A Bear in the Desert: How Putin Justified the Russian Military Intervention in Syria

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Abstract

This paper studies how the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, justified the Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war and compares the arguments he used in the domestic and in the international contexts. Relying on discourse analysis, this research project systematically analyses 133 speeches made by the Russian President between 2011 and 2021. It identifies the main themes that emerge from these speeches and illustrates in three word clouds how Putin articulates his rationale depending on the audience. Among other things, this project finds that in a domestic context, Putin mainly framed the intervention as an anti-terrorist operation that prevented terrorists from coming to Russia. In parallel, when he spoke to an international audience, he emphasized the importance of international cooperation and the need to find a political solution to the Syrian crisis. This paper deconstructs these arguments that form Putin's narrative and examines the underlying ideas and interests. It also links them to the broader international context which has been marked by increasing tensions between Russia and the West following Moscow's annexation of Crimea. Overall, this Major Research Project contributes to the academic knowledge on how Putin uses narratives and ideas to justify military actions outside of Russia's borders.

Keywords: Russia, Putin, Syria, Middle East, intervention, justification, discourse, audience.

Introduction

On September 30, 2015, Russia launched a military operation in Syria responding to an official request from the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad. A bit more than ten years into Assad's presidency, his authority had become widely contested and protests erupted in the context of the Arab Spring in 2011. The country collapsed into a brutal civil war that involved government forces, opposition groups and terrorist organizations. From 2015 onwards, Russia's air support and on-the-ground military forces helped Assad stay in power and take back control of most of the Syrian territory. This paper proposes to analyse how the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, justified this military intervention in Syria and examines his rhetoric in both the domestic and international contexts. This Major Research Project seeks to answer the following question: *How did Putin justify the Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war? How does this rationale differ depending on the audience and why?* To answer this question, this paper analyses 133 transcripts of speeches, interviews, news conferences and press statements that were published on the English version of the Kremlin website.

Moscow is one of Damascus's long-standing allies. In the second half of the twentieth century, Syria was one of the main Soviet allies in the Middle East. In the 1970s, the Soviet navy established a supply and maintenance facility in Tartus, Syria, and Soviet troops were stationed in the country during the 1980s (Trenin 2018, 26–27; Vasiliev 2018, 384). Tens of thousands of Syrians studied in Soviet and Russian universities or military schools (Vasiliev 2018, 386). In the 1990s, Moscow's involvement in the region was in decline. Russia was focused on its own domestic affairs (Vasiliev 2018, 385) and on making sure that its actions in the Middle East would not negatively affect its relationship with its main international partner at the time, the West (Issaev 2021, 427). Naturally, Russia-Syria relations were minimal during this period (Vasiliev 2018, 385).

At the turn of the 2000s, bilateral relations between the two countries started to pick up again. Trade between Russia and Syria increased from 2001 onwards and peaked in 2011 (Pieper 2019, 370). By 2008, Russia became Syria's main trading partner (Borshchevskaya 2021, 157–58). Syria was also openly opposed to American hegemony in the region at the time of the intervention in Iraq, which was also criticized by Russia (Vasiliev 2018, 386). In 2005, Bashar al-Assad visited Moscow and discussed a number of issues with the Russian president before signing a friendship treaty (Borshchevskaya 2021, 63). In 2008, Syria was one of the only countries that completely supported Russia in its invasion of Georgia (Borshchevskaya 2021, 64). Military cooperation also increased during the first decade of the millennium: Syria bought Russian weaponry, including medium-range missile systems, and Russia trained Syrian officers and helped repair military equipment (Vasiliev 2018, 388; Casula and Katz 2020, 301–2).

Russia's intervention in Syria is a crucial event in the history of Russian foreign policy as it cemented this renewed partnership between both countries. It represents a major shift in the bilateral relationship and demonstrated the Kremlin's readiness to support its ally. In addition, the intervention is also symbolic of Russia's return to the Middle East after the traumatic and monumental failure of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Studying how Putin justified this intervention and making the distinction between his rhetoric in the domestic and international contexts is especially important: Not only this is a way to understand better what the intervention meant, but it also helps us build a better understanding of how Putin uses ideas and narratives to try to justify military interventions abroad. In the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, understanding how Putin speaks to the Russian public and to the international community is even more important.

This paper also fills a gap in the academic literature on the Russian intervention in Syria by systematically studying Putin's discourse in both the domestic and international contexts. Previous studies have focused on broader international factors such as the guiding principles of Russia's foreign policy and its geopolitical and military interests (Kofman and Rojansky 2018; Korolev 2018; Trenin 2018; Borshchevskaya 2021; Dück, Rieger, and Stahl 2021; Lavrov 2021; Trenin 2021). Some authors have also explored how Putin's intervention in Syria reflects domestic concerns such as the need to achieve political mobilization in Russia (Allison 2013; Issaev 2021). Many authors have briefly outlined Putin's justifications, and Notte (2016) and Borshchevskaya (2021) have studied these justifications more in depth; however, none of them have studied Putin's discourse systematically. In addition, we know that Putin's foreign policy discourse is intended for both a domestic and an international audience, generally aiming at legitimizing the regime at home and projecting a certain image in the international arena (Pieper 2019, 376; Frear and Mazepus 2021, 1215–17; Meister 2021; Herd 2021b, 162)**.** However, in the case of Syria, this distinction between the rhetoric in domestic and international contexts has rarely been made**.** This research proposes to address both of these gaps.

The structure of this paper is the following: Chapter 1 focuses on the literature review, which will analyse how scholars have studied the Russian intervention in Syria so far. Chapter 2 outlines the methodology used to conduct this research. Chapter 3 analyses the arguments and the themes that appear in Putin's various speeches on the intervention. Chapter 4 illustrates how Putin's rhetoric varies depending on whether he is addressing a domestic or an international audience and assesses the impacts of these arguments in both contexts. Finally, the conclusion discusses how this topic could be studied further and offers some thoughts on what the findings of this research mean in the context of the conflict in Ukraine.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

The Russian intervention in Syria has been widely studied from different perspectives. As this chapter will show, scholars have generally focused on explaining the intervention itself. However, less attention was paid to how Russia's military actions were justified. This chapter will outline how the intervention was studied so far and will identify the gaps that this research project seeks to address.

In the academic literature, many scholars have studied the Russian intervention in Syria from a realist perspective. Several authors adopting this approach have claimed that Russia's actions were evidence of Moscow's ambition in the international arena and a return to great power politics (Korolev 2018; Trenin 2018; 2021; Dück, Rieger, and Stahl 2021). In this sense, Averre and Davies (2015) have argued that Russia's intervention exemplifies its support for the more traditional principle of sovereign equality of states and its opposition to humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect (R2P) principle (Averre and Davies 2015). Some authors have focused their studies on Russia's geopolitical and military interests (Kofman and Rojansky 2018; Borshchevskaya 2021; Lavrov 2021). Anna Borshchevskaya, in her book titled *Putin's War in Syria,* argued that Russia intends to create an Anti-Access/Air Denial laydown (A2/AD) stretching from the Arctic to Syria to deter the West (Borshchevskaya 2021, 69–88). Kofman and Rojansky (2018) and Lavrov (2021) have studied Russia's strategy in the region. They also briefly discussed how the operation was framed as part of the fight against international terrorist groups (Lavrov 2021, 31–32), and how Russia wanted to coerce the US into collaboration to gain recognition as a major player in the international arena (Kofman and Rojansky 2018, 12). Others have focused on Russia's perception of threat. Giles claimed that security threats perceived as urgent are the source of Russia's renewed assertiveness in the case of Syria (Giles 2017). Rezvani (2020), for his part,

argued that Russia's fear of the jihadist threat and its desire to safeguard geostrategic interests in the Middle East, including its sole foreign maritime base, are part of what guided Moscow's decision to intervene in Syria, a conclusion shared by Beccaro (2021).

Some authors have focused more closely on the role played by domestic factors in Russian foreign policy. Allison (2013) has argued that the potential impact of the Syrian crisis on the Russian domestic political order was more important than material interests. Of specific concern were the Islamists networks present in the North Caucasus and the perceived risk of Russia being the next in line if the West successfully imposed its standards to Syria (Allison 2013). Issaev (2021), argued that the roots of the military intervention in Syria lie in domestic politics. Indeed, in 2015, the tremendous amount of public support that resulted from the annexation of Crimea was beginning to falter, and economic frustration was increasingly widespread. Therefore, the Russian regime needed to achieve political mobilization in order to avoid the repetition of the 2011-2012 protests, which saw thousands of Russian citizens on the streets of Moscow to protest against alleged electoral fraud and corruption. Intervening in Syria was a way to achieve such a mobilization, especially since the population was favourable to Bashar al-Assad and opposed to foreign (Western) interference in Syria (Issaev 2021).

Other authors have presented different perspectives. For instance, Jankovski (2021) studied how Vladimir Putin's foundational image informed his image of the war in Syria. Among other things, Jankovski pointed out that the normative desirability of the state and the importance of military power as the ultima ratio in international politics are two pillars of Putin's foundational image that influenced the way he portrayed the war in Syria (Jankovski 2021). Proposing to go beyond traditional security studies, Moulioukova and Kanet (2020) argued that Russia was not strong economically or politically when it decided to intervene in Syria. Rather, it gave preference

to ontological security needs: Moscow chose to reinforce Russia's biographical narrative of a great power in opposition to the hypocritical West, thus strengthening routinized and embedded self-identity beliefs (Moulioukova and Kanet 2020).

