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RUSSIA'S ENGAGEMENT IN SYRIA

What are Russia's motives?

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By Mikkel Bøgeskov Eriksen, Head of Section , Agency for International Recruitment and Integration.

Area of Expertise: Radicalisation and Terrorism, Russian Foreign Policy, and East German intelligence gathering in Denmark during the Cold War

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ABSTRACT

This report addresses the motives for Russian engagement in Syria and centres on the domestic context, where four research questions are analysed. These questions are as follows: 1) What explains the Russian power elite's support for Russia's engagement in Syria? 2) Is the Russian engagement in Syria utilised to divert the Russian population from the domestic economic crisis by pursuing great power foreign policy in Syria? 3) Can fighters returning from Syria to Chechnya cause domestic instability? 4) How can the involvement in Syria be interpreted in relation to a broader understanding of the Russian Grand Strategy?

Methodically, the report is based on expert interviews, including academics and diplomats. The interviews are supplemented by documents containing academic journals, speeches, opinion polls, and newspapers.

Theoretically, the analyses are based on Buzan's model of the state.

The first analysis reveals that Putin's power to a large extent is based on client relations with the power elite. The second analysis demonstrates the pro-regime communication of the state-controlled media and the Orthodox Church in opposition to the Russian population. The third analysis sheds light on three indicators of increasing turmoil and instability in Chechnya. Finally, the findings on Russia's Grand Strategy goals include the re-establishment of great power status, capable of matching the US in the desired context of a multipolar world - a world where the US recognises Russian interests, Russia's great power status and its right to dominate and influence non-NATO countries within the sphere of the former Soviet Union. Therefore, Syria is one of several battlegrounds in a chain of attempts to check American domination.

Key words: Russia, Syria, Chechnya, intelligence, diversion, Kremlin, Putin, terrorism

ABBREVIATIONS

Caucasian Emirate (CE)

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

Committee for State Security (KGB)

Islamic State in Iraq & Syria (ISIS)

Ministry of Defence (MOD)

Main Intelligence Agency of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU)

The Middle East (ME)

The European Union (EU)

The United States of America (US)

The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB)

Presidential Security Services (SBP)

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Russia's engagement in Syria represents the largest deployment of Russian forces outside the former Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc after the end of the Cold War. This report seeks to understand Russia's reasons to intervene in Syria. The official goals of the intervention are to support the Assad regime, to liberate territories from ISIS, and to foster peace talks. However, one must ask: are these official goals disingenuously stated in order to hide other unofficial, but essential goals? What other motives, specifically domestic ones, might be connected to Russia's involvement in Syria? Is it possible that Russia's involvement in Syria is utilised domestically to divert the attention of the Russian people from the economic crisis by appealing - as an international great power - to the general public, manifested by Russia's presence in Syria? Also, more than 2,000 Russian citizens are fighting in Syria. In fact, some observers estimate that Russian is one of the most widely spoken language among the foreign fighters in Syria. If these fighters were to return to Russia in large numbers, they might well become a significant threat to national security and stability.¹ Internationally, with respect to the current peace talks, are Russia, the US and the EU able to establish a viable plan for peace and bring the Syrian conflict to an end? In other words, can Russia become a partner rather than a rival to the US and the EU, or does Russia's involvement in Syria symbolise a new Russian foreign policy aiming to counterbalance the influence of the US and EU?

The Purpose of the Report

The report seeks to understand the domestic factors influencing the Russian engagement in Syria by investigating the following four research questions:

1. What explains the Russian power elite's support for Russia's engagement in Syria?
2. Is the Russian involvement in Syria utilised to divert the Russian population from the economic crisis by pursuing great power foreign policy in Syria?
3. Can fighters returning from Syria to Chechnya cause instability?
4. How can the involvement in Syria be understood in relation to a broader understanding of the Russian Grand Strategy?

(1) Sokolov, D. (2016) Russia's other Pipeline: Migration and Radicalisation in the North Caucasus, the Wilson Center Kenan Cable No. 17, (online) available at: http://www.kennan-russiafile.org/2016/08/29/russias-other-pipeline-migration-and-radicalization-in-the-north-caucasus/?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiWkdNMlpURTBNeK5sTmVpabClslQlQ1JBRmg1KOVxcFBclO1KQ1YzMTZxUTJRbVFRSGFBT09XRTNoa3VBXC9vMGdPMOhKbGpod3hOcTZVclRldDNUtjhtcXF6WHZmZmFkMTZLSlFzNDZZM2xPYXFrZ2dvdKJ3Z0t6NEJVMGJqelJTM0wwPSJ9 (accessed 26-09-2016); Kramer, M. (2015) The return of Islamic State fighters, PONARS, Georg Washington University, (online) available at: <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/return-islamic-state-fighters-impact-caucasus-and-central-asia> (accessed 07-03-2016)

The purpose of the first research question is to give the reader an understanding of the relations within the Russian power elite. An analysis of Putin's appointments to the top positions within the intelligence services may serve as an example of the client-based structure of the power elite where loyalty is a key feature. Hence, it contributes to explaining the power elite's support for the engagement in Syria.

