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## **Unveiling the Russian Narrative: Media Coverage and Kremlin Strategy in the Syrian Civil War**

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# Preface

The Russian intervention in Syria, which commenced in September 2015, marked a decisive moment in the Syrian Civil War and significantly influenced the conflict's trajectory. This intervention, requested by the Syrian government under President Bashar al-Assad, involved a substantial and multi-faceted military campaign that included airstrikes, ground operations, and the deployment of private military contractors, notably the Wagner Group<sup>1</sup>. Russia began its intervention with a series of coordinated airstrikes, claiming to target ISIS and other terrorist groups. However, it soon became evident that many of these strikes were directed against a broader spectrum of opposition groups, including those backed by Western nations. Utilizing advanced aircraft such as the Sukhoi Su-24, Su-25, and Su-34, Russia's air force conducted thousands of sorties, which played a critical role in weakening the rebels' positions and supply lines<sup>2</sup>.

One of the most significant events of the Russian intervention was the Battle for Aleppo. Starting in late 2016, Russian airpower supported Syrian government forces in a brutal campaign to retake the city, which had been divided between government forces and rebels since 2012. The extensive bombing campaign resulted in massive destruction and high civilian casualties, but ultimately, in December 2016, government forces regained control of Aleppo, marking a turning point in the civil war<sup>3</sup>.

Russian forces also played a crucial role in the battles for Deir Ezzor and Palmyra. In Deir Ezzor, Russian air support was instrumental in lifting the siege imposed by ISIS on the city's government-held areas, allowing Syrian forces to reclaim strategic territory. Similarly, in Palmyra, Russian airstrikes and ground operations helped Syrian forces recapture the ancient city from ISIS in March 2016, although ISIS briefly retook it later in the year before it was permanently secured by government forces with Russian assistance in 2017.

A significant aspect of Russia's intervention has been the involvement of the Wagner Group, a private military contractor believed to have close ties to the Russian government. The Wagner Group has provided ground support and engaged in direct combat operations, often supplementing official Russian and Syrian government forces<sup>4</sup>.

The Wagner Group was reportedly involved in various key operations, including the aforementioned battles for Palmyra and Deir Ezzor. Their presence allowed for more flexible and deniable operations, which the Russian government could distance itself from if necessary<sup>5</sup>. Wagner fighters were frequently on the front lines, providing critical infantry support and undertaking risky maneuvers that regular Russian troops might avoid.

One of the most notable incidents involving the Wagner Group occurred in February 2018 during the Battle of Khasham. Wagner forces, alongside Syrian government troops, launched an offensive against positions held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who were supported by the United States. The clash resulted in a massive U.S. airstrike that reportedly

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<sup>1</sup> "Syrian Civil War | Facts & Timeline | Britannica," May 27, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Syrian-Civil-War>.

<sup>2</sup> Pavel Felgenhauer, "1. The Russian Strategic Offensive in the Middle East," in *1. The Russian Strategic Offensive in the Middle East* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019), 1–33, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781735275284-005>.

<sup>3</sup> "Syrian Civil War | Facts & Timeline | Britannica."

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Felgenhauer, "1. The Russian Strategic Offensive in the Middle East."

killed many Wagner personnel. This incident highlighted the complex and often perilous nature of Wagner's involvement in the conflict.

Russia's focus on Syria somewhat shifted since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24 2022. A report published by the Institute for the Study of War shows that Wagner mercenaries were being redeployed to the Ukrainian battlefield<sup>6</sup>. Besides removing Russian troops from Syria, Russia also decreased the political and humanitarian aid it invested in the al-Assad regime. Although the invasion of Ukraine and the response from the West required Russia's full attention, Syria could potentially still serve as a vehicle of Kremlin strategy. As this thesis's academic overview will later point out, Russia's presence in the Middle-East come with a variety of geopolitical and economic benefits to Moscow. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been part of several armed conflicts, the Syrian Civil War being only one of them. Russia's motives for taking part in armed conflicts are obvious to some, but enigmatic to others. A recurring theme however, is Moscow's aim to strong-arm its way towards geopolitical success in terms of global or regional influence<sup>7</sup>. The Russian public however, is giving other explanations for the state's actions. As this research will illustrate, it is Moscow's wish to convince the Russian public of the virtue of the state and provide Russian citizens with alternative reasons for the recurring need to commit acts of war. In this capacity, the Russian state-run media are being activated to legitimize Moscow's actions towards the domestic audience. This thesis aims to discover in what way the Russian state media covers the Syrian Civil War since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the end of February 2022. Globally, the Russian intervention and presence in Syria has received much less attention since the invasion of Ukraine. Therefore, it is worthwhile to investigate if Moscow still employs the same media tactics it has employed in other conflicts. The accompanying research question is as follows: What does the Russian media's coverage of the Syrian Civil War look like and how does this serve Kremlin strategy?

In order to investigate if the Russian domestic audience is still being deceived, this research will first shine a light on the classic narratives that the Russian state-run media have previously put out in previous conflicts. Seven existing narratives have been distilled by looking at Russian state media coverage of the Chechen Wars, the Russo-Georgian War and the Russo-Ukrainian War from 2014 onward. Afterwards, coverage from Russian news outlets of the Syrian Civil War was analyzed, in the hope that narratives that were pushed in previous conflicts could also be recognized in this particular case. Furthermore, the coverage was also analyzed for any new, dominant narratives that have not been recognized in previous conflicts the Russian state was involved in. The analyzed coverage consisted of a wide range of articles from the outlets Vedomosti, TASS and Rybar. As each outlet targets varying parts of the Russian domestic audience, analysis of their coverage provided a deep understanding of the message that the authorities tried to convey to the public as a whole. In addition to investigating for narratives, the articles from TASS were also analyzed on language. The vocabulary that was used in the articles was compared to the type of vocabulary that is historically found in propaganda. This addition to the research allowed for an analysis that not only consisted of the analysis of content, but also of the analysis of tone. Furthermore, this second research aimed to find out whether the Russian tone regarding geopolitics had gotten harsher or more aggressive in the light of Western repercussions after February 2022.

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<sup>6</sup> Wagner Troops Redeployed to Ukraine," Institute for the Study of War, , <http://dev-isw.bivings.com/>.

<sup>7</sup> Moritz Pieper, "'Rising Power' Status and the Evolution of International Order: Conceptualising Russia's Syria Policies," *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no. 3 (2019): 365–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1575950>.

This thesis follows a typical academic structure. The first chapter will review existing literature and provide the research with a theoretical framework. The literature is followed by a detailed description of the methodology that has been used in the research. The second chapter will illustrate the existing narratives that the Russia state has applied when covering conflicts that Moscow is involved in. The third chapter will contain the research results, analysis of the results and a discussion of the results. All in all, the thesis will seek to provide a conclusive answer to the posed research question.

# Chapter 1: Literature Review & Methodology

In order to understand the narratives, tone and topics that exist in the Russian state-run media, it is paramount to know the Kremlin's motives on a global, regional and domestic scale. Analysis of coverage on the Syrian conflict must be seen in the light of Russia's policies and ambitions since the Putin era. The following literature review will not only provide the reader with the necessary background on Kremlin strategy, but will also connect larger Kremlin strategies to the specific types of media content that the state wants the public to consume. The existing academic literature on Russia's global strategy, objectives in Syria and media tendencies will altogether provide the framework on which this thesis' research is built.

## 1.1: Russia's Strategic Objectives on a Global Scale

When examining Russia's interest in Syria and coverage of the conflict in the state-run media, it is important to first take a look at Russia's overall strategic objectives on a global scale. Various authors have contributed to the understanding of Russia's goals and actions since the Putin era. On the basis of their work, I have established the following list of general strategic objectives that the Kremlin is pursuing:

### 1. Global Influence

Russia aims to exert global influence as an independent power by engaging in diplomatic activism and institutional visibility rather than relying solely on the projection of material power. This objective involves positioning Russia as a key player in global politics and international decision-making processes.

### 2. Regional Dominance

Another strategic objective for Russia is to maintain dominance in the former Soviet region. This involves engaging with neighboring countries in the region through economic, diplomatic, cultural and military means to negotiate preferred international postures and ensure Russia's influence in the region.

### 3. Economic Development

Russia seeks to enhance its economic position and reduce dependence on oil exports by diversifying its economy and attracting Western investments. This objective is crucial for Russia's long-term growth and stability in the face of global economic challenges.

### 4. Modernization and Technological Advancement

Russia aims to strengthen its technological capabilities and modernize its industries to remain competitive in the global market. This objective is essential for enhancing Russia's economic power and influence on the international stage.

## 5. Balanced Multi-Vector Approach

Russia's strategic objectives also include maintaining a balanced multi-vector approach in its foreign policy, especially in response to the West's shifting economic center. This approach involves engaging with multiple international partners to diversify alliances and enhance Russia's global standing.

The strategic objectives of Vladimir Putin's Russia have been subject to extensive analysis and debate among scholars. Andrei Tsygankov, a prominent expert on Russian foreign policy, emphasizes that regional dominance and global influence are central to Putin's strategic ambitions. According to Tsygankov, Putin's administration views the need for influence over the post-Soviet space as a critical step towards reasserting Russia's status as a great power<sup>8</sup>. This regional dominance is not merely a matter of geographic control but also encompasses cultural and political influence, aimed at maintaining a sphere of influence where Russia can assert its leadership unchallenged by Western powers<sup>9</sup>.

On the global stage, Tsygankov argues that Russia seeks to project power and influence to counterbalance the dominance of the United States and its allies. This objective is reflected in Russia's active involvement in various international conflicts and its strategic partnerships with countries that share its opposition to Western hegemony<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, Marina Miron and Rod Thornton argue that Russia engages in 'strategic deterrence', an effort that seeks conflict on a smaller scale in order to avoid conflict on a larger scale<sup>11</sup>.

The pursuit of global influence is intertwined with efforts to present Russia as a defender of a multipolar world order, where power is more evenly distributed among major states, thus providing Russia with greater leverage in international affairs. Moritz Pieper contributes to this point, arguing that Russia actively seeks to position itself as a key global player by constantly contesting the West<sup>12</sup>.

In contrast, Andrew Monaghan offers a different perspective by highlighting Putin's emphasis on ensuring Russia's economic growth and wealth as a fundamental strategic objective. Monaghan notes that economic stability and development are paramount for maintaining domestic stability and legitimizing the current political regime. Putin's economic strategies have focused on diversifying the Russian economy, reducing dependence on Western markets and technologies, and fostering economic resilience in the face of international sanctions<sup>13</sup>.

Monaghan further argues that Putin's policies aim to create a strong economic foundation that can support Russia's strategic goals both regionally and globally. This includes investments in sectors such as energy, defense, and technology, which are seen as vital for sustaining Russia's power and influence. Economic growth is thus not only a means of

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<sup>8</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Preserving Influence in a Changing World: Russia's Grand Strategy," *Problems of Post-Communism* 58, no. 2 (2011): 28–44, <https://doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216580203>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 30-32

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 28-42

<sup>11</sup> Marina Miron and Rod Thornton, "Emerging as the 'Victor'(?): Syria and Russia's Grand and Military Strategies," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 34, no. 1 (2021): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2021.1923991>.

<sup>12</sup> Pieper, "'Rising Power' Status and the Evolution of International Order."

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Monaghan, "Putin's Russia: Shaping a 'Grand Strategy'?", *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 89, no. 5 (2013): 1221–36.



enhancing the standard of living for Russian citizens but also a crucial element of national security and geopolitical strategy<sup>14</sup>. Monaghan's most important source is a document called 'the Strategy of the Development of the Russian Federation up to 2010', supposedly written by Vladimir Putin. Unfortunately, the document itself is no longer accessible in the Netherlands.

Together, the analyses of Tsygankov, Miron, Thornton, Pieper and Monaghan provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted strategic objectives of Putin's Russia. While regional dominance and global influence form the cornerstone of Russia's geopolitical ambitions, ensuring economic growth and wealth remains an essential objective for sustaining these ambitions and securing the regime's long-term stability.

## **1.2: Russia's Interest in Syria and its Connection to the Kremlin's Global Strategy**

In light of Russia's main strategic objectives, let's now take a look at how the Kremlin's motives to intervene in the Syrian civil war intertwine with these main strategic objectives. Various academics have written about Russia's reasons for the intervention. While other reasons for intervening are mentioned in Russia's state-run media, the underlying objectives that Russia pursued with its military operation very much fit into their broader, global aims.

### **1. Preserving a Key Ally**

One of the foremost reasons for Russia's intervention is the preservation of its longstanding alliance with Syria. Under the leadership of Bashar al-Assad, Syria has remained a crucial ally for Russia in the Middle East. Supporting Assad's regime is vital for maintaining Russia's influence in the region and ensuring the continuity of a friendly government in Damascus<sup>15</sup>. This strategic partnership dates back to the Soviet era<sup>16</sup> and has been instrumental in Russia's Middle Eastern policy.