Fewer authors have focused on the role that Putin plays in Russian politics to explain the intervention in Syria. McFaul (2020) argues that President Putin personally chose a confrontational path with the West. He perceived the Syrian crisis as another example of the West attempting to overthrow regimes that it dislikes, and therefore the Syrian opposition, supported by the West, was labelled as terrorists seeking to overthrow the legitimate government (McFaul 2020). Similarly, Lewis (2020) argued that Putin's conservative values and hostility towards the West are key to understand the period that followed Putin's return to the Presidency in 2012. More specifically, Putin has brought back ideas of Russian messianism, which is the conviction that Russia has a special role to play in the world, and he uses these ideas to justify his actions in Syria and to bolster his domestic legitimacy (Lewis 2020). It is worth noting that several authors have studied how Russian foreign policy more broadly has been influenced by Russian messianism (Zonova 2007; March 2020; Curanović 2021) but that this theme was less prominent in the literature on the intervention in Syria. From a slightly different perspective, Marten (2015), who wrote prior to the military intervention being launched, argued that a personalized network approach taking into account the importance of personal patronage and personal links between leaders can better explain Russia's policy towards Syria, especially the sudden move from a clear no-foreign-intervention position to calling Syria to put chemical weapons under international control (Marten 2015).

How the intervention was justified is not a topic that was studied directly by many scholars. Two authors have dedicated significant analysis to this aspect. Notte (2016) compared how Russia justified its involvement in Syria and in Chechnya. She found that Moscow's argument was mostly

centred on counterterrorism, and that it consisted of two parts: (1) the threat that Russia faces is civilizational, and (2) no distinction between a "good" and "bad" opposition can be accepted (Notte 2016). Borshchevskaya (2021), in her book, wrote one chapter on Putin's domestic campaign following the intervention in Syria, and one chapter on diplomatic efforts. Although Borshchevskaya cites important speeches that took place in both the domestic and international contexts, she does not systematically analyse each of them. Nevertheless, these chapters are among the most useful to have an idea of the main themes of Putin's justification for the intervention in Syria. Domestically, the counterterrorism narrative, including the need to fight terrorists in Syria before they come (back) to Russia and the alleged role of the West in supporting terrorism, appeared to be one of the most important themes. The speeches analysed by Borshchevskaya also illustrated Putin's emphasis on the fact that Russia was acting on an official invitation from Syria, unlike the US. Furthermore, Borshchevskaya found that Russia argued against the possibility of regime change and claimed that it was committed to defending the government of Syria and respecting international law. In addition, Russian officials made a direct parallel between Syria and Libya, arguing that foreign interference and regime change can only lead to chaos, while also saying that countries should join forces to fight terrorism globally (Borshchevskaya 2021).

Other authors have identified similar themes, although they did not focus on studying the Kremlin's justifications. Fighting terrorism, in particular jihadism (Pieper 2019, 374–75; Casula and Katz 2020, 298, 308; Averre 2021, 400), preserving the Syrian state to avoid another Libya and ensure that the legitimate government can exert its sovereignty and fight terrorism (Pieper 2019, 372; Averre 2021, 400–402; Clunan 2021, 11), claiming great-power status (Kramer 2021, 33), and claiming that the intervention abided by international law (Pieper 2019, 380; Averre 2021,

403) were the main themes that emerged from the authors' brief examination of how Russia framed, rationalized and legitimized its intervention in Syria.

Certain authors have argued that other themes have held a prominent place in Putin's discourse on the intervention in Syria. The comparison between the Arab Spring and the colour revolutions that swiped across various post-Soviet states is one of them. Some academics have argued that in Putin's view, the Arab Spring and the colour revolutions were two sides of the same coin and that both posed a threat to regime stability (Casula and Katz 2020, 301; Simons 2020, 207, 212; Omelicheva 2021, 272; Herd 2021b, 167). Other authors have identified the protection of cultural heritage as another key theme of Putin's justification of his intervention in Syria (Plets 2017, 19; Russo and Giusti 2019, 849). Finally, certain authors have argued that Putin has tried to convince the Russian public that the intervention in Syria was not the repeat of the disastrous Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s (Trenin 2018, 64–65; Borshchevskaya 2021, 28, 73, 93).

Overall, the academic literature on the Russian intervention in Syria is quite rich. However, there was no systematic discourse analysis of how Putin justified the intervention. In addition, the distinction between the domestic and the international contexts has rarely been made. The literature on Russian foreign policy is clear: Putin's discourse is intended for both a domestic and an international audience. In the domestic context, foreign policy discourse generally serves to legitimize Putin's regime at home; in the international context, Putin uses discourse to shape the image that he wants to project beyond Russian borders (Pieper 2019, 376; Frear and Mazepus 2021, 1215–17; Meister 2021; Herd 2021b, 162). Scholars studying the Russian intervention in Syria have not clearly made that distinction. This research project will attempt to fill that gap.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Data

The focus of this paper is to understand how the Russian intervention in Syria was justified by Vladimir Putin and how he has used different arguments depending on the audience. It seeks to shed light on how Putin plays with ideas and narratives to justify military interventions abroad.

This paper relies on discourse analysis to achieve this objective. Discourse analysis, which essentially consists in analysing written or spoken language, is a very common research method in constructivist studies of Russian foreign policy. It is based on the premise that language plays a key role in social construction, and it is particularly useful to capture how meaning is created and to examine subjective understandings of the social reality (Feklyunina 2020, 16). In addition, discourse is a valuable source of information to study Russia's perspective and how it seeks to project itself to different audiences (Frear and Mazepus 2021, 1215–16). As such, this method is the most appropriate to study Putin's rhetoric and to investigate how he adapts his narrative and the meaning of Russia's action depending on the audience.

The analysis is essentially focused on Vladimir Putin. According to the academic literature, Putin exerts a crucial influence on Russian foreign policy, and he is a central actor in the Russian political system (Allison 2013; Lo 2015; McFaul 2020). Therefore, it makes sense to focus on him to examine how justifications for the intervention in Syria vary depending on the audience. Other actors such as Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov and Minister of National Defence Sergei Shoigu are also important; however, none of them is as central to both foreign and domestic policy as the Russian President.

To examine how Putin justified the Russian intervention in Syria to domestic and international audiences, I collected translated transcripts of Putin's speeches, interviews, news

conferences and press statements from the English version of the Kremlin website. I used the following search string in Google to collect these documents: site:http://en.kremlin.ru/events/ "Syria". This string forces Google to look for the word "Syria" in the events section of the Kremlin website, which contains the type of transcripts mentioned above. Using only one neutral key word was useful to avoid focusing unintentionally on speeches that justify the intervention in a certain way, which would have constituted a selection bias.

I applied a filter in Google to focus on the 2011-2021 period. Although the Russian intervention started in 2015, I decided to include sources that go back to 2011 as the Arab Spring and protests in Syria started that year. Documents that were published in 2022 fall out of the scope of this research. The recent Russian invasion of Ukraine is a crucial element in the study of Russian foreign policy, and this merits to be the focus of a separate research project. To make sure that this paper solely focuses on Russia's intervention in Syria, I did not collect transcripts that were published beyond December 2021.

I went manually through all the results that Google returned and selected the transcripts where President Putin specifically mentioned the Russian intervention in Syria. I did not select transcripts if Syria is mentioned exclusively by someone else or if it is mentioned for reasons that are not linked to the Russian intervention in the country. In some cases, I selected documents that include indirect quotes. For instance, I kept some news releases that indirectly quoted President Putin on the intervention in Syria. In total, I selected 133 documents following these criteria.

This paper will refer to these documents as "speeches" although only the written and translated versions of these speeches, interviews, news conferences and press statements were consulted. It is important to note that there is evidence that the Kremlin distorts the record: the transcripts published on the English version of the Presidential website can sometimes include

paragraphs that were not part of the delivery of the speech and sentences can be re-written for political purposes (Herd 2021a, 18). Because of limited resources, these transcripts were not checked against the President's actual speeches in Russian. This is not a major issue in the case of speeches made in an international context. The Kremlin's edits are meant for an international audience, and this paper is precisely interested in how Russia addresses the world. Yet, this paper is also interested in Putin's arguments to convince the Russian public and these distortions can represent an issue in this context. The Kremlin may change Putin's arguments in the English transcripts to adjust the image that Russia projects in the international arena. By relying only on English transcripts, this paper might miss nuances or arguments that are meant for the Russian public. This is an important limitation of this research.

I conducted a preliminary analysis of the speeches that contained the highest frequency of the word "Syria". I established a preliminary set of codes that reflected the main themes found in these sources. I adjusted these codes as I went on to analyse the rest of the documents. I attempted to avoid assumptions and projections by using this inductive method instead of importing themes from the literature, although I recognize that I cannot completely make abstraction of the academic articles that I read prior to analysing these speeches, interviews and news conferences. The final coding structure is detailed in Annex A.

I manually coded each source to extract the main themes of Putin's justification of the intervention. Each of the main themes that were identified in the coding process will be addressed in a specific subsection under chapter 3 of this paper, which is entitled "Recurring Themes in Putin's Rhetoric". To analyse these themes in depth, I rely on academic sources from the rich literature on Russian foreign policy.

To examine how Putin's rationale varied depending on the audience, I categorized the documents according to the audience that is targeted in each case. I defined three mutually exclusive categories: (1) domestic, (2) international, and (3) domestic and international. Essentially, if Putin is clearly speaking to a domestic audience, I categorized the document in the domestic category. For instance, his presidential addresses to the Russian federal assembly fall into the domestic category. Following the same logic, his 2015 speech at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) or any interviews with Western media fall into the international category. There were a number of cases where the nature of the audience was not clear. When Putin could be speaking to both an international and a domestic audience, I categorized the document under "domestic and international". For instance, that was the case of Putin's remarks at the Valdai International Discussion Club, a Russian discussion club that holds events welcoming high-level Russian officials, foreign dignitaries, and scholars from Russia and abroad. It is worth noting again that speeches were only categorized in one of the three categories. The third category does not include speeches from the first two categories.

