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Kinnell, Andrew (2017) *An analysis of Russia's discursive strategy towards the Syrian conflict*. [MSc]

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University  
of Glasgow

School of Social & Political Sciences

***An analysis of Russia's discursive strategy  
towards the Syrian conflict***



Vasily Maximov—AFP/Getty Images

Student Number: 2271945

Programme of Study: MSc Russian, East European and  
Eurasian Studies 2016-2017

Word Count: 14778



## Contents

### Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	4
<b>Introduction</b> .....	5
<b>Literature Review</b> .....	9
<b>Theory and Methodology</b> .....	16
<b>The Path to Intervention</b> .....	24
<b>What concepts does the Russian government deploy to explain the rationale in its policy towards Syria?</b> .....	27
<b>How does the Russian government portray both its Self and Others in the Syrian conflict?</b> .....	33
<b>How does the Russian government arrange these concepts into a discourse explaining its policy towards Syria?</b> .....	38
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	44
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	48

## Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Dr Ammon Cheskin for his advice and support, and to Dr Hardman for her insightful comments on the research design. I would also like to thank Liam, Kevin, Megan and Laura for their support throughout the process of researching and writing.

## Introduction

In 2016, Russian forces assisted in the recapturing of the ancient city of Palmyra from ISIS. To celebrate, Russia organised a classical music performance in the Roman amphitheatre. President Putin addressing the concert via video stream told spectators that “our contemporary civilization will be relieved from this horrible disease, international terrorism” (John, 2016). This one example demonstrates the extent to which the Russian government sought to present itself as a positive actor for good in the Syrian conflict.

### Aims of the Research

In this dissertation, we will analyse and deconstruct the various ideational factors which are invoked within Russian government official discourses to provide justification for their Syrian strategy. Most studies of Russia’s involvement in the Syrian conflict to date have sought to explain Russian actions in realist terms i.e. geopolitical gain, heightened status, prestige etc. However, “a nation’s foreign policy may not always align with what outsiders believe are their long-term interests” (Dijkink, 1996). This research, therefore, takes a different approach which will explore the ideas and narratives of the Russian government. More specifically, we shall firstly deconstruct and analyse key concepts within Russian discourses such as “stability”, “political process” and “legitimacy”. We shall then analyse Russia’s discursive representation of 'Self' and various 'Others' and the construction of political frontiers. For example, if we examine what Foreign Minister Lavrov said in 2015, "Let me repeat that we, our partners in the region, the United States and some other colleagues do not see the situation 100% identically", Russia distinguishes and attributes differential status to the players in 'the situation', naming 'we' and 'our partners in the region', 'the US', and 'colleagues', thus drawing a frontier between Russia and its “partners” in the region on one hand, and the US and other “colleagues” on the other (Lavrov, 2015). We will finally go on to analyse the wider Russian discursive constellation which sets out Russia’s narrative about the conflict and International Relations more widely. We will argue that there is no singular or, as Notte (2016) claims,

“overarching” reasoning deployed to justify Russian involvement, rather a multiplicity of arguments are articulated within Russian narratives, each of which seeks to provide justification for their Syrian strategy at different levels and to different audiences.

Russia articulates its Syrian strategy narratives within international institutions, with other states on a bi-lateral basis and within the international and domestic media. Russian discourses invoke various ideational justifications for their Syrian strategy in such settings. Therefore, by deconstructing ‘official’ Russian discourses it will allow us to better understand Russia’s Syria strategy and the ideas and narratives which underpin Russian Foreign Policy strategies more broadly. This research, by uncovering and deconstructing Russian discourses, will analyse and deconstruct the narratives behind them and thus will expose ‘clues’ about wider Russian Foreign Policy strategies and moves. “Policies must fit within the prevailing narrative framework, while the great task of politics is to shape the narrative of tomorrow” (Hausmann, 2015). In order to analyse and deconstruct Russian narratives the three following sub questions are addressed:

- 1) What concepts does the Russian government deploy to explain the rationale in its policy towards Syria?
- 2) How does the Russian government portray its Self and Others in the Syrian conflict?
- 3) How does the Russian government arrange these concepts into a discourse explaining its policy towards Syria?

Before going on to address these questions directly we first explore existing literature which relates to Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict. This will help to frame the research and provide the reader with the necessary background relating to Russian Foreign Policy widely and more specifically the nature of Russian involvement in Syria.

Following a review of the literature, the theoretical and methodological frameworks used in this project are explained. The literature review identified a gap in existing research, namely that existing

approaches have largely focused on explaining Russian involvement in Syria from 'traditional' IR perspectives- thus this research aims to bridge this gap in the research and the theoretical and methodological frameworks are key to achieving this. The theory and methods chapter outlines the theoretical underpinning of the research- Copenhagen School Discourse theory- and explains the assumptions and benefits of such an approach. The process of discourse analysis and deconstruction is also explained in detail. This section also addresses the source selection, sample selection and the limitations of the research.

After setting out the theoretical underpinnings and methodological framework of the research, the dissertation provides a short section of analytical background. This section focuses on Russia's discursive strategies from the outset of the Syrian conflict. This section helps situate the main focus of the research within its wider discursive context and thus more effectively allows "change within context" to be highlighted.

We then move on to the discussion, which is broken down into three sections each of which address one of the research questions. This research finds that there are two significant *nodal points* within Russian discourses which give meaning to other key concepts which allude Russia's conflict goals and how they are justified. The nodal points "stability" and "political process" are widely cited throughout the discourses analysed, and by deconstructing them the research has found that many historic, cultural and ideological concepts are built around these oft stated conflict goals. By examining the way that the discourses draw political frontiers between the Self and Other, the research finds that Russia has often sought to broaden the Self to include all those opposing ISIS and other terrorist groups, while simultaneously defending their own subject position which differentiates the way Russia views the conflict from other external actors involved. Lastly the research analyses and explains how the key concepts and the portrayal of the Self and Other are all built into one complex narrative that explains to the Russian public and the world Russia's official Syrian strategy. The dissertation concludes by examining the structure of the Russian narrative



surrounding its Syria policy. Discussing the implications of the findings for our understanding, not only of Russia's policy towards Syria, but also how it helps us to decode their foreign policy more broadly.

### Historical Background

The historical background to the conflict, and Russia's intervention, involve a number of key events and players, which we will briefly outline here for the purpose of providing context.

In March 2011, protests erupted against the government of President Al-Assad with demonstrators demanding democratic reform. Similar protests had toppled the authoritarian governments in Egypt and Tunisia in what became known as the "Arab Spring". The Syrian government however responded by "killing hundreds of demonstrators and imprisoning many more" (Al-Jazeera, 2017). The brutal repression by the government fuelled wider protests against the regime, and resulted in defection from the military and the establishment of the "Free Syrian Army" which sought to overthrow the government of President Al-Assad. What began as protests for democratic freedoms gradually turned into a full scale civil war.

In August of 2013, there was a chemical weapons attack that killed over three hundred civilians. The US and the West immediately blamed the Syrian government for the atrocity and both the US and Britain were on the verge of militarily intervening against the Syrian government. Russia however managed to convince US to not get involved militarily and instead allow UN inspectors to investigate and destroy all chemical weapon stocks in Syria (BBC, 2017). Russia defended the Syrian government and insisted that it was a "fact" that the opposition also had chemical weapons and had used them against civilians. Preventing Western military intervention against the Syrian government was a major diplomatic triumph for Russia (Hamid, 2013).

In 2014, a US-led coalition did begin operations in Syria their target was ISIS however not the Syrian government. ISIS had taken over large parts of Iraq and were making significant inroads into Syria. So

much so that in June 2014 they declared an Islamic caliphate. Russia since the outset of the conflict had played a decisive role in supporting the government of President Al-Assad, providing both diplomatic support and military hardware to the Syrian government (Allison, 2013: 1). On the 30th of September 2015, Russian involvement in the conflict escalated as President Putin won unanimous approval of the Russian Federation Council to “authorise the use of the Russian Armed Forces’ contingent outside the country”. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov informed the UN Security Council that this authorisation of force would “consist exclusively in the operation of the Russian Air Force to strike at ISIS positions in Syria” (Lavrov, 2015). A campaign of aerial bombardment began immediately following approval, while Lavrov told journalists “don’t listen to the Pentagon about the Russian airstrikes”, revealing an element of the discursive antagonism that has accompanied Russia’s military campaign.

## Literature Review

This section will explore contemporary literature and the key debates relating to Russian foreign policy. Firstly, overarching debates about what motivates Russian Foreign Policy shall be highlighted, taking account of the different theoretical perspectives, which have consequence for this research project. Secondly, this section shall explore literature which offers an explanation for Russia’s involvement in the Syrian conflict. Lastly, this section shall outline what existing literature says about Russian justifications for their involvement in the Syrian conflict.

Debates on Russian Foreign Policy largely fall within two different but oft overlapping paradigms; constructivist and realist theoretical perspectives and the debate over internal and external stimuli (Donaldson et al, 2014: 3). Constructivism, broadly, focuses on the role of ideas and ‘historical, cultural, and ideological factors’ asserting that they are the key determinants in shaping a nations foreign policy (Fierke, 2010). Realism meanwhile, broadly, focuses on the national interests of a state, and posits that foreign policy reflects a desire of a state to maximise its power (Pursiainen,

2000: 55). The internal versus external debate meanwhile, focuses on both ideational and material factors; some theorists posit domestic, internal factors are a significant factor in explaining Russian foreign policy decisions while others conclude that external factors are more significant (Donaldson et al, 2014: 3). These perspectives and debates shall be expounded upon in this section.

