls that should go to school. They should but **it is not for Obama to bring them there using such means**” (VN, 04/10/2015, 34:48). Against this background, Vladimir Putin in his speech in the UN, and Dmitrii Kisiliev in his show, have referenced multiple times what can be called Russian preferences: “**bringing back order** to the Middle East” (VN, 04/10/2015, 31:20); “**support state institutions** where they are left” (VN, 04/10/2015, 32:24); and “we can only pity **states** and peoples which were penetrated by the USA” (VN, 04/10/2015, 26:35).

Consequently, it appears that for the Russian leadership, ‘international’ means space that exists as a space between independent units – states. This space is regulated by a certain set of norms or “rules of the game,” and these rules are the subject of dialog and communication between these units. What Russia is truly against is the opposite logic of ‘international,’ which understands it as the space of transnational processes,

universal in its nature. As something that, in principle, goes beyond the state logic. For Russia, global processes and international process are two different things, with global process being a subject of control of any state within its own territory. Within the Russian paradigm, such things as “universal standards,” be it education, healthcare, LGBT-rights, or terrorism, do not exist. Or at least they exist only on a country level, with no international dimension.

Therefore, within the Russian narrative, the universal logic of ‘international,’ as represented in 2015 by Barack Obama, is an ultimate enemy since it attempts to promote a liberal worldview as the only one morally acceptable, and this promotion is the basis for the international politics of the USA. Whereas for Russia, ‘international’ means an area where different worldviews, or “**traditional ways of life**” (as it appears in Syrian intervention discourse) are in dialog with each other. In other words, for Russia ‘international’ being understood as the sum of parts (states) does not result in a new entity bigger than this sum.

However, another problem then appears for Russia from within this logic. While not necessarily seeking conflict with the opposing logic, Russia still sees the international arena as a sphere of communication and, consequently, one can say the Russian leadership indeed seeks dialog with its partners. However, it wants to be a moral equal in this dialog, rather than a student who is taught the “right” way of life. Even more, Russia wants to be seen in this dialogue by the significant other the same way Russia sees itself. As was discussed previously, this is the image of “savior,” of a strong and good and therefore “right” power.

What is more such an innate understanding of international and war appears to be shared by Russian people and elite alike. According to polls conducted in March 2015, 47% of Russian respondents preferred that the country be a great power which they conceptualize as one “respected and afraid of,” for the sake of the country’s economic well-being<sup>2</sup>. Even against the background of a deepening economic crisis in January 2016 36% of the population considered Russia to be a great power in the world,

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<sup>2</sup> Levada Center. Press-release “Positions of the Russian Federation on International Arena” (March, 23. 2015)  
Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2016 from <http://www.levada.ru/old/23-03-2015/pozitsii-rossii-na-mezhdunarodnoi-arene>

compared with 27% in 2015<sup>3</sup>. As I argued in my article “The fact is that, from the perspective of at least 30% of the Russian population, Russia being considered an enemy by most developed countries does not weaken their pride for the motherland but instead strengthens it. Even admitting that the country is economically weak compared with the West, people are proud that at least in terms of foreign policy capacities, Russia seems to be on equal footing” (Shchelin, 2016).

Apparently, great powerness can be considered as one of the fundamental political myth of Russian society. Political myths are common in all modern countries (Smith, 1991; Hosking & Schöpflin, 1997) since they are the means to keep nations together, however not an every political myth is based on an idea of great power as it is in Russian case. As Hanna Smith (Smith, 2014, 361) argues “national unity had given a boost to Russian self-confidence and Russian great power identity had found its place in Russian domestic discourse”.

Here it is possible to argue that Syria as another “just war” served as means for the Russian state to preserve the image of the country in the eyes of Russian citizens. Indeed, one of the primary social functions of war in the state of Modern to be the ultimate means of State visibility. This is the function of war usually forgotten, but in the Westphalia system of modern states it is in part through war how a modern state has prevailed over previous forms of government. The creation of massive armies where all soldiers, no matter the social class, were melted into a single body was one the key social mechanisms of the creation of the “imagined communities” of modern nations. War and the possibility of total war, such as WWI and WWII – that involves not only those who serve in the army but every citizen – has resulted in multiple social practices that permanently reinforce the coherence of the “nation-state” construct and allowing the suppression of the differences between the groups and community that otherwise would not be held together. Paraphrasing Charles Tilly’s statement – the modern state needs war but modern war does not need a modern state. On the contrary, an international disdain towards war as a political practice is a new phenomenon for a modern state. In fact, war used to be generally understood by policymakers in the way