To identify which theme is the most prominent in each category, I built three word-clouds using the software NVivo and reported them in chapter 4 of this paper. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software that allows researchers to easily annotate and code documents. It can also build word clouds automatically, with the size of each word representing its frequency in certain documents or passages. In the context of this research, the three word clouds illustrate what words were the most frequent in the three categories of passages, i.e., "domestic", "international", and "domestic and international". Passages that do not pertain to the intervention in Syria were excluded from the word clouds. In other words, if a passage was not coded, it was not taken into account in NVivo's word clouds. This approach allowed me to make sure that I identify the most

prominent themes and that I do not simply rely on my own subjective interpretation of how themes vary depending on the audience.

Finally, I relied on a certain number of academic articles to explain why Putin's discourse appears to vary depending on the audience. Explaining why Putin's rationale differs is not an exact science and this research does not pretend to be able to examine what is happening in the mind of the Russian President, nor does it pretend to be designed to identify causal relationships. Rather, this analysis is attempting to make sense of the empirical observations and to offer some reflections by drawing on the rich literature on Russian foreign policy.

Chapter 3: Recurring Themes in Putin's Rhetoric

This chapter analyses the main themes of Putin's rhetoric. The analysis will be broken down by the main themes that emerged from Putin's discourse: (1) fighting terrorism, (2) sovereignty and statehood, (3) international law and the legality of the intervention, (4) critique of the West, the United States and the Liberal order, (5) testing weapons, and (6) international cooperation. This chapter also briefly analyses some themes that were less frequent in Putin's discourse but that were highlighted in the literature on the Russian intervention in Syria.

3.1. Fighting Terrorism

Putin mainly justified the military intervention in Syria by framing it as an anti-terrorist operation. He explicitly referred to it as such in a meeting with government members that took place on the day the operation was launched in September 2015 (President of Russia 2015c). He also reused the same terminology later that year during his Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly and framed the operation as part of a "war against terror" before mentioning that "Russia is waging an expressly open, direct struggle against international terrorism" (President of Russia 2015o). Throughout the years, Putin continued to frame the operation as a fight against terrorism. He explicitly or implicitly made claims about fighting terrorism in Syria in 70 speeches, which represents approximately 53% of the total number of documents analysed. In total, 111 passages stand out for the use of such an argument.

Putin also often refers to specific terrorist groups that are internationally recognized as such, like the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), to capitalize on the international legitimacy of fighting these terrorist groups. For instance, in 2016, during a meeting with Russian ambassadors

and permanent envoys, he claimed that Syria was a crucial place to fight terrorism, especially ISIS (President of Russia 2016h). That same year, he also told Russian Armed Forces service personnel that Russia will "continue to assist the Syrian army and authorities in their fight against the so-called Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra and other terrorist groups that have been declared as such" (President of Russia 2016d; see also Putin 2013; President of Russia 2013d; 2015a; 2015b; 2015c; 2015f; 2015h; 2015n; 2015q; 2016b; 2017f; 2019g; 2019i). By repeatedly mentioning that he is fighting internationally recognized terrorist groups, he appears to be trying to convince both the Russian public and the international community of the legitimacy of his intervention.

At the same time, he actively sought to discredit most of the Syrian opposition by linking it to terrorist groups and, in some cases, by claiming that the opposition is also responsible for committing atrocities. In 2013, Putin published an article in the New York Times claiming that:

> There are few champions of democracy in Syria. But there are more than enough Al-Qaeda fighters and extremists of all stripes battling the government. The US State Department has designated the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, fighting with the opposition, as terrorist organisations (Putin 2013).

In an interview with Charlie Rose on September 29, 2015, the day before ordering the intervention, Putin questioned the presence of a civilised opposition in Syria and claimed that "60 percent of Syria is controlled either by ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra or other terrorist organisations" (President of Russia 2015b; see also President of Russia 2013b; 2013d; 2016i).

Ultimately, such a focus on terrorism contributes to building a narrative according to which supporting Assad is the only way to fight powerful terrorist groups. Two days before announcing Russia's military intervention in Syria, Putin said at the UNGA that: "President Assad's government forces and the Kurdish militia are the only forces really fighting terrorists in Syria" (President of Russia 2015a). The following day, he told Charlie Rose that "we should help

President al-Assad's army" and that he, Charlie Rose, and his audience should "finally realise that no one except for al-Assad's army is fighting against ISIS or other terrorist organisations in Syria" (President of Russia 2015b).

In parallel, Putin also argues that fighting terrorism in Syria is necessary to prevent it from spreading to Russia. Putin makes this defensive argument very explicit in his 2015 Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly:

> The militants in Syria pose a particularly high threat for Russia. Many of them are citizens of Russia and the CIS countries. They get money and weapons and build up their strength. If they get sufficiently strong to win there, they will return to their home countries to sow fear and hatred, to blow up, kill and torture people. We must fight and eliminate them there, away from home. (President of Russia 2015o)

There are many other similar examples in Putin speeches (see for instance President of Russia 2015c; 2015f; 2015g; 2015h; 2015n; 2015p; 2016d; 2017b; 2017n; 2018e; 2019j). This "self-preservation" aspect is an essential part of the whole argument on fighting terrorism, and it is also a very powerful one, especially to generate support for the intervention among the Russian public. It uses a very simple logic that everyone can understand and support; no one wants to have terrorism in their country. While naming specific groups was an attempt to give inherent value to the intervention, the self-preservation argument attempts to convince the Russian public of the instrumental value of going to Syria.

3.2. Sovereignty and Statehood

To justify the intervention, Putin puts a lot of emphasis on the importance of preserving the Syrian state (President of Russia 2015a; 2015i; 2015j; 2016h; 2017d; 2017g; 2017m; 2017n; 2018g; 2020a; 2020b). In his interview with Charlie Rose on September 29, 2015, he explained that Russia, through the support it was giving to the Syrian government, was "trying to prevent the creation of a power vacuum in Syria in general because as soon as the government agencies in a state, in a country are destroyed, a power vacuum sets in, and that vacuum is quickly filled with terrorists" (President of Russia 2015b). In 2017, during a joint news conference with French President Emmanuel Macron, he talked about the importance of upholding the Syrian state to fight terrorism, since "it is impossible to counter the terrorist threat by destroying the statehood of countries that are already suffering from internal problems and disputes" (President of Russia 2017d).

To support this argument, Putin often refers to Libya. He points out how chaos and terrorism followed the NATO-led intervention that took place in 2011 (President of Russia 2012c; 2013a; 2013d; 2015h; 2015o; 2016j; 2019j), and how this chaos then spread from Libya to Mali (Putin 2013) and contributed to strengthening ISIS (President of Russia 2015a). In a number of speeches, he explicitly argues that the toppling of the Libyan government was a mistake that should not be repeated in Syria. For instance, in an interview with NBC on June 11, 2021, the Russian President argues that restoring predictability and stability in Syria is crucial to avoid a second Libya (President of Russia 2021c; see also President of Russia 2012b; 2015b; 2016e). Making this parallel between the situation in Libya and in Syria serves as a powerful warning of what could happen should the Syrian state collapse. Unsurprisingly, Putin mostly uses the comparison between Syria and Libya when he is talking to an international audience. This makes sense since, as we will see

later, such a comparison allows Putin to critique the West for what happened in Libya. It is also worth noting that Putin made the same comparison with Iraq (see for instance President of Russia 2012b; 2017b; 2019j) and Afghanistan (see for instance President of Russia 2012c; 2021c).

In some cases, this comparison runs parallel to Putin's argument that he is not necessarily defending the government or Assad as such. As early as in 2012, Putin mentioned that Russia was "not for al-Assad, nor for his opponents" (President of Russia 2012b), and said the following year that "we're not advocates of the incumbent Syrian government or the country's incumbent president, Bashar al-Assad" (President of Russia 2013a). In an interview with Al Arabiya, Sky News Arabia and RT Arabic on October 13, 2019, he explains that Russia "came to Syria to support the legitimate government." Surprisingly, he explicitly recognizes during the interview that the leadership is responsible for the situation in the country, but he makes it clear that Russia cannot allow "terrorists to capture Syria and to establish a terrorist pseudo-state there" (President of Russia 2019j). This builds on previous speeches where he mentioned that Russia intervened to support the "legitimate" or "lawful" government in its struggle against terrorism (President of Russia 2015b; 2015c; 2015f; 2016a; 2016d; 2018c; 2019i).

To be sure, one could reasonably argue that he has a personal preference for Assad and his regime. Indeed, one of Russia's core messages is that Assad should not be pressured by the international community to leave because this is something the Syrian people has to decide (Giles 2017, 25). However, when one reads the transcripts of Putin's speeches, interviews and news conferences, one can see that Putin has really put more emphasis on preserving the Syrian state, fighting terrorism, and stabilising the situation rather than preserving the Assad regime.

Furthermore, Putin tries to cast Russia as a neutral actor by arguing that it is up to Syrian citizens to decide the fate of their country, that this is about respecting Syrian sovereignty. Indeed,

throughout the years, the Russian President frequently referred to the importance of letting Syrians decide their own future (President of Russia 2012b; 2013a; 2015b; 2015g; 2015q; 2016d; 2019a; 2019i; 2019j; 2019l; 2020b), sometimes specifically mentioning that there should be inter-Syrian talks (President of Russia 2015m; 2018j; 2019m; 2021a) or a political process led by the Syrians themselves (President of Russia 2019d; 2020d). In general, this specific emphasis on the importance of respecting Syrian sovereignty and letting Syrians decide comes up more often when Putin speaks to an international audience.