A convincing constructivist framework is put forward by Tsygankov and Tsygankov (2010) who argue that Russian foreign policy has shown a “remarkable degree of historical continuity” over centuries and its traditions have endured despite very different forms of government. They claim that the ideological grounding of Russian foreign policy lies within the three different, juxtaposing visions of what they term “the Russian Idea”, a view of what Russia’s role in the world is. Tsygankov and Tsygankov categorise the three differing articulations of the “Russian Idea” as Westernism, Statism and Civilisationism. Westernism posits that the Russian Idea is “essentially a Western idea”, emphasising Russia shares values and traditions with Europe. Westernists are fearful of the non-Western ‘other’ and seek integration with the “civilised nations” of the West. Statism equates the Russian Idea with a “strong independent state”, which preserves political and social order. Further, Statists fear the ‘external other’ and emphasise the need for a strong military and economy to avert any meddling in Russian domestic affairs. Lastly, Civilisationism frames the “Self–Other relationship in terms of cultural oppositions”. For Civilisationists, Russia is its own distinct civilisation and they stress the differences between Russia and the West. These assumptions about reality, the author suggests, frame the way in which international relations theory is produced in Russia and consequently also frame the way in which Russia acts both internally and on the world stage. Tsygankov and Tsygankov’s work does provide a very useful analytical and conceptual framework, however it fails to explain how, and why, different visions of the Russian Idea achieve hegemonic status among Russian elites and policymakers, and why different versions remain what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) would call “antagonistic” and not obsolete.

Another useful constructivist perspective is advanced by Hopf (2000) who like Tsygankov and Tsygankov focuses on identities and norms. Hopf asserts that “world politics has no predominant system; it has subcultures, each of which can be understood only by examining how states constitute themselves in their societies. The answer to the question of who are enemies and who are friends begins at home” (2000: 294). Hopf argues that internal ideational factors are key in shaping Russian Foreign Policy as it is within Russian society itself that ideas about Russia’s role in the world and about the ‘other’ are generated. Hopf’s position therefore does not challenge Tsygankov and Tsygankov’s “Russian Idea” but does stress that it would be internally generated idea, not generated by ideas external to Russia. For Hopf, Russian “interests” are constructed within a social context and understanding this context is essential to understanding how Russia interacts with other states (2000: 294). This however does raise criticism from both a realist perspective and from those who argue external factors and ideas can have significant influence on the foreign policy decisions of the Russian state (Donaldson et al, 2014).

Checkel (1997: 124) argues that in periods of uncertainty and crisis “decision makers engage in an information search and are thus more receptive to new ideas”. The “Atlanticist” (a similar term to what Tsygankov and Tsygankov would call Westernist) foreign policy of the early Yeltsin years did not last and a more “statist” position became hegemonic as Russia sought to protect its interests and power against what was perceived to be an increasingly assertive West. Donaldson et al contend that external factors (such as NATO expansion) saw the Russian Federation “shift to the right” domestically and pursue a more antagonistic line with the West (2014: 237). On the other hand, those who believe that internal factors are more significant point to the political pressures on the government of Yeltsin from opponents both in the Duma and in wider Russian society (Donaldson et al, 2014: 237). The debate over internal versus external factors is prominent in contemporary literature, including in articles that specifically seek to explain Russian involvement in Syria, which is the primary focus of the succeeding paragraphs in this section.

The vast majority of the literature focusing on Russian involvement in Syria has come from a realist perspective, though there has been much disagreement over which factors in particular have been key in explaining Russia's actions.

Averre and Davies (2015) assert that Russia's policy towards Syria is aimed at strengthening Russia's regional and international influence but is also rooted in its "values" which challenge Western liberalism. This challenge, the article postulates, has been over the norms of humanitarian intervention. The article draws from "policy documents, speeches and articles by leading Russian officials, together with a series of interviews with academic experts and former practitioners", maintaining, that debates about Foreign Policy in Russia are largely limited to those in the political elites and that academic contributions largely reflect "official views" (Averre and Davies, 2015: 814). The article highlights that Russia takes a 'statist' view of the 'responsibility to protect', which accuses the West of exploiting humanitarian concerns to pursue regime-change. Russia's policies, most notably blocking Western attempts at intervention and supporting the government of President Al-Assad, are explained by Russian refusal to accept Western dominance of the international system, rejecting the notion of "forced democratisation", and by doing so allows Russia to solidify its role as a major power. The argument advanced by Averre and Davies (2015) fits within much of the wider discussions of Russian Foreign Policy, as it acknowledges the importance of realist national interests while also factoring in the competing ideas between Russia and the West. The article is useful however from a constructivist perspective it does have some gaps. Most notable is its contestation that Russia is simply critical of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Glenville (2015) found that R2P is an internationally established norm, so much so that even when Russia prevents the international community taking action against Assad they justify their actions by evoking the need to protect civilians, therefore the Averre and Davies article perhaps underestimates the significance of globally established norms on Russian actions.

Following a similar argument to Averre and Davies, Charap's 2013 article argues Russia's policy has little to do with Syria itself but is part of a wider strategy being pursued by the Kremlin. The article asserts Russian security interests rely upon keeping "secular autocrats" in power, not just in Syria but in the Russia's "immediate neighbourhood" in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, where like in Syria, Russia fears Islamist governments could displace pro-Kremlin autocrats. Charap however notes such factors do not explain Russia's behaviour on the international stage regarding the conflict. He goes on to postulate that Russia is highly suspicious of the nature of Western led interventions, and is "paranoid" that such an intervention may be aimed at Russia itself. Charap argues that the insistence of the US that Assad must be removed from power undermined their case for intervention on humanitarian grounds in the eyes of Russia who believe the US is engaged in a "sinister game of geopolitics". Russia is therefore vigorously opposed to external forces pursuing regime change as it contradicts their "deeply held principles, not concrete regional interests" (Charap, 2013: 37). Charap's article is very useful as it again highlights, from a realist perspective, that Russia's interests go beyond material factors but also include ideational factors. The main criticism of Charap's article is that it fails to fully explain why Russia is paranoid about Western intervention in its own affairs. It does however give further legitimacy to the analytical framework of the "Russian Idea", as this fear of the other is deeply rooted in Russian perceptions of the world (Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 2010).

Allison (2013), like Charap, and Averre and Davies, argues that preventing regime change is a key priority for Russia in Syria. Russia "rejects the notion that states can be held subject to standards of political legitimacy devised in western capitals". Allison however offers a more complex explanation beyond simply the rejection of Western interventionism. Allison argues that the Russian's are concerned about the message that interventionism sends to opposition groups throughout the Middle East and beyond "the belief that 'the foreigners will help us' to overthrow the regime may be 'contagious'. It could 'appear among the protesters in other countries of the region' hoping for assistance from the international community. This would be 'an invitation to a whole array of civil

wars” (Allison, 2013: 797). Further to this concern about wider regional stability, Allison also argues that “the Russian leadership under Putin values states that project a shared outlook with Moscow on the wider international stage. Damascus and Moscow can bond around a pluralist emphasis on territorial sovereignty and the repudiation of externally promoted regime change. They joined in opposing US efforts to obtain UN Security Council approval for intervention in Iraq in 2002–2003, as well as the actual US-led intervention in Iraq. In spring 2003 Putin backed Syria in warning that ‘even if there are people who do not like the regime in this country, it should not be changed under pressure from outside’—a precursor to the current controversy”. Allison’s article and the rest of the existing literature did focus on many of the same themes, primarily opposition to Western interventionism and protecting Russian interests in the region.

While these explanations of Russian involvement in Syria do conform to the mainstream IR theoretical frameworks, principally realism, there is less focus on Russian involvement from a constructivist perspective and the focus is much more on external factors rather than internal factors. This is despite much of the literature recognising that Russia’s “deeply held principles” (Charap, 2013) as a significant determining factor in shaping Russian involvement in Syria, none of the articles offer an explanation of why such principles are so deeply held, how they were formed or how they are communicated. The following paragraph looks more at how Russia explains its actions in Syrian and how it invokes the aforementioned, deeply held principles to justify its actions.

There has been very little written about how Russia justifies its actions in the Syrian conflict. Notte (2016) however offers a very valuable insight into Russian discourses regarding the conflict. She draws a historical comparison between the Russian government’s discourses on Syria and Chechnya. The article asserts that Russia has justified its actions in both conflicts by deploying a “reductionist counter-terrorist narrative”. In Syria, she claims the conflict has been portrayed in Russian discourses as a “civilisationist” struggle between “fascist” ISIS and the “legitimate” government of President al-Assad. The author states that Russia rejected the notion of ‘moderate’ opposition forces

allowing Moscow to “impose one overarching frame of reference (counter-terrorism) onto the entire conflict”. Notte highlights that the US “does not buy into” Russian discourse which conflates all opposition groups together, rather the US maintains its support for the “moderate” opposition to President Al-Assad. The article concludes that Russia’s discourse is unlikely to change the minds of the international community but acknowledges that Russia may change “facts on the ground” regardless. Notte’s article highlights a difference between what the rest of the literature has identified as key factors and principles motivating Russian involvement and how Russian discourses explain Russian policy. Notte’s article shows that terrorism is deployed widely in Russian discourses to explain their intervention, however this was only mentioned briefly in the rest of the literature. Notte’s article was also more recently published than many of the other articles which perhaps reflects more accurately the contemporary discourses and the reasoning of the Russian state and decision makers, especially given the nature of Russian involvement changed significantly in September 2015 when they became directly involved militarily.