Additionally, Russia perceives the survival of Assad's government as essential to preventing Western-backed regime change efforts. Moscow views such efforts as destabilizing and a direct threat to its sovereignty and the stability of its regional allies. By bolstering Assad, Russia aims to counteract what it sees as an encroaching Western agenda of intervention and regime change, which has previously led to instability in countries like Iraq and Libya. Moritz Pieper highlights a fundamental principle that underpins Russia's foreign policy, namely the doctrine of state sovereignty and non-intervention. Russia staunchly opposes foreign-imposed regime change and champions the right of nations to determine their own political futures<sup>17</sup>. By intervening in Syria, Russia reinforces its commitment to these principles, which it applies to its domestic and regional policies. This stance is particularly significant in the context of Russia's own geopolitical concerns, such as the Western influence in its neighboring countries and the legitimacy of its actions in regions like Crimea.

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<sup>14</sup> Monaghan. 25-28

<sup>15</sup> Pieper, "'Rising Power' Status and the Evolution of International Order."

<sup>16</sup> Dennis Lichtenstein et al., "Framing the Ukraine Crisis: A Comparison between Talk Show Debates in Russian and German Television," *The International Communication Gazette* 81, no. 1 (2019): 66–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048518755209>.

<sup>17</sup> Pieper, "'Rising Power' Status and the Evolution of International Order."

By defending Syria's sovereignty, Russia sets a precedent for its own geopolitical maneuvers. Pavel Felgenhauer argues that the intervention in Syria thus deflected public attention from the Ukrainian crisis<sup>18</sup>.

## 2. Protecting Strategic Military Assets

Russia's intervention is also driven by the need to protect its strategic military assets in Syria. The naval base at Tartus is Russia's only naval facility in the Mediterranean, serving as a crucial hub for its naval operations in the region. Securing this base has been paramount for maintaining a Russian naval presence and projecting power across the Mediterranean<sup>19</sup>. Moreover, the establishment of the Khmeimim airbase has provided Russia with a strategic foothold, enabling effective air operations and support for ground forces. This airbase has become a critical asset for Russia's military strategy, enhancing its operational capabilities and reinforcing its influence in the region. In addition to Russia's the protection of strategic military assets, the intervention also provided an opportunity for Russia to test and develop various innovations. Dmitry Adamsky illustrates how the Syrian battleground proved to be useful for both the development of weapon systems, as well as the development of integrated striking abilities<sup>20</sup>. Anna Borschevskaya adds that the Kremlin liked the idea of having a larger military presence in Syria because it would help cement Russia's influence in the whole of the Middle-East<sup>21</sup>.

## 3. Asserting Global Power Status

Felgenhauer argues that Russia's intervention in Syria is also a demonstration of its military capabilities and a statement of its global power status. The operation has allowed Russia not only to develop, but also to showcase its advanced weapons systems and operational proficiency. By successfully conducting military operations in Syria, Russia enhances its standing as a formidable military power on the world stage<sup>22</sup>. Additionally, Russia's involvement challenges U.S. dominance in the Middle East. By positioning itself as a counterbalance to American influence, Russia promotes a multipolar world order where no single country, particularly the United States, dominates global affairs. This strategic move underscores Russia's desire to reshape international relations and affirm its role as a major global actor<sup>23</sup>. Pieper makes a similar point, but adds that Russia is actively engaged in 'norm contestation'<sup>24</sup>. He illustrates how Russia does not only mean to challenge Western influence, but also the norms and values that the West promotes. In practice, this means that Russia tries to legitimize its intervention by arguing it is right to protect Syria's state sovereignty. More 'Western' reasons to militarily intervene across the border, for example humanitarian grounds, are not deemed to be as important.

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<sup>18</sup> Felgenhauer, "1. The Russian Strategic Offensive in the Middle East."

<sup>19</sup> Miron and Thornton, "Emerging as the 'Victor'(?)"

<sup>20</sup> "10. Russian Lessons Learned From the Operation in Syria: A Preliminary Assessment," accessed June 30, 2024, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9781735275284-014/html>.

<sup>21</sup> Anna Borshchevskaya, *Putin's War in Syria: Russian Foreign Policy and the Price of America's Absence*, 1st ed. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755634668>.

<sup>22</sup> Felgenhauer, "1. The Russian Strategic Offensive in the Middle East."

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Pieper, "'Rising Power' Status and the Evolution of International Order."

#### 4. Economic Interests

Economic interests further drive Russia's intervention in Syria. The Syrian government has been a significant purchaser of Russian arms, and maintaining Assad's regime helps secure ongoing and future arms contracts. These contracts are economically beneficial for Russia's defense industry, which relies on foreign sales to sustain its production and development capabilities<sup>25</sup>. Malath Alagha portrays how the use of Russian arms in the civil war have sparked interest for Russian-made weapons from several countries around the world. Since being in use on the Syrian battlefield, Russian weapons have increasingly been purchased by Algeria, Pakistan, Vietnam, Indonesia and several Latin American countries. Moreover, Alagha highlights the Middle East's critical role in global energy supplies, meaning that securing its interests in Syria allows Russia to influence energy routes and policies. This enhances Russia's position in the global energy market and bolsters its economic leverage.

#### 5. Diplomatic Leverage

Russia's intervention in Syria provides significant diplomatic leverage. By playing a central role in the Syrian conflict, Russia positions itself as an indispensable player in any negotiations regarding Syria's future and the broader Middle Eastern geopolitics. According to Luke Bartz, this involvement enhances Russia's influence in regional affairs and strengthens its alliances with key players such as Iran and Hezbollah<sup>26</sup>. Additionally, Cinem Cengiz explains that through active participation in peace processes, such as the Astana talks, Russia tries to showcase its commitment to facilitating political resolutions. The aim of this diplomatic engagement is to reinforce Russia's image as a peace broker, countering Western narratives that depict it solely as a military aggressor<sup>27</sup>.

#### 6. Preventing a Power Vacuum

Pieper emphasizes Russia's strategic support for President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, aimed at preserving the country's governance structures and preventing their collapse<sup>28</sup>. Prime Minister Dmitrii Medvedev highlighted the necessity of maintaining Syria as a unified state to avoid the chaos and instability seen in other conflict-ridden nations like Libya, Yemen, and Afghanistan. The potential consequences of a power vacuum in Syria are depicted as disastrous for the Middle East, with the void likely to be filled by militant Islamists, posing a security threat to Russia's southern border. Moreover, chaos in Syria would have negative consequences for Russia's access to energy markets in the Middle East.

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<sup>25</sup> "Alagha, Malath Analysis of Russia's Involvement in Syria from a Political Economy Perspective," [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378300867\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Russia's\\_involvement\\_in\\_Syria\\_from\\_a\\_political\\_economy\\_perspective](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378300867_Analysis_of_Russia's_involvement_in_Syria_from_a_political_economy_perspective).

<sup>26</sup> Luke Bartz, "Russian-Syrian Relations: Past and Present," 2016, <https://hdl.handle.net/11244.46/79>.

<sup>27</sup> Sinem Cengiz, "Assessing the Astana Peace Process for Syria: Actors, Approaches, and Differences," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East (Online)* 7, no. 2 (2020): 200–214, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798920901876>.

<sup>28</sup> Pieper, "'Rising Power' Status and the Evolution of International Order."

### 1.3: Legitimizing the Intervention to a Domestic Audience

When examining conflict, the state-run media reports in a way that suit the Kremlin's desires. Although Russia has a multitude of (underlying) (geo)political objectives that causes it to meddle in the of other states, these objectives do not get mentioned in the state-run media. Rather, Russia is presented as a virtuous nation that intervened for other, more upstanding reasons. Through these efforts, the Kremlin seeks to legitimize its military operation towards the country's domestic audience. Moreover, the Kremlin seeks to convince this audience of the general virtue of the authorities<sup>29</sup>.

Over the past 15 years, Russia's perspective on information security has significantly evolved, characterized by some key developments and transformations. Sergey Sukhankin writes how in the early 2000s, Russian theoretical thinking on information security issues intensified, with influential figures like Igor Panarin reshaping the country's understanding of information. Panarin highlighted the concept of "social information" and its relevance to national security, setting the stage for Russia's strategic considerations.

In 2016, Russia introduced the "Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation," which reflected a sophisticated component of Russia's comprehensive security strategy. This doctrine integrates both military and non-military tactics to build offensive and defensive capacities in the information sector, marking a holistic approach to information security.

From 2010 to 2016, rapid technological advancements and external events prompted significant shifts in Russia's information security mindset. The importance of information expanded dramatically, with policymakers recognizing the internet as a crucial tool for geopolitical objectives. Disseminating information became vital for foreign policy, underscoring the strategic value of information control<sup>30</sup>.

In the early 2010s, Russia began challenging the notion of the global information/cyber space as an unrestricted domain. This change in viewpoint highlighted Russia's increasing focus on the global information arena as a battleground, contrasting with Western ideas of information freedom. Consequently, Russia developed an integrated strategy that includes not only offensive information security capabilities, but also concentrates on the importance of domestic control of the information space. As a result, the authorities try to mold public opinion themselves instead of having a free arena of thought.

When examining how the Russian state in fact exercises influence over the state-aligned media network, the following four mechanisms can be extrapolated that characterize the Kremlin's grip on the domestic information space:

#### 1. Direct Control

Elisabeth Schimpfoss and Ilya Yablokov portray how the Kremlin directly influences news reporting by setting the agenda and issuing guidelines to journalists, reporters, and television hosts<sup>31</sup>. They mention that this influence has grown more propagandistic, particularly during Putin's third presidential term. Daphne Skillen also writes on this in her book, but adds that journalists that either work for state-run or independent have been

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<sup>29</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "8. Russia's Offensive and Defensive Use of Information Security," in *8. Russia's Offensive and Defensive Use of Information Security* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019), 302–42, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781735275284-012>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Sukhankin, "8. Russia's Offensive and Defensive Use of Information Security."

intimidated or silenced by the authorities, also resulting in an more controlled media environment<sup>32</sup>.

## 2. Proximity to Power

Schimpfossl and Yablokov write that media figures that are close to decision-making centers, have the liberty to speak openly and spread ideas without censorship<sup>33</sup>. These individuals serve as key public voices for the Kremlin, mediating and contributing to the production of the Kremlin's discourse.

## 3. Taboos and Unwritten Rules

There is a strict taboo against negative reporting on Vladimir Putin. State-aligned networks even employ special teams to manage Putin's news coverage. Criticism of Putin is often softened by using more neutral terms like "power". According to Ben Sohl, state-aligned networks deems it necessary to protect Putin, because of the idea that the Western media constantly seek to discredit and undermine him<sup>34</sup>. Although Schimpfossl and Yablokov mainly argue on the 'unwritten rules' that exist in the Russian media, Agnieszka Legucka and Robert Kupiecki actually argue that journalists that work in the state-aligned media environment norm actively get penalized if they deviate from the norm<sup>35</sup>.

## 4. Information Control

The Kremlin ensures that news reporting aligns with its narrative and objectives. Journalists often anticipate and cater to what they believe the authorities desire. This control extends to topic selection, story framing, and overall messaging on state-aligned television networks. Marlene Laruelle adds that the more sympathetic a media outlet is towards the authorities, the larger state subsidies directed towards the outlet become.

Overall, Russia's approach to information security has broadened to encompass a deeper understanding of information's role in national security. It emphasizes the strategic necessity of controlling information flows and developing robust offensive and defensive measures in the information realm. This evolution demonstrates Russia's dedication to protecting its interests in the world. Thus, in order to legitimize its intervention in Syria and the Kremlin's actions as a whole, the media is weaponized in order to convince the domestic audience of the virtue of the state. it may even be argued that the Russian intervention therefore has a positive influence on the popularity of the authorities among the Russian people. In order to properly beguile the domestic audience, the Russian state-run media generally distributes

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<sup>32</sup> Daphne Skillen, *Freedom of Speech in Russia: Politics and Media from Gorbachev to Putin*, BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies 108 (Abingdon, Oxon ; Routledge, 2017).

<sup>33</sup> Schimpfossl & Yablokov, *Mass Media in the Post-Soviet World: Market Forces, State Actors, and Political Manipulation in the Informational Environment after Communism*, 1st ed., vol. 178, Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society (La Vergne: Ibidem-Verlag, 2018).

<sup>34</sup> Ben Sohl, "Discolored Revolutions: Information Warfare in Russia's Grand Strategy," *The Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (2022): 97–111, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2022.2057113>.

<sup>35</sup> Agnieszka Legucka and Robert Kupiecki, *Disinformation, Narratives and Memory Politics in Russia and Belarus*, 1st ed., Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series (Abingdon, Oxon, New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003281597>.

narratives that may not align with the truth. Chapter 1 will investigate what narratives have historically been pushed by the media when covering conflicts that the Kremlin is involved in.