The second research question analyses the role of the pro-regime state-controlled media and the Orthodox Church regarding diverting the Russian population from the economic crisis by appealing to a narrative of great power foreign policy. In other words, the great power identity and status shall secure the power elite's legitimacy, and thus stability. With that said, the report uses a distinction between *great power identity* and *great power status*. The first term refers to the Russian people's identity, while the great power status is the way in which other states perceive and recognise Russia, i.e. Russia's reputation among states in the international system.

The third research question provides insight into the consequences of potentially returning foreign fighters from Syria.

The fourth research question seeks to clarify to what extent the aforementioned three research questions can be placed within the context of the Russian Grand Strategy goals, the perceived threats against these goals, and the resources allocated to counter these threats.

The Context

The following section provides a brief contextual outline of the Russian-Syrian historical connections, the transition of Russia from communism to capitalism, and the significance of the Arab Spring in relation to the Syrian conflict. During the Cold War, Syria became the Soviet Union's most important ally in the Middle East (ME). The alliance provided the Soviet Union with a strategic foothold in the ME, while Syria in return received political, economic and strategic support from the Soviets.² Although the end of the Cold War resulted in the dismantling of the Soviet Union, the Russian-Syrian relations remained intact. However, the new Russian state, its leadership, and the Russian people found themselves in a stage of crisis. By the mid-1990s, the Russian people were exhausted, frustrated and gradually growing politically apathetic after experimenting with capitalism and some sort of democracy. In this relation, the end of the Soviet Union - and thus the end of its superpower status - coincided with a feeling of humiliation and anxiety about the future which impacted millions of Russians.³

In this context, the need for order, economic growth, and a sense of great power status emerged - and so did the leader to achieve it. Putin was determined to do two things: first, to ensure that the chaos of the 1990s never happened again; and second, to break free from Western tutelage and restore Russia's independence. These aims were offered in the form of a social contract con-

(2) Karsh, E. (1988) *The Soviet Union and Syria, the Assad Years*, London, Chatham House Papers, Routledge p. 94

(3) Suny, G. (2011) *The Soviet Experiment*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2nd edition, p. 533

sisting of stability and prosperity at home, restored dignity aboard - both in exchange for limited political freedoms.⁴ A decade after Putin's appointment as president of Russia, the ME was set ablaze as the Arabic Spring started unfolding, initially in Tunis in 2010. Later in 2011, the Arab Spring reached Syria. Demonstrations broke out in response to the detainment of three young men in the city of Daraa due to their protests against the Assad government.⁵

(4) Braithwaite, R (KCMG Former Ambassador to the USSR) (2015) Prebend Seminar: 'Do we understand Russia, can there be an understanding with Russia?' Lecture to MA Security and Intelligence Studies. University of Buckingham. 19 February 2015. Presentation paper

(5) Jensen, L., Stokke, D. & Nielsen, S. (2015) KULTURLANDESTUDIE SYRIEN FORELØBIG UDGAVE, Royal Danish Defence Academy, (online) available at: <http://www.fak.dk/publikationer/Documents/Syrien.pdf> (accessed 31-05-2016)

CHAPTER II

ANALYSIS I

This analysis seeks to answer the following two questions: 1) What explains the support by the Russian power elite for Russia's involvement in Syria? Is the Russian involvement in Syria utilised to divert the Russian population's attention from the economic crisis by pursuing a great power foreign policy in Syria? 2) Which means do Putin and the power elite use to divert the attention of the Russian population from the economic crisis, i.e. analysing institutions such as state-controlled media and the Orthodox Church. In relation to Syria, the analysis will also illustrate how events in Syria are utilised to divert the attention of the Russian population from the crisis. Moreover, the analysis contains an outline of the Russian economy and an analysis of how the Russian people react to the economic crisis. Theoretically, the analysis uses Buzan's model of the state to understand the state and some of the threats Russia faces. The model contains three components: the idea of the state, the institutions and the territorial integrity. The bottom line is the survival of human collectives, and the standard unit of security is the territorial state. On the premise that the international system is anarchistic, states are the central units and national security is the central issue. Threats against the state can occur within five sectors: military, political, economic, societal, and environmental.⁶