In this section, we have explored the current debates relating to Russian Foreign Policy exploring it both at broad, theoretical level and in relation to Syria in particular. There are numerous accounts, mainly from realist perspectives, which explain Russian involvement in Syria however there have been very few articles analysing Russian discourses regarding the conflict. This research project, therefore, hopes to address to this gap in the research and offer an insightful account of how Russia explains and justifies its policy towards Syria through its discourses.



## Theory and Methodology

This research offers a constructivist perspective on Russian involvement in Syria, focusing on the role of ideas. The literature review revealed that many of the debates on Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict have focused on realist explanations of Russia's Syrian strategy, with particular emphasis given to the role of external motivating factors such as Russia maintaining power in the region. This research meanwhile is not concerned with the 'hidden reasons' behind Russian motivations, rather we seek to uncover and deconstruct the discourses and ideas the Russian state deploys to justify its actions.

More specifically, this research shall investigate how, using particular discursive strategies, the Russian government seeks to justify its involvement in the Syrian conflict. Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict takes place on many levels. As well as being involved militarily and being a close ally of the Syrian government, they are also involved in numerous ideational antagonisms within international institutions and also with many states on a bi-lateral basis; some of which are allies and some of which are adversaries. Russian narratives towards the Syrian conflict argued within these contexts are representative of a wider Russian Foreign Policy strategy and their attempts to promote Russian ideals abroad and shape global public opinion in Russia's favour (Hopf, 2005). Therefore, understanding Russian justifications for the positions and policies it has pursued is crucial to a fuller understanding of not only their actions in Syria, but can provide clues about the nature of, and the conditions which delimit, their involvement in the wider realm of international relations (Waeber, 2005). To achieve a comprehensive understanding of Russian narratives, Constructivist IR theory and Copenhagen School Discourse Theory are drawn from as the primary theoretical underpinnings of this research.

### Constructivist IR and Copenhagen School Discourse Theory

This section outlines the key theoretical premises of both Constructivist IR theory and Copenhagen School Discourse theory. Although there are differences between both approaches (Copenhagen School is based more on post-structuralism) it is the commonalities of both approaches which provide the theoretical framework of this research. There are three main assumptions this research is based on.

Firstly, the recognition that there is no singular, objective discourse about the Syrian conflict. Rather, there is a contestation over the facts of the conflict and their meanings among the different actors involved. As Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov commented “Let me repeat that we, our partners in the region, the United States and some other colleagues do not see the situation 100 percent identically” (Lavrov, 2015). Consequently, instead of working from assumptions based on the ‘way things really are’, this research seeks to offer an explanation of change within a given context (Fierke, 2010). Copenhagen School discourse approach asserts that change is likely to occur during a period of what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) call ‘dislocation’. Dislocation is a period of crisis, in which the parameters pertaining to the understanding of an issue, or in this case a conflict in a country and its international dimensions, were destabilised thus allowing for hitherto hegemonic discourses to be fundamentally challenged (Wæver, 2005: 37). Russia’s escalated involvement in the Syrian conflict has created a period of dislocation and a renewed, recharged battle of ideas has emerged to try and establish a new order out of the conflict, this research aims to analyse Russia’s contribution in this battle.

The second theoretical assumption relates to the processes of interaction within International Relations. States “make choices in the process of interacting with others and, as a result, bring historically, culturally and politically distinct ‘realities’ into being” (Fierke, 2010). States do not participate in international relations in an ‘objective’ way but rather interact in a meaningful, socially constructed international system (Fierke, 2010: 180). Copenhagen School Discourse theory recognises that the Foreign Policies of states must “hold a definitive relationship to discursive

structures, because it is always necessary for policy makers to be able to argue where ‘this takes us’” (2005:35). Thus, in analysing the discourses of the Russian government in relation to Syria, this research highlights the “historically, culturally and politically distinct” concepts being deployed and traces how they are used to build a meaningful and convincing discourse about how Russia justifies its role in the conflict and indeed in the wider sphere of international relations.

Thirdly, this research acknowledges the social dimensions of International Relations and the importance of norms, rules and language. Constructivists recognise that ideas play a major role in shaping the possibilities and outcomes in the field of International Relations. Again, the Copenhagen School approach fits well with this theoretical outlook. In deconstructing the data, the struggle to conquer shared nodal points will be given much attention, as different meanings can be imposed onto these shared concepts, and varying interpretations can be made of them (Weaver, 2005: 37). In Syria for example, there is an antagonistic struggle over concepts such as ‘terrorists’ and ‘moderates’, with the Russian government, and others, seeking to establish their articulation as the legitimate and ultimately hegemonic version. These concepts even when hegemonic are always contested and always interpreted differently depending on differing “historically specific systems of rules” (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 3).

These theoretical assumptions guide and shape the methodological approach.

### Methodology

While Constructivist IR and Copenhagen School Discourse Theory provide the theoretical foundations of the research, discourse analysis is the method employed to answer the research questions.

### Discourse Analysis and Deconstruction

Discourse and discourses are “systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects” (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 5). To understand and uncover these “meaningful

practices”, discourse analysis treats a wide range of linguistic and non-linguistic data- this research will analyse press conference briefings- as ‘texts’ or ‘writing’ (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 6). This is because, as outlined in the theory section, discourses frame the choices open to actors, or as Waever (2005: 35) puts it “structures within discourse condition possible policies”. Discourse analysis therefore analyses ‘texts’ as “sets of signifying practices that constitute a ‘discourse’ and its ‘reality’ thus providing the conditions which enable subjects to experience the world of objects, words and practices” (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 6).

This is achieved by a process known as deconstruction. Deconstruction involves breaking down the ‘texts’ and discovering the different elements within and highlighting how these elements are articulated within a system to provide meaning. This will be done in accordance with the theoretical framework outlined above. Thus, the deconstruction process consists of “tracing the development of a few key concepts, their historical origins, their transformations and, not least their constitutive relationship to other concepts” (Waever, 2005: 36). Below, this process is alluded to in more detail.

Copenhagen School Discourse theory contends that all social identities and concepts are fluid and exist within an antagonistic system in which their definitions are the object of constant struggle. Nevertheless, it does accept that “partial fixations” of meanings are both possible and necessary (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 11). However, this does leave us at a somewhat of a paradox- if all identities and concepts are constantly in flux and being challenged by different articulations, then how is it possible for a meaning to become socially fixed and hegemonic (even if temporarily)? Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) concept of a “nodal point” offers a response to this paradox (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 11). Nodal points are “privileged signifiers” upon which meanings are built (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 11). An example used by Zizek, is that concepts such as ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’ and ‘state’ take on a “new meaning by being articulated around the signifier ‘communism’, which occupies the structural position of the nodal point” (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 11). Thus, this research shall identify the nodal points which bind together meanings, and

allow key concepts in the Russian discourses to be identified and explained- both in relation to their historical origins as well as in relation to other concepts in the discourses.

The second research question is concerned with how Russian discourses portray both Self and Others. This involves deconstructing the 'texts' and exposing the political frontiers and boundaries which seek to distinguish the 'Self' (or what Waever refers to as 'we') from the 'Other'. Norval (2000: 220) argues that frontiers are 'inherent' to the process of distinguishing Self from Others, and how "there is only politics where there are frontiers". She posits that "political frontiers serve not only to individuate identity, but also to organise political space through the simultaneous operation of the logics of equivalence and difference" (Norval, 2000: 220). The logics of equivalence and difference, and their chains, are thus key to discovering the way in which Russian discourses portray allies and enemies. Norval (2000: 221) notes that when the logic of equivalence is 'prevalent' in the discourse, "relations between competing groups tend to take a 'friend-enemy' form". Further to this insight, Mouffe (2000) argues that political discourse "attempts to create specific forms of unity among different interests by relating them to a common project and by establishing a frontier to define the forces to be opposed, the "enemy"". The logic of difference on the other hand, when it predominates in discourse, there is a "multiplicity of articulations between subject positions" which makes it more difficult to establish or construct an enemy (Norval, 2000: 221).

To make these concepts less abstract, Gareth Stedman Jones's analysis of Chartist discourse provides a useful example (Norval, 2000: 221). Chartist discourse sought to draw "an equivalence among different elements of the nation or the people against the monopolisers of political representation and power, so that there was a division between those who were represented and those who were not". (Norval, 2000: 221). While this had initial success, the logic of equivalence was gradually eroded by parliamentary reforms which allowed wider sections of society to engage in the polity. Norval goes on "Rather, the nation was now dissolved in a number of different subject positions. This dissolution of the chains of equivalences that constituted the people into different

subject-positions served to stabilise the social formation and prevent antagonistic relations from developing” (2000, 221). While one or the other of the logics may ‘predominate’, both are essential to the construction of political identities and frontiers. Griggs and Howarth use the example of environmental groups protesting the development of a second runway at Manchester Airport. The groups did manage to form a unified frontier against proponents of the runway, however differential identities continued to exist (Norval, 2000: 222). Likewise, in the Syrian conflict Russia and its ‘partners’ have a somewhat unified frontier against ISIS, however the conflict goals and strategies of these partners are often very different. Therefore, this research will ensure neither the chains of equivalence or difference are ‘neglected’ in the analysis (Norval, 2000: 222). Furthermore, this research will show how both the logics of equivalence and difference are deployed and trace their chains throughout the Russian discourses relating to the Syrian conflict. By doing this we shall uncover political frontiers and consequently unpack how both the Self and Other are portrayed.