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<sup>3</sup> Levada Center. Publication “Nearly half of Russians think that the West sees Russia as a concurrent” (February, 4, 2016)

Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2016 from <http://www.levada.ru/2016/02/04/pochti-polovina-grazhdan-schitayut-cto-zapad-vidit-v-rossii-konkurenta/>

Barkawi and Brighton state (Barkawi, Brighton, 2011, 126) “war is a generative force like no other. It is of fundamental significance for politics, society and culture ... War, the threat of war and the preparation for war mark the origins, transformation, and end of polities.” Moreover, as Jens Bartelson points out: “from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century, war has been saddled with an almost magical capacity to produce sociopolitical order out of its manifold negations, and has been involved in the shaping of actors and in the drawing of the boundaries separating them” (Bartelson, 2016).

Such an understanding of war fits into the proposed concept of “just war” revealed during the analysis of the Russian narrative of intervention in Syria. Russian leadership clearly sees force and power as a visible mechanism in dialog both in the space of international communication, as well as during the process of presentation of Russia to Russian citizens – keeping Russian “imagined community” coherent. Indeed, as John Hutchinson points out “wars have significance when *the experiences of conflict* generate profound ideological-cultural cleavages and through their outcomes change the balance of power between rival conceptions of the nation” (Hutchinson, 2017, 49).

Summing up, one can read Russian actions exclusively from within the logic of competition between great powers: they “sent strategic bombers on sorties over the country from bases in central Russia, and ordered the Russian navy to fire missiles at Syrian targets from positions in the Caspian and Mediterranean Seas. By doing so, Russia undermined the de facto monopoly on the global use of force that the United States has held since the collapse of the Soviet Union” (Trenin, 2016). In contrast, however, the very same action can also be read as an attempt to act accordingly to what one partner in the dialogue expects from an equal. It is not a coincidence that the opposition of “honesty vs. fake” is so vivid in Russian discourse of the Syrian intervention. Within the Russian discourse, the “global use of power” that Dmitrii Trenin writes about is not referring to interests, but instead refers to equality during communication practices. Russian resentment towards the current world order is not simply a result of feeling that some of its interest have been attacked, but because “they lied to us” (VN, 18/10/2015, 25:30). The USA is not Russia’s enemy, but it becomes one when there is “**refusal to form a direct dialogue**” (VN, 18/10/2015, 19:08) - one can add “dialogue with respect and as with an equal.”

Against such a background, the Syrian intervention and war in general acquires a very particular meaning. The Syrian intervention becomes an example of a “just war,” in which the main function is communicative. It is a certain kind of language used to remind Europe what Russia is from the Russian perspective, and to demand from Europe an adequate dialogue. War, therefore, is turned into a performance. Its function—to present oneself the way one perceives oneself, and to get the recognition one thinks one deserves unconditionally just for being.

### **Social function of war**

The proposed interpretation of the Russian intervention in Syria primarily helps to understand the paradox of the gap between Russian rhetoric and Russian actions during the first stage of the operation. If the logic behind the decision is one centered around the desire to “feel being right,” one can expect poor preparation of the operation from the perspective of the analysis of such a complex international phenomenon as the Syrian civil war. For example, if Russia really wanted to cooperate with the West and the USA over Syria in order to break its isolation after the war in Ukraine, then it should have shown commitment to the fight against ISIS and have proved its military capacities to win in this fight. This would have been the most reasonable and logical way to persuade Western partners. However, as it was shown by the Institute for the Study of War, during the first stage of Russian intervention, ISIS positions remained mostly untouched by Russian airstrikes despite the claims of Russian diplomats. US officials also estimated that only 10-30% of Russian airstrikes targeted ISIS (Guardian, 2015). In fact, an air strike is not the kind of data that is easily hidden and would be more reasonable for Russian authorities to be consistent with, should they desire partnership with the USA. Moreover, the way the Russian military interfered in the Syrian conflict has resulted in little help on the ground for the Assad regime during first 6 months of Russian involvement. Neither was the stability of the governmental regime promoted nor were terrorists' bases destroyed. Several operations inspired by the desire to create an image of success have led to severe losses in other areas. One can treat this gap as an intentional deliberation, but at the same time it can be simply a sign of Russian unpreparedness. In short, Russia, following a logic that is not understood by the international community, has entered into a conflict where the interests of so many

actors are complexly intertwined. It has proven that the Russian army and Russian diplomacy was not and is not prepared to act in such an environment; that is why Russia keeps performing ad hoc policy without any strategic military reasoning.