## 1.4: Methodology

In order to find out what the Russian coverage of the Syrian Civil War looks like, a total of 73 articles were analyzed. The articles had to mention the war in Syria. While searching through the databases of the chosen outlets, the articles were found using the search prompt Война в Сирии (Vojna v Sirii, War in Syria). Additional relevant articles were found using the tag Сирия (Sirija, Syria) in search bars. The final requirement was that articles could only date from February 24 2022 up to February 29 2024. This resulted in 20 articles from the website of Vedomosti, 35 articles from the website of TASS and 18 news updates published on the Rybar Telegram channel. The specific news outlets were selected because together they represent a wide range on the Russian media spectrum as they target varying audiences. Through qualitative content analysis, themes were sought out and the articles were linked to known narratives that were outlined in chapter 1. These narratives were put together by looking at original Russian coverage of conflicts, complemented with existing academic research. Results of the qualitative analysis in three ways. The article could either be ascribed to an existing narrative, the article could be ascribed to a new narrative, or the article could not be ascribed to a specific narrative at all.

With the goal of complementing the yielded results on content with another research of language, a second qualitative research was conducted in order to look for propagandistic vocabulary. In order to accomplish this, the 35 TASS articles were analyzed for the use of the following terms: Угроза (Ugroza, Threat), Нацист (Nazist, Nazi), Террорист/Терроризм (Terrorist/Terrorism), преступление (Prestupleniye, Crime) and территориальная целостность (Territorial'naya tselostnost', Territorial Integrity). These words were selected because they historically common in propaganda<sup>36</sup>. Possible declensions of the terms were also accounted for. In both qualitative analyses, key terms and narratives were also recorded for their date of publishing, thereby providing both analyses with a timeline.

It must be noted that the research results are prone to a certain level of subjectivity. When identifying a narrative in an article, one cannot directly assume that the article was written with the intent to push that narrative. In the same way can the use of words that are historically found in propaganda, not directly be linked to or be evidence of state propaganda. The analyses of content, themes and language does however provide for an overview of trends and recurring tendencies. This does in fact allow for substantial evaluations and interpretations to be made. Therefore the research of the thesis is a viable one.

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<sup>36</sup> HOW TO ANALYZE PROPAGANDA, [https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/102172\\_book\\_item\\_102172.pdf](https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/102172_book_item_102172.pdf).

## Chapter 2: Classic Narratives in Coverage of Conflicts

Russia has been part of several armed conflicts in the post-Soviet era. During these conflicts, the Russian state-run media has covered these conflicts in a multitude of ways. Central however, was the constant framing of a conflict in favor of the Russian authorities. In order to investigate Russian coverage of the Syrian civil war from the end of February 2022 onward, coverage on other past and present conflicts has been studied: The Russo-Georgian War (2008), the Chechen wars (1994-1996 and 1999-2009) and the Russo-Ukrainian War (2014-). Out of this research, the following seven main narratives have been distilled. These known narratives are later compared to research results of this specific thesis.

### 1. Defensive Posture and Protection of Russian Citizens

During the Russo-Georgian War, Russia framed its intervention as a necessary action to protect Russian citizens and peacekeepers in South Ossetia from Georgian aggression<sup>37</sup>. In the Chechen Wars, the Russian narrative focused on combating terrorism and restoring order in Chechnya, portraying the conflict as a fight against separatists and extremists threatening Russian stability and security<sup>38</sup>.

Since the Russo-Ukrainian War, Russia often claims it is protecting ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking populations in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea from alleged Ukrainian nationalist threats and persecution. The following example is a translated piece out of a Lenta.ru article from 2021<sup>39</sup>:

*‘Moscow will respond to any of Kiev’s possible provocations in the Donbass and will do everything to protect its citizens in eastern Ukraine. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made this promise in an interview with MIA Rossiya Segodnya .  
“We will continue to make efforts to resolve the internal Ukrainian conflict through political and diplomatic means (...). An adequate response will be given to any possible military provocations of Kyiv against Donbass,” the diplomat promised, adding that the situation in Ukraine causes concern for the Russian side.’*

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<sup>37</sup> Gregory Feifer, “Russia In Georgia: Aggressor Or Peacekeeper?,” *NPR*, August 11, 2008, sec. Russia, Georgia Fight Over Breakaway Region, <https://www.npr.org/2008/08/11/93490124/russia-in-georgia-aggressor-or-peacekeeper>.

<sup>38</sup> THE CHECHEN WARS, MEDIA, AND DEMOCRACY IN RUSSIA,” [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279170297\\_THE\\_CHECHEN\\_WARS\\_MEDIA\\_AND\\_DEMOCRACY\\_IN\\_RUSSIA](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279170297_THE_CHECHEN_WARS_MEDIA_AND_DEMOCRACY_IN_RUSSIA).

<sup>39</sup> “Лавров пообещал сделать все для защиты граждан России в Донбассе,” *Lenta.RU*, 2024, <https://lenta.ru/news/2021/12/31/donbass/>.

## 2. Blaming the West and NATO

A consistent theme across these conflicts is the portrayal of Western countries, particularly the United States and NATO, as instigators or supporters of hostile actions against Russia. This narrative suggests that the West is trying to encircle Russia, undermine its sovereignty, and spread instability.

During the Chechen Wars, Foreign (Western) support for Chechen militants was highlighted, often linking them to broader global jihadist networks<sup>40</sup>.

Since the Russo-Ukrainian War, The Ukrainian government is often depicted as a puppet of the West, with the Euromaidan revolution portrayed as a Western-backed coup.

During the course of the Russo-Georgian War, Georgia's actions were depicted as being supported or even orchestrated by Western powers, particularly the United States. The following example is a translated piece out of a Rossiyskaya Gazeta article from 2008<sup>41</sup>:

*'From everything that has happened over the past two days around South Ossetia, only one logical conclusion can be drawn: the United States has been and remains the real party to this conflict. Moreover, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, who arrived in Tbilisi on Sunday evening, agrees with this opinion. In the Georgian capital, he said that the central mission in the negotiation process is carried out by the European Union, and not the United States. And he added that Brussels should be "on the front line," since Washington is "in a certain sense, one of the parties" to the conflict. Considering that it is France that currently holds the presidency of the EU, one can conclude from what Kushner said: the European Union has made it clear who is really in charge of the Georgian president.'*

## 3. Historical and Cultural Unity

During the Russo-Georgian War, there were elements of portraying South Ossetia and Abkhazia as historically distinct from Georgia<sup>42</sup>, with cultural and historical ties to Russia. Since the Russo-Ukrainian War, the most prominent narrative is one that emphasizes the historical and cultural ties between Russians and Ukrainians. The annexation of Crimea was justified by referencing historical claims and the need to reunite with the "motherland." At the time of the Chechen Wars, Chechnya was framed as an integral part of the Russian Federation with deep historical connections, and the wars were portrayed as efforts to maintain national unity. The following example is a translated piece out of a Rossiyskaya Gazeta article from 2005<sup>43</sup>:

*'So, in the wake of the parade of sovereignties at the beginning of 1991, the Chechen Autonomous Republic, which was part of the Russian Federation, declared its intention to become independent. Naturally, the first president of Russia, who positioned himself as a*

<sup>40</sup> "THE CHECHEN WARS, MEDIA, AND DEMOCRACY IN RUSSIA."

<sup>41</sup> "Евросоюз признал США одной из сторон грузино-осетинского конфликта," Российская газета, August 12, 2008, <https://rg.ru/2008/08/12/es-osetia.html>.

<sup>42</sup> "Russia and Georgia Wage PR Battle for Hearts and Minds | Reuters," <https://web.archive.org/web/20110521080150/http://uk.reuters.com/article/2008/08/10/uk-georgia-ossetia-pr-idUKLA53600320080810>.

<sup>43</sup> "Дудаев мог быть уничтожен до первой чеченской кампании," Российская газета, December 16, 2005, <https://rg.ru/2005/12/16/chechnya.html>.



*strong leader, could not allow this to happen. And when he felt that negotiations with the leader of this self-proclaimed republic, Dzhokhar Dudayev, had reached a dead end, he decided to use force. But doing this while remaining within the framework of legitimacy was not easy: after all, citizens of Chechnya are citizens of Russia. Then a far from new scenario was adopted: the overthrow of the current government by opposition forces. This is what the Russian leadership of that time began to nurture. And - a very "successful" coincidence - in Chechnya there were a lot of weapons available to everyone, no matter who came across them. They helped with qualified military personnel from Russia. And so in November, opposition troops stormed the Chechen capital with the aim of seizing the presidential palace and seizing power. But the assault fizzled out. For those preparing it, this came as a complete surprise, and they began organizing the invasion according to all the rules of military art.'*

#### **4. Delegitimizing Opponents**

During the Russo-Georgian War, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili was depicted as irrational and aggressive, with Russian media emphasizing Georgian attacks on civilians<sup>44</sup>. During the course of the Chechen Wars, Chechen leaders and militants were portrayed as terrorists, criminals, and Islamic extremists.

Since the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War, The Ukrainian government and military are often depicted as fascists, nationalists, and illegitimate, with frequent references to neo-Nazi elements within Ukraine. The following example is a translated piece out of an Izvestiya article from 2023<sup>45</sup>:

*'By denying the superiority of Nazi ideology in Ukraine, representatives of Kyiv are openly lying. Political scientist Alexey Kochetkov pointed this out on September 19 in a conversation with Izvestia.*

*Thus, he commented on the statements of the former representative of the President of Ukraine in Crimea Anton Korinevich at the International Court of Justice. The Ukrainian politician denied the Nazi orientation of the Kyiv regime.*

*"There are a lot of examples that can be given here. A person who says that there is no Nazism in Ukraine is simply lying, like most modern Ukrainian politicians, who say black when it's white, and black when it's black, look you in the eye and openly lie," the expert pointed out.*

*Ukrainian nationalists dreamed of an independent state under the rule of a national leader. The extremist movement has also developed a special greeting, almost identical to the famous Nazi gesture - the right hand raised up. At the same time, they were supposed to say "Glory to Ukraine!" In response, at first they said "Glory to the leader!", but then the OUN split into Bandera and Melnik, and the second part of the phrase began to sound like "Glory to the Heroes!"*

<sup>44</sup> Andrew Osborn in Tskhinvali, Georgia, and Jeanne Whalen in Moscow, "Evidence in Georgia Belies Russia's Claims of 'Genocide,'" *Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 2008, sec. News, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB121874784363742015>.

<sup>45</sup> Ксения Темникова, "Политолог обвинил во лжи отрицающих нацизм на Украине политиков," *Известия*, September 19, 2023, <https://iz.ru/1576346/2023-09-19/politolog-obvinil-vo-lzhi-otritcaiushchikh-natcizm-na-ukraine-politikov>.

## 5. Humanitarian and Peacekeeping Role

During the Chechen Wars, Russian actions were framed as necessary to protect civilians from terrorist threats and to rebuild and stabilize the region<sup>46</sup>.

Since the Russo-Ukrainian War, Russia claims to be providing humanitarian aid to conflict zones in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea and protecting the local population from Ukrainian aggression<sup>47</sup>.

During the Russo-Georgian War, Russia presented itself as a peacekeeper and humanitarian actor intervening to stop Georgian atrocities against South Ossetians. The following example is a translated piece out of a RIA Novosti article from 2008<sup>48</sup>:

**'MOSCOW, December 23 - RIA Novosti.** *The Investigative Committee under the Prosecutor's Office (ICP) of the Russian Federation has reason to believe that Georgia's military aggression against South Ossetia can be qualified as genocide of the South Ossetian people. This was stated by the chairman of the SKP, Alexander Bastrykin, on Tuesday at RIA Novosti at the presentation of the book "The Ossetian Tragedy. The White Book of Crimes against South Ossetia, August 2008."*

*The book was prepared by Kirill Tanaev based on the factual materials of the criminal case on the fact of Georgia's military aggression against South Ossetia and contains data on war crimes by the Georgian military against the civilian population of South Ossetia and Russian peacekeepers.*

*"We have reason in the future to talk about qualifying the actions of the military leadership and the Georgian army as actions of an aggressive nature, which were aimed at destroying the South Ossetian people as a national-ethnic community," Bastrykin said. At the same time, he noted "that to recognize the fact of genocide, it is not the number of victims that is important, what matters is the intent, purpose, motive - the subjective side of the crime."*

## 6. Legal and Political Justifications

During the course of the Russo-Georgian War, the intervention was framed as a response to Georgian violations of international law and aggression against South Ossetia, which had been under Russian peacekeeping mandate<sup>49</sup>.

During the Chechen Wars, actions were justified under the framework of Russian constitutional law and anti-terrorism legislation<sup>50</sup>.

The annexation of Crimea was justified through a contested referendum, which Russia portrayed as an expression of the local population's will. The support for separatists in

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<sup>46</sup> "THE CHECHEN WARS, MEDIA, AND DEMOCRACY IN RUSSIA."

<sup>47</sup> Lichtenstein et al., "Framing the Ukraine Crisis."

<sup>48</sup> Р. И. А. Новости, "СКП РФ опубликовал новые данные о геноциде в Южной Осетии," РИА Новости, 20081223Т1450, <https://ria.ru/20081223/157916348.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Ana K. Niedermaier, *Countdown to War in Georgia: Russia's Foreign Policy and Media Coverage of the Conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia* (Minneapolis, MN: East View Press, 2008).