Therefore, to sum up Putin's argument so far, fighting terrorists, stabilising the situation, and preserving the state would lead to an opportunity to hold an internal political process respecting Syria's sovereignty. This was especially present in Putin's rhetoric in the weeks that followed the announcement of the intervention. For instance, in an interview on the Rossiya-1 television channel on October 12, 2015, Putin explained that: "our task is to stabilise the legitimate government and establish conditions that will make it possible to look for political compromise" (President of Russia 2015f). Later that month, when President Assad came to Russia on October 20, he explained that "our position is that positive results in military operations will lay the base for then working out a long-term settlement based on a political process that involves all political forces, ethnic and religious groups" (President of Russia 2015g; see also President of Russia 2015h). In the following weeks and years, he repeatedly claimed that fighting terrorism precedes the stabilisation of the situation and a political settlement (President of Russia 2015j; 2017f; 2017g; 2019a; 2019f), and that the objective was to "create the conditions" for a political settlement (President of Russia 2015k; 2016c; 2016d; 2017c; 2018c; 2018d). In many other cases, Putin addresses the themes of fighting terrorism, stabilising the situation, preserving the state, and promoting the political process

in the same breath (President of Russia 2015b; 2015l; 2015m; 2016j; 2017k; 2018h; 2019h; 2020d; 2020e; 2021a).

Putin's emphasis on the importance of preserving Syrian statehood is consistent with how his world view has been characterized in the literature. One of the most basic elements of Putin's conception of world politics is the ontological centrality of states, which means that states are the main actors in international relations. In Putin's view, this is not only a reality but something that must be preserved because it is "normatively appropriate and desirable" (Jankovski 2021, 74). In fact, he sees the nation-states as the "ultimate guarantor of stability and order, both domestically and internationally" (Krickovic and Weber 2018, 297).

Putin's argument on the right of Syrians to determine their own future is also consistent with Westphalian conceptions of sovereignty, which is precisely how the Russian political class typically understands sovereignty according to the academic literature. In essence, Westphalian sovereignty consists in a mutual recognition of the exclusive authority of states over their territory (Paris 2020, 2). For Russia, this is of the utmost necessity to preserve international security and peace. Russian politicians generally reject Western liberal narratives. They argue that they are uniformizing and consider that they encourage interference in internal state affairs (Averre 2021; Frear and Mazepus 2021). They prefer "sovereign globalization" or "sovereign democracy," which essentially means that integration in global markets is desirable, but populations should be politically and culturally insulated from one another (Herd 2021b). Russia rejects the more recent softening of sovereignty that came with the spread of liberal humanism and is preoccupied with the eroding power of nation-states (Clunan 2018, 4). In the context of the intervention in Syria, this conception resurfaces with Putin's emphasis on the importance of letting Syrians decide their own future.

However, an important nuance is that Putin's conception of sovereignty is not necessarily universal: In the post-Soviet area, sovereignty takes a very different meaning. As explained by Deyermond (2016) and recalled by Feklyunina (2020), Russia conceptualizes the sovereignty of neighbouring post-Soviet states as "porous in relation to Russia while remaining impermeable in relation to states outside the region" (Deyermond 2016, 982). Therefore, in its 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, the Kremlin was very vocal about its support for Syria's "independence and territorial integrity" while avoiding even the remotest references to sovereignty for Ukraine and Georgia (Frear and Mazepus 2021, 1224–25).

3.3. International Law and the Legality of the Intervention

In the case of the Syrian intervention, Putin continuously referred to international law and the United Nations (UN), using legal arguments to attempt to legitimize the intervention and cast Russia as a responsible player in the international arena (Konyshev and Sergunin 2020, 178). In numerous cases, Putin claimed his actions in Syria, i.e., the intervention and his support of the Syrian government prior to the intervention, were in line with international law (President of Russia 2013b; 2015b; 2015c; 2015f; 2015o; 2016d; 2018e). In the weeks and months that followed the announcement of Russia's military involvement in Syria, Putin repeated that Russia was acting at the request of the Syrian government, making the intervention legal under international law (President of Russia 2015b; 2015d; 2015f; 2015h; 2016d). Indeed, the Russian leader frequently explains to the public that one needs either a resolution from the United Nations Security Council or an invitation of the national government to be legally allowed to intervene militarily (President of Russia 2015b; 2015c; 2015d; 2015f; 2018i). He makes clear to his audience that Russia has been invited by the Syrian government while other countries that have a military presence in Syria were

not invited. In this sense, he frequently accuses the US (President of Russia 2017a; 2017b; 2018i; 2019i) and other countries (President of Russia 2015c; 2015f; 2021d) of violating international law. In addition, he highlights that imposing a government to a foreign nation is illegal (President of Russia 2015q) and invites all countries to respect international law (President of Russia 2015a; 2016b). More recently, he also evoked the importance to act in accordance with the UN Security Council's resolution 2254 (President of Russia 2019a; 2019c; 2019f; 2020b; 2020d), which was adopted on December 18, 2015, and called for a ceasefire and a political settlement in Syria while also calling for Member States to "prevent and suppress terrorist acts" committed by groups such as ISIS (United Nations 2015).

In Putin's rhetoric, the UN is presented as the most important international institution. This is one of the pillars of Russia's interpretation of the current world order (Chebankova 2017, 224). When talking about the situation in Syria, Putin explicitly mentions that the UN has a "central role in global politics" (President of Russia 2013f; see also President of Russia 2021b). Furthermore, he also explains that the UN should be part of the solution in Syria. In particular, he often mentions that a political settlement should take place "under the auspices of the United Nations" (President of Russia 2017f; see also President of Russia 2015d; 2017l; 2019c; 2019f; 2019k). He also talks about the UN playing a role in overseeing the fight against international terrorism (President of Russia 2015o; 2018b).

In the years that followed the start of the intervention in 2015, Putin explicitly borrowed liberal themes to justify his actions abroad as he regularly made sure to recall that Russian actions in Syria also consisted in providing humanitarian assistance (President of Russia 2016m; 2016n; 2016o; 2017j; 2018b; 2018h; 2018k; 2018l; 2019l; 2020d; 2020g). He mentioned that "humanitarian assistance for Syria's post-conflict recovery is a primary goal," and invited the

international community to contribute to such an effort (President of Russia 2019f; see also President of Russia 2019c; 2021c). As Europe saw the pressures of mass migration flows increase, Putin also argued that providing humanitarian assistance to Syria would help Syrians go back to their homes and reduce the number of people seeking refuge in Europe (President of Russia 2018f; 2018h; 2018j).

To be sure, this does not mean that Russia and the West fully align on questions relating to humanitarian assistance. Significant disagreements remain. For instance, as Putin explained in an interview with NBC on June 14, 2021, international humanitarian assistance should be sent through the central Syrian government, which he argued can be trusted for the distribution (President of Russia 2021c). Furthermore, in the case of the intervention in Syria, Russia refrains from using any language associated with the responsibility-to-protect framework. Indeed, Russia rejects the idea that sovereignty could be conditional to respecting certain humanitarian norms, and prefers to stick to principles such as territorial integrity and non-interference (Averre and Davies 2015). Russia may be borrowing liberal justifications to retrospectively justify its actions in Syria, but there remain profound tensions between Russia and the West, mainly the US. The next section will briefly unpack these tensions to examine how Putin's justification of the intervention in Syria plays into this context.

3.4. Critique of the West, the United States and the Liberal Order

Throughout these justifications for the intervention in Syria, Vladimir Putin does not hesitate to heavily criticize the West while placing Russia on the right side of History. One of the most outstanding aspects of this rhetoric is the Russian leader accusing the West of supporting terrorism in the Middle East. Prior to the Russian intervention, Putin did so very directly and very

bluntly, accusing the US of siding with terrorists just to get rid of Bashar al-Assad (President of Russia 2013d). He also claimed that Al-Qaida was the United States' "pet project", and strongly implied that the West wanted to "use militants from Al-Qaeda or some other organisations with equally radical views to accomplish their goals in Syria," later mentioning that the people supported by the US in Syria are the same kind of people as those incarcerated in Guantanamo (President of Russia 2012c). Shortly after the intervention was launched, he continued to implicitly build on these accusations, arguing that countries should have no contact with terrorist organisations and should not "attempt to use them for self-seeking goals" (President of Russia 2015o) or "as a battering ram to overthrow the regimes that are not to one's liking" (President of Russia 2015h). In his speech at the UNGA on September 28, 2015, Putin claimed that "the Islamic State (…) was initially developed as a weapon against undesirable secular regimes" (President of Russia 2015a). The following day, during his interview with Charlie Rose, he made a similar claim: "It seems to me that somebody wants to use either certain units of ISIS or ISIS in general in order to overthrow al-Assad and only then think about how to get rid of ISIS" (President of Russia 2015b). Later, during a press conference in December 2017, Putin rhetorically wondered: "We tell our American partners (about terrorists) where they travel and they ignore this. Why? Perhaps to use them (terrorists) to fight Assad?" (Putin cited in Borschevskaya 2021, 95).

Beyond these accusations of supporting terrorism, Putin has often argued that the West, and the US in particular, is responsible for the chaos that has affected the Middle East in recent decades. To this effect, he often mentions Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan and criticized the Western interventions, at least implicitly (President of Russia 2012b; 2012d; 2013c; 2015a; 2015b; 2015h; 2016j; 2018j; 2019j; 2021c; Putin 2013). For instance, in his 2015 Presidential Address to the

Federal Assembly, Putin offered a blunt explanation of why there is so much chaos in these countries:

> We all know why that happened. We know who decided to oust the unwanted regimes and brutally impose their own rules. Where has this led them? They stirred up trouble, destroyed the countries' statehood, set people against each other, and then "washed their hands", as we say in Russia, thus opening the way to radical activists, extremists and terrorists (President of Russia 2015o).