The Idea of the State and its Institutions

The idea of the state includes a domestic and an international dimension. Domestically, a state's population must believe in the link between the nation and the state. Thus, the dismantling of the Soviet Union may to some extent be explained as a lack of faith in the idea of the Soviet Union. A prominent actor such as Boris Yeltsin challenged the idea of the Soviet Union by appealing to a Russian nation and nationality. The idea of the state must include some kind of higher purpose, greater ideas and potential identities. The greater idea of the state can be understood as an *organised ideology*.⁷ Thus, the organised ideology in the Soviet Union was communism, while today, great power status seems to be central in the current ideology. Although Taylor perceives the nature of the Russian ideology, defined as Putinism, to be more like a code, he points out four core components. One of the most essential components is the idea of a strong state or *statism*. The state has primacy over the individual.⁸ The citizens serve the state rather than the reverse. In this relation the component is *great power status*. Russia must be a great power to prevent being pushed around globally by other states, but also to fight violations of its sovereignty and to counter that Western states lecture Russia on the insufficiencies of its domestic political system.

(6) Buzan, B (1991) *People, States and Fear*, an Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era, Pearson Longman, Padstow, p.19

(7) *Ibid.*, p.79

(8) Taylor, B.D. (2015) *The Code of Putinism*, PONARS, Elliott School of International affairs

“Such a country as Russia can only survive and develop within the existing borders if it stays as a great power.”⁹

The necessity of a strong state domestically and internationally is linked to the concept of *anti-Westernism* and in particular the concept of *anti-Americanism*. It is the perception of Putin and the power elite that the US is conducting a sort of political warfare against Russia. This is evident in relation to the Ukrainian demonstrations in Kiev in 2014. As stated by Patrushev, the US is trying to create an inter-state military conflict by using the Ukrainian events in the pursuit of power change in Russia with the final aim of dismantling the Russian state. In relation to the sanctions imposed by the West in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, he states:

“Western leaders are publicly declaring that sanctions should destroy the economy and trigger popular protests . . . the West unequivocally demonstrates that it does not merely seek to change Russian policy . . . but to change the regime.”¹⁰

An image is thus presented of a besieged Russia that necessitates a strong state domestically and internationally. The final ideational component of Putinism is conservatism or anti-liberalism, where collectivity is superior to individuality and order and tradition are ranked higher than change and reform.

The Kremlin and the Russian Power Elite

Putin is deciding all core foreign policy and defence issues while being surrounded by a small group of people who refrain from criticism. Due to this structure, Putin is by and large regarded to be in absolute control of power in Russia.¹¹ In addition, Putin enjoys the support for the great power foreign policy by the parliament, parties in the Duma, governors, mayors, the Orthodox Church and state-controlled media.¹² While the tsars' legitimacy was based on divinity and hereditary, monarchical rules, and while the general secretaries relied on ideology and party, Putin's rule is based entirely on himself. This helps explain why the great power policy is utilised as a means to create legitimacy.¹³ However, Putin also relies on a solid network of clients and their loyalty is less based on values and legitimacy than on material interests which will be elaborated in the following section.

(9) Tsygankov, A. (2015) Putin's Vision of Russia as a Normal Great Power (online) available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/250171757_Vladimir_Putin's_Vision_of_Russia_as_a_Normal_Great_Power (accessed 24 May 2016)

(10) Monaghan, A. (2016) Russian State Mobilization Moving the Country on to a War Footing, Chatham House, London, p.18

(11) Staun, J. (2016) Interview, Royal Danish Defence Academy, 07-04-2016; Trenin (2016) A five-year outlook for Russian foreign policy: demands, drivers and influences, Carnegie Moscow Center, (online) available at: <http://carnegie.ru/2016/03/18/five-year-outlook-for-russian-foreign-policy-demands-drivers-and-influences/ivkm> (accessed on 18 March 2016); Braithwaite, 2015

(12) Trenin, 2016

(13) Freeland, C. (2011) Russia's "sultan" Putin, Reuters, (online) available at: <http://blogs.reuters.com/chrystia-freeland/2011/09/30/russias-sultan-putin/> (accessed 12-05-2016)

Institutions and Actors

This section aims to shed light on one of Putin's appointment within the client-based network of the GRU. The section points out that in spite of the fact that Putin is in almost absolute control of power due to his client-based network, his power is to some extent vulnerable because factions within the intelligence community occasionally challenge Putin's appointments. As Madeira observes, in today's Russia "the intelligence community constitutes the executive branch itself".¹⁴ Some of the most powerful individuals and groups have a background within the intelligence community. This group of people is also known as *siloviki*. Taylor notes that although many *siloviki* share the character of loyalty, the concept is a more general feature of the system - with loyalty to the team as key practice.¹⁵