<sup>50</sup> "THE CHECHEN WARS, MEDIA, AND DEMOCRACY IN RUSSIA."

Donetsk and Luhansk is framed as support for self-determination. The following example is a translated piece out of an Interfax article from 2014<sup>51</sup>:

*'Moscow. March 17. INTERFAX.RU - Based on the results of processing 100% of the ballots of the all-Crimean referendum, 96.77% of voters voted for Crimea's entry into Russia. Such data was announced on Monday morning by the chairman of the commission for holding the all-Crimean referendum, Mikhail Malyshev. "The number of votes cast by referendum participants in support of reunification with Russia amounted to 1 million 233 thousand, which is 96.77%," he said at a briefing on Monday.*

*(...)*

*"The results of the referendum held in Crimea clearly showed that the residents of Crimea see their future only as part of Russia. People voted for the reunification of the people who have always lived together," said Sergei Neverov, Vice-Speaker of the State Duma, Secretary of the General Council of United Russia.'*

## **7. Demonizing Dissent**

During past conflicts and still today, media often demonizes domestic and international critics of Russia's actions, portraying them as traitors or foreign agents. Dissenting narratives are suppressed, and media coverage is tightly controlled to ensure a consistent and favorable portrayal of Russian actions.

These frames and narratives are tailored to both domestic and international audiences, aiming to garner support, legitimize Russia's actions, and undermine the credibility of opponents. The following example is a translated piece out of a Rossiyskaya Gazeta article from 2016<sup>52</sup>:

*'Russia's active role in international affairs in recent years has caused a lively reaction in the United States and was accompanied by numerous comments from the American political elite, publications in local media and NGOs. Mostly, of course, negative. The growing influence of Moscow is perceived here as a direct threat to its own dominance in the world.*

*(...)*

*For every objective publication, there were ten, or even a hundred, denigrating Russia. The main information flow on Russian issues is clearly negative. And those who are too keen on understanding Moscow's position, such as New York University professor Steven Cohen or director Oliver Stone, are easily labeled as "Putin apologists." Or even more rude, but well-established in local political jargon, "useful idiot."*

*(...)*

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<sup>51</sup> "За присоединение Крыма к России проголосовало 96,77% крымчан," Interfax.ru, March 17, 2014, <https://www.interfax.ru/world/365090>.

<sup>52</sup> "Что в иностранных СМИ пишут о России," Российская газета, March 23, 2016, <https://rg.ru/2016/03/23/chto-v-inostrannyh-smi-pishut-o-rossii.html>.

*In the United States, dirty tricks in information warfare are not uncommon. Alas, Americans, who often consider Russians susceptible to propaganda, themselves have such an unshakable faith in the objectivity of their own media that they often take their publications at face value, without bothering to check through alternative sources. '*

Figure 1 gives a complete overview of the extracted narratives, providing each with a clear description.

<b>Narrative</b>	<b>Description</b>
Defense Posture and Protection of Russian Citizens	Russia takes part in armed conflict out of the need to protect its borders and its citizens
Blaming the West and NATO	Russia is being drawn into armed conflict because of a collective Western effort to undermine its sovereignty and regional stability
Historical and Cultural Unity	Armed conflict is justified because a contested region shares historical and cultural ties with Russia.
Delegitimizing Opponents	Russia has to resort to armed conflict in order to free a region, a people and/or the world of a villainous opponent.
Humanitarian and Peacekeeping Role	Russia needs to parttake in armed conflict in order to provide the world with peace and stability.
Legal and Political Justifications	Russia's part in armed conflict is justified because under the framework of (inter)national laws.
Demonizing Dissent	Criticism of Russia's military actions is unjustified, false and/or Russophobic.

Figure 1. Known narratives in the Russian media. Thomas Bemelmans

# Chapter 3: Russian Media and the Coverage of the Syrian Civil War

In order to investigate Russian coverage on the Syrian Conflict, three news outlets have been selected that together form a comprehensive overview of all spheres of Russian media. Vedomosti has enjoyed a reputation of being a respected newspaper since it was founded in the end of the 1990's. State news agency TASS has been at the center of Russian news from the outset of the Soviet Union. It takes a central role in the procurement and distribution of news, as it is often quoted by other, both foreign and domestic, news outlets. The news outlet of Rybar, which primarily operates through Telegram, has grown immensely since it was founded in 2018. Focusing on geopolitical and military matters, the channel has gathered over a million subscribers. What connects these three news outlets is their decreasing editorial independence and pressure from Moscow. What separates the outlets however, is their audience and style of writing. Together, they reflect the kind of news Moscow wants all of Russia to receive, ranging from the more liberal reader to the harsh anti-Western one. This chapter will first discuss the outlets in depth. Thereafter, the Russian coverage of the Syrian conflict will be analyzed through these media, carefully looking for existing and new narratives on conflict.

## 3.1 Vedomosti, TASS and Rybar

### Vedomosti

Vedomosti, a prominent Russian business daily, was founded in 1999 as a joint venture between the Financial Times, The Wall Street Journal, and the Finnish company Sanoma. This collaboration aimed to establish a high-quality business publication in Russia, providing reliable and comprehensive economic news and analysis. The inception of Vedomosti marked a significant development in Russian media, as it sought to introduce Western standards of journalism and business reporting to the Russian market. Over the years, Vedomosti has carved out a significant place in the Russian media landscape, despite the challenging environment for independent journalism in the country<sup>53</sup>.

Vedomosti's audience primarily consists of business professionals, economists, policymakers, and academics who seek detailed and insightful coverage of economic, financial, and corporate matters. The publication has been well-regarded among Russia's business elite and those with a keen interest in the global economy.

For a long time, Vedomosti's writing style has been characterized by its strong journalistic standards, analytical depth, and clarity. The publication maintains a formal and objective

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<sup>53</sup> "RSF Decries Interference in Editorial Independence at a Leading Russian Business Daily | RSF," April 25, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-decries-interference-editorial-independence-leading-russian-business-daily>.

tone, aiming to provide fact-based reporting and thorough analysis. The articles often feature data-driven insights, comprehensive reports, and expert opinions, reflecting the complex nature of economic and business topics. This analytical approach distinguished Vedomosti from more sensationalist media outlets, which gave it the reputation as a reliable source of serious journalism. The paper's commitment to accuracy and depth ensured that its content remains highly relevant and credible<sup>54</sup>.

Throughout its history, Vedomosti had strived to maintain editorial independence, a challenging feat in Russia's media environment, given that it is subject to state influence and censorship. In its early years, the support from international media giants provided a buffer against external pressures, enabling Vedomosti to establish a reputation for unbiased reporting. However, the landscape of Russian media ownership has evolved, presenting new challenges to Vedomosti's editorial independence<sup>55</sup>.

In 2015, Sanoma sold its stake to a Russian businessman, and in 2020, ownership transferred to individuals with closer ties to the Russian state. These changes in ownership raised significant concerns about the potential erosion of Vedomosti's editorial freedom. The departure of international stakeholders removed a critical layer of protection against government influence, making the publication more vulnerable to external pressures<sup>56</sup>.

The challenges to Vedomosti's editorial independence are multifaceted. There have been instances where the publication's editorial policies clashed with the interests of its new owners, leading to tensions within the newsroom. In 2020, the appointment of Andrey Shmarov as acting editor-in-chief led to a crisis, as journalists protested against editorial interference and attempts to align the publication's coverage with pro-government narratives. This conflict resulted in the resignation of several key editors and journalists, highlighting the fragile nature of editorial independence in the current media climate<sup>57</sup>.

Despite these challenges, Vedomosti's editorial team had consistently tried to uphold journalistic integrity. The outlet faced pressure to conform to state narratives, particularly concerning sensitive political topics, but has managed to retain a degree of autonomy, especially in its economic and business reporting. When looking at the mechanisms through which the state exerts influence over the media, as mentioned in the literature review, it can be argued that Vedomosti deals with mechanisms 3 and 4: 'Taboos and Unwritten Rules' and 'Information Control'.

The commitment of Vedomosti's journalists to factual and unbiased reporting remains a cornerstone of the publication's identity, even as it navigates the complexities of its current ownership structure.

The publication's impact extends beyond its readership, influencing policy discussions and business practices. Vedomosti's investigative reports have uncovered significant instances of corruption and mismanagement, prompting public debate and, in some cases, governmental action. Its role as a watchdog in the Russian business environment underscores the importance of independent journalism in fostering a healthy and transparent economic system.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> A. B. C. News, "Editors Abandon Top Russian Newspaper, Accusing Boss of pro-Kremlin Censorship," ABC News, accessed June 30, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/editors-abandon-top-russian-newspaper-accusing-boss-pro/story?id=71274971>.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

In the Russian media landscape, Vedomosti serves as an important example of a high-quality news outlet in a restrictive media environment. Its history of international collaboration, commitment to editorial independence, and focus on in-depth economic reporting have made it a vital resource for its audience. Out of the three selected outlets in this research, it must be said that, historically speaking, Vedomosti has the best reputation in terms of journalistic capacity and truthfulness. Furthermore, data from media monitor Mediascope show that Vedomosti is still the second best read newspaper in Russia, trailing only after tabloid newspaper Metro<sup>58</sup>.

## TASS

TASS, originally the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union, now known as the Russian News Agency TASS, serves a multifaceted and wide-reaching audience. As one of the oldest and most prominent state-owned news agencies, TASS's audience encompasses various sectors both domestically and internationally.

Within Russia, TASS primarily targets a broad audience. Given its status as a state news agency, TASS is a critical source of official news and government perspectives, making it indispensable for those involved in public administration and governance.

Moreover, TASS caters to the general Russian public. Its coverage spans a wide array of topics, including politics, economics, science, culture, and sports, providing comprehensive news updates that are accessible to everyday citizens. The agency's role in disseminating information about national events and government initiatives positions it as a key player in shaping public opinion within Russia<sup>59</sup>.

Internationally, TASS aims to reach a global audience that includes foreign governments, international organizations, and global media outlets. By providing news in multiple languages, including English, Chinese, and Arabic, TASS ensures its content is accessible to a diverse international readership. This global reach helps TASS project Russian perspectives on international affairs and global events, positioning it as a tool for Russian soft power. Foreign media organizations often rely on TASS for updates on Russian news and official statements, making it a primary source for understanding the Russian government's stance on various issues. Additionally, TASS's extensive network of correspondents around the world enables it to provide international news coverage, thereby attracting a global audience interested in a Russian viewpoint on worldwide events.

The issue of editorial independence is a significant and complex challenge for TASS, rooted in its historical development and current operational structure. Founded in the early 20th century and later rebranded during the Soviet era, TASS has long been an instrument of state propaganda. During the Soviet Union, TASS was explicitly used to disseminate the Communist Party's ideology and policies, with no pretense of editorial independence. This As a state-owned entity, TASS operates under the direct influence of the Russian government. This relationship inherently constrains its editorial independence. The agency's primary mandate includes promoting the government's narrative and supporting its policy objectives, which often results in biased reporting, especially on politically sensitive topics.

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<sup>58</sup> "Рейтинги," Mediascope. <https://mediascope.net/data/>.

<sup>59</sup> "Putin Ally Appointed to Head Russia's TASS News Agency," *Reuters*, July 5, 2023, sec. Media & Telecom, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/putin-ally-appointed-head-russias-tass-news-agency-2023-07-05/>.

The Russian government's control over TASS manifests in various ways. Editorial decisions are closely aligned with state interests, and there is a significant emphasis on covering events and issues from a perspective that supports government policies. This alignment with state interests can lead to selective reporting and omission of stories that might be critical of the government or present it in a negative light<sup>60</sup>.

Journalists and editors at TASS often engage in self-censorship, avoiding topics that could lead to conflict with state authorities. This self-censorship is driven by the awareness of potential repercussions, including legal actions, job loss, or other forms of retaliation. The external pressures from the government further complicate the agency's ability to maintain editorial independence. The Russian media landscape is heavily regulated, with laws and regulations that restrict press freedom and limit the scope of permissible reporting. When looking at the mechanisms through which the state exerts influence over the media, as mentioned in the literature review, it can be argued that TASS deals with mechanisms 1 and 2: 'Direct Control' and 'Proximity to Power'.

The lack of editorial independence has significant implications for TASS's credibility, both domestically and internationally. While TASS is respected for its comprehensive and timely news coverage, its close ties to the government raise questions about the objectivity and reliability of its reporting. This skepticism is particularly pronounced among international audiences and independent media organizations, which may view TASS's content as government propaganda rather than unbiased journalism. In July of 2023, TASS witnessed a new wave of increased state censorship, as the outlet's director Sergei Mikhailov was replaced by Andrei Kondrashov, a strong ally of president Putin<sup>61</sup>.

Despite these challenges, TASS attempts to maintain a degree of journalistic professionalism. The agency employs a large network of correspondents and journalists who strive to report accurately and comprehensively. In areas such as business, technology, and cultural reporting, TASS often displays a higher level of objectivity, which helps bolster its overall credibility. However, the inherent tension between state control and journalistic independence remains a persistent issue. This becomes especially visible when reading articles that discuss (geo)political topics or themes on foreign policy.