From the perspective of this thesis, what is even more important in this case is the way the social function of war has been changing in the Russian discourse of Syrian intervention. Instead of military aspects with battle plans and clear objectives, a performative element of warfare has entered the forefront. War instead has become the means to express one's identity. The Russian intervention in Syria, within the Russian discourse, becomes a virtual war in the same way as Jean Baudrillard wrote of the Gulf war, meaning that with the help of virtual technologies the Gulf War had become a purely virtual war: "so war, when it has been turned into information, ceases to be a realistic war and becomes a virtual war, in some way symptomatic [...] everything which is turned into information becomes the object of endless speculation, the site of total uncertainty" (Baudrillard 2001, 242). Paul Virilio shows that modern means of warfare: heat-seeking missiles, infra-red and laser guidance systems, warheads fitted with video cameras, are also a means of representation that marks "the complete evaporation of visual subjectivity into an ambient technical effect, a sort of permanent pan cinema. Which, unbeknown to us, turns our most ordinary acts into movie action, into new visual material, undaunted, undifferentiated vision-fodder... [of which the main aim is] a waning of reality: an aesthetics of disappearance..." (Virilio 1994, 47, 49).

This observation is closely connected with the discoveries of literature on such an element of modern warfare as media spectacle. It originates from political philosophy – in particular in the writings of Paul Virilio, Douglas Kellner, and Jean Baudrillard (Virilio, 2000, Kellner, 2003; Baudrillard, 2009) and presumes that with the development of military and television technologies, the reality of war has become separated from its image, turning armed conflicts into media spectacle solely designed for political ends. Chouliaraki has shown (Chouliaraki, 2006, 2013) how the performative function of the spectacle of war is intentionally oriented towards certain publics to make them (re)constitute themselves as the result of such exposure. Contemporary media has created a new dimension to how audiences perceive wars by making war reality so televised through the graphic quality of live broadcasting, that it

almost appears as though it is happening at home, even though the conflict is thousands of miles away. Real-time bombings and invasions are part of the media routine nowadays, often resembling a high-definition computer game (Lenoir, 2000). The logic of screen displays has become an integral part of terrorist propaganda (Silverstone, 2007: 27).

Indeed, war can be understood as the mechanism of communication, particularly that of strategic communication, which some analyze as ‘population-centric wars’—aimed at winning the popular support of the people of a country the war is conducted against (Butler, 2009; Holmqvist, 2013). Or, as it was explained by Richard Falk, “[there is a] scissors effect operating, between public pressure ‘to do something’ produced by media exposure to human wrongs, and the dominant realist predilection of states to ‘keep out’ unless vital interests are at stake.” The result is that “you get shallow intervention and a ‘politics of gesture’ rather than any intervention of a transformative nature.... the politics of gesture means that you do something, but you do something that does not involve big risks.” (Der Derian, 2009, p. 72). Such an international disdain towards war as a political practice is a new phenomenon for a modern state. In fact, war used to be generally understood by policymakers in the way Barkawi and Brighton state, “war is a generative force like no other. It is of fundamental significance for politics, society and culture ... War, the threat of war and the preparation for war mark the origins, transformation, and end of polities” (Barkawi, Brighton, 2011, 126). Moreover, as Jens Bartelson points out, “from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century, war has been saddled with an almost magical capacity to produce sociopolitical order out of its manifold negations, and has been involved in the shaping of actors and in the drawing of the boundaries separating them” (Bartelson, 2016).

What is more, as has been discussed in the research puzzle, the fields of perception of modern war (Virilio, 1988) has changed as well due to technological developments in warfare itself. It is interesting that, from Virilio’s perspective, this substitution of military reality as something anchored in ‘a place’ began long ago: “in the thirties, it was already clear that film was superimposing itself on a geostrategy which, for a century or more, had inexorably been leading to the direct substitution, and thus sooner or later the disintegration, of things and places” (Virilio, 1988, 47). However, advanced modern warfare has reached levels of virtuality previously

unimaginable for military theorists. As a result, the spatial dimension of war is disappearing for the military and political leaders of militarily developed nations, depriving the popular conscription army system of its military purpose since, instead of millions of soldiers, modern warfare depends on technological advantages.

Summing up, nowadays more than ever the symbolic meaning of war, and its performative function, is becoming the center point of the social function of war. The narrative of war legitimation now serves not just some pre-calculated goals but reflects the foundational assumptions about the identity of an actor and more importantly the logic based on which one acts. And in the case of Russia, this logic, and consequently its aims in the Syrian intervention, is neither the rationalist logic of consequence, nor the liberal logic of appropriateness. Instead, one can talk about constructivist logic with war being a means of self-representation to the significant “other.” Being in a just war is connected with being a Great Power since, as it is generally acknowledged to be one, a state requires a combination of military and economic resources in a combination with the attractiveness and recognition by other Great powers (Levy, 1981; Neumann, 2008; Nye, 1990). And it appears that Russian leadership believes that only through re-creating the situation of being a “savior” in a war, can it become accepted in a dialogue the way Russia believes it deserves.