Furthermore, Putin also blamed the West for not collaborating with Russia in the fight against terrorism. Indeed, in the months that followed the launch of the Russian operation, Putin mentioned twice that the US was blaming Russia for hitting unarmed opponents while Washington refused to share information about what targets they should not hit (President of Russia 2015h; 2015k). In addition, he also explicitly claimed that the US was willing to go against their own interest by not collaborating with Russia (President of Russia 2013d; 2018g), a theme that will also resurface later in this paper, although more implicitly, in section 3.6 on international collaboration.

Further criticisms of the US, pertaining to a wide range of themes, contribute to creating this rhetoric of Russia being on the right side of History, while the US is presented as a machiavellic and cruel actor. In 2015, Putin claimed that the US and the West were fighting terrorism ineffectively, and that "we see no real results" (President of Russia 2015f). The following year, he accused the US and its allies of submitting a resolution at the Security Council to provoke a Russian veto, and then "blame everything on Russia" and "unleash anti-Russian hysteria in the controlled media" (President of Russia 2016i). Later in 2020, Putin also said that Western sanctions against Syria "sidestep the UN Security Council," are "illegitimate and illegal," and "suffocat[e] the Syrian Arab Republic economically" (President of Russia 2020d). He shamed Washington and Brussels for extending sanctions against Damascus while the Secretary General called to ease sanctions in the context of the pandemic (President of Russia 2020d). A few months later, when Steve

Rosenberg from NBC asked Putin if Russian authorities were “squeaky clean”, he answered “compared to you, yes, we are, indeed, squeaky clean” (President of Russia 2020f).

These criticisms of the West in relation to the Syrian crisis take place within the wider context of increasing tensions between Russia and the West. Since the beginning of the post-Cold War era, Russia and Western countries have entertained diverging expectations. On the one hand, the West essentially perceived the end of the Cold War as the triumph of liberal democratic values over communism. With liberalism being crowned victorious, the West expected Russia to naturally adhere to liberal norms and values. On the other hand, Russia expected that the end of the Cold War would entail a process of “transcendence” of the liberal order, where the Western liberal countries and the defeated Russian superpower would come together as equal partners into a pluralistic “Greater West” (Sakwa 2017; Loftus and Kanet 2021, 60–61). Of course, this transcendence never took place.

Excluding the first years of the US’s war on terror, during which relations between Russia and the West slightly improved, Russia-West relations have been consistently degrading following the end of the Cold War. Some of the key events that contributed to the slowly increasing tensions include NATO’s bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the “colour revolutions” of the years 2003-2005, the enlargement of the European Union and NATO in 2004, and NATO’s intervention in Libya (Casula and Katz 2020, 299–300; Clunan 2021, 9). In particular, Moscow sees NATO’s eastward enlargement as a direct security threat and a violation of a verbal promise made to Gorbachev not to expand NATO to Russia’s borders (Coulon 2018, 171–173). Of course, Moscow also has a lot of blame to take. Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and now its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which all run counter to

international law and challenge the rules-based order, have dramatically contributed to the degradation of its relations with the West.

All these events and the West's response to Russia's military interventions have been perceived by Moscow as examples of the West's aggressive behaviour and evidence of its efforts to erode Russia's sovereignty. Coupled with the West's active promotion of liberalism and democracy, this behaviour has been seen by Russia as a direct threat. Time and time again, Russian leaders have accused the West, and especially the United States, of igniting the protests that formed the colour revolutions that swiped through former soviet republics at the beginning of the 2000s. From this perspective, Russia has assumed that the West has been consistently seeking to oust non-liberal regimes. Although this trend was not identified in the speeches that were gathered for this research, the academic literature claims that Russia was interpreting the Arab spring in a continuum with these colour revolutions, all of which are seen as being teleguided from Washington (McFaul 2020, 123). Ultimately, Russia is worried that the Kremlin is the next target of the liberal steamroller, i.e., that Putin's regime will be the victim of an umpteenth colour revolution. The 2011-2012 protests that shook Moscow were perceived through that lens, with Putin even claiming that US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton had given the signal to the protesters (Borshchevskaya 2021, 47). In this sense, Russia is convinced that the West's promotion of liberalism and democracy is part of a transformative and subversive agenda that infringes on Russia's sovereignty and is contrary to basic principles of non-intervention, which Russia holds very dear.

Moreover, the expansive character of the Western liberal project has been seen by Moscow has infringing on Russia's "great-power rights," in particular in the post-Soviet space. Russia, who thinks of itself as a great power equal to the US, believes that it has exclusive oversight within its sphere of influence. As mentioned previously in the section on sovereignty and statehood, Russia's

conception of sovereignty is not as Westphalian in the context of the post-Soviet space. For these countries, sovereignty is a rather porous concept while Russia's "legitimate" interest in the region is perceived by the Kremlin as emerging from a natural great-power right. NATO expansion and the perceived involvement of the West in colour revolutions is therefore seen as unacceptable by Moscow (Lo 2015, 14–15; Deyermond 2016; Coulon 2018, 171–73; Viakhireva 2020, 32; Frear and Mazepus 2021, 1217–18, 1224–25).

Therefore, the overarching narrative is that Russia is a great power, with a glorious past, facing a direct and indirect threat from the West. In this narrative, Russia is both able to intervene in its neighbourhood and beyond, e.g., in Syria; it is a reliable partner able to help regimes facing internal and external pressures. It can do so on-demand and does not require any modifications to state structure, respecting traditional Westphalian principles of non-interference. At the same time, Russia is facing great dangers: as mentioned previously, it perceives the West's liberal agenda as a direct threat and blames Western governments for any form of contestation and even terrorism in countries that are historically aligned with Moscow, as we have seen in the case of Syria.

Taking a step back, this opposition to the West is part of an even more profound trend that the literature identifies as Russia's tendency to define itself against the West. In the academic literature on Russian foreign policy, the West is repeatedly conceptualized as the "Other." In fact, in the study of the construction of Russian identity and interests, the West is a common and well recognized reference point (Feklyunina 2020, 8). Indeed, in modern times, Russia has been oscillating between rejecting and internalizing the global hegemonic order (Morozov 2020, 35). In the past decade, Russia has adopted a neo-revisionist stance. Fundamentally, this stance is centered on the defence of sovereign, or conservative, internationalism that rejects humanitarian interventionism, regime change and nation-building. To be sure, Russia has not completely rejected

the importance of global governance and the possibility to work with the hegemonic power. Rather, it emphasizes the need to have a system where interlocutors are mutually recognized as equal and where classical principles of sovereignty are enforced (Sakwa 2017, 342–43). Russia has been explicitly in favour of a more multilateral world where global governance remains important but without Western liberalism holding a position of dominance (Kramer 2019, 603; Ziegler 2020, 124–25). In this sense, Russia has not been fully opposed to liberalism: It generally adheres to some of the basic principles of charter liberalism, which is based on a state-centered order and entails a commitment to "hard" sovereignty, while opposing the "softening" of sovereignty that comes with liberal humanism and economic neoliberalism (Clunan 2018, 46–47). Of course, there remains a major caveat to that, which is the Russian conception of sovereignty in the post-Soviet space. Consequently, and especially since Russia launched its "special military operation" in Ukraine, it appears more appropriate to conclude that Russia uses the concept of Westphalian sovereignty in a tactical or instrumental way to fight the uniformizing liberal narrative (Frear and Mazepus 2021)**.** Nevertheless, this can still fit within the conceptualization of Russia's position as neo-revisionist, and this remains useful to capture the extent of the Russian challenge to the liberal order.

Now going back to Putin's justification for the war in Syria with this context in mind, one can appreciate that Putin's rhetoric, and the intervention itself, are part of this broader challenge to the global, US-led, liberal order. The Russian narrative of the war in Syria, which focuses on terrorism, attempts to cast doubt on the Western interpretation of the Arab Spring being the product of a desire for more democracy in the Middle East (Averre and Davies 2015, 820; Borshchevskaya 2021, 92). In addition, beyond this question of narrative, the intervention itself has been an attempt to claim great-power status and to send a clear message that Russia can help regimes that are in trouble (Giles 2017, 26). As explored earlier, Russia also tried to cultivate its image of a "neutral

mediator" that can provide stability while respecting principles of non-interference and sovereignty. In this sense, Russia was both actively and rhetorically trying to position itself as an alternative to the West (Herd 2021b, 162, 165).

3.5. Testing Weapons

Throughout the Russian intervention in Syria, Putin has often claimed that the intervention was an opportunity to test military capabilities. He talked about the experience that was gained during the operation (President of Russia 2016m; 2018e; 2018l; 2019e), mentioning it is "difficult to think about a better training exercise" (President of Russia 2015q; see also President of Russia 2016d). At the same time, Putin also claimed that Russian weapons "proved their effectiveness in Syria" (President of Russia 2016n), but he also recognizes, in another speech, that there were flaws in some of the Russia weapons and equipment and that these needed to be fixed (President of Russia 2018a). Nevertheless, that is part of the whole idea of testing weapons, which is one of the main benefits of the intervention in Syria in Putin's view.

According to the qualitative analysis of Putin's speeches, this argument seems exclusively used in the domestic context, especially in meetings with the Russian military. For instance, Putin used this argument in December 2015 during his annual press conference, in 2016 when he met with Russian Armed Forces service personnel (President of Russia 2016d) and with senior officers appointed to command position (President of Russia 2016m). In 2018, a bit more than two years after the start of the intervention, this argument came back to retroactively justify Russia's military involvement in Syria. He made similar claims about the benefits of testing weapons when he spoke at a military-practical conference on the results of the intervention in Syria (President of Russia 2018a), at his annual televised Q&A, Direct Line (President of Russia 2018e), and at a Defence

Ministry Board meeting in December 2018 (President of Russia 2018l). The same argument also briefly featured in his 2019 Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly (President of Russia 2019e).