TASS, as a state-owned news agency, plays a crucial role in disseminating information and shaping public discourse within Russia and abroad. Its audience is diverse and its website's yearly hits are in the hundreds of millions. However, the agency's lack of editorial independence, rooted in its historical role and current state ownership, poses significant challenges. The influence of the Russian government over TASS's editorial decisions undermines its credibility and raises questions about the objectivity of its reporting. Despite efforts to maintain professional journalistic standards, the tension between state interests and independent journalism continues to define TASS's operations and reputation.

### **Rybar**

Rybar is a prominent Russian news outlet known for its detailed coverage of military and geopolitical issues. Launched in the mid-2010s, Rybar has quickly gained a significant following among those interested in defense and strategic affairs, particularly concerning Russian military operations and international conflicts. The platform operates primarily

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.



through its Telegram channel, which boasts over a million subscribers, illustrating its broad reach and influence.

Rybar's audience is predominantly composed of Russian individuals with a keen interest in military affairs, defense strategies, and geopolitical developments. This includes military personnel, defense analysts, policy makers, and a segment of the general public fascinated by military technology and strategy. The detailed and technical nature of Rybar's content appeals to an audience that values in-depth analysis and comprehensive reports on military operations, both within Russia and globally<sup>62</sup>.

The outlet's followers appreciate its focus on providing minute-by-minute updates during conflicts, which is particularly evident in its coverage of the Syrian Civil War and the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War. Rybar has become a go-to source for real-time information and expert commentary, enhancing its reputation as a reliable source of military news. The platform's audience also includes a significant number of nationalist and pro-Kremlin supporters, who resonate with its patriotic tone and supportive stance on Russian military interventions. Despite its domestic reputation for detailed reporting, Rybar faces significant challenges regarding editorial independence. The outlet's content often aligns closely with the official narratives propagated by the Russian government, raising questions about its autonomy. Reports that contradict official narratives or criticize the government are rare, reflecting a constrained editorial environment<sup>63</sup>.

To avoid repercussions for undesirable content, Rybar, like many other Russian media outlets, may practice self-censorship. This involves selectively reporting information that aligns with state interests while omitting or downplaying news that could be seen as critical of the government or its policies. Self-censorship ensures the outlet remains in the government's good graces, avoiding potential sanctions or shutdowns.

Rybar's content often serves as a tool for disseminating state-approved messages. The outlet's coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian War, for instance, frequently echoes the Kremlin's justification for its actions, portraying Russian military operations as defensive maneuvers aimed at protecting ethnic Russians and countering Western aggression. This narrative supports the broader state propaganda efforts to shape public opinion and garner support for the government's actions<sup>64</sup>.

In October 2022, Russian independent economic new medium The Bell identified Mikhail Zvinchuk, a former member of the Russian's Defense Ministry's press service, as the founder of Rybar. The Bell's investigation also highlights the state's financial support of Rybar. Such financial backing would naturally come with expectations of editorial alignment with government policies. Dependence on state funding can limit an outlet's ability to operate independently, as financial security becomes tied to compliance with state directives. When looking at the mechanisms through which the state exerts influence over the media, as mentioned in the literature review, it is difficult to directly ascribe certain mechanisms to the outlet. There are fewer articles written or allegations pointed towards Rybar than is the case with TASS and Vedomosti. There is also less clarity about ownership structures and management positions. It is clear however, that the Russian state exerts control over Rybar. It would be fair to state that Rybar deals with at least one mechanism 4: 'Information Control'.

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<sup>62</sup> "Who's behind Rybar? The Bell Unmasks One of Telegram's Most Widely-Cited pro-Kremlin Military Analysis Channels," Meduza, accessed June 30, 2024, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/11/18/who-s-behind-rybar>.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

Rybar has carved out a niche as a detailed and timely source of military and geopolitical news, attracting a dedicated audience interested in these areas. However, the outlet's lack of editorial independence raises important questions about the credibility and objectivity of its reporting. The alignment of Rybar's content with state narratives, the practice of self-censorship, and the likely state influence on its operations all point to an editorial environment that prioritizes conformity with government views over independent journalism. As such, while Rybar remains a significant player in the Russian media landscape, its role as an independent news source is critically compromised by these factors.

### 3.2: Documentation of Vedomosti's coverage on the Syrian Conflict

This section illustrates the coverage of the Syrian Civil War by the Russian news outlet Vedomosti over a two-year period from February 24, 2022 to the end of February 2024. The focus is on identifying and categorizing the narratives employed in 20 selected articles to understand the framing and messaging strategies used by Vedomosti.

In 6 out of the 20 articles, Vedomosti adopted the narrative of blaming the West and NATO for the turmoil in Syria. These articles typically portrayed Western countries, especially the United States and NATO allies, as the primary instigators of conflict. They emphasized Western interventions and support for opposition groups as key factors that exacerbated the war and contributed to instability in the region. Special focus is out on the United States' aim to destabilize the region and gain economically from Syria's natural resources. The following example is a translated segment out of a Vedomosti article published on March 24<sup>rd</sup> 2023<sup>65</sup>:

*'The United States and a number of other countries intervened in the civil war in Syria in September 2014 under the pretext of fighting terrorist groups. Back in September 2018, the official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, noted that the United States was artificially prolonging the conflict and destabilizing the situation in the republic. The Foreign Ministry representative noted that the US authorities were trying to "obtain justification for maintaining an illegal armed presence on Syrian soil." Currently, the Americans are extracting oil on Syrian territory and selling it without the appropriate permission from local authorities.'*

Another 4 articles followed the narrative emphasizing Russia's humanitarian and peacekeeping efforts in Syria. These pieces highlighted Russia's role in providing aid, facilitating peace talks, and stabilizing war-torn areas. This narrative aimed to cast Russia as a benevolent actor committed to resolving the conflict and alleviating human suffering. Extra focus is put on Russia's successful fight against terrorism, while the articles may also highlight that the West only operates in Syria under the false pretext of fighting terrorism.

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<sup>65</sup> "Американская База На Северо-Востоке Сирии Попала Под Обстрел," Вedomosti, March 24, 2023, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2023/03/24/968112-amerikanskaya-baza-popala>.

The following example is a translated segment out of a Vedomosti article published on November 23<sup>rd</sup> 2022<sup>66</sup>:

*'Russia, Turkey and Iran condemn the growing activity of terrorist groups in Syria and confirm their readiness to continue the joint fight against terrorism, according to a joint statement following a meeting on Syria in the Astana format.  
"Expressed their determination to continue their cooperation in the fight against terrorism in all its forms and manifestations... Condemned the growing presence and activity of terrorist groups and related entities operating under various guises in various parts of Syria," the statement said.  
These groups not only threaten the territorial integrity of Syria, but also the national security of neighboring countries, representatives of the three states emphasized. Participants in the Astana format also emphasized the need to implement all agreements on northern Syria and preserve the territorial integrity of this republic.'*

Four articles adopted a neutral tone, providing balanced reporting without overt bias towards any particular narrative. These pieces aimed to present facts and developments in the Syrian conflict without attributing blame or highlighting specific achievements. Six articles revealed a new narrative to be prominent in Vedomosti's coverage of the Syrian Conflict. These articles celebrated military successes and strategic victories achieved by the Syrian government with Russian support. They often underscored the defeat of terrorist groups and the restoration of government control over previously contested territories. This emphasis on Russia's success in the region is exaggerated when comparing the rhetoric to actual achievements on a military and humanitarian level. Often portrayed as proof for Russia's victories in Syria and successful aid to the Al-Asadd regime is Syria's slow reconciliation with other Arab countries. This narrative has been labeled as the narrative of 'Victory'. The following example is a translated segment out of a Vedomosti article published on April 13<sup>rd</sup> 2023<sup>67</sup>:

*'In December 2022, at the initiative of Turkish President Recep Erdogan and with the mediation of Russia, the process of normalizing Syrian-Turkish relations began. Then, the first meeting of defense ministers and intelligence chiefs of the two countries in 11 years took place; a meeting of deputy foreign ministers of Russia, Syria, Iran and Turkey is scheduled for mid-April. The final point for the resumption of relations between Damascus and Ankara should be a personal meeting between Erdogan and Assad.  
In Western Europe, whose governments have supported the armed opposition with money and weapons since 2011, there are also voices calling for the rejection of Assad's removal. The first to declare that this condition was not necessary for a settlement in Syria was French President Emmanuel Macron back in 2017.'*

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<sup>66</sup> "Россия, Турция и Иран договорились продолжить борьбу с терроризмом в Сирии," Вedomosti, November 23, 2022, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2022/11/23/951715-rossiya-turtsiya-i-iran-dogovorilis-prodolzhit-borbu-s-terrorizmom>.

<sup>67</sup> "Министр иностранных дел Сирии посетил Саудовскую Аравию впервые с 2011 года," Вedomosti, April 13, 2023, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2023/04/13/970688-ministr-inostrannih-sirii-posetil-saudovskuyu-araviyu>.

The narratives of ‘Defensive Posture and Protection of Russian Citizens’, ‘Historical and Cultural Unity’, ‘Delegitimizing Opponents’, ‘Legal and Political Justifications’ and ‘Demonizing Dissent’ were not found in the articles. The frequency of narratives has been visualized in figure 2.

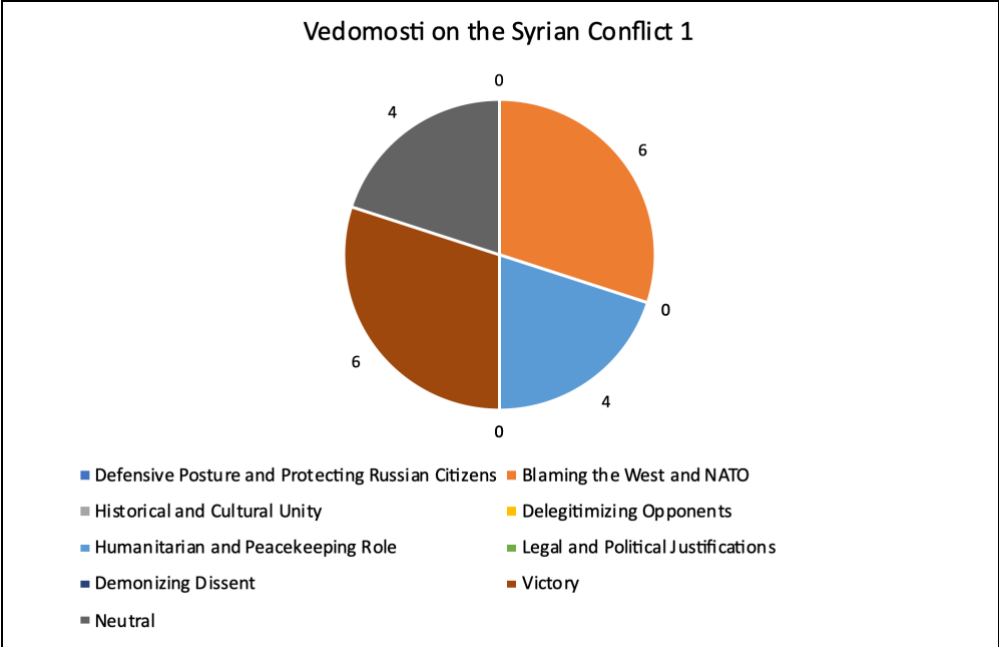


Figure 2. Vedomosti on the Syrian Conflict, Division of Narratives

In Vedomosti’s coverage, narratives were also categorized according to the time they were published. Any change in rhetoric during the two years of coverage could then be documented. The established timeline showed that between February 24<sup>th</sup> and August 2022 (Q1), no apparent narratives could be identified. Coverage between August 2022 and February 2023 (Q2) showed an emphasis on Russia’s humanitarian and peacekeeping role, as well as an increased focus on blaming the West and NATO. The third quarter, between February 2023 and August 2023, saw a sudden surge in narratives highlighting Russia’s victory. There was also an increase of application of the narrative ‘Blaming the West and NATO’ and a decrease of the narrative ‘Humanitarian and Peacekeeping Role’. The final quarter, between August 2023 and the end of February 2024, was characterized by a division between articles that blamed the west or remained neutral. Both narratives were only identified twice. The narrative timeline has been visualized in figure 3.