Therefore, war, the way Russia interprets it, and the intervention in Syria in particular, has a value of a very particular kind – it allows the country to do a morally good and right thing. Civilians have to die or suffer from the “evil” force somewhere so Russia can save them and by being a “savior” prove that it should be spoken to as an equal, and ideally to stop the process of “globalization” of international relations and prevent them from becoming transcendental. Evil must exist so that Russia can fight it and to be praised for its efforts.

Summing up the analysis of the Russian narrative of its intervention in the Syrian civil war has revealed several important elements. In particular, it allows an understanding of the problem with seemingly missing “goal” presented in Table 1, when one speaks of “ethical narratives” of intervention developed in Russian media.

It appears that the key global conflict for Russia is between two logics of the ‘international’: “transcendental/global/liberal” and “structured/national.” These logics can not coexist peacefully together unless there is a space for dialogue as well as a way

to communicate. Moreover, this problem of co-existence is not one of national interests in a utilitarian way but instead of morality and values. Therefore, it appears that, prior to intervention in Syria, the key problem between the two logics was an absence of communication based on understanding. The Russian leadership, following the narrative, believes to know the “evil” logic behind the USA and the EU policies, whereas the Russian way of thinking and looking upon the world is ignored; promises given to Russia are broken and the country and its leadership are not being treated as morally equal. From this perspective, constant references to the deeds of other powers go beyond a mere propaganda tool, labeled by modern media and scholars as “whataboutism.” Instead, it reflects the Russian leadership’s deepest belief about international relations.

In such a context, the intervention in Syria within the Russian discourse was, to an extent, not at all about Syria. As any human, the Russian leadership desires be in the “right.” But in the current Russian mainstream, the experience of “being right” is built upon the historical experience of World War II as a “just war.” As the result, it is only through recreating this war experience that Russia can fill the emptiness in the gap between how it is seen by the international community and how it sees itself.

One principal question remains, though, and it is the question of time. War in Syria has been raging since 2011, but Russia interfered only in September 2015. To see how the issue of timing has been addressed within the Russian narrative, this thesis will proceed to analyze the data revealed in the place of conflict in Ukraine in the context of Syrian intervention. This will be represented in the closing chapter of the research.

### **Context of war in Ukraine in the Russian narrative of intervention into Syrian civil war**

The conclusions drawn in the previous chapter have discussed the narrative of the war in Syria without referring to the context of another conflict Russia has been involved prior and during it: the war in Eastern Ukraine. In fact, one of the most popular explanations as for the motives behind the Russian intervention in Syria is connected precisely with the international implications of Russian aggression against Ukraine. There are a number of comments that consider Russia’s goal in Syria to be to secure a

deal with the United States over Ukraine, and post-Soviet space in general, in exchange for the cooperation of Russia in Syria, possible concessions of Russian influence in the country, or Russia taking on the most difficult role in dealing with ISIS (Nye, 2016; Macfarquhar, 2016; Bodner, 2015). Such an explanation still fits into the realist paradigm, however this in fact answers more questions about the paradoxes of the Russian operation. Firstly, this idea links the Syrian intervention to a broader context of Russian foreign policy during the last 10 years and especially the period post-2014. Secondly, it explains the timing of the operation – after Russian defeat in Ukraine. Thirdly, treating the Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war as a diversion from the conflict in Ukraine makes the eagerness of Russian withdrawal from the conflict in March 2016 far more reasonable.

Therefore, from the perspective of this thesis, it is important to discern how the war in Ukraine was put within the context of the Russian narrative of intervention in Syria. The question in particular is to figure out how the conflict in Ukraine fits into established discursive oppositions, as well as Russia's supposed desire to be understood and accepted by the West. To figure it out, apart from the discourse analysis, the thesis will also contrast the importance attached to both topics (Syria and Ukraine) over the year prior to and during the intervention in Syria.