This argument fits within this narrative of Russia needing to fight terrorists in Syria before they come to Russia. When he met with Russian Armed Forces service personnel in May 2016, he explained that the intervention was not only the "chance to test everything in combat," but also that the costs incurred in Syria "help enhance our country's defence capability and resolve strategic and current tasks to ensure Russia's security" and "we need to do it now, to avoid paying a much higher price later" (President of Russia 2016d). In other words, testing weapons and improving defence capabilities is urgent from a national security point of view. As such, this element of the Russian rationale for the intervention in Syria echoes the more prominent self-preservation argument that was explored earlier. Although it appears to be the only case where he made this link explicit, this speech offers a window into how each justification is loosely linked with other justifications.

At the same time, Russia's testing and advertising of its weapons in the context of the intervention in Syria is in itself consistent with the broader attempt to claim great-power status. As mentioned in the previous section, Russia is attempting to showcase to the world that it is able to intervene in regions that are not traditionally part of its sphere of influence. In this context, testing arms is part of this attempt to recover great-power capabilities and to project a renewed grandeur (Borshchevskaya 2021, 83; Smith 2021, 53).

3.6. International Cooperation

Another part of the Russian rationale and rhetoric is an argument in favour of international cooperation. In parallel to what was explored in the previous sections, Putin also called for more international cooperation in the context of the Syrian conflict. In fact, this research identified that there were 96 passages where Putin made references to international cooperation and the need for such cooperation in the context of the conflict in Syria. These references were found in 63 speeches, near half of the total number of files analysed for this project. Needless to say, international cooperation remained a very prominent theme despite Putin's criticisms of the West and the anti-American sentiments present in many of the Russian leader's speeches, as explained previously. In fact, it is worth mentioning that international cooperation is the most prominent theme after fighting terrorism, and that it is especially prominent in speeches directed at an international audience.

In particular, he argued in favour of jointly fighting against terrorism, calling on the US and other countries to join Russia in the fight against international terrorism and emphasizing the necessity to unite forces against this common enemy (President of Russia 2015c; 2015h; 2015j; 2015k; 2015n; 2016h; 2016k; 2017d; 2017e; 2020c). At some point, he also argued clearly in favour of having an "international counterterrorist coalition" (President of Russia 2017a; see also President of Russia 2015a). He also claimed that Russia achieved "positive, constructive cooperation with the United States of America" (President of Russia 2016d), and that their vision coincides with the American vision (President of Russia 2015q). To be fair, though, Putin did not only talk about counterterrorism cooperation with the West. In fact, he frequently focused on cooperation with Iran and Turkey (President of Russia 2015i; 2017c; 2017h; 2019a; 2019h; 2020d; 2020e; 2021a).

It is worth noting that during his 2015 Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, Putin also made the parallel with Allied forces fighting Nazism during the Second World War (President of Russia 2015o). Although this was the only time Putin clearly made this parallel, it is interesting to see how he drew on the narrative of the Great Patriotic War and the victory of the Soviet Union, which is central to Putin's nation building attempts (Walker 2019), to boost the legitimacy of Russia's actions in Syria and to convince officials that there should be another glorious international coalition with Russia proudly standing on the right side of history.

Putin also presents international cooperation as necessary to achieve "normalisation" in Syria (President of Russia 2019f; 2019j), "restore peace" (President of Russia 2018f), and "resolve the situation" (President of Russia 2017h), especially emphasizing that this cooperation would support the political process in Syria (President of Russia 2012a; 2013b; 2013e; 2013f; 2015e; 2015f; 2015g; 2015h; 2015j; 2015m; 2015q; 2016d; 2016j; 2017c; 2017f; 2017k; 2018b; 2018h; 2018j; 2019a; 2019b; 2019d; 2019i; 2019h; 2019k; 2019l; 2019m; 2020d; 2020e; 2021a). Essentially, this is part of a broad attempt to put a positive label on Russia's actions in Syria and legitimize the intervention. It is about convincing the world and the Russian public that Russia is ultimately committed to bringing about the conditions for a political process to take place and for peace to be restored. Putin uses these words, "political process", "political solution", "peace", "normalisation", to exert productive power, which relates to the production of meaning through diffuse social relations (Barnett and Duvall 2005). He is trying to fix the meaning of Russia's actions through these discursive practices and give a positive connotation to the intervention.

Beyond this analysis of Putin's rhetoric, the intervention itself can be interpreted as part of a broader strategy to coerce the West into a dialogue and force it to recognize Russia as a great power. By intervening in Syria, Russia attempted to position itself as a key stakeholder in the

Middle East and demonstrate parity with the US. Moscow wanted to show to the world that it can express and achieve its interests abroad just as any other powerful Western capital. However, Moscow needs major Western capitals, especially Washington, to recognize Russia's reappearance as a great power in the international arena. Forcing the West to dialogue to resolve the Syrian crisis was part of this attempt to gain this recognition of Russia's importance at both the regional and global levels (Trenin 2018, 82; Konyshev and Sergunin 2020, 176; Ziegler 2020, 133; Herd 2021a, 21, 26; Issaev 2021, 430).

3.7. Other Less Prominent Themes

Some themes highlighted in the literature were less present in the speeches analysed in this research. First, the link between the Arab Spring and the colour revolutions was much less clear in Putin's discourse than in the literature. Indeed, this research did not find any example of Putin clearly linking Syria and the Arab Spring to colour revolutions. The only example that was found in the speeches is a comment made by Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu during a Defence Ministry Board meeting in 2016. Speaking about the Russian operation in Syria, Shoigu said that "the disintegration of the Syrian state was prevented and the chain of colour revolutions that multiplied in the Middle East and Africa was cut short" (President of Russia 2016n). This could potentially indicate that this kind of rhetoric was more common among other officials in the Russian government, but this research does not present enough evidence to support this claim since it focused on Putin's speeches and only happened to include other officials' discourse when they interacted with Putin.

Second, Russian messianism, which was a common theme in the literature, particularly in the literature on Russian foreign policy more broadly, was much less prominent in Putin's discourse

on Syria than expected. For instance, Putin did not directly mention that Russia has a special role in terms of protecting Christians and Christianity. In fact, he only referred twice to the need to protect Christians in the Middle East (President of Russia 2017j; 2019l) and did so without mentioning that Russia has some sort of messianic role. The idea that Russia occupies a very special role in history due to its geopolitical position that straddles both Asia and Europe was only implicitly mentioned once in Putin's speeches (President of Russia 2013d). In light of the literature, we understand that this messianism and sense of uniqueness is part of the ideology that forms the background of the Russian official discourse; however, there were surprisingly very few specific traces of this messianism in the speeches analysed in this project.

Third, the importance of protecting cultural heritage was a theme that came up in some parts of the literature, but that was not at all prominent in the speeches studied in this paper. Authors have discussed how Russia put a lot of emphasis on how recapturing Palmyra in 2016 was a victory of civilization over ISIS's barbarism, which posed a threat to the preservation of important cultural heritage sites in Syria (Plets 2017, 19; Russo and Giusti 2019, 849). Putin also had a conversation with Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO from 2009 to 2017, to discuss the protection of the cultural heritage of Palmyra (UNESCO 2016), and UNESCO adopted a resolution that Russia drafted a few weeks after the recapture of Palmyra to promote the protection of cultural heritage (Plets 2017, 22). In the speeches, interviews and news conferences that were analysed, there were only a few instances were President Vladimir Putin emphasized the importance of preserving cultural heritage in the context of Russia's operation in Syria (President of Russia 2016d; 2016l; 2017i), including the need to clear mines from Palmyra (President of Russia 2016f). Even when Russia held a concert in the ancient city of Palmyra to celebrate Russia's recapture of the city from the hands of ISIS, Putin, in a video conference with the people present at the event, chose to focus

on the importance of fighting terrorism rather that the protection of cultural heritage (President of Russia 2016g) (see Annex B).

Fourth, according to the literature, the Kremlin was keen to make sure that Russia did not get bogged down in Syria and to convince the Russian people that this new campaign in the Middle East would not simply be the repetition of the Soviet failure in Afghanistan (Trenin 2018, 64–65; Borshchevskaya 2021, 28, 73, 93). In the speeches analysed for this research, there was no evidence of Vladimir Putin trying to convince Russians that Syria was not just another Afghanistan. He simply tried to reassure the Russian public that this was a limited operation (President of Russia 2015l; 2015q; 2016d), that they were not getting "entangled in inter-religious conflicts" (President of Russia 2015c; 2015f) or jeopardising Russia's interests (President of Russia 2013f).

Chapter 4: Different Audience, Different Arguments

This chapter analyses word frequencies to examine how Putin's rhetoric varies depending on the audience. The word clouds created using NVivo illustrate which themes are more prominent when Putin speaks to a domestic audience and those more prominent when he speaks to an international audience. This chapter will then attempt to answer why his rationale differs depending on the audience and will provide a brief assessment of the impact of Putin's rhetoric.

4.1. Word Clouds

As explained in chapter 2 on methodology and data, all speeches, interviews, news conferences and press statements were separated in three mutually exclusive groups, according to whether the speeches were targeting (1) a domestic audience, (2) an international audience, or (3) both.

Number of files and passages categorized by type of audience

Type of audience	Number of files	Number of passages
Domestic	41	168
International	71	187
Domestic and International	21	70

Source: Numbers compiled by the author using NVivo.

Three word clouds were created, one for each type of audience. As mentioned previously, the word clouds are built using the passages that were associated with each type of audience. Therefore, the word clouds do not take into account passages that are unrelated to the Russian intervention in Syria.