Once the key concepts, political frontiers and chains of equivalence and difference have been identified and explained, showing how they form a wider discourse, a constellation, about the conflict is the focus of the third research question (Waeber, 2005: 36). Articulation is the term given to a “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In other words, key concepts and signifiers are the building blocks, however unless they are articulated as part of a wider structure they do not carry meaning on their own. Articulation is thus the process of arranging these building blocks in a certain way to create a meaningful, constructed discursive narrative- a comprehensive outlook on the world. We shall thus reveal how Russian narratives are articulated to explain and justify Russia’s role in the Syrian conflict and in the wider sphere of international relations.

### Sources

Two primary sources will be used in this research. Official documents from the Russian Foreign Ministry’s website which relate to Russia’s role in the Syrian conflict and likewise official documents

from the Kremlin's website which illustrate the Russian President's stance on the conflict. These two sources have been selected because this research is concerned with the official discourse of the Russian government. Understanding both the articulations of the Kremlin and the Foreign Ministry are vital to understand how Russia justifies its involvement in the Syrian conflict, as these are the political institutions, and often the individuals, who formulate and execute Russian Foreign Policy. Cheskin (2012: 326) recognises that studying official state discourse is valuable as elites attempt to "produce and re-produce 'truths' through their public discourse". Furthermore, Averre and Davis (2015: 814) assert that "debates in Russia have mainly been confined to a narrow circle of government actors, with contributions by academics largely reflecting official views". Thus, this research will analyse these official views.

Both the Kremlin's website and the Foreign Ministry's website are fully translated into English and are publicly accessible. The Foreign Ministry's website has an entire section dedicated to the "Situation around Syria", where all press releases and official documents relating to Russian involvement in Syria can be found. The fact that such a dedicated segment of the website exists shows that the Russian government are engaged in a battle of ideas at an international level, with translations also in French, German and Spanish.

#### Sample and Timeframe

The sources do provide a plethora of data, however in order to ensure the research includes the richest and most thorough accounts the sample is drawn exclusively from press conferences held by both Foreign Minister Lavrov and President Putin in which they provide justifications for Russia's involvement in Syria. Waever (2005: 40) asserts that focusing on "difficult situations" such as press conferences, where actors must "mobilise rhetorical power and generate most meaning for their purpose" is particularly fruitful for analysis.

The timeframe this research focuses on is from September 2015 until September 2016. The reason for this timeframe is that Russian involvement in the conflict was elevated from 30th of September 2015 when President Putin ordered airstrikes to be carried out. This escalation of Russian involvement represents what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) call a period of “dislocation”, in which counter discourses challenge the hegemonic discourses. Thus, this research, by drawing a sample from within this timeframe, hopes to effectively capture the battle of ideas surrounding the conflict.

### Limitations

We have acknowledged in the above chapter that this research aims to remain at the level of discourse, we do not seek to establish any real truths or hidden motivations. Nevertheless, despite the scope of the research being clearly delimited there remains limitations which are acknowledged here.

Firstly, the discourses of the Russian state are meant for domestic audiences as well as international audiences. Whilst the Kremlin and Ministry for Foreign Affairs both offer comprehensive translations from the originally articulated Russian into English these translations have been accused of being “cleaned up” versions compared to the original speeches and thus do not reflect accurately what was said (Berdy, Moscow Times: 2017). While this may mean the translations do not reflect precisely what was actually articulated by the individual actors at press conferences and so on, it does nevertheless reflect the officially sanctioned message the Russian state wants the world to hear. Hence, while it is a limitation to some extent it is not a considerable one, especially since the research aims to deal with ‘official views’ which the two sources used most certainly represent.

A second limitation of the research is that the timeline for research, in keeping with the methodological framework used by Waeber (2005), has been selected somewhat “creatively”. This has allowed the research to focus on a period of heightened tensions which arose after Russia became directly involved militarily. The research, as outlined above, focuses on the period from



September 2015 to September 2016, allowing us to analyse a year of Russian discourses since direct military involvement and trace their development during this period of 'dislocation'. However, the research will not account for more recent developments in what is a fluid and ongoing war in which Russia remains a key actor. Thus, while we will analyse and discover much about Russian discursive strategies, they may have developed and changed further in more recent weeks and months as the conflict, and the discursive ideational struggle, continues to wage on.

## The Path to Intervention

Scholars generally agree that Russia has strategic and geopolitical interests in the Middle East, with Syria being of particular importance with long term military, diplomatic and strategic ties between the two states (Natz, 2012; Borshchevskaya, 2013; Hove and Mutanda, 2015). In this section, we will briefly outline what experts have identified as Russian interests in Syria. We shall then highlight the policies pursued, and examine how they were articulated in defence of these interests and in justification of their strategy since the beginning of the conflict in Syria in 2011. This will help contextualise Russia's heightened intervention in the conflict that began in September 2015.

Russian interests in Syria are multifarious according to scholars. For Natz (2012), Russia's interests in Syria can be summated as the following: a desire to maintain their naval facility on Syrian territory, a geopolitical interest in keeping President Al-Assad in power and by doing so preventing a US geopolitical victory, preventing UN resolutions being warped and Syria "becoming another Libya", and finally preventing the spread of Islamic fundamentalism into Russia itself. Other experts also highlight Russian economic and business interests but most agree that Russian has both a mix of material and geopolitical interests in Syria (Natz, 2012; Borshchevskaya, 2013; Hove and Mutanda, 2015).

The Russian interests highlighted by these scholars provide us with insights into Russia's vision of itself, its role within the conflict and how it sees the importance of Syria and the region to Russian

interest more broadly. Firstly, the desire to maintain a large naval presence in Syria highlights how Russia views itself as an important regional and global power that can project power far from its borders. Borshchevskaya (2013) notes that President Putin “has made expansion of Russian sea power a pillar of his third presidential term” with the Syrian naval base key to Russia's aim of maintaining a naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Secondly, by aiming to prevent the US scoring a geopolitical victory this shows that the US remains a significant Other for Russia and they remain sceptical of US intentions. Hove and Mutanda claim that “Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin, was determined to frustrate the West, especially the USA, and to prevent her from forcing change”. Thirdly, and linked to the previous point, preventing a repeat of the Libyan situation is important for Russia as they view strengthening international organisations and laws as a means to achieve a multipolar world in which Russia is an important player. Hove and Mutanda (2015) posit that Russia’s Syrian strategy “intended to thwart the United States’ ‘arrogance’, whereby she toppled regimes decisive for Russia’s aspirations”. Lastly, Russia’s desire to prevent the spread of Islamic terrorism into Russia’s own territories reflects a state security concern for the Russian government. Mudallali (2012) posits that Russia believes itself to be a target of an Islamist plot to destabilise the Russian state. He claims that “the Russian position is actually rooted in a deep-seated fear, and sometimes paranoia, of the spread of Islamic radicalism”.

Russia’s strategy in Syria since the commencement of the crisis in 2011 has reflected these interests. They pursued a strategy of defending the Syrian government, providing diplomatic support and military hardware to the regime (Averre and Davies, 2015). Here we shall outline a two of Russia’s most significant policies towards the Syrian conflict prior to becoming involved militarily in 2015. We will show how they were articulated and justified, both internally within Russia and to international audiences. The two specific policies we will analyse here are the vetoing of UN resolutions condemning the Syrian government and the diplomatic effort to eliminate Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile. Firstly, Russia since 2011 has vetoed UN resolutions which criticised and called for

international sanctions against the Syrian government. The first of such vetoes took place at the UN on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October 2011. Addressing the UN after the vote, Vitaly Churkin, Russia's UN Representative said that Russia's veto was due to "the logic of respect for the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria and non-interference, including military, in its affairs". He went on in the same statement to draw parallels with Libya and warned that external military interference would hinder a peaceful solution being found. In his statement, he also said that the Syrian government was not solely to blame for the crisis, and that the opposition must also be scrutinised while also lambasting the "unilateral sanctions" of the West which represented "attempts at forcing regime change" (Churkin, 2011).

Secondly, Russia in 2013 prevented Western-led military involvement against the Syrian government of President Al-Assad. Following a chemical weapons attack that killed over a thousand people, the US was on the brink of intervening against the government of President Al-Assad who they blamed for the attack. Russia managed to convince the US not to militarily intervene but instead to reach a deal with the Syrian authorities to remove and destroy their chemical weapon stockpiles (BBC, 2017). Speaking at a joint press conference with his US counterpart John Kerry, Foreign Minister Lavrov justified this diplomatic effort by claiming that "Successful implementation of these agreements will not only yield success in terms of the execution of the common task to eliminate all reserves of chemical weapons, but will also allow for the prevention of a military scenario, which, without any exaggeration, would be catastrophic for the region and for international relations in general." Lavrov also linked this move to the strengthening of the UN and made comments suggesting that the Syrian opposition had a responsibility to ensure the successful implementation of the plan, not just the Syrian government (Lavrov, 2013).