In his analysis of why it took almost a month to appoint a new chief of the GRU, Mark Galeotti argues that the appointment stalled due to a power struggle between the military, favouring Korobov and Putin, and his power block, favouring Deputy Minister Lt. Gen. Alexey Dyumin.¹⁶ As the military succeeded in blocking Dyumin's appointment for almost a month, Russia should not be regarded as a one-man monarchy with Putin as a tsar with absolute power. The point is that although the military was poorly consulted in regard to Crimea and Syria, it has proven to have the capacity to resist unpleasant situations by temporally blocking Putin's clientelistic appointment.¹⁷ In addition, Galeotti points to the possibility of the FSB backing the GRU, despite being rivalling agencies. The rationale is clear: if the Dyumin could be placed in GRU, it is certainly likely that this could also happen to the FSB. Furthermore, to clearly understand why the agencies are reluctant to the appointment of Dyumin, we need to understand his role in Putin's client-based network. As many other high-ranking profiles appointed by Putin, Dyumin is a former bodyguard to the president. He was in charge of the Special Forces or "the little green men" during the Crimea campaign in 2014. A year later he was promoted to colonel in the Presidential Security Services (SBP) and even invited to join Putin's ice hockey team. In 2015, he was appointed head of the military's Special Operations Forces, Chief of Staff of the ground forces and then Deputy Defence Minister.¹⁸ Thus, in the client-based network, loyalty towards Putin is more important than competences which can result in resistance from power blocks such as the GRU.

The Mind-Set

Reflecting on the Russian mind-set may help explain why the power is centralised around Putin - how and why the motives are constructed. Based on the fact that nearly all officers were trans-

(14) Madeira, V. (2015, February 19). *Current threats: Internal and external*. University of Buckingham, Buckingham.

(15) Taylor, B.D, 2015

(16) Galeotti, M. (2016) What Putin's Security Appointments say about how Russia works, War On the Rocks, (online) available at <http://warontherocks.com/2016/02/what-putins-security-appointments-say-about-how-russia-works/> (accessed on 12-05-2016)

(17) Ibid.

(18) Ibid.

ferred to the core of the succeeding Russian Federation in the same way as the tsarist officer corps was integrated into the Red Army, Niels Bo Poulsen argues that the mind-set is related to the Soviet past. Throughout the transition from the Soviet Union to the Russian state, there was no democratic discussion of what should be adopted from the Soviet past, and what should be left behind.¹⁹ Thomas Winkler follows the same logic as he points out the role of the power elite's upbringing in the Soviet Union, in which the answer to any problem is centralisation.²⁰ Likewise, Taylor observes that the mind-sets of Putin and many within the power elite may to some extent be explained by their background in the KGB. Hence, absence of control is an opportunity for independent influence or alternative centres of power, which to a silovik is perceived as a threat to the integrity of the state. Mind-sets that are influenced by control and order tend to favour unity and anti-pluralism, both connected to organised ideology containing components of statism, anti-liberalism, and anti-Westernism.

The unity serves to unite the Russian state against foreign and domestic enemies and links domestic crisis to foreign subversive influence.²¹ Moreover, this view is not limited to the power elite. It is the general assumption in the population that if the centralised power is weakened, stability and order are in danger of collapsing. In other words, things deteriorate. These assumptions are historically rooted in situations leading to less centralisation: the revolutions in 1917, Mikhail Gorbachev's decentralising reforms, and Boris Yeltsin's attempts to liberate and decentralise. Perhaps it can be argued that the Russian identity and international status have become matters of security. Such argument may be based on the social contract between state and people. In the preliminary phase, the social contract between Putin and the Russian people consisted of exchanging political freedom for economic growth. However, around 2003-2005 the character of the contract evolved to exchanging political freedom for great power identity. During 2003-2005, everything associated with Western culture came to be regarded as evil and inferior.²² Trenin argues that the year 2006 was the turning point for Russia's relationship with the West:

“Until recently, Russia saw itself as Pluto in the Western solar system, very far from the center, but still fundamentally a part of it. Now it has left that orbit entirely.”²³

Staun draws a parallel between contemporary Russia and the situation in Germany in the 1920s. He argues that the “old national romantic discourse” of culture vs. civilisation resembles a discourse that currently prevails in Russia. There was a widespread tendency in interwar Germany to see everything French as corrupted, decadent and unnatural. In Russia, Western culture is currently framed as superficial, consumerist and nihilistic, while Russia is presented as a natural

(19) Poulsen, N. B. (2016) Russian Views of War and Warfare and their current and future implications, Krigsteoriseminar, Royal Danish Defence College, 4 April 2016

(20) Winkler, T. (2016) Skype Interview with the Danish Ambassador in Moscow, 11.04.2016

(21) Taylor, B.D, 2015

(22) Staun, 2016, Interview

(23) Trenin, D. (2006) Russia leaves the West, Foreign Affairs, (online) available at: (accessed 11 March 2016)

cohesive force with a strong bond between the people and the rulers based on shared values, i.e. conservative ideas such as traditional family values and orthodox faith.²⁴