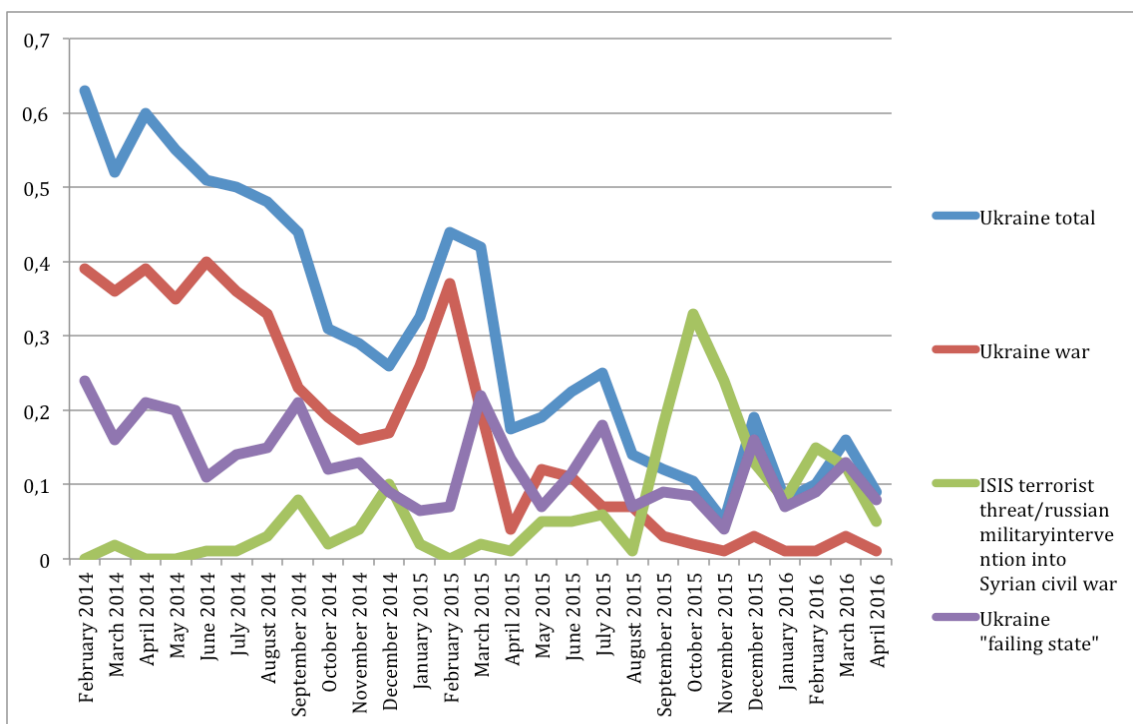
First, an important distinction must be made. From the very beginning, the anti-Ukrainian element on Russian federal television could be subdivided into two narratives: “the war in Ukraine narrative” and “Ukraine as a failing state narrative.” The war narrative embraces the body of ideas that can be summarized under the notions of “a Russian world,” “Novorossia,” “Crimea as a part of Russia,” “Bandera and Faschism,” and any reports about military activity on the territories of so-called “people’s republics.” The ‘Ukraine as a failing state’ narrative focuses on the issues of Ukrainian domestic politics, socio-economic difficulties in the country, political scandals etc. – all information that can create an impression among Russian audience that the neighboring country is on the verge of collapsing. To trace how the usage of these two narratives has been implemented alongside the narrative of the danger of ISIS terrorism and the Russian fight against terrorism in Syria, a more detailed research was required.

Therefore, I conducted a discourse analysis of the same dataset of “Vesti-Nedeli” but from a different angle. All Sunday news reports from February 2014 until April 2016 have been analyzed and the share of all three narratives (“the war in Ukraine narrative”, “Ukraine as a failing state narrative” and “fight against terrorism in Syria/ISIS terrorism threat narrative”) in the entire body of the news program has been counted (share of minutes devoted to the narrative/total number of minutes in the news program).

Based on the patterns discovered, it was expected that several time-marks would indicate shifts in the proportions of the Russian propaganda narrative inputs into the public opinion. In particular, the war narrative should dominate in the year 2014, whereas following the signing of the Minsk 2 agreement, “Ukraine as a failing state” should become the primary narrative. Finally, based on chart 2, the “ISIS as a menace” narrative cannot start being enforced into public opinion earlier than August 2015.

The results of this study are presented in the chart below.