The explanations and justifications of both Churkin and Lavrov provide us with a useful insight into Russia's discursive strategy prior to military intervention, and allow us to better understand their strategy within its wider context (Fierke, 2010). Russia's strategy prior to 2015 was justified by

invoking sovereignty, international law, avoidance of previous mistakes and opposition to Western attempts at regime change. In the chapters to follow, we will examine how Russia's discursive strategy evolved during its military intervention.

## What concepts does the Russian government deploy to explain the rationale in its policy towards Syria?

We now turn to the focus of this research, the period of 'dislocation' following heightened Russian involvement in Syria. This section will deconstruct and analyse the key concepts within Russian discourses during this period of dislocation and will offer an explanation of their meanings, origins and relation to other concepts.

There are several concepts within Russian official discourses which allude to Russia's conflict goals and "argue where this takes us" (Waeber, 2005). This research shall focus on the most prominent and significant concepts as they best reflect the discursive strategy of the Russian state towards the Syrian conflict, and thus give us clues about the "big patterns" of Russian foreign policy ideology more widely.

Russian discourses call for a "stability" and a "political solution" to the Syrian conflict. Both of these concepts act as nodal points within the discourse, giving meaning to the signifiers that are deployed to "fill" these ideas with meaning. Firstly, we deconstruct the term "stability" and unpack the concepts, and ideas, which are framed around it. "Stability" is repeatedly referred to in Russian discourses regarding Syria. Stability as a concept is articulated around, and thus derives its meaning from and gives meaning to, signifiers such as 'sovereignty' and 'statehood' which Russia claims to be defending by its involvement in Syria.

“Stability” is one of Russia’s main conflict goals according to the discourses, so before explaining the concepts articulated around it, firstly we deconstruct the concept of “stability” itself. Russia links “stability” to the maintenance of the rule of law and the authority of the Syrian government to control all of the territory within its borders. When asked about the need for stability in Syria, President Putin claimed that “When you have ISIS and other such groups of international terrorists right next to the capital, who is going to want to look for a settlement with the Syrian authorities, sitting practically under siege in their own capital?” (Putin, 2015). While “stability” may be one of Russia’s stated goals for their actions in Syria, the idea of stability is rooted much deeper within Russian political culture. “Stability” is important to Russian elites in two ways; both internally they seek political and societal stability, and externally Russia wants a stable international system (Hopf, 2005). Firstly, the internal importance of stability is rooted within a “statist” conception of the Russian Idea (Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 2011). A strong, stable and, to quote President Putin, a “unified Russian nation” commands respect externally and projects an image of a great power internally. Hopf (2005: 234) posits that this reflects a “centrist” Russian Foreign Policy discursive strategy, a similar conception to Tsygankov and Tsygankov’s “statist” typology, as it emphasises that if Russia is to return to a Great Power status this will be achieved by a period of stable military and economic development “at home” and the “empowerment of multilateral international institutions abroad”. Hence, when Russian discourses towards Syria argue for “stability” they are alluding to their wider narrative about Russia’s role in the world and what is required to make Russia a Great Power once more. For Russia, therefore, “stability” is a concept rooted in their desire to return to Great Power status, which they believe can be achieved by having an internally strong and stable state, and externally by having “a multilateral management of global affairs” (Hopf, 2005: 233).

For Russia, the concept of “statehood” is very significant. Again, Tsygankov and Tsygankov’s “statist” conception of the Russian Idea is intrinsically linked to the concept of statehood. In Russian discourses towards Syria, this “statist” ideal is expressed frequently. When asked by a journalist

about the nature of Russian involvement in Syria, President Putin responded firstly by discussing the situation of Russia during the 1990's. He remarked that Russia was weak during the early 1990's and that external forces were seeking to further weaken and change Russia. Now, however, he is clear that Russia is "immeasurably" stronger and is able to "deal with problems" both internally and "near our borders but also far from them". Putin, in this same answer, revealed that by being increasingly "independent, self-reliant and self-sufficient" Russia has regained its power and authority within the international system. Consequently, by deploying the idea of "statehood" as part of their explanation for their Syrian policy, Russian discourses reveal more about their vision for Russia in the world rather than the specificities of their Syrian actions (Charap, 2013). Thus, Russian articulation of the concept "statehood" is best understood as part of a wider "statist" Foreign Policy Strategy that is not unique to their policy towards Syria but is intertwined with Russia's vision of itself and a route to establishing itself as a Great Power (Hopf, 2005). The concept of "statehood" helps fill the nodal point of "stability" with meaning as its articulation asserts that undermining, especially from out with, a nation's "statehood" results in instability. "We need to support and strengthen statehood where it exists, and here, I am referring to Syria" (Putin, 2016). Russia therefore by aiming to strengthen the "statehood" of the Syrian government are consequently helping to establish "stability", a situation that in Russia has, according to President Putin, ushered in a revival of national strength allowing them to "deal with problems" both internally and externally.

As well as calling for a strong, stable "statehood" for Syria, "sovereignty" is the second concept to be linked to the nodal point "stability". Russian discourses call for the "sovereignty" of Syria to be respected and strengthened. Lavrov states that Russia seeks to help "the Syrian state to be restored as a sovereign, independent and democratic polity". For Russia, the "sovereignty" of the Syrian government provides them with a legal legitimacy for their intervention, under international law military intervention is legal if it is "invited" by a sovereign, legitimate government. Lavrov's quote also suggests that at present, the Syrian government has been deprived of its "independence" as a

state, in part, due to external interference. He goes on to urge opponents of the Syrian government “not to be guided by their own ambitions, including neo-imperialist ones, but the interests of fulfilling the UNSC resolutions” (Lavrov, 2016). This concept similarly aligns with what Hopf (2005) calls a “centrist” narrative. Namely that Russia seeks to restore its Great Power status, in part, by strengthening international institutions and seeking to establish a multipolar world, with a “stable” relationship between the leading powers. “Sovereignty” therefore functions to both provide legitimacy for Russian military involvement in the conflict, while also reflects a broader “centrist” narrative that seeks a stable world order with the “sovereignty” of nations respected and safeguarded by international institutions such as the UN.

“Political process” likewise occupies the position of a nodal point within Russian discourses. The concept of a political process is built around ideas of “legitimacy”, “law” and “regime change”.

Russian discourses explain their policy towards Syria by repeatedly referring to the “legitimacy” of the current Syrian government. Russia, to quote President Putin, is involved in Syria to primarily “support the legitimate government”. The concept of legitimacy serves two purposes in Russian discourses. Firstly, it delimits who Russia deems fit to take part in any future political process. And secondly, it provides a broader ideational premise for supporting the government of President Al-Assad and their wider Syria strategy. Russian discourses claim that for a “political process” to be effective it must encompass “the entire spectrum of the opposition” and must involve “inter-Syrian” dialogue. However, contrary to this claim the discourses also delimit which groups make up the “legitimate” and “patriotic” opposition, those who should take place in such dialogues. Russian discourses attempt to frame “patriotic” opponents to the Syrian government as those who are willing to reach a “mutual understanding” with the “legitimate” government of President Al-Assad. The majority of the opposition have repeatedly insisted that President Al-Assad must leave office prior to any political process getting underway, however this has not changed Russia’s discursive strategy (BBC, 2017). As well as alluding to who they regard as the “legitimate” opposition, Russian

discourses delimit who they view as illegitimate. Lavrov for example insists that Western nations were trying to establish a delegation of the opposition to act as the officially-recognised opposition body at an international level, despite them only representing what he calls “foreign-based opponents of the regime”. Russia, meanwhile, contends that rather than having a select few represent the Syrian opposition, they would rather see a “wide range of opposition groups” included within a “political process”. Lavrov further criticised “part of the opposition” for “presenting ultimatums and conditions for the negotiation process” and their attempts to “create discord within the International Syria Support Group”. Russian discourses posit that much of the opposition to the Syrian government is collaborating with the US and Western interests, therefore the opposition who is not “patriotic” is thus vested in the pursuit of “changing political regimes” and the “other geopolitical ambitions” of the US, consequently rendering such opposition groups illegitimate and unworthy of engaging with in a “political process”.

Russian discourses, by placing great emphasis on the “legitimacy” of the Syrian government, are making a broader ideological point as well as a specific claim about the suitability of actors to be involved in a hypothetical political process to establish peace. The idea of legitimacy is rooted in Russia’s wider interpretation of the world. As noted by Averre and Davies (2015), legitimacy is to be decided by an internal “political process” not by “forced democratisation” imposed from outside. Allison (2013) also offers a further insight into the Russian concept of “legitimacy”. He claims that as well as seeking to prevent any externally opposed change, Russia is concerned with offering support to groups opposing the “legitimate” government as doing so may be interpreted as a message that “the foreigners will help us”, a message the Russian government does not want to spread, least of all into Russia itself. Hopf’s (2000) analysis is therefore validated in his claim that the internal, Russian-specific ideas are very significant in shaping the Russian understanding of, and consequently responses to, situations out with its own borders. The concept of “legitimacy” has roots in a



“statist”, or “centrist”, narrative with Russia seeking to maintain “stability” by advocating a “political process” ((Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 2011), (Hopf, 2005)).