The Economic Crisis in Russia

Recently, Russia has been through a grave economic crisis from which it has far from fully recovered. Before addressing the possible influence of the economic problems on Russia's decision to intervene in Syria, a few remarks about the crisis itself are in order. Wimbush describes the Russian economic situation as critical. As 67% of Russia's economy comes from energy export, declining energy prices, in particular for oil, have halved Russia's export between 2013 and 2016.²⁵ In addition, due to the fall in the price of oil, the solution has been to try pumping more oil in order to stay as close as possible to the level of income prior to the price fall. As the domestic budget relies on income from extraction of natural resources and weapons sales, this is virtually the only way of financing public expenditures. For the Russian budget to balance, the price for a barrel of oil must be around USD 100-110.²⁶ As a consequence of current oil price being around USD 29-49 per barrel, Russia is burning its strategic reserves.²⁷ The need for more oil extraction is, however, severely restricted by the old infrastructure, and due to the sanctions, new Western technology capable of strengthening the Russian infrastructure is not an option at the moment.²⁸ A recent statement from Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev demonstrates the importance of the relationship between economy and great power status:

“We are solving our financial problems without the help of international sources. This is our common victory. It means that we can develop by using the internal sources” (...) “No one has forced us to our knees. Unlike other countries, we are not begging with an outstretched hand, as we used to do in the 1990s. We are not waiting for the International Fund chief to come to this country so that we could beg him for some money in order to be able to run the budget.”²⁹

The quote illustrates two vital factors. First, according to Medvedev, Russia can repel the external economic factors and build the economy from within. This in itself demonstrates that Russia is successful as a great power, since the perceived external threats (sanctions and oil prices) do not

(24) Staun, J. 2016, Interview

(25) Wimbush, S. E. (2017) Russia in Decline, Introduction, Jamestown Foundation, (online) available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/introduction> (accessed 25-06-2017)

(26) Madeira, V (2016) Skype Interview, 20 March 2016; Holodny, E. (2015) Here are the break-even oil prices for 13 of the world's biggest producers, Business Insider, (online) available at: <http://www.businessinsider.com/break-even-oil-prices-for-all-the-major-producers-in-the-world-2015-7?r=US&IR=T&IR=T/> (accessed 26-09-2016)

(27) Statista (2016) Average annual OPEC crude oil price from 1960 to 2016 (in U.S. dollars per barrel), Statista, (online) available at: <http://www.statista.com/statistics/262858/change-in-opeac-crude-oil-prices-since-1960/> (accessed 04-05-2016)

(28) Madeira, 2016

(29) Shalgin, A. (2016) PM: Russia can develop without foreign borrowing, State Duma press services/TASS, (online) available at: <http://www.tass.ru/en/economy/871033> (accessed 04-05-2016)

undermine Russia's economy or force it to go begging for foreign financial aid. It further implies that Russia is something unique compared to states that can be affected/influenced by such threats. The quote can also be seen as a message to other countries having endured sanctions from the West or are in danger of facing sanctions. Many non-Western states have sympathy towards Russia because some of these states have also endured sanctions by Western states.³⁰ The reference to the 1990s shows a perception of Russia repositioning itself as a great power, and that "the Russian way" of addressing the economic challenges is better than the course directed by Western advisors during the 1990s.

Despite the regime's claims of having successfully tackled the economic situation, around 20 million Russians live in poverty and the number is increasing.³¹ This group of people does not represent any immediately threat as they are too busy struggling to survive. In addition, many Russians have reacted stoically. One reason is that the military industrial complex and the state-owned energy sector are huge generators of jobs in the industrial towns and cities located in rural Russia, where Putin, contrary to Yeltsin, enjoys overwhelming support and thus benefits from great patience in relation to the power elite's capability to improve the economy.³² With that said, Danish Broadcasting Corporation's correspondent in Moscow, Matilde Kimer, notes that there is a lack of economic optimism and in general describes the Russian population's response to the crisis as apathetic.³³ Despite its relative small size, the Russian middle class is the tension field in the balance between great power identity and economic growth. In this tension field, the demands for economic growth may surpass the one for great power identity. The middle class is generally better educated, and thus many are more critical, meaning that they are likely to favour the opposition. The re-election of President Putin at the Parliamentary Election in December 2011 resulted in demonstrations, the largest since the early 1990s, against election fraud, largely attended by the middle class and segments from the younger generation.³⁴ Therefore, it can be argued that the Russian political elite fears something similar at the coming elections.