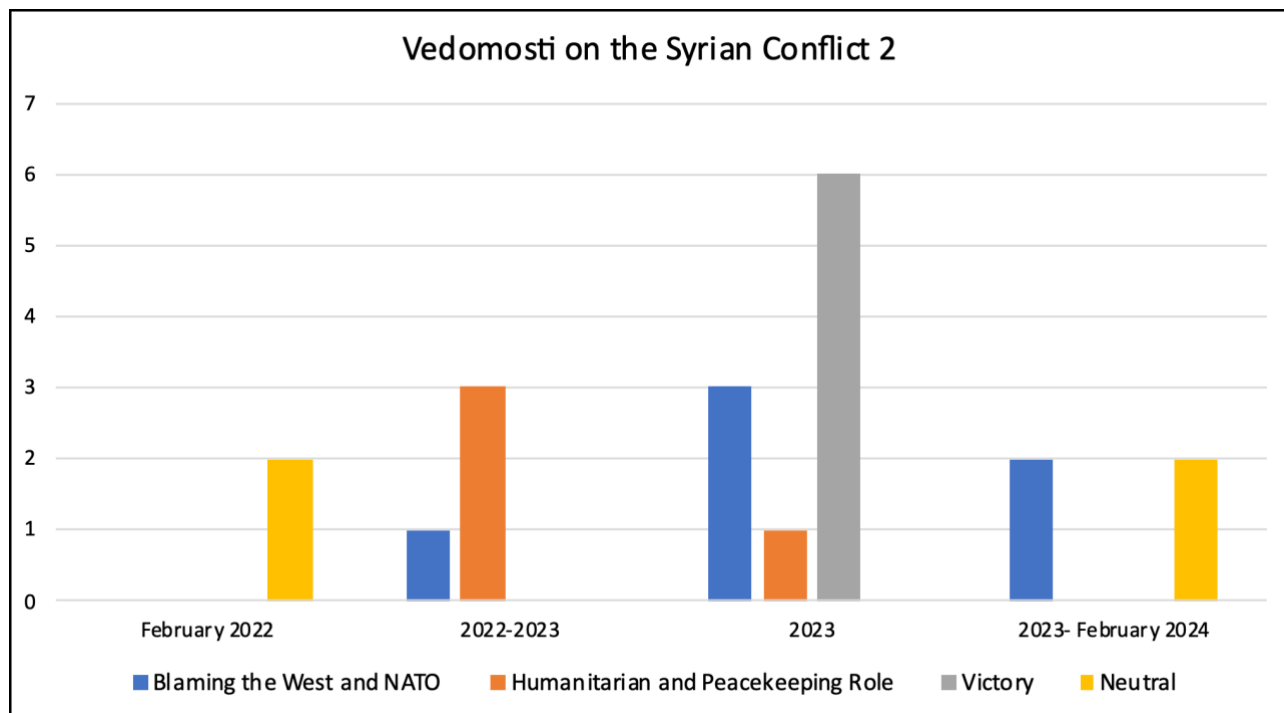


Figure 3. Vedomosti on the Syrian Conflict, Timeline.

### 3.3: Documentation of TASS’s coverage on the Syrian Conflict

This section illustrates the coverage of the Syrian Civil War by the Russian news outlet TASS over the established time period. The focus is on identifying and categorizing the narratives employed in 35 selected articles to understand the framing and messaging strategies used by TASS.

In 15 out of the 35 articles, TASS adopted the narrative of blaming the West and NATO for the turmoil in Syria. Similarly to the Vedomosti coverage, These articles typically portrayed Western countries as the primary instigators of conflict. They emphasized Western interventions and support for opposition groups as key factors that exacerbated the war and contributed to instability in the region. The following example is a translated segment out of a TASS article published on February 27<sup>th</sup> 2023<sup>68</sup>:

*'BEIRUT, February 27. /TASS/. Western countries, with their anti-Russian hysteria, are trying to distort the facts and escalate the situation in the world. This is stated in a statement issued by the Syrian Foreign Ministry on Sunday, the contents of which were quoted by the SANA agency .*

*"Syria strongly condemns the hysteria directed against Russia by the United States and [other] Western countries, which are thus trying to distort the facts, inflame the situation and maintain the crisis, seeking to maintain their hegemony in the world," the statement said.*

<sup>68</sup> “МИД Сирии: Запад антироссийской истерией пытается исказить факты и накалить обстановку - TACC,” TACC, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/13888643>.

*It also emphasizes that the policies of the United States and its allies are based on "lies, disinformation, distortion of the past and present," and that all the information and political resonance they cause is merely an attempt to "maintain chaos in the world in the interests of criminals, terrorists, and neo-Nazis."*

*The Syrian Foreign Ministry also stated that Russia has the right to defend itself from the West, which threatens its national security. "Russia has every right to defend itself and [seek] to rid its people of the danger associated with attempts by the West and the United States to threaten its national security and stability. <...> The task of all countries is to resist the policies of the United States-led West, has become a threat to the entire world," the statement said.'*

Only 3 articles followed the narrative emphasizing Russia's humanitarian and peacekeeping efforts in Syria. These pieces again highlighted Russia's role in providing aid and stabilizing war-torn areas. This narrative aimed to cast Russia as a benevolent actor committed to resolving the conflict and alleviating human suffering. The peacekeeping role of Russia is again characterized by the fight against terrorism. The following example is a translated segment out of a TASS article published on March 29<sup>th</sup> 2022:

*'LATAKIA /Syria/, March 29. /TASS/. Thousands of people in the cities of Latakia and Tartus in Syria took to the streets on Monday to protest in support of Russian servicemen who are taking part in a special military operation in Ukraine. In Latakia alone, about 5,000 people took part in the protest, the head of the National Development Department in Latakia Province and chairman of the local branch of the Baath Party, Geysam Nisbail, told TASS. "Today, we, the Syrian people, are here to testify and express our gratitude and appreciation to our Russian friends who are helping us in this difficult time for us, which began 10 years ago, and who have stood up to protect the Arab people from terrorism. We, as representatives of the entire Syrian people, the President of Syria Bashar al-Assad, express our solidarity and fully support the position that our president has chosen in relation to Russia and the current situation in the world," said Gaysam Nisbail.'*

One article followed the narrative emphasizing the historical and cultural ties between Russia and Syria. This narrative highlights the longstanding connections and mutual interests between the two nations, often to justify Russian involvement in the conflict. Connections between Russia and Syria date back to Soviet times. This article however, highlighted the aim to integrate Russian language into the Syrian population. The following example is a translated segment out of a TASS article published on September 1<sup>st</sup> 2022<sup>69</sup>:

*' "The Russian Presidential Academy may begin to cooperate with leading state universities of the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR) and train SAR civil servants according to its programs. This was agreed upon by the rector of the Academy, Alexei Komissarov, with the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Syrian Arab Republic to the Russian Federation, Bashar al-Jaafari. During the visit, the ambassador expressed Syria's interest in training civil*

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<sup>69</sup> "РАНХиГС договорился о сотрудничестве с Сирией по подготовке госслужащих," ТАСС, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/18639977>.

*servants at the Presidential Academy and proposed establishing relations with leading state universities of the SAR, including Damascus and Tishreen Universities," the statement said. According to Al-Jaafari, currently in Syria about 40 thousand schoolchildren are studying Russian as a second foreign language. He also announced plans to increase Russia's quotas for training Syrian citizens in Russian universities.*

...

*Speaking about the development of Russian-Syrian cooperation, the Syrian president noted "the importance of joint work in the cultural and educational aspects," since, from his point of view, the most significant goal is to achieve "integration at the level of the peoples [of the two countries]." He added that "the circumstances of the joint war on terrorism will also contribute to the integration of the [Russian and Syrian] peoples from the cultural and social points of view." ‘*

Six articles followed the narrative of providing legal and political justifications for Russia's and Syria's actions. These pieces emphasized the legality and legitimacy of interventions and actions taken by Russia in Syria, often citing international law and political agreements. Furthermore, the Syrian authorities are often quoted as being supportive of Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Syria is

The following example is a translated segment out of a TASS article published on October 20<sup>th</sup> 2022<sup>70</sup>:

*'BEIRUT, October 20. /TASS/. Syrian citizens are following the progress of Russia's special military operation (SVO) in Ukraine in the same way as they followed the battles with terrorists in their country. This was stated on Thursday by the President of the Arab Republic Bashar al-Assad during a meeting with the Russian delegation led by the special representative of the Russian President for the Syrian settlement Alexander Lavrentiev. According to the Syrian leader, quoted by the state news agency SANA , "the Syrian people are watching the NWO in the same way as they followed the battles against terrorists in Syria, since the military actions that Russia is waging are aimed at restoring international balance."*  
*Assad also congratulated the Russian side on the successful holding of referendums on joining the Russian Federation in the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics, the Kherson region and the liberated territories of the Zaporyzhye region.'*

Three articles employed the narrative of delegitimizing opponents. This narrative portrayed the adversaries of the Syrian government, particularly opposition groups and their leaders, in a negative light, often labeling them as terrorists or extremists. Articles were also found to accuse the West of committing aggressive and illegitimate acts of political, military or economic nature. The following example is a translated segment out of a TASS article published on July 3rd 2022<sup>71</sup>:

<sup>70</sup> "Асад: сирийцы следят за СВО так же, как следили за боями с террористами в своей стране," ТАСС, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/16112767>.

<sup>71</sup> "Посол САР заявил, что Запад усилил санкции против Сирии из-за поддержки спецоперации - ТАСС."

*“The West’s unjust sanctions against Syria are intensifying, becoming more complicated to the point of real economic terrorism. And the West’s escalation against Syria is intensifying, especially after supporting a special operation aimed at protecting the people of Donbass,” he (Ambassador of Syria in Russia) said.*

*According to Haddad, Western countries are using the same tools and methods against Russia that were previously used against Syria. The ambassador assured of the Syrian people's continued support for Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. “Achieving complete victory in Syria and Ukraine is inevitable. The future of our friendly peoples and the whole world depends on these victories, which will forever bury the unipolar system and establish a global system based on respect for the sovereignty of states,” he noted.’*

The newly found narrative of 'Victory' was present in 8 articles. These articles celebrated military successes and strategic victories achieved by the Syrian government with Russian support. They often underscored the defeat of terrorist groups and the restoration of government control over previously contested territories. Similar to Vedomosti’s articles, special attention was given to the slow reconciliation of Syria with other Arab countries. The following example is a translated segment out of a TASS article published on March 24th 2022<sup>72</sup>:

*“The Syrian authorities have begun a reconciliation process near the country's capital in the village of Attal in the Rif Damascus province. Here a special commission has begun receiving deserters and militant accomplices to give them a chance to start a peaceful life. The reconciliation process is taking place with the participation of representatives of the Russian Armed Forces group in Syria”, Alexey Nosov, a representative of the Russian group of troops, told reporters.*

*According to him, this "once again demonstrates to both Syria and the rest of the world that the Russian army is working to end the conflict." "Where there is a Russian army, peace comes and civil accord arises, life becomes peaceful and safe. And here the Russian military acts as a guarantor of justice in the reconciliation process. In addition, our military police monitors order in all areas. After the start of the special operation in Ukraine, the level of trust in our army among the Syrians has increased even more," Nosov added.’*

Only 2 articles adopted a neutral tone, providing balanced reporting without overt bias towards any particular narrative. These pieces aimed to present facts and developments in the Syrian conflict without attributing blame or highlighting specific achievements. The narratives of ‘Defensive Posture and Protecting Russian Citizens’ and ‘Demonizing Dissent’ were not identified when studying the TASS articles. The frequency of the narratives has been visualized in Figure 4.

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<sup>72</sup> “В городе Аттал под Дамаском начался процесс примирения - ТАСС,” ТАСС, , <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/14165761>.



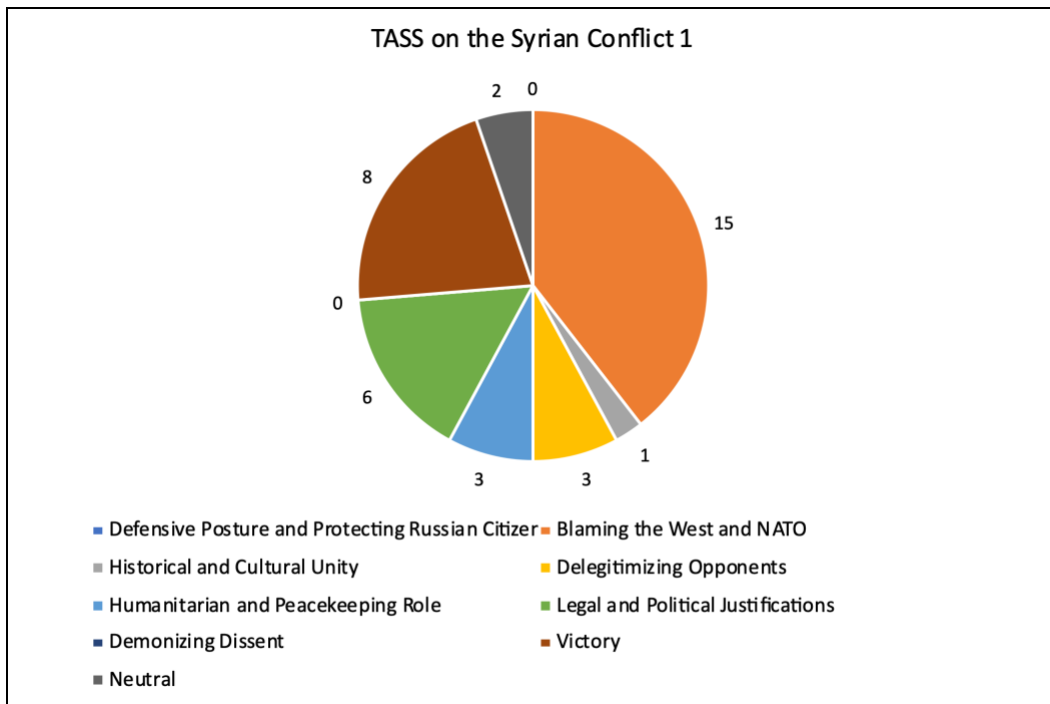


Figure 4. TASS on the Syrian Conflict, Division of Narratives

The narratives found in the TASS articles were also documented chronologically. The established timeline showed that between February 24<sup>th</sup> and August 2022 (Q1), blaming the West was the dominant narrative. Closely behind followed rhetoric that sought to delegitimize opponents. This quarter in the timeline was further characterized by talk of victory, political and legal justifications, and Russia’s supposed humanitarian role. Coverage between August 2022 and February 2023 (Q2) still showed an emphasis on blaming the West. The only other identified narrative was that of ‘legal and political justifications’. The third quarter, between February 2023 and August 2023, saw a sudden rise in narratives highlighting Russia’s victory. The narrative ‘Blaming the West and NATO’ saw a decrease in application. The final quarter, between August 2023 and the end of February 2024, was characterized another increase in articles that blamed the West. Application of the narrative of ‘Victory’ was decreased and for the first time articles that could only be categorized as ‘neutral’ became apparent. The narrative timeline has been visualized in figure 5.