The second concept which is linked to the nodal point of “political process” is the idea of that Russian involvement in Syria is “lawful”. Almost immediately after the commencement of the Russian aerial campaign, they faced criticism from the West for targeting ‘moderate’ opposition forces as well as their stated ISIS and terrorist targets (BBC, 2017). Russian discourses responded by deploying the concept “lawful” aiming to show that their operations are both legal and legitimate (in contrast to Western actions) and that they are upholding internationally established, democratic norms by aiding the Syrian government and seeking ultimately a “political solution” to the conflict. By seeking to present their actions as “lawful” Russia is making an attempt to seize the moral authority from the West who have in the words of President Putin “Are used to holding a monopoly on the international stage and do not want to have to make way for anyone else”. Thus, Russian involvement, conversely, is framed as part of a “civilisationist” struggle to uphold internationally established norms which are threatened not only by terrorism, but by “illegal” interventionism against a “lawful” and “legitimate” government (Notte, 2016).

Both President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov are keen to stress that “only the Syrian people will decide the fate of Syria”. Russian discourses postulate that it is not up to the external actors to dictate a political solution to the Syrian people, but rather they must decide this for themselves democratically. Indeed, countering the “regime change” ambitions of the West is a key part of Russia’s rationale in advocating a “political process” to bring an end to the conflict. Russian discourses evoke the experiences of Iraq and Libya as evidence that regime change does not work. “Some are still nurturing the illusion that “we change the regime in Syria, and everything will be fine”” (Lavrov, 2016). For Russia, it is a “deeply held principal” that nations must shape their own future free from external interference and is again rooted within a “statist” or “centrist” Russian narrative (Charap, 2013).

Overall, this research has uncovered the signifiers articulated around the nodal points “stability” and “political process”. These concepts provide us with a valuable insight into the ideational rationale of the Russian government for their Syrian policy. By unpacking and deconstructing the ideas behind these concepts, we have found that Russian explanations are reflective of “deeply held” values and positions, which reveal both how Russia views the Syrian conflict and how it views its own position and role within the realm of international relations more widely. The concepts deployed within Russian discourses broadly reflect a “statist” or “centrist” narrative, which places a great deal of emphasis on the need for a strong, independent state that is viewed internally and externally as a Great Power. While the discourses do largely reflect a “statist” narrative, they also have a “civilisationist” element to them as well, as Russian ideas are juxtaposed to the ideas of the West. In the next section, we shall explore this and other antagonisms in more depth.

## How does Russia portray both its Self and Others in the Syrian conflict?

*“There is much more to it than just two agendas”- Lavrov, 2015.*

As was set out in the methods chapter this section shall analyse Russian portrayals of the “Self” and “Other” by deconstructing the political frontiers and analysing the chains of equivalence and difference that exist with the discourses. We shall begin firstly by examining the chains of equivalence which aim to widen the scope of the Self and unite Russia’s partners around its key conflict objectives and establish a frontier.

Russian discourses draw a political frontier against the threat of ISIS and “international terrorism” by deploying logic of equivalence in their discourses. President Putin said that prior to Russia launching a campaign of airstrikes they sought to “work together” with Western and regional partners to overcome the “evil” of terrorism. Lavrov likewise invokes the word “evil” to describe the threat of

ISIS, and following the Paris attacks in November 2015, uses this tragedy to justify Russia's military campaign, to both domestic and international audiences. He said there must be an "efficient and broad based international coalition to fight Islamic State and other terrorist groups", attempting to forge unity among the various 'partners' involved in the conflict against the threat of ISIS and other terrorist groups. Events like the Paris attacks provided Russia with an opportunity to win support for their position on the conflict, and Lavrov was keen to stress the anti-terrorist nature of Russian operations, claiming that any "precondition (to fighting terrorism) is absolutely inappropriate" (Lavrov, 2015). By focusing on "international terrorism" and "ISIS" as the main enemy, or the "Other", Russia sought to advance its own conflict goals and ambitions by deploying what Notte (2016) called a "reductionist counter-terrorist narrative" which aimed at uniting the various actors around the Russian view that the conflict is largely a fight between the "legitimate" and "lawful" Syrian government versus "ISIS and other terrorists". By deploying such a strategy Russia hoped to justify and win over Western and regional support to their position. Thus, broadening the "Self" to include all those fighting against ISIS, encompassing the both the US and the Syrian government and other actors who had antagonistic relations. While Russia does seek to forge a united political frontier against "ISIS" and "international terrorism", they do nevertheless distinguish between "terrorist" and "patriotic" opponents to the Syrian government, hence Notte (2016) is oversimplifying when claiming Russian discourses are "reductionist".

The logic of equivalence is deployed widely in Russian discourses as they seek to ally the government of President Al-Assad with their conception of Self. They attempt to achieve this by establishing a political frontier between his government and the internal "normal" or "patriotic" opposition. The government of President Al-Assad is portrayed as a responsible and stable actor. Lavrov repeatedly defends the Syrian government insisting that "Al-Assad is not behind all the misfortune" and that the conflict is "not about Al-Assad" who is just a "Syrian politician" who can be voted out at the ballot box. Russian discourses portray President Al-Assad in a positive manner, positing that his

government comply with international laws and cooperate with the international community in the fight against ISIS and other terrorist groups. Russia is keen to align the Syrian government with their conception of Self as it provides them with justification for militarily and diplomatically supporting the regime. Indeed, Allison (2013) notes that Russia has many shared values with the Syrian government, in particular they have a mutual resentment of Western interference. The allying of President Al-Assad with the Russian conception of Self was also achieved by the Othering of the domestic, "patriotic" Syrian opposition. Russian discourses draw an equivalence with President Al-Assad by portraying his opponents as "obsessed with regime change". Lavrov criticises the opposition for "disrupting the political process" and their "categorical refusal to cooperate". Russian discourses, seeking to legitimise their support for the Syrian government internationally and domestically in Russia, are keen to stress that President Al-Assad is cooperative in the fight against ISIS and "international terrorism" whereas the opposition is more concerned with the ousting of the Syrian government than overcoming the terrorist threat. While we found Russian discourses to be highly critical of the "patriotic", "normal" opposition to the Syrian government, they nevertheless do acknowledge their existence, even hosting a meeting with leading figures in Moscow, and by calling for a "political process" as a means to ending the conflict suggests they do believe that patriotic opponents to President Al-Assad do have an important role to play. We therefore disagree with the claim made by Notte (2016) that Russian discourses reflect a reductionist "counter-terrorist narrative", as we noted above this is a gross oversimplification of the way Russia justifies its involvement in Syria.

While Russian discourses attempt to forge a united frontier against the "common enemy" of ISIS and terrorism, the logic of difference is also widely deployed and analysing it and tracing the chains allows us to further differentiate Russia's view of Self from those considered Others. Russia's different "subject position" is expressed in relation to the nature of their intervention juxtaposed against the intervention of other external actors. Russia maintains that its intervention in Syria is "a

war of annihilation” against terrorism (Lavrov, 2015). Russian narratives, while simultaneously attempting to forge unity against the threat of “international terrorism”, seek to establish a political frontier between those they deem to be fighting terrorism and those external actors who they believe to be more concerned with other “irrelevant issues” such as the fate of President Al-Assad. This also allows Russia to claim that while their ‘partners’ demand “preconditions” to fighting against ISIS and terrorism, they are resolutely committed to what is a “civilisationist struggle” (Notte, 2016). Russia by deploying such a logic sought to portray its Self to the world as a bulwark against “international terrorism”, and internally such a narrative aimed to boost President Putin’s image “as a strong leader who was able to protect the Russian people from terrorists based in Syria and project power abroad” (Williams and Souza, 2016).

The US and other Western ‘partners’ criticised Russia for targeting ‘moderate’ rebels with airstrikes rather than ISIS (BBC, 2017). For example, US Foreign Secretary John Kerry claimed that “We must not be confused in our fight against ISIS with support for Assad” (Kerry, 2015). Russian responses to this international criticism again deployed the logic of difference, which differentiated their ‘subject position’ from the stance of the US and other ‘allies’. President Putin, for example, insisted that the Russian airstrikes campaign was complying with international law as Russian intervention had been “at the request of the official Syrian government”. Meanwhile, he asserted that all the other nations involved were acting “unlawfully”, Lavrov even suggests “criminally”, as their operations had neither been sanctioned by the Syrian government or approved by the UN Security Council (Lavrov, 2016). This frontier between the Self and Other, alludes to two more deeply rooted ideational aspects of Russia’s Syrian narrative. Firstly, it reflects a “centrist” or “statist” desire to see emboldened international institutions and laws. Russia seeks to position itself as the defender of international law and established norms, it accuses the West of interpreting “international law selectively to justify its interventions” (Roberts, 2017). Putin claims Russia is defending international law which is an “irritant” for the West who are “used to holding a monopoly on the international stage and do not

want to have to make way for anyone else". Secondly, the Othering of Western 'partners' and their ideational claims reflects a wider "civilisationist" narrative, which frames Russia's relationship with the West as ideationally antagonistic, not only in relation to the Syrian conflict but more widely in the sphere of international relations. "This narrative appears to be shaped in part by an understanding of Russia's global potential as an alternative to the West, combined with concerns about a hostile West that has failed to acknowledge Russia's rightful place as a major power in the international system" (Roberts, 2017).