(30) Winkler, 2016

(31) The Guardian: Millions more Russians living in poverty as economic crisis bites, The Guardian, (online) available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/22/millions-more-russians-living-in-poverty-as-economic-crisis-bites> (accessed 04-04-2017)

(32) Winkler, 2016

(33) Kimer, M. (2017) Interview, 04-04-2017

(34) Berry, E. (2011) Rally Defying Putin's Party Draws Tens of Thousands, New York Times, (online) available at:

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/world/europe/thousands-protest-in-moscow-russia-in-defiance-of-putin.html?_r=0 (accessed 04-05-2016); Kramer, A. & Herszenhorn, D (2011) Boosted by Putin, Russia's Middle Class Turns on Him, The New York Times, (online) available at:

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/12/world/europe/huge-moscow-rally-suggests-a-shift-in-public-mood.html?_r=0 (accessed 26-09-2016)

State-Propaganda's Role in Diverting Focus from the Economic Crisis

Although it is difficult to conclude that the political power elite exploits the engagement in Syria, deliberately or not, in order to divert the population from the economic crisis, Winkler observes that security-related issues are often highlighted when the economic situation is a political topic. Furthermore, Ball notes that the Russian regime has considered creating a domestic narrative of a great power foreign policy as crucial to secure legitimacy. However, Ball emphasises that when controlled domestic dangers are losing impact, foreign adventures become necessary, i.e. Ukraine and Syria. Ball forecasts that the temptation to exploit foreign adventures to ensure legitimacy is likely to increase due to Russia's declining economic situation which may potentially result in Putin being unable to deliver on his social contract with the Russian people.³⁵ Nissen points out that the regime needs to balance between two narratives: 1) the great power status, illustrated by the efficiency of the troops' deployment in Syria and the use of sophisticated military technology, such as cruise missiles launched from war ships and submarines, and 2) the narrative that the deployment and operationalisation of these weapon systems do not put stress on the national budget given the economic context.³⁶ Prominent media also agree that Syria is utilised to divert the population away from the economic crisis.³⁷

State propaganda accuses the West of imperialism and undermining the society with liberal ideas and subversion. Thus, the demonstrators in Kiev were portrayed as a CIA coup.³⁸ In relation to the mind-set, siloviki carry the Soviet heritage. Many will remember actual coups sponsored by the CIA such as Chile, Iran, the notorious coup attempt on Cuba, and the support to dissents groups in Eastern Europe. On one hand, this is a frequently held point of view among the greater population, and many regard CIA as the architect behind the collapse of the Soviet Union,³⁹ which may help explain the high degree of support for intervention in Syria. On the other hand, many also recognise the patterns from the old Soviet propaganda.⁴⁰ However, because the narratives are constantly repeated by an efficient Russian propaganda machine, many Russians still buy into

(35) Ball, Y. D. (2017) Protecting Falsehood with a Bodyguard of Lies: Putin's Use of Information Warfare, Center for Security Studies, ETN Zürich,

(36) Nissen, T. E. (2016) Russisk mediekrigsførelse omkring Syrienintervention, Rusland i Syrien, ed. C. Jensen, p.122

(37) Tharoor, I. (2015) Why Russia's Syria war is bad news for the U.S. (and why it isn't), The Washington Post, (online) available at: (accessed 04-05-2017); D. (2015) Putin's military gambits distract Russians from economic woes, The Irish Times, (online) available at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/eur-ope/putin-s-military-gambits-distract-russians-from-economic-woes-1.2478783> (accessed 04-05-2017)

(38) Shevardnadze, S (2014) US foreign aid agencies paid for Kiev street violence - ex-US agent Scott Rickard, Russia Today, (online) available at: <https://www.rt.com/shows/sophieco/ukraine-revolution-usa-support-246/> (accessed 27-09-2016)

(39) Braithwaite, 2014

(40) Kimer, 2017 interview

them.⁴¹ The fear of regime changes is existent in the Russian population as 25% regard the US as responsible for manipulating terrorist rebellions against the Assad.⁴² In the words of Foreign Minister Lavrov from 2014:

“Western leaders are publicly declaring that sanctions should destroy the economy and trigger popular protests . . . the West unequivocally demonstrates that it does not merely seek to change Russian policy . . . but to change the regime.”⁴³

Lavrov's quote is similar to the view of many Russian officials and experts. Russia is facing a wider threat of “hot spots” and instability around its borders. In regard to the coverage of Syria, former journalist and anchor of RT in Washington, Wahl, emphasises:

“When the crisis in Ukraine came to dominate the news coverage, this lack of context took on a sinister role. It is a role that has persisted to this day in Russian media's coverage of the war in Syria. The narrative wasn't just about morphing perceptions of America or the West—it was about misrepresenting a deadly conflict that directly involved Russia.”⁴⁴

Philip Petersen from the Potomac Foundation agrees with Wahl:

“Russian authorities understand information warfare as influencing consciousness of the masses as part of the rivalry between the Russian/Eurasian civilisation and the Atlantic civilisation led by the USA.”⁴⁵

The above quotes indicate that the agenda of the state-controlled media is to create resilience towards Western influence. In other words, the human mind has become a battlefield. Staun argues that due to the power elite's control of essential mass media, public opinion has changed to some extent, changed from having a positive perception of the West to a more suspicious and narrow version.⁴⁶ In this battlefield, Putin seems to have solid stance as 80% support President Putin and think of him as the right person to navigate Russia in times of war and conflict.⁴⁷ A sense of encirclement is widespread among the Russian population. This includes the belief that it is

(41) Felgenhauer, P (2016) Russia's Future: A Stability That Will Not Last, a Revolution That Will Not Win, Jamestown Foundation, (online) available at: [/https://jamestown.org/program/pavel-felgenhauer-russias-future-a-stability-that-will-not-last-a-revolution-that-will-not-win](https://jamestown.org/program/pavel-felgenhauer-russias-future-a-stability-that-will-not-last-a-revolution-that-will-not-win) (accessed 25-06-2017)

(42) Staun, J. (2016) Ruslands strategiske interesser i Syrien, Rusland i Mellemøsten, ed. Jensen, C., Forsvarsakademiet, Copenhagen, p. 65

(43) Monaghan, 2016, p.18

(44) Wahl, L. (2016) Discrediting the West - an insider's view of Russia's RT, The Institute for Statecraft, (online) available at: <http://www.statecraft.org.uk/research/discrediting-west-insiders-view-r> (accessed 05-04-2017)

(45) Petersen, P. (2016) Russian New Generation Warfare, PONTOMAC foundation, required slideshow from the conference at the Royal Danish Defence College

(46) Staun, 2016 Interview

(47) European Delegation to the Russian Federation, Daily Review of Russian Press, Moscow, 22 April 2016

“us against the US and its followers from the EU”, and that the West has the intention to steal Russia's natural resources. It is the impression that a strong leader is needed in order to counter the perceived threat from Western imperialism. This mood and Braithwaite's point that greatness to Russians is equal to grand armies and navies contribute to an understanding of why a VITSOIM poll from 15 December 2016 showed that the military forces enjoy the strongest support and approval of all institutions. The church and the state-controlled media came second and third. As the next section will illustrate, the Church and the media are synthesised in the sense that the media speak positively about the Church and the Church about the power elite who controls the media. However, while in relation to the polls, the average Russian might be patriotic and support policy conducted by the power elite, he is at the same time still bothered by the economic burden of the Crimea annexation and the Syrian campaign.⁴⁸ Many Russians cannot relate to Syria, and the few casualties result in worries about the engagement in Syria, which has mainly been portrayed as a struggle between the legitimate Syrian government and ISIS.⁴⁹ Moreover, another explanation can be found in the Russian counter-narratives to the Western media's coverage of Russia's engagement in Syria, as the following section will illustrate.

In the case of Syria, the West has condemned Russia for tolerating war crimes conducted by the Syrian regime, including the use of gas, barrel bombs, and intended targeting of hospitals, especially during the battle of Aleppo. In striking contrast to such accusations, the official Russian line is that air strikes “are not carried out in case of risk for lives of civilians ...our aviation does not even plan airstrikes if there is a possibility of civilian casualties”.⁵⁰ Another way of countering the accusations is by claiming that the US led war effort cannot be separated from the Russian war effort. This narrative is particularly notable in an article from 6 March 2017 with the headline *The Western media myth of two battles: “Aleppo is falling, Mosul liberated”*. Analysing this article, it becomes clear that the RT never mentions the accusations about war crimes, but solely intends to send the message that the Russian and the US led military efforts cannot be separated ethically:

“There is no guarantee that American bombs are any safer than Syrian or Russian bombs.”⁵¹

The following two sections analyse the diversionary aspects of the Russian declared withdrawal from Syria on 14 March 2016 and the following classical concert performed by the Mariinsky

(48) Kimer, 2017, Interview

(49) Bennetts, Marc. *Putin's War in Syria: Why Russians don't seem to care*. Newsweek. 10 October 2016

(50) McKew, M. (2017) Trump's Plan to Fight ISIS With Putin Isn't Just Futile. It's Dangerous, Politico, (online) available at: <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/02/trumps-plan-to-fight-isis-with-putin-isnt-just-futile-its-dangerous-214743>; Dearden, L. (2016) Russia denies killing civilians in Syrian air strikes while threatening to reveal alleged US 'collateral damage', the Independent, (online) available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/russia-denies-killing-civilians-in-syrian-air-strikes-while-threatening-to-reveal-alleged-us-a6814951.html>