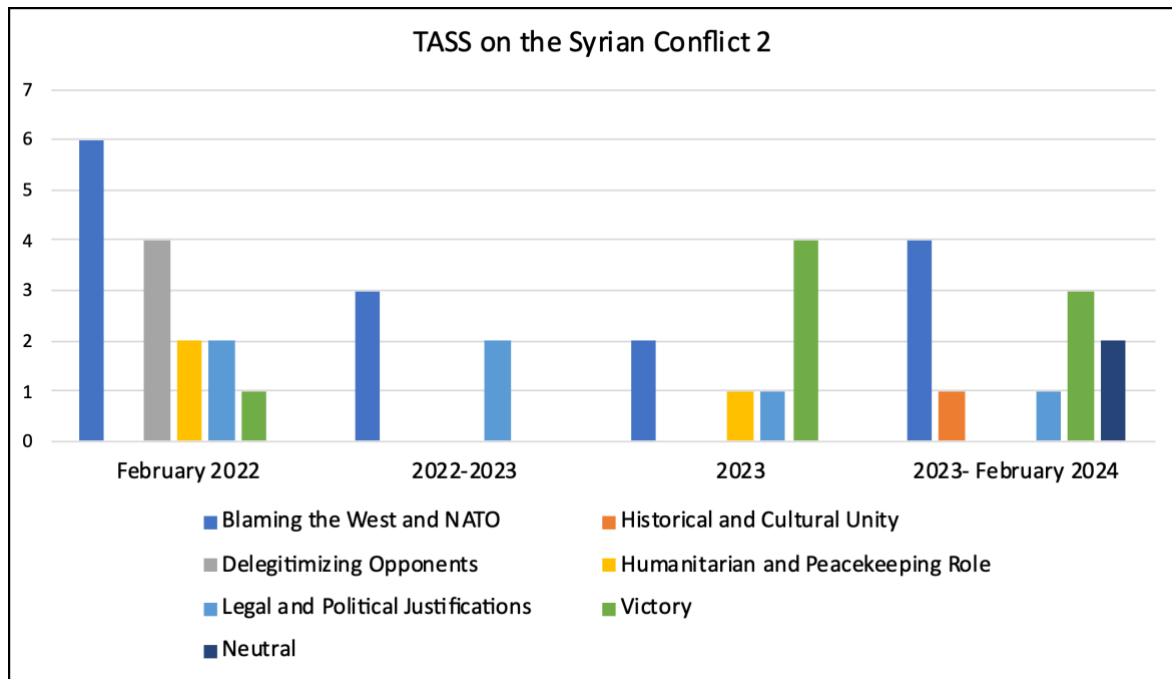


Figure 5. TASS on the Syrian Conflict, Timeline.

In an addition to the identification of sets of narratives in the three chosen sources, TASS articles were also studied for their use of language. Five terms that have historically been present in propagandistic discourse were selected and looked for in the 35 TASS articles. These were then again categorized into four time quarters that spanned over the two years of gathered content. In the first quarter, the word *Terrorist* or *Terrorism* was used 35 times. The word *Ugroza*, meaning ‘threat’, was used 19 times. The word *Nazist*, meaning ‘Nazi’, came up nine times. *Prestupleniye*, meaning ‘crime’, was documented four times. *Territorial’naya tselostnost’*, which means ‘territorial integrity’, was found to be used once. In the second quarter, the word *Terrorist* or *Terrorism* was used six times. The word *Ugroza*, was used twice. *Territorial’naya tselostnost’* was used once. *Nazist* and *Prestupleniye* were not used at all. In the third quarter, *Terrorist* or *Terrorism* was used four times. *Prestupleniye* was found to be used once. The other words were not used at all. In the fourth and final quarter, the word *Terrorist* or *Terrorism* was used twelve times. The word *Ugroza*, was used twice. *Territorial’naya tselostnost’* was used five times. *Nazist* and *Prestupleniye* were not used at all. The timeline of word use has been visualized in figure 6.

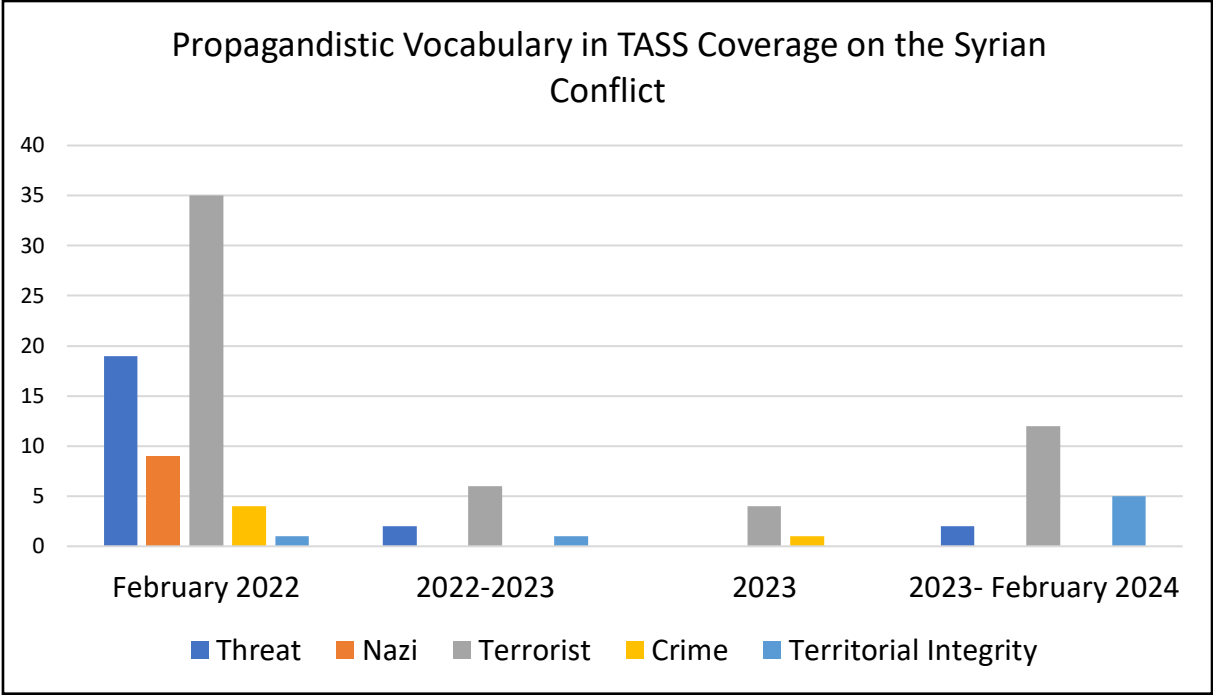


Figure 6. Propagandistic Vocabulary in TASS Coverage of the Syrian Conflict.

### 3.4: Documentation of Rybar’s coverage on the Syrian Conflict

This section illustrates the coverage of the Syrian Civil War by the Russian news outlet Rybar over the established time period. The focus is on identifying and categorizing the narratives employed in 18 news updates to understand the framing and messaging strategies used by Rybar.

4 out of the 18 articles, Rybar adopted the narrative of blaming the West and NATO for the ongoing conflict in Syria. These articles shared many similarities with the way that the Vedomosti and TASS articles tried to blame the West.

Only 1 article followed the narrative emphasizing Russia's humanitarian and peacekeeping efforts in Syria, and one other article employed the narrative of delegitimizing opponents. The narratives of ‘Historical and Cultural Unity’, ‘Defensive Posture and Protection of Russian Citizens’, ‘Legal and Political Justifications’, ‘Demonizing Dissent’ and ‘Victory’ were not documented.

The majority of the articles, 12 out of 18, adopted a neutral tone, providing balanced reporting without overt bias towards any particular narrative. These pieces aimed to present facts and developments in the Syrian conflict without attributing blame or highlighting specific achievements. It must be noted however, that Rybar has been accused of spreading fake news. Furthermore, the outlet is openly pro-war and pro-Kremlin. Seemingly neutral reporting can therefore be factually incorrect in an attempt to glorify Russian military and political efforts. The following example is a translated news publication on Rybar’s Telegram channel. The date of publication is October 1<sup>st</sup> 2023.

‘

*What's happening in Syria?*

*The situation for 27 September - 1 October 2023*

*Fighting continues between the "Syrian Democratic Forces" (SDF) and Arab tribal militias in Zaefratieh.*

*The rebels released a statement where they denied involvement with any political force. They also accused the Kurds of colluding with the government in Damascus with the Iranians and refusing to fight against them.*

*In this case, one can even believe in the sincerity of the Arab clans' motives: they get nothing from the oil of Zayefratiyah, just as they get nothing from the Kurdish outsiders who have occupied these lands and are establishing their own order.*

*In the south, in Druze Al-Suwayda, protests against the dire socio-economic situation continue unabated, and even the flags of the Syrian opposition have been spotted.*

*There is no deep meaning in this - the Druze do not care about the problems of regions with Sunni or other populations. But the situation once again demonstrates that the government has lost control over the situation in the province and is actually acting as an observer.*

*In the early morning of 1 October, Israel launched another strike on Syria. Explosions went off in al-Dimas and near the Mezzeh airbase, and Syrian air defences went off near Damascus. The results of the attack remain unknown, as do the targets of the raids themselves, the military expediency of which has long been questioned.*

*The United States has reported on a joint operation with the Kurds in north-eastern Syria to capture the coordinator of the Islamic State, Mamdouh Ibrahim al-Hajji. Such raids with the capture of various IS functionaries take place regularly and do not seriously affect the general background.*

*In general, the situation in Syria is the same: although there are no large-scale hostilities, constant protests and localised clashes have become commonplace.*

*The country increasingly resembles a powder keg, where one spark can provoke a war not between the usual parties to the conflict, but against everyone. '*

The frequency of the narratives has been visualized in figure 7.

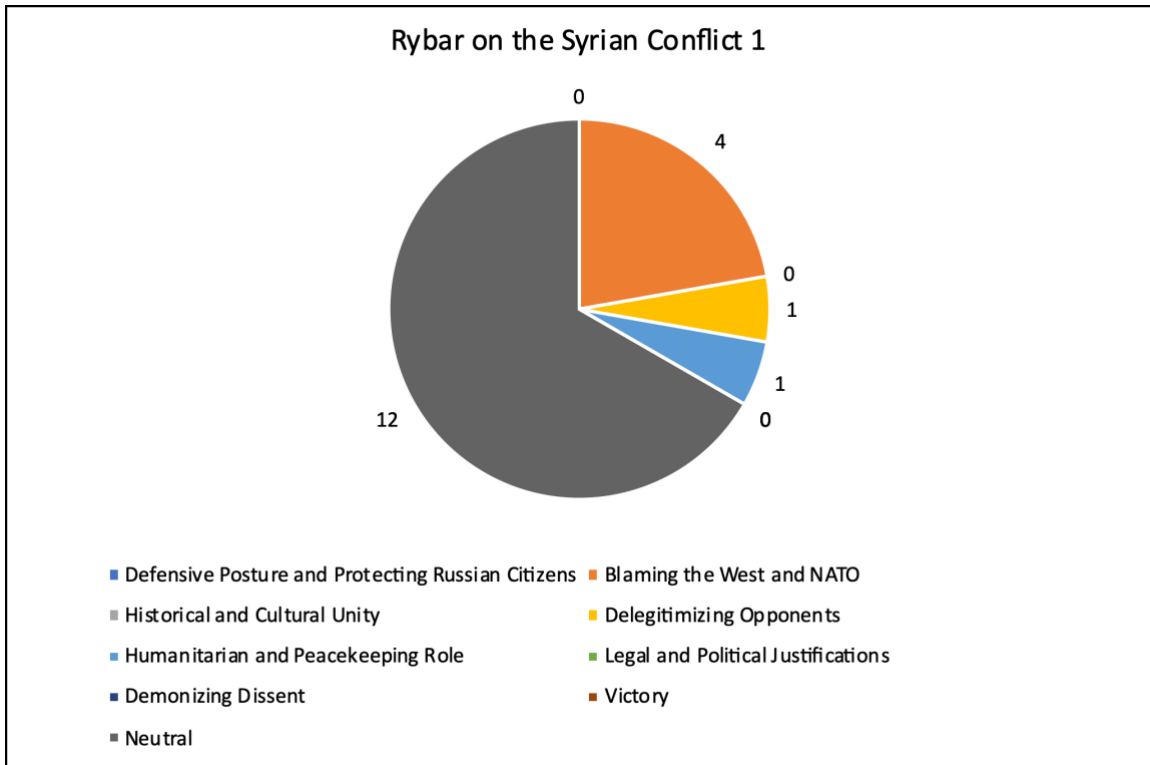


Figure 7. Rybar on the Syrian Conflict, Division of Narratives.