Russian discourses recognise the US as the other "leading power" involved in the Syrian conflict. As well as trying to forge a common, united frontier with the US against ISIS and international terrorism, Russian discourses define the meaning of their Self in relation to the Other of the US. As acknowledged by Hopf (2005: 238), "while Russian identity has deep daily roots, its great power identity is in a daily construction project with the external world, especially with the US". Consequently, a political frontier is drawn by Russian discourses which attempts to highlight their Great Power status by differentiating Russia from the US in several ways. As discussed above, Russian narratives juxtapose their involvement in Syria from that of Western 'partners' including the US by framing Russian involvement as legal and compliant with international laws whereas Western involvement is portrayed as illegal. As well as this broad political frontier which differentiates Russia from the West, Russian discourses make more specific claims which attempt to Other the US. Russian discourses contend that the US has been ineffective, unlike Russia who has been very effective, in the struggle against terrorism in Syria. President Putin asserts that the US "say they are fighting terrorism, but we see no results". He goes on to claim that the US programme to train the Free Syrian Army has been highly ineffective and that "they would have been better to give \$500 million to us" (Putin, 2015). As well as criticising the ineffectiveness of American anti-terrorist operations, Russian discourses also seek to differentiate the modus operandi of their own anti-terrorism operations from those of the US, whose ambitions, and intentions they remain skeptical

of. Lavrov claims “We have questions about the coalitions conduct in their fight against terrorism”. By portraying the US as both ineffective against terrorism and casting doubt on the nature of US involvement, Russia is drawing a frontier between themselves and the Americans which reveals their broader ideational antagonism with the US.

Overall, Russian discourses make attempts to unite various actors around their narrative by deploying a “counter-terrorist” narrative, seeking to broadening the Self to encompass all those fighting ISIS and other terrorist groups. Russian discourses defend the government of President Al-Assad, framing him as merely a “politician” who is not to blame for the chaos in Syria. Meanwhile Russia strives to differentiate Al-Assad and the Syrian government from the “normal” opposition who they deem to be “obsessed with regime change” and uncooperative in the struggle against terrorism. Here, we disagree with Notte (2016) who claims Russian discourses are “reductionist” and convey an “overarching counter-terrorist narrative”. We have found that while Russian discourses do try to forge a united frontier against terrorism, they do nevertheless recognise that the “patriotic” and “normal” opposition not only exists but has an important role to play in a future “political process”. Russian discourses seek to juxtapose their involvement in the conflict from the involvement of their Western ‘partners’ who unlike Russia are acting “illegally” in Syria. Russia also claims to be resolutely fighting against terrorism, while they claim their partners are more interested in regime change and “other irrelevant issues”. The way Russian discourses portray Self and Others in relation to Syria give us a valuable insight into wider Russian Foreign Policy narratives and provide clues about how they relate to Others including the US and the West. This shall be explored and analysed in more depth in the final chapter and in the conclusion.

How does the Russian government arrange these concepts into a discourse explaining its policy towards Syria?

In the preceding chapters, we have analysed the key concepts and the portrayal of Self and Other within Russian discourses. In this chapter, we shall illustrate how these ideas are interwoven into a wider discursive constellation which both explains and provides justification for Russia's actions in Syria, as well as helping us to decode Russia's wider Foreign Policy strategies.

We shall demonstrate that there is no single, or as Notte (2016) claimed "an overarching counterterrorist framework", justification cited by the Russian government to explain their policy towards Syria. Their discursive strategy is better understood as the articulation of multifarious ideas, advancing multiple justifications for their involvement. We thus contend, that their narrative is aimed at different audiences and attempts to win over these audiences to the subject position of the Russian government. This shall be explored forthwith, before we go on to consider what the narrative reveals about Russia's broader Foreign Policy strategies.

#### What Russia's official narrative tells us about their Syrian strategy

We have revealed in previous chapters the key concepts and the portrayal of Self and Other within Russian narratives. In this section, we shall explain how these ideas are synthesised together into a complex narrative that reveals Russia's official view of "where this takes us" in the Syrian conflict (Waever, 2005). We will show that Russian narratives seek to justify their Syrian strategy both internally to domestic audiences and externally to the international community and media. Below we set out the four inter-related strands of this self-justifying narrative, namely 'Preventing the Spread of Instability argument', 'the Internal Security argument', 'the Problem with Unipolarity argument' and lastly the 'the Counter-Terrorism argument'. We will address these in turn.

Russian narratives assert that the Syrian conflict risks creating a situation of instability in which terrorist groups could find advantage. In an interview with Russian media, President Putin asserted, for example, that "In Syria, we are fighting terrorist organisations and preserving legitimate



government structures to avoid a collapse. Otherwise, we would see a replay of the Libyan developments, or even worse, the Somalian developments” (Putin, 2015). Russian involvement is consequently justified on the basis of providing stability to Syria and its “statehood”. Russian discourses argue that instability can be halted if a “political solution” can be reached between the Syrian government and the “patriotic”, “normal” opposition who denounce violence. The call for a political solution, with the fate of President Al-Assad to be determined at the ballot box, is part of their ‘Preventing the Spread of Instability argument’. Russian discourses claim that a “political solution” in which “compromise” can be reached can lead to a more stable Syria and consequently a more stable region.

Russia claims regional stability to be a security necessity, as is preventing terrorists from making further inroads in the region. “We are helping President Assad fight this threat before it reaches our borders”. The reference to ‘our borders’ reflects Russia’s official Internal Security argument. The Syrian conflict is depicted as a threat to Russia’s own security, if the “terrorist international” is not stopped in Syria it will be able to gain traction and become a greater threat within Russian territory. President Putin explicitly links the notion of stability in Syria to Russia’s own security, when he tells a Russian interviewer that their Foreign Policy sought to “defend Russia’s independence and sovereignty” (Putin, 2015).

Additionally, Russian discourses contend that while they seek to provide stability in the region, the US and other ‘partners’ involved in the conflict risk causing instability with their insistence that President Al-Assad must be removed from power. This aspect of the narrative we term the ‘Problems of Unipolarity’. Lavrov, at a joint news conference with his US counterpart John Kerry, claimed that “History knows situations when certain countries tried to ‘woo’ extremists and terrorists in the hope of using them for achieving their own geopolitical goals and for overthrowing undesirable regimes”. Russia claims that the US and the West, by providing funding and support for opponents of the ‘legitimate’ and ‘legal’ Syrian government, they risk making the situation worse,

causing greater instability and chaos. Thus, Russian official narratives, by juxtaposing their subject position with that of the West, seek to win support within Russia by framing the conflict as not only a struggle to overcome the threat of instability posed by ISIS and other terrorist groups, but also as a struggle against a Western-dominated international system. President Putin in the same interview with Russian media as referenced above claimed that “They are used to holding a monopoly on the international stage and do not want to have to make way for anyone else” (Putin, 2015). Russia’s official narrative suggests that their Syrian strategy, including their support for the Syrian government, is forcing the West to “make way” for them as an equal, “leading power” in the Syrian conflict. The discourses however also reveal a second aspect to the ‘Problems of Unipolarity’ argument. As well as the threat the US and the West poses to stability within Syria, Russian discourses claim that they also violate international law. In an interview on Russian television President Putin claimed, “All other countries that have so far taken part in operations in Syria are acting unlawfully, because there is no UN Security Council resolution on these operations, and no official request from the Syrian authorities”. Russian involvement in Syria is thus portrayed as “legal” and compliant with international law, whereas the intervention of the US and other Western ‘partners’ is portrayed as illegal. Russia therefore by defending the “sovereignty” of Syria by backing the “legitimate” Syrian Government is justifying its strategy on the basis that it is compliant with, and acting as the defender of, international law, while the US and the West treats international law with contempt. Thereby, Russian involvement is justified on the basis that it is a resistance to Western attempts at regime change and geopolitics, as well as resistance to Western efforts to ignore or circumvent international law. Russia portrays both of these issues as ‘Problems of Unipolarity’ and their involvement is justified on the grounds that the West can no longer “dominate” international law, or “dictate to us” now that Russia is capable of dealing with “problems not only near our borders but far from them”.

The final argument we shall outline is the 'Counter-Terrorism' argument. As Foreign Minister Lavrov informed a joint press conference with John Kerry, "Goal number one is fighting ISIS and other terrorists, and only then stabilisation and political process". Russian discourses argue that their operations in Syria are part of a "war of annihilation" against ISIS and other terrorist groups. This argument is used to justify their strategy both internally and externally, and it is inextricably linked to the other arguments outlined above. As was discussed previously in this section, the terrorist threat is "international" and Russian discourses argue that it must be defeated in Syria before it can spill over into Russia itself, thus Counter-Terrorism is linked to the Internal Security argument, in the words of President Putin "Thousands of people running around there now with Kalashnikovs would end up on our territory". Likewise, Russia justifies its strategy to the international community by emphasising the international nature of the terrorist groups operating within Syria. Foreign Minister Lavrov told an international news conference that they must "Understand we have a common enemy instead of pointing fingers at each other over and over again. All concerns about one's pre-election political image or over some domestic political events in this or that country should be set aside. Instead of playing geopolitical games, all parties should focus on resolving an issue that has become truly existential for human civilisation". Russian discourses therefore position Russia as a bulwark against the threat of international terrorism, while seeking to ally themselves with those who have a common cause in overcoming the terrorist threat. While Russia does seek to "work with" the US and other 'partners' to defeat terrorism, they also argue that the US and others are not as focused on countering terrorism as Russia is. President Putin for instance claimed that, "They say they are fighting terrorism, but we see no results". Russia argues that the US and other Western 'partners' are distracted by "geopolitical games" and "other irrelevant issues" when they should be uniting with Russia to fight the "terrorist international". Counter-terrorism is therefore an important argument within Russian discourses, however as we have demonstrated, it is not an "overarching" narrative as Notte (2016) claims but rather one of several key inter-related explanations articulated to justify Russia's strategy.