Chart 1. Share of “war in Ukraine narrative”, “Ukraine as a failing state narrative” and “fight against terrorism in Syria/ISIS terrorism threat narrative” in Vesti-Nedeli news broadcasts



A first look at this chart confirms suggestions that the war in Syria could be a so-called “distraction operation.” In March 2015, for the first time, the narrative of “war in Ukraine” stopped being the dominant one in the Sunday news broadcasts. Instead, focus on the events within Ukraine became the what was emphasized. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the Russian elite (not wanting to get rid of the Ukrainian discourse completely as it has become an integral part of Russian TV propaganda), decided to persuade the Russian audience that, despite an absence of clear military victory, the Ukrainian state will eventually return to Russia, being unable to survive on its own. At the same time, the general share of anti-Ukrainian propaganda in Vesti-Nedeli broadcasts dropped dramatically between March 2015 and April 2015: from 42% of screen time to 18,5%. The next relative peak of anti-Ukraine propaganda happened in July 2015 (25%), with the Ukraine-war narrative constituting only 6% of the screen time. After this came a two-month period (August and most of September 2015) in which the Russian public was not subjected to any massive military propaganda: nothing anti-Ukrainian and relatively moderate anti-ISIS. Finally, with the start of the operation in Syria, Russian media became almost entirely focused on it.

However, the development of the shares of coverage of these wars potentially indicates a mere connection between the two, rather than the causal link. Therefore, one must look how Ukraine has been portrayed in the examined Russian media within the narrative of intervention in Syria. Several conclusions can be made based on such analysis.

First, Ukraine has only rarely been referenced to within the context of intervention in Syria. When such references do happen, it was always precisely while talking about the ‘international space.’ The key opposition of “inclusion vs. exclusion” and “honesty vs. dishonesty.” For example, Russian media’s discussion on the contrast between the way Russia was spoken to and the way Ukraine was spoken to during the international summits. In regards to a meeting between Putin and Obama, which happened during the UN general assembly in September 2015, it was highlighted that “Ukraine was not a priority” (VN, 4/10/2015, 32:55) and “Europe got tired of Ukraine” (VN, 4/10/2015, 38:26). Moreover, American policy towards Ukraine was presented as dishonest: “Obama: sex with no responsibilities ... what has happened – happened, it

was based on mutual agreement and there is no reason to talk about it now” (VN, 4/10/2015, 32:58).

Thus, it is possible to argue that Russian leadership indeed hoped to shift the importance of war in Ukraine aside once the intervention in Syria had begun. However, in the broader picture of Russian discourse this meant not interest-based policy, but instead a policy of restoration of the “true” Russian image. Indeed, after the war in Ukraine, Russia has been viewed globally as a country-aggressor and by no means could be considered a morally right power. Yet the narrative of intervention in Syria indicates how important it is for the country and the government to be treated as Russia deserves. And from the Russian perspective, war in Ukraine has never been unjust. Instead it is the West that breaks all its promises, in particular the agreement with Janukovitch and promoting the coup d’etat – in other words, promoting chaos. The Russian involvement in Ukraine was therefore not an attempt to rebuild the Soviet empire, but to restore order and justice and to be a “savior” again. Instead, Russia has become an international pariah. In other words, the war Ukraine, within the Russian discourse of Syrian intervention, is an “empty signifier” (Laclau, 2014).

The notion of an empty signifier supposes that in a discourse – being understood as the system of meanings assigned to objects and not the language per se – for the system to be coherent, there must always be something excluded from the system itself, something outside of the system, which makes the system possible only being left aside from the system. And for the system of the discourse of Syrian intervention, Ukraine is a distortion that blocks the communication between Russia and its significant “others.” Here it is important to mention, that in 2014 only 11 countries out of 193, while voting in the UN, supported Russia in its case against Ukraine over the annexation of Crimea. The same year, according to Pew Research Center, “across the 44 countries surveyed, a median percentage of 43% have unfavorable opinions of Russia, compared with 34% who are positive. Negative ratings of Russia have increased significantly since 2013 in 20 of the 36 countries surveyed in both years, decreased in six and stayed relatively similar in the remaining 10” (Pew Research Center, 2015, 3). Other Great powers do not recognize Russia as such calling Russia a “regional power” at the very best (Guardian, 2014).

War in Ukraine has resulted in the gap between how Russia sees itself and how world sees it. Somehow dialogue should be restored. The way the discourse of the Russian intervention in Syria is constructed implies that Russia does not seek confrontation with the EU and the USA, but instead wants to help them solve the problems threatening them – be it a refugee crisis or the chaos caused by American policy in the Middle East. However, the language used in the Russian narrative does not necessarily imply making a deal as in trade negotiations. Instead, it is a language of a process of constantly continuing communication.

By the summer of 2015, this communication stopped and from the Russian perspective has to be restored. This can be supported by placing emphasis on Russia's readiness for cooperation, its readiness for joint operations against ISIS, and on Russian openness towards a fair dialogue. Therefore, the connection between wars in Ukraine and Syria within the Russian discourse is by no means causal but contextual. One can talk about the story of failed communication practices; but with the war in Ukraine Russia has found itself in a situation when its feeling of "being right" has become ignored by all relative others, and to restore this feeling and acceptance by the others, some action had to be taken.