The narratives found in the Rybar publications were also documented chronologically. The division of narratives remained quite stable during the first three quarters, only including 'Blaming the West and NATO', 'Delegitimizing Opponents' and 'Humanitarian and Peacekeeping Role'. Q4 however, was most notable, because no narratives could be identified. The narrative timeline has been visualized in figure 8.

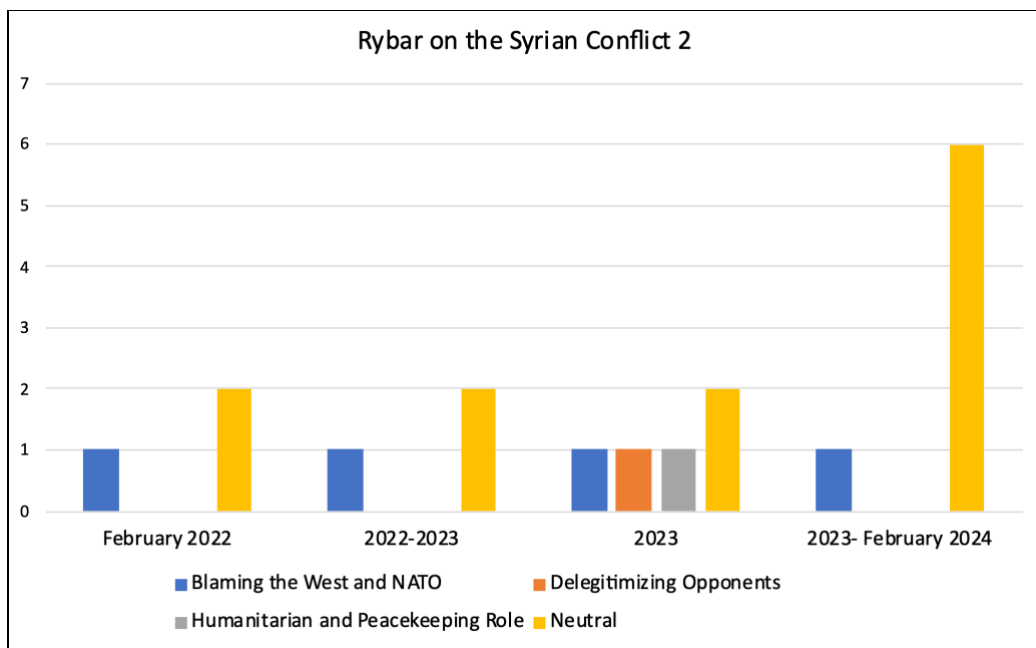


Figure 8. Rybar on the Syrian Conflict, Timeline

# Chapter 4: Analysis and Discussion

## 4.1: Analysis

Vedomosti's coverage of the Syrian Civil War reflects a blend of state-aligned narratives and occasionally neutral reporting. The significant presence of articles blaming the West and NATO aligns with broader Russian media strategies that often depict Western powers as antagonists in geopolitical conflicts. This framing helps to justify Russian actions and positions to both domestic and international audiences.

The emphasis on humanitarian and peacekeeping roles serves to enhance Russia's image as a stabilizing force, countering the negative portrayals by Western media. By highlighting victories, Vedomosti reinforces the narrative of Russian military prowess and strategic competence, bolstering national pride and public support for foreign interventions.

The neutral articles, while fewer, suggest an attempt to maintain a veneer of journalistic integrity and provide a balanced perspective. However, their limited number indicates that the outlet's overall editorial stance leans towards promoting state-aligned narratives. This stance must be interpreted within the context of Vedomosti's target audience and heritage as a newspaper of reputation. A generally educated, more liberal audience will not respond well to unfounded accusations, blatant lies or outright aggressive rhetoric.

The analysis of Vedomosti's coverage of the Syrian Civil War from February 2022 to February 2024 reveals a strategic use of framing to shape public perception. The predominant narratives of blaming the West and NATO, emphasizing humanitarian and peacekeeping efforts, and celebrating victories serve to align the outlet's reporting with Russian governmental positions. The presence of neutral narratives, though less frequent, indicates an effort to balance reportage but does not significantly detract from the overall alignment with state interests. This pattern highlights the complex interplay between journalistic practices and state influence in Russian media.

TASS's coverage of the Syrian Civil War reflects a strategic use of framing to shape public perception and align with Russian state interests. The significant presence of articles blaming the West and NATO indicates a consistent effort to portray external actors as the main antagonists, aligning with broader Russian media strategies that emphasize Western hostility and interference.

The limited number of articles emphasizing humanitarian and peacekeeping roles suggests a lesser focus on portraying Russia as a benevolent force in this context compared to other narratives. However, the narrative of victory is well-represented, reinforcing the image of Russian and Syrian military success and competence.

The presence of neutral narratives, although minimal, indicates an attempt to maintain a veneer of journalistic balance. The inclusion of narratives emphasizing historical and cultural unity, delegitimizing opponents, and legal and political justifications further demonstrates the complexity of TASS's messaging strategy, aiming to legitimize Russian actions through various lenses. Considering TASS's role as a central Russian, state-run news agency, its coverage aims to reach the entire spectrum of the domestic audience. In addition to having

a higher amount of yearly readers, TASS's potential to influence the Russian population is greater than is the case with Vedomosti and Rybar, just because it takes a central role in Russian society. The research on TASS's use of propagandistic vocabulary in its articles is becomes interesting when taking this central role into regard. The results show that propagandistic vocabulary was, by far, most prevalent in the first months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As Russia received much criticism for their actions, both internationally and domestically, the state had much to gain from influencing its population. In these early months after the invasion, TASS applied a large amount of terms such as threat, Nazi and terrorist/terrorism in order to ignite anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiment in the domestic audience. The use of such vocabulary generally inspires feelings of fear and uncertainty into the reader, which can in turn be used to influence the reader into a certain direction of thought.

The analysis of TASS's coverage of the Syrian Civil War from February 2022 to February 2024 reveals a predominant reliance on state-aligned narratives, particularly those blaming the West and NATO. While other narratives are also present, their lower frequency suggests a secondary role in TASS's overall editorial strategy. This pattern highlights the outlet's function as a tool for state messaging, aiming to shape public perception, legitimize Russian actions, and align with the strategic interests of the Russian government.

Rybar's coverage of the Syrian Civil War surprisingly reflects a modest application of narratives, with a notable inclination towards maintaining a neutral stance in the majority of articles. The significant presence of neutral narratives suggests an effort to present balanced reporting, which contrasts with the more overtly biased narratives often seen in other Russian state-aligned media. In reality however, the absence of clear narratives cannot directly be interpreted as a sign of journalistic virtue or overall neutral stance towards geopolitics. Rybar's content has been faced with allegations of dis- and misinformation, directed towards a pro-Russian stance. Nonetheless, it remains surprising that Rybar rarely engages in using persuasive narratives. The presence of articles blaming the West and NATO indicates that Rybar still aligns with some key state narratives, portraying external actors as antagonists and attributing much of the conflict's blame to Western interference. However, this narrative is less dominant compared to the neutral reporting.

The limited number of articles emphasizing humanitarian and peacekeeping roles and delegitimizing opponents indicates a lesser focus on portraying Russia as a benevolent force or on demonizing opposition groups. This observation corresponds with Rybar's reputation as being a military-oriented medium. The audience does not need to be convinced of the Kremlin's virtue, as most of Rybar's audience is already pro-Putin and pro-war.

The analysis of Rybar's coverage of the Syrian Civil War from February 2022 to February 2024 reveals a predominant reliance on neutral narratives, with occasional use of state-aligned narratives such as blaming the West and NATO. While other narratives are also present, their lower frequency suggests a secondary role in Rybar's overall editorial strategy.

Over all, the research results exposed two interesting phenomena. First of all, a new narrative was identified that differed from rhetoric seen in past conflicts that Russia was engaged in. The victory narrative, through which the selected media outlets try to convince their readers of the success of Russia in Syria, leaves out actual facts and illustrates a false picture of the Syrian Civil War and Russia's part in it. Successes are not as great as they are being made out to be by Vedomosti, TASS and Rybar.

The second interesting phenomenon that was uncovered, was the use of Syria as a vehicle for Russia to justify its actions in Ukraine. Oftentimes, Russia's actions in Syria were portrayed as benevolent and humanitarian. This was then compared to Russia's actions in Ukraine, implicating that these were of the same benevolent nature. Furthermore, many Syrian state officials were quoted as being positive of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Also, the Syrian authorities organized a number of demonstrations that showed support of Russia and its 'special military operation'. These demonstration were then again highlighted in the selected media outlets. It can be argued that both of these exposed phenomena serve the purpose of falsely trying to influence the Russian population in order to gather support for the state.

## **4.2: Discussion**

The results of the conducted research can be seen a supplementary to existing knowledge of the Russian media sphere, state tactics and target rhetoric. The sample size of 73 articles is large enough to draw conclusions from. The sources (Vedomosti, TASS and Rybar) are different in terms of content publication, tone and target audience and therefore provide the research with a broad representation of the Russian media consumer. However so, the research also has its limitations. Interpretations of media are prone to a certain level of subjectivity. Although conclusions can be drawn from the research results, it must be noted that conclusions are made of the author's interpretations. For that reason, it would be interesting to see future research on the topic. Further research might include interpretations from a multitude of researchers and might include a larger time frame. For reason of feasibility, Russian coverage of the Syrian Civil War from 2015 up to 2022 was not added to the research scope. Finally, it should be mentioned that apart from the Russian state-aligned media, there still exist many independent Russian media outlets. Although these are facing many pressures and challenges, they still reach a part of Russia's population. In further research, it would therefore also be interesting to take independent outlets into account in order to be juxtaposed to state-aligned coverage of Syria.



# Conclusion

In this comprehensive study of the Russian media's coverage of the Syrian Civil War and its alignment with Kremlin strategy, a multifaceted analysis has been conducted to unravel the intricate relationship between media narratives, state propaganda, and geopolitical objectives. By examining a diverse sample of 73 articles from outlets such as Vedomosti, TASS, and Rybar, this research has provided a detailed exploration of how the Russian state-run media shapes narratives to influence public opinion and advance strategic goals. The theoretical framework established in elucidated Russia's strategic objectives on a global scale, encompassing goals such as global influence, regional dominance, economic development, and technological advancement. These objectives served as a lens through which the subsequent analysis of media coverage of the Syrian conflict was conducted, shedding light on the ways in which the Kremlin's actions in Syria are portrayed and framed for domestic and international audiences. Through a meticulous examination of media narratives from past conflicts and their resonance in the coverage of the Syrian Civil War, the thesis aimed to uncover patterns, themes, and messaging strategies employed by Russian state media to shape public perception and advance strategic objectives. The findings underscored the complex interplay between media narratives, state propaganda, and public opinion. By conducting qualitative content analysis and scrutinizing language usage in news articles, the research identified key themes and propaganda techniques utilized by Russian state media in its coverage of the Syrian conflict. By categorizing articles based on recurring or emerging narratives, the study provided a comprehensive overview of the media landscape and its role in shaping public discourse. In conclusion, this thesis has not only deepened our understanding of how the Russian media's coverage of the Syrian Civil War aligns with Kremlin strategy but has also highlighted the broader implications for information warfare and strategic communication. By unraveling the complexities of media manipulation and narrative construction, this research contributes to a nuanced comprehension of how the Russian state leverages media as a tool for influencing public opinion and advancing its geopolitical interests on the global stage. When directly answering the thesis' research question; 'What does the Russian media's coverage of the Syrian Civil War look like and how does this serve Kremlin strategy?', the answer is as follows: The Russian media's coverage of the Syrian Civil War reveals a strategic alignment with Kremlin objectives, utilizing narratives and propaganda to shape public opinion and advance geopolitical interests.

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