### What Russia's narrative towards Syria reveals about their wider Foreign Policy strategy

In the section above, we examined a number of inter-related arguments that collectively form Russia's explanatory narrative towards the Syrian conflict. These arguments also inform us about Russia's wider Foreign Policy strategy and the ideas that shape it. In this section, we discuss three key areas of Russian thinking on foreign policy, looking at how they projected their broader values within the specific context of the Syrian conflict. Our argument is that Russia's discursive strategy during the Syrian crisis displayed a high degree of continuity with long-standing Russian foreign policy values, both in terms of concepts and argumentation. With this in mind, we now turn to insights and frameworks regarding Russian foreign policy language and values by scholars such as Tsygankov and Tsygankov (2010), Hopf (2005) and Tudoroiu (2015). In doing so we identify three key values identified by the scholars as being projected by Russian foreign policy actors. These are 'Statism', 'Civilisationism', and 'Great Power status'.

Firstly, Russia's narrative towards the Syrian conflict reflects, at least partially, what Tsygankov and Tsygankov (2010) call a "statist" and Hopf (2005) terms a "centrist" understanding of their role in the world. Russian discourses towards the Syrian conflict argue that "stability" is dependent on the "sovereignty" and independence of nations being respected. Consequently, while they argue that "stability" is what they seek to achieve for the Syrian state, Russia's narrative also makes clear that their own independence, stability, and sovereignty are of vital importance. In the words of President Putin, "We therefore have no desire to restore the empire or rebuild the Soviet Union, but we do have a duty to defend Russia's independence and sovereignty. This is what we have been doing and will continue to do so". This research therefore supports the findings of Hopf (2000: 294) and Charap (2013: 37) who argue that the Foreign Policy strategy of Russia is generated, primarily, "at home" and the Russian government's Syrian strategy is reflective of their "deeply held values, not concrete regional interests" (Charap, 2013: 37). Russia's "statist" conception of itself and its role in the world

is likely to continue to shape their Foreign Policy moves as long as they feel the world is dominated by a unipolarity which is hostile to their values.

Secondly, and strongly linked to the first point, Russian narratives reveal a hostility towards the West. Again, Tysgankov and Tsygankov (2010) and Hofp (2005) term this anti-Westernism as “Civilisationist” and “Conservative” respectively. Russian discourses argue that the West is trying to advance its own “geopolitical ambitions” in Syria by calling for President Al-Assad to resign and backing the opposition forces. Russian involvement in Syria is thus partially framed as opposition to ‘unipolarity’, Western-dominance of the international system and their perceived contempt for international law. The discourses however also reveal what Charap calls Russian “paranoia” that the West is seeking to weaken the sovereignty of nations, not only Syria but indeed Russia itself. Putin reflected this “paranoia” in an interview with Russian media he claimed that “Attempts are made to weaken us from within, make us more acquiescent and make us toe their line”. Russia by deploying “Civilisationist” and anti-Western arguments to justify their Syrian strategy suggests that their broader relations with the West are not set to improve anytime soon.

Thirdly, Russian discourses allude to a more confident and assertive Russian state. Tudoroiu posits that Russia has used the Syrian conflict to reassert its own Great Power status (Tudoroiu, 2015). President Putin claims that the Russian military and economy has improved “immeasurably” and consequently they were no longer willing to accept being “dictated to” by the West. As noted by Theron (2017) “Russia’s overall actions in Syria participate in the Kremlin’s narrative of the return of Russia’s power in the world, “defending” itself against “imperialist” Westerners”. Speaking about Russia’s use of its new advanced missile systems in Syria, President Putin said, “They have seen too now that Russia is ready to use them if this is in the interests of our country and people”. The discourses suggest that Tudoroiu is correct, and that Russian Foreign Policy will remain more assertive and aggressive, and they will defend their perceived interests and “deeply held principles” by military force if ultimately required.

The analysis suggests that Russia is determined to build up and maintain a strong and stable state that is recognised as a “leading power” within a multipolar world. We also found that anti-Western “Civilisationist” reasoning is deployed to justify their actions and the West is portrayed as the main Other within their narratives. Russia is more confident and assertive having “immeasurably” strengthened its armed forces and economy over the last decade, perceiving itself as a Great Power on the world stage. We postulate that Russia is likely to continue to play an assertive role within the sphere of international relations, especially when its “deeply held principles” are challenged.

## Conclusion

In this dissertation, we have shown that Russia’s official narrative towards the Syrian conflict is complex and multifaceted. By analysing discourses of both the Russian President and the Minister for Foreign Affairs we have provided an in-depth discourse analysis of how the Russian government justified and explained its Syrian strategy during the period of heightened Russian involvement that commenced in September 2015. We found that Russian discourses largely reflected a continuity of the discursive strategy pursued prior to 2015. The main change in discursive strategy was to provide justification for their own military intervention, by placing more emphasis on the need to combat terrorism. Moreover, we have shown that Russian narratives contain within them several key concepts which are articulated around the nodal points “stability” and “political process”. We have deconstructed these concepts and found they were largely reflective of what Tysgankov and Tsygankov (2010) call a “statist”, or Hopf (2005) terms a “centrist” narrative. These concepts emphasise the Russian government’s desire for a strong, independent Russian state that is viewed both internally and externally as a Great Power capable of dealing with problems, and projecting its power, near its borders “but also far from them”. An analysis of the key concepts also revealed a “civilisationist” aspect within Russian narratives, with Russian involvement justified by virtue of its opposition to Western and, in particular, US dominance.

We have shown the way Russia portrays both Self and Others within their narratives, by examining and analysing the political frontiers within the discourses. We found that Russian discourses sought to draw a political frontier against the Other of “ISIS and other terrorist groups”, thereby attempting to create a wider Self category to encompass all those who are opposed to “international terrorism” including their Western ‘partners’. Russian discourses align Russia with the Syrian government of President Al-Assad. They do this by drawing a political frontier between the Syrian government and the “normal”, “patriotic” opposition who they claim, unlike President Al-Assad, have been uncooperative in the fight against terrorism. They accuse them of being more concerned with regime change. We found that Russian discourses Other the West, in particular the US. They juxtapose Russian involvement as “lawful” and “legal” while accusing the West of acting “unlawfully” and violating international law. Russia also claims that the West is more concerned with “irrelevant issues” like regime change and questions whether they are as resolutely committed to fighting terrorism as Russia claims to be.

In the final chapter of the research, we demonstrated that there was no single argument or “overarching counterterrorist framework” within the discourses that sought to provide an explanation and justification for Russia’s strategy. Rather, we deconstructed four inter-related arguments present within Russian discourses. We termed these arguments ‘Preventing the Spread of Instability argument’, ‘the Internal Security argument’, ‘the Problem with Unipolarity argument’ and finally the ‘the Counter-Terrorism argument’. In turn, we unpacked each of these arguments. The Preventing the Spread of Instability argument claimed that the Syrian conflict risks the collapse of Syrian institutions and a repeat of the chaos witnessed in Libya or even Somalia. Russia therefore claims that their involvement is to prevent the spread of instability and support the “legitimate” government in overcoming the terrorist threat. Secondly, the Internal Security argument focused on the threat that the Syrian conflict posed to Russia’s own domestic security. Both President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov claimed that the “terrorist international” was not only a threat to the Syrian

government but to Russia's "own borders". Preventing "people with Kalashnikovs" crossing from Syria into Russia was thus one of Russia's main arguments for their Syrian policy. The third main, inter-related argument we unpacked was the Problem with Unipolarity argument. Russian narratives claimed that the US and the West were more concerned with regime change and other "geopolitical goals" than they were about defeating ISIS and other terrorist groups. Russia claims this is not only opportunistic but it violates international law. Russian involvement was therefore justified on the basis that the West could no longer "dominate" international law, or "dictate to us" now that Russia is "immeasurably stronger". The final argument we deconstructed was the Counter-Terrorism argument. Russia claimed to be fighting a "war of annihilation" against ISIS and other terrorist groups in Syria. The Counter-Terrorism argument is linked to all of the other arguments within the discourses. Russia claimed that terrorists would gain from instability in Syria and the wider region. They argued that terrorism also poses a risk to both Russia's own security and represents a threat which is "existential for human civilisation". Russian discourses also deployed the Counter-Terrorism narrative to distinguish their operations from those of the West who they consider to be more interested in "irrelevant issues" such as the fate of President Al-Assad.

These arguments provided us with a valuable insight into Russia's wider Foreign Policy strategy. Russia discourses reflect a "statist" outlook, seeking to establish Russia as strong, independent and self-reliant Great Power, capable of dealing with problems "near its borders but also far from them". Russia also maintains an anti-Western stance which provides justification for their Foreign Policy decisions, on the basis that the West "cannot and should not" be in control of the international system alone. Lastly, an analysis of the discourses revealed a more confident and assertive Russian state, which is willing to use military force to defend its "deeply held principles" and interests where challenged.

In this research, we have shown that Russian involvement in Syria was justified by a complex, multifaceted narrative. We have challenged the claim that Russian discourses are "reductionist". We



believe that further research into Russian discursive strategies would provide a deeper understanding of their ideational motivations and thus of their future policy moves, regarding both the Syrian conflict and in the sphere of international relations more broadly.

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