From such a perspective, the reasoning for timing of the Syrian operation becomes relatively clear. It happened right after any other opportunities of genuine dialog between Russia and Europe, and Russia and the USA, had been blocked. However, it does not make war in Syria a simple diversion from the war in Ukraine. Instead, it is part of a longer dialogue, a hand offered to the West to admit to each other the way they are. In a certain way, Ukraine is supposed to be traded off but not for Syria. As Dmitrii Kisilev pointed out while talking about potential joint declaration on Syria made by Russia and the USA: "Russia has no hidden goal – compare it with what the USA and its allies have done in Iraq and Lybia ... well, these are deeds of the past – experience" (VN, 14/02/2016, 15:51). If Russia is ready to treat former US wrongdoings against what Russia perceives as "good" – state stability – then it is also implied that Russian leadership expected the same treatment of the war in Ukraine by the West. The war in Syria in such a context is a new beginning, not a diversion – the prospect of better relationship between Russia and the West, based on mutual acceptance.

Summing up, there is a clear similarity between the wars in Ukraine and Syria. It is difficult to discern if the Russian elite is interested in *making* Russia a great power, but based on the messages it spreads, the Russian elite clearly wants Russia to at least appear as one. Therefore, the wars in both Syria and Ukraine are symbolic. The Russian elite wants an improved image and recognition from the West, and not a full-scale war. The challenges for this strategy are obviously “reality constraints,” as previously discussed. Economically, Russia is not a great power, it is not ready for a full-scale war with any other states except failed ones.

From this perspective, the conflict in Syria, which has been only deteriorating as of 2014 – autumn 2015 was a perfect stage for the Russian leadership to present itself to the world and the West in a “right” way as “a savior of civilization” (in particular Europe) against the barbarity of ISIS (caused by the “Evil” transcendental US logic of ‘international’ meaning global). Such a performance was particularly necessary after the complete misunderstanding between Russia and the West that emerged during the revolution in Kiev and following the war in Eastern Ukraine. Moreover, in contrast to Ukraine, where the West and Russia have opposite understanding of what force is “evil,” in Syria there was a potential clear common enemy. And it is hardly a coincidence that calls to unite against this enemy have become the repeating motive of the Russian narrative during the entire period of operation in Syria.

## Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to attempt to understand the Russian intervention into the Syrian civil war utilizing a social constructivist approach. There were several questions asked: how the narrative of Russian intervention has been constructed within Russian media, on which structural elements it was based, as well as how media analysis can be used to research armed conflicts in which modern Russia is involved. Finally, what the deconstructed narrative can add to the understanding of the worldview Russian leadership believe in. As with most qualitative research, analysis of the discovered elements of discourse and their interrelations resulted in certain assumptions that were not hypothesized prior to the study. In the following conclusion, the results of the study will be reviewed, along with the acknowledgement of its limitations, suggested directions for future research, and an assessment of the importance of the findings for proper evaluation of the directions of Russian foreign policy in the years to come.

## Review of Findings

First and foremost, the results of the research suggest that the primary element of the Russian discourse of its intervention is that of an ethical origin. More than any calculated or traditional security interests, the Russian media emphasized the ethical dimension of the allegedly happening global conflict. Russian position maintains that the country acts as an independent subject, driven by a good and just moral compass. It is precisely this ethical purity that makes Russia a better great power than its opponents. These statements apparently go beyond being simple propaganda tools utilized by the Russian elite for some practical purposes. Instead, they reflect beliefs about the identity of the country as shared by the elite and general population alike. Consequently, the need to be an “independently good power” sets certain discursive limitations for Russian foreign policy.

Second, such an emphasis on the moral side of the conflict highlights the problem of the social function of war in Russia on an international as well as domestic level. The conducted research indicates that the performative element of war – war as a stage on which to present oneself the way one believes one is – has become the central element of war as a social phenomenon in modern Russia. War is not a continuation of politics but a continuation of identity. And in the Russian case, war as an element of identity is particularly important precisely because of its particular moral dimension: being univocally good and right, and even purified, for the wrongdoings of the past. Such a particular reading of war is most likely connected with the discourse built around the Great Patriotic War, the moral experience of which is being recreated today with the help of modern media.

Third, the second function of war, derived from its self-representative element, is communicative. Since identity can develop only in its interrelation with the “other,” in modern Russia the intervention in Syria was in part a communicative action, meant to remind the West of what Russia is. Separate research is needed, though, to discover to what extent the Russian message has been received the way Russian leadership intended. What is possible to point out, however, is that with the development of warfare technologies, the symbolic elements of war, as well as the discourses built around them, are becoming no less important and may prove even more so than the actual actions on the battlefield.