Word Cloud 1: Most frequent words used, passages targeting a domestic audience

Source: Data compiled by the author using NVivo

Word Cloud 2: Most frequent words used, passages targeting an international audience

Source: Data compiled by the author using NVivo

Word Cloud 3: Most frequent words used, passages targeting both a domestic and an international audience

Source: Data compiled by the author using NVivo

The first word cloud shows that terrorism is one of the most prominent themes in passages that target a domestic audience. The word "terrorist" occupies a prominent place in the word cloud, while "terrorists" and "terrorism" also occupy a significant place. What is also striking in this word cloud is the high frequency of words pertaining to the military: "weapons", "army", "forces", "armed", and the word "military" itself are very prominent. One can also find the words "operation", "operations", "combat", "fight" and "defence" when looking just outside the middle of the cloud. In particular, the fact that the word "weapons" occupies such an important place echoes the previous discussion on the intervention being framed as an opportunity to test arms. As mentioned earlier, this is a theme that appears to be specific to the domestic context.

When moving to the second word cloud, the most striking result is that this militaristic vocabulary does not occupy the same space. Rather, words such as "political", "settlement", and

"process" are much more prominent. One can also note that "Turkey" and "Iran" appear in grey, while they did not appear at all in the first word cloud. Both findings echo the discussion on Russia's attempt to call for increased international cooperation to find a political solution to the conflict. Although it is important to recognize that we do see "terrorism" and its derivatives in this word cloud, it is absolutely stunning to see how these words are dominated by the words "political" and "settlement". This suggests that the anti-terrorist argument remains common in Putin's rhetoric, but that he tends to focus more on the need for a political solution when he is talking to an international audience. Vice-versa, the words "political" and "process" also appear in the first word cloud, suggesting that this theme is also important, but not as prominent as the anti-terrorist argument. The use of the word "humanitarian" is more constant: the word can be found in grey in both word clouds, which suggest that in both cases Putin has been attempting to argue that there is a humanitarian aspect to Russia's action, as explained earlier. However, this argument is not the most central, and both word clouds confirm that.

Interestingly, a number of important concepts and themes only appear in the second word cloud, which confirms certain preliminary findings that were briefly discussed in the previous chapter. This is the case for the word "Libya". The comparison between Syria and Libya occupies an important place in Putin's rhetoric, and as mentioned earlier, it is generally used to convince an international audience of the importance of preventing the fall of the Syrian regime. Similarly, the word "sovereignty" appears right on the border of the second word cloud, while not appearing at all in the first one. This goes in the same direction as the discussion in the previous chapter on how Putin emphasizes the importance of letting Syrians decide their own future. Putin appears to be using arguments related to sovereignty more often when he is addressing an international audience compared to when he is talking to the Russian public.

In addition, there are certain differences that can be noted but from which we can only draw very tentative conclusions. For instance, “ISIS” is there in both word clouds, even if it is slightly more prominent in the second one. This suggests that Putin mentioned a bit more frequently the well-known terrorist group when addressing an international audience; however, the difference remains relatively small, and it would probably be more cautious to conclude that Putin places a similar focus on this terrorist group in both cases. Similarly, the word “legitimate” appears in grey in the second word cloud and the word “assad” is in black, but both are absent from the first illustration. Looking back to the main themes that were explored in the first section, this could mean that Putin more frequently claims that the Russian intervention supports the “legitimate” government of Syria. However, the world cloud does not take into account what is qualified as “legitimate” and does not allow us to conclude in which context Bashar al-Assad is mentioned. Therefore, there is no clear conclusion that can be drawn from this observation.

Turning to the last word cloud, one can see that it is essentially the combination of the first two illustrations: the words “terrorism”, “terrorists”, “process” and “political” occupy the most prominent spot in the word cloud. Therefore, it is the combination of the themes that were at the forefront of the previous two word clouds. It is important to note that this word cloud is not literally the combination of the first and second word clouds. Indeed, the passages that were used to create each illustration are mutually exclusive. The third word cloud is based on passages for which we could reasonably argue that Putin was addressing both an international and domestic audience. Hence, the third word cloud really suggests that when addressing both types of audiences at once, Putin’s rhetoric combines the main arguments that he normally uses for each audience. The only caveat is that the third word cloud is based on a smaller number of passages. Therefore, it is not fully comparable to the first two illustrations.

4.2. Explaining the Differences

The word clouds illustrate how Putin adapts his justification of the war in Syria to his audience. Informed by the rich academic literature on Russian Foreign Policy, this section attempts to explain why there is a difference between how Putin justified the intervention to the Russian public and to the international community.

When facing a domestic audience, Putin mainly emphasizes concerns related to terrorism and testing weapons. This suggests that he frequently draws on the self-preservation argument to justify the intervention to the Russian public. As explained in previous sections, it is a very simple argument according to which Russians need to fight terrorists abroad before they come to Russia, and one of the implications of this argument is that Russia needs to increase its military capabilities.

Putin's focus on terrorism and weapons reflects an attempt to bolster his political legitimacy and achieve political mobilization. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russian economic growth has been slowed down by Western sanctions. By the third and fourth quarter of 2015, economic growth was at its lowest since the global financial crisis of 2009. Economic growth and modernization were one of the key pillars of Putin's political legitimacy during his first years in power at the beginning of the 2000s. Halfway through the second decade of the new millennium, economic frustration was becoming a problem and the country was facing a significant modernisation deficit. The annexation of Crimea provoked a tremendous increase in Putin's approval rate as people welcomed the so-called return of the peninsula. By 2015, this support was already crumbling and parliamentary elections, scheduled for the fall of 2016, were approaching fast. In this context, there was a need for the ruling regime to find new sources of political legitimacy (Issaev 2021, 429; Meister 2021, 76, 79).

Putin's domestic explanation for the war in Syria reflects these concerns about state cohesion in Russia. The anti-terrorist and self-preservation rhetoric that he repeatedly used to justify the intervention in Syria serves to divert attention away from economic difficulties and from other public policy shortcomings in areas like education, health and infrastructure. This focus on external threat provokes a rally-around-the-flag effect which overshadows the other domestic concerns and generates support for the ruling regime who is presented as the only one able to provide security. By using such an argument, Putin feeds into and exploits the idea of a besieged Russia to rebuild and consolidate his authority, a strategy that Tsar Nicholas I, Lenin and Stalin have used in the past (Allison 2013, 796, 815; Lo 2015, 24–25).

In parallel, the discussion on testing weapons in Syria is also related to Russia's claiming of great-power status. Focusing on the military industrial complex also helps to distract the public's attention, but it also contributes to the consolidation of the Kremlin's narrative of the return of a great power in the international arena. Testing weapons is itself a projection of power and having a strong military is a fundamental element of Russia's claim to great-power status (Smith 2021). Domestically, this claim to great-power status is especially relevant since such a status is at the heart of the Russian national identity and helps legitimize the regime in place (Herd 2021, 162). At the same time, status is something that a state's own population has to judge (Clunan 2021, 5). Therefore, Putin's emphasis on talking about testing weapons in the domestic context could be part of an attempt to convince the Russian public of their country's great-power status.

When speaking to an international audience, Putin stresses the importance of reaching a political settlement. One of the major drivers of this focus on a political settlement is most likely to be, again, Russia's quest for great-power status. As explained earlier, Russia wants to present itself as a responsible and neutral actor that upholds principles of sovereignty and non-interference.

At the same time, this focus on a political settlement is part of this wider attempt to convince Western capitals, especially Washington, to collaborate with Moscow as equals. The Russian campaign in Syria and its rhetorical focus on reaching a political settlement with all parties of the conflict served to coerce the West into a dialogue and temporarily divert attention from the situation in Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea. Such a collaboration is essential for Moscow to achieve great-power status. Vis-à-vis the Western Other, Russia is attempting to position itself as an equal, independent actor. Collaborating in the resolution of the Syrian crisis is part of this attempt to show to the world that Russia matters and that conflicts cannot be solved without Moscow (Giles 2021, 27–28; Pieper 2019, 377).

The word clouds also showed that Libya and sovereignty were themes that were prominent when Putin was speaking to an international audience. As explained earlier, in the international context, Putin mostly uses the comparison with Libya to criticize the West for its past interventions and to frame his intervention in Syria as a mere attempt to avoid chaos. For Putin, sovereignty is mostly understood in Westphalian terms. His conception is based on the traditional idea of non-interference and respect for other non-post-Soviet states' authority within their boarders. Both themes are examples of Putin's normative challenge to the West: he is challenging the liberal narrative centred on democracy promotion and the liberal humanist idea of sovereignty as conditional to the respect of human rights. Rather, he presents Russia as being committed to the preservation of statehood and as a security and sovereignty provider (Herd 2021, 167).

In a nutshell, one of the drivers of the domestic discourse appears to be the need to achieve political mobilization and to secure political legitimacy. In a context of economic crisis and modernisation deficit, this is very likely to be an important concern that contributed to Putin's choice of focusing on the anti-terrorist and self-preservation argument to justify the intervention in

Syria. In parallel, Putin's militaristic discourse also taps into broader claims to great power status, which resonate at both the domestic and international levels. Indeed, claims to great power status are likely to be the main driver behind his focus on a political settlement. Finally, his focus on Libya and sovereignty when speaking to an international audience is mostly linked to his attempt to challenge the norms of the international liberal order, and such a challenge necessarily needs to occur in the international arena. Of course, themes that are generally present in speeches that take place in an international context can be present in some cases in a domestic context, and vice-versa, but in general the above explanations give a sense of why some themes were more present in one context than another.

4.3. The Domestic Impact of Putin's Rhetoric

The academic literature on the Russian intervention in Syria assesses that Putin's rhetoric has been largely successful in generating support for the intervention among the Russian public. President Putin's approval rate rose following the intervention even if the country's economy was in crisis (Issaev 2021). People also generally accepted the main justification for intervention, the fight against terrorism, and even repeated the official line according to which intervening in Syria is necessary to kill terrorists before they come to Russia (Borshchevskaya 2021, 97–98; Issaev 2021, 435).