Next, it appears that the timing of the Syrian intervention as a communicative action was partially determined by the emergence of the gap between how Russian leadership sees the country, on the one hand, and the West on the other following the conflict in Ukraine. The war in Ukraine has destroyed the Russian image as a “good actor,” or as a “savior of Europe,” and has caused Russia to seek its restoration by “saving” Europe once more in Syria, this time from terrorist threats and the refugee crisis.

Finally, the most unexpected finding of this research is the image of the true opponent of the Russian Federation within the narrative of Syrian intervention and any war in general. Contrary to many assumptions, it is not the USA as a country nor any other power. Instead, what the Russian leadership considers to be its enemy is the opposing logic of International, which this thesis defines as global

or transcendental. The Russian leadership is committed to resisting any project that claims possession of a universal moral code followed by the transnational, or even beyond-national, approach for the solution of global problems. Rather, the Russian leadership supports an intra-national approach, where different nations and moral logics meet each other and cooperate on a solution to a challenge, without even attempting to become an entity that goes beyond national interests. Compared to transcendental logic which assumes that, with the development of international relations, a true global community as an entity of a new quality greater than the sum of its parts will emerge. From the Russian narrative perspective, such a development is impossible without setting a particular way of life as the only morally right one, which for the Russian elite is unacceptable. This ethical dimension of Russian multipolarity, as the resistance to moral universalism and moral unification was an unexpected discovery.

Here it should be highlighted that such an understanding of the Russian enemy, from the perspective of the Russian elite, makes certain attitudes of Russian foreign policy more understandable. Any entity committed to transcendental logic, politicians, or projects will always be met with distrust. From this perspective, it is no coincidence that Barack Obama was the most hated American president in the Russian media. Such hatred developed precisely because his image was the embodiment of this transcendental logic of action, of what in the USA is called progressivism. Distrust towards the European Union appears to be of the same nature. Rejecting transcendental logic, and the potential of any of its adherents to be genuinely committed to the goal of the betterment of humanity, the Russian elite views all actions derived from such logic as attempts to spread chaos and evil, or as simple neo-imperialism. Ironically, such an understanding of what this thesis calls 'transcendental logic of international' ideologically and linguistically unites Russia with alt-right forces within the West who reject the globalism of progressivists.

As the result, it appears that the true problem in Russian-Western relations lies not in the clash of national interests, or lack of trust on its own, but the lack of a common language in which to speak. Being unable to understand or to believe in the logic of action of the one another results in a "broken phone" game when,

instead of messages, parties use war, sanctions, and countersanctions resulting in any attempt at discussion devolving into a game of “whataboutism.” Therefore, it is no coincidence that effective cooperation regarding Syria between Russia and the West has not emerged.

### **Contributions and Further direction of the research**

This thesis is a case study of the discursive dimension of a particular event in modern Russian history – the Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war. However, there are still several results presented that can contribute to international relations as a science.

To begin with, this study contains the qualitative analysis of a body of data previously unanalyzed. Most studies of modern Russian media are of an instrumentalist approach, with little respect paid to their discursive structure.

Secondly, another contribution is the enhancement of the existing knowledge of the interdependency of such matters as the development of media and war technologies, the social function of war, the problem of communication in international relations, identity, and foreign policy justification, as well as the role of language and moral beliefs in foreign policy making. Consequently, there remains the need for a multidisciplinary approach while performing an analysis of foreign policy decisions.

Finally, there are some practical considerations for predicting the direction Russian foreign policy might develop in the future based on the findings of this research. Unfortunately, should the Russian elite fail to develop any way of communicating in an international arena, as well as presenting itself via an alternative to war, there is the constant risk of the country entering yet another armed conflict. This places all of the post-soviet space into jeopardy, especially countries that share a common border with Russia: Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and even Estonia, as well as any other country the Russian military is capable of attacking.

From the perspective of the further studies, this thesis finds that it is crucial to pursue further work on the question of the communicative element of international relations in a broad sense, in particular theorizing if the two 'logics of international' can co-exist with each other, or if they are doomed to conflict with one another until a victor is decided. Is there any space in which a true dialogue can take place, and what kind of mediator can the international community and all parties involved develop in order to create a language both logics can use to communicate with each other? These are the questions further studies of international relations must answer.

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## Appendix

List of reports from “Vesti-Nedeli” dataset, from which one can find citations in the thesis

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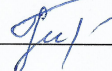
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
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