More broadly, Putin's narrative contributed to bolster the image of Russia as a great power in the minds of its citizens. After years of feeling humiliated by the West following the end of the Cold War and the traumatic period of transition that constituted the 1990s, the intervention in Syria was seen in a positive way and contributed to a collective feeling that Russia was finally returning to the international arena as a great power (Casula and Katz 2020, 309; Issaev 2021, 430). At the

same time, Russia overcame the "Afghan syndrome", which had made intervening in a foreign Muslim country unthinkable following the disastrous war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and the Middle East came back to public consciousness (Trenin 2018, 64; Casula and Katz 2020, 309).

4.4. The International Impact of Putin's Rhetoric

Regarding the war in Syria, the Kremlin has been rather successful in pushing its narrative in the international space while diverting attention from its actions in Ukraine, at least until it launched a full-scale invasion in February 2022. Russia forced its inclusion in the international dialogue over the Syrian crisis and was able to project great power status. Over time, the West downgraded its willingness to see Assad go, discretely accepting that emphasis needed to be on fighting terrorism. Ultimately, the West has been sidelined from the resolution of the conflict in Syria, with Russia, Turkey and Iran now in the front seat with the Astana process. Overall, Russia seems to have won the battle for the dominant narrative on Syria (Pieper 2019; Simons 2020; Borshchevskaya 2021).

However, Putin's normative contestations related to regime stability, non-interference, and resistance to the liberal agenda, which are central to its rhetoric on the intervention in Syria, do not amount to a counter-hegemonic argument comparable to the challenge posed by the USSR during the Cold War. Russia has not been able to develop an independent language from the Western-led international liberal order. As such, Russia can be conceptualized as a subaltern empire, stuck in a position of normative dependence with the West as Russian foreign policy remains confined in Western terminology. Therefore, it remains that Russia is a neo-revisionist actor, that does not seek to fundamentally challenge the rules of the international order, but rather to modify the functioning of the system and its place within this system (Pieper 2019, 381–82; Morozov 2020, 35; Sakwa

2021). Technically, this suggests that Russia and the West are not fundamentally opposed to potential cooperation.

According to the Kremlin's rhetoric, counterterrorism could be a potential area of cooperation between the West and Russia. As explained above, Putin has been particularly keen to emphasize this theme to draw Western countries into increased cooperation with Russia in the case of Syria. Objectively, there are some reasons to think that Russia and the West could cooperate to fight terrorism. In the past, the events of September 11, 2001, brought the West and Russia on the same page (Plakhov 2019). Looking at Canada-Russia relations as an example, one can also see that high-level officials of both countries have discussed the fight against terrorism in a number of meetings in 2016 and 2017. At that time, there was a brief push for a rapprochement between the two countries as they both shared concerns regarding the return of foreign fighters (Berthiaume 2016; 2017). However, the intervention in Syria might have jeopardized this potential area of cooperation between Russia and Western countries. Washington believes that the intervention has sparked tension between Sunni and Shia extremist groups, and Brussels still does not accept Russia's support of Bashar al-Assad. More broadly, Russia has also not been very cooperative in countering the financing of terrorism and its heavy-handed response remains very criticized (Omelicheva 2021, 274).

Conclusion

This paper systematically examined Vladimir Putin's discourse on Syria and found that his justification for the Russian intervention in that country focused on the following themes: (1) Moscow needs to intervene in Syria to fight terrorists before they come to Russia, (2) Damascus needed help to avoid the complete collapse of the Syrian state, (3) Russia abides by International Law because it only intervened following the invitation from the Syrian government, (4) the West's approach is detrimental and past Western interventions are responsible for the chaos in the Middle East, (5) the Russia intervention in Syria is an opportunity to test weapons, and (6) international cooperation is essential to reach a political settlement in Syria, provided that such cooperation takes place within Russia's terms.

This paper also found that Vladimir Putin does not always rely on the same rationale; it varies depending on whether he is speaking to a domestic or international audience. When he is speaking to a domestic audience, he mostly focuses on fighting terrorism and testing weapons. Such an emphasis on these two themes reflects an attempt to bolster his political legitimacy, achieve political mobilization and claim great-power status. Domestically, this has been overall a convincing argument. Russians have generally accepted Putin's rhetoric on the intervention in Syria. When he is speaking to an international audience, he emphasizes international cooperation and the need to achieve a political settlement in Syria. This reflects an attempt to divert attention from the situation in Ukraine and to coerce the West into collaborating with Russia. It is also part of Moscow's attempt to claim great-power status and increase its level of influence. In the international arena, Russia has rather successfully been able to influence the narrative of the war in Syria and diverted attention from the Ukrainian crisis. However, it was not able to fully convince the West to collaborate.

With Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the prospects for a potential rapprochement with the West has virtually disappeared. The Russian strategy in Syria seemed to be aimed at forcing the West into some sort of cooperation, as Moscow wanted to confirm the return of Russia in the great powers club. However, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has annihilated Russia's attempt to gain this recognition from the West and dramatically affected its potential to play a leadership role in world politics. NATO's unity and appeal has been reinforced, and countries that were generally friendly to Moscow like China and India are now increasingly careful to avoid expressing any kind of support. In this context, Russia's past attempt of reintegrating the international arena as a great-power and gaining recognition as such seems doomed for now.

Despite NATO's revived unity and the deepening gap between the alliance and the Kremlin, Putin has more than one trick up his sleeve. Russia's effective disinformation and propaganda has convinced individuals everywhere, even in the West, that it was not to be blamed for what is happening in Ukraine. It has also won the information war in parts of the world already hostile to the West, including in Africa.

Besides, Russia's intervention in Syria and its rather successful influence on the narrative has potentially emboldened Vladimir Putin. This war proved that Russia is able to intervene militarily beyond its borders and that it can help maintain an allied regime in power. Future research on Russian foreign policy would be needed to examine whether and how the interventions in Syria and Ukraine are linked. Indeed, research could be done on whether Russia's intervention in Syria contributed to pave the way for the 2022 invasion and whether Putin was counting on the West's inability to present a strong and united front, just like in Syria.

Even without taking into account the most recent events in Ukraine, the intervention in Syria remains an important international event of Putin's presidency. It could still be the focus of

future research interested in how Putin shapes his message and his narrative, especially as it offers a little more historical perspective. Such research could address, among other things, some of the limitations of this paper. First, focusing only on President Putin's discourse limited the scope of this analysis and one could gain a broader understanding of Russian discourse in general by studying other actors. In the case of Syria, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov, for example, was one of the key players (Lo 2015, 9). Future research could examine how Lavrov justified the intervention in Syria in his interactions with other countries. Such research could measure to what extent his discourse echoed (or not) the main themes of Putin's discourse and assess whether there are any discrepancies.

Second, the word clouds in NVivo present some technical limitations. The first one is that synonyms and derivatives cannot be merged to appear under the same label. For instance, "terrorism", "terrorist" and "terrorists" appear as three separate words in the word clouds. Obviously, combining these words would have been relevant to illustrate how prominent this theme was in Putin's discourse. Future research could be done using a different program that can address this limitation. The second limitation in this case is that word clouds in themselves are limited by the fact that they illustrate word frequency and not idea frequency. Words can mean different things depending on the context. However, there is no obvious way to capture idea frequency objectively. The coding of passages was one way to capture the different themes and ideas, but that is subject to the author's subjectivity. One way around this issue could have been to establish a list of phrases or key words and to make sure that these elements are found within the same paragraph or page, for example. However, NVivo did not allow for this level of complexity, and it was only possible to build word clouds using simple word frequencies.

Finally, this research was limited by the fact that it only took into account translated discourse. Future research on how Putin justifies military interventions abroad would benefit from the skills of academics who are proficient in Russian. Some speeches are likely not translated or published on the English version of the Kremlin's website, and there are nuances that can hardly be translated. In addition, transcripts that are published online are not a verbatim translation of the actual speeches and can be distorted, as mentioned in chapter 2 (Herd 2021a, 18). Overall, this does not pose a significant problem in the context of this work, but future research would likely be needed to capture speeches that are not translated and details that are removed from official transcript.

Addressing these limitations would be one way forward to gain a better understanding of how Putin justified the intervention to the Russian public. Although this may seem to be a very modest suggestion for future research, we are at a time when understanding even the smallest details of Russian foreign policy could make a difference in our overall analysis of Russia's place in the world. In this context, no avenues should be left unexplored.

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Annex A

Coding structure

Name	Description
Main justifications and main themes	
Achieving normalization - Restoring peace	
Anti-Americanism	
Comparisons	
Afghanistan	
Iraq	
Lybia	
Humanitarian assistance	
International cooperation	
Int'l law - Legal intervention	
Political solution	Emphasizing the need to reach a political solution via diplomatic channels.
Preserve Syrian state	
Sovereignty	
Sovereignty (Russia)	
Sovereignty (Syria)	Defend sovereignty of Syria
Syrian's right to decide	
Terrorism	
Assad fights terrorists	

Name	Description
Int'l terrorism	Fight international errorism (broadly)
Mentioning IS or other well-known groups	
Legitimate gov't vs. terrorists	
Self-preservation	Fight terrorism to prevent terrorists from coming to Russia
West supports terrorism	
Test arms	Including showing military improvements
Other justifications and themes	
Afghanistan - Reassurance	Reassure that Russia will not be bogged down in Syria
Colour Revolutions	
Messianism	
Protect Christians	Russia conceptualized as a “Third Rome”
Uniqueness	Unique East/West bridge
Protect cultural heritage	

Annex B

Russian performance at the amphitheatre of the Syrian city of Palmyra on May 5, 2016

Source :

Albert, Aji, and Philip Issa. 2016. “Russian Symphony Orchestra Plays in Palmyra as Syrian Refugee Camp Burns.” Sydney Morning Herald. May 6, 2016. https://www.smh.com.au/world/deadly-air-strikes-on-syrian-refugee-camp-kill-dozens-says-human-rights-group-20160506-gonnlt.html.