(51) RT (2017) *The Western media myth of two battles: 'Aleppo is falling, Mosul liberated'*, Russia Today, (online) available at: <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/379616-aleppo-mosul-iraq-syria-media/> accessed 05-04-2017

Symphony Orchestra in Palmyra on 5 May 2016. The withdrawal was unexpected and caused confusion about the extent to which the Russians had actually withdrawn from Syria. Putin proclaimed that Russia had achieved its objectives: secure the Assad regime, liberate territories from ISIS, and create a platform to pursue peace talks. However, internationally, Gorenburg suggests that the declared withdrawal was a move to normalise Russian military presence in Syria, make it permanent, and send an international message about Russian effectiveness – i.e. pursuing great power foreign policy. With that said, the withdrawal might simply mean that Russia was unable to logistically continue to fight with the same intensity. Tsvetkova states that ships have brought in more material than they have returned.⁵²

Domestically, the withdrawal was intended to convince the Russian population that the campaign was over,⁵³ most importantly to eliminate any doubt that the engagement in Syria would turn into an “Afghan syndrome” or be associated with the wars in Chechnya. These concerns could be connected to polls showing that 87% felt relief when Putin marked the withdrawal.⁵⁴ Also, as Nissen notes on page 12, the Russian narrative of Syria is in a tension field which on one hand wants to demonstrate great power foreign policy and on the other hand to convince the Russian population that the engagement is not a burden on the budget. The indirect message of reducing military cost until it is really needed is especially interesting given the upcoming elections. The withdrawal may intend to remove focus from the economic situation by portraying Russia as a victor, at the same time allowing the funds used on the military engagement in Syria to be invested in economic growth to better the Russian population. The promise by Prime Minister Medvedev about more social investments in Siberia and rural Russia is a case in point.⁵⁵

Another noteworthy event in Syria is the classical concert performed by the Mariinsky Symphony Orchestra in Palmyra on 5 May.⁵⁶ In addition to representing a triumphant celebration of the victorious Russian campaign in Syria after the conquest of this historic and strategically important city, the concert may have been intended to divert the attention of the Russian population from the economic crisis. A concert in a newly conquered territory signals control and military supremacy. Also, the concert may signal some kind of superior Russian culture by connecting classical music to the historical ruins of Palmyra. Projecting this kind of cultural image serves to distance Russian culture not only from ISIS, but also from the West. As earlier elaborated, Western culture

(52) European Delegation to the Russian Federation, 2016

(53) Gorenburg, D. (2016) There is no Russian Withdrawal from Syria, War on the Rocks, (online) available at <http://warontherocks.com/2016/03/there-is-no-russian-withdrawal-from-syria/> (accessed 03-05-2016)

(54) Tsvetkova, M. (2016) Exclusive: Russia, despite draw down, shipping more to Syria than removing, Reuters, (online) available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-supplies-idUSKCNOWWODJ> (accessed 03-05-2016)

(55) Krasilnikov, S. (2016) Russian PM wants National Wealth Fund used on life-changing projects support, TASS, (online) available at: tass.ru/en/economy/870907.pdf (accessed 09-05-2016)

(56) Rosenberg, S. (2016) Russia's Valery Gergiev conducts concert in Palmyra ruins, BBC, (online) available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36211449> (accessed 05-05-2016)

is framed and perceived as nihilistic and profit-orientated with a liberal mind-set undermining traditional and "true" values. The concert shall thus illustrate that Russian culture is superior to Western culture.⁵⁷

The Orthodox Church

The Russian Orthodox Church plays an important role in conveying messages to the Russian population about the country's great power identity, autocracy, traditional values, and involvement in Syria. The Church functions as a moral voice by sending the message that the engagement in Syria is a virtuous act, meant to save Christian minorities. Spokesmen for the Church not only picture Putin as the saviour of Christianity, but also stress that the Christian minorities are under Assad's patronage, thus providing an additional argument to keep Assad in power.⁵⁸ Moreover, the Church's voice of morality and the narrative of Russia's engagement as humanitarian also counter the aforementioned accusations about tolerating the Syrian regime's war crimes and violations of human rights. Priests frequently appear in the media blessing the Air Forces operating in Syria, implying that the Church is also integrated in the military. In September 2015, the Russian Orthodox Church's Patriarch Kirill said:

"The fight with terrorism is a holy battle and today our country is perhaps the most active force in the world fighting it."⁵⁹

The holy battle implies the importance of Russian intervention in Syria as something beyond humanity and something existential, i.e. a forceful justification. This helps explain why Putin pictures himself as a protector of conservative and "true" Christian values and why Patriarch Kirill has called Putin a miracle from God.⁶⁰ The miracle reference is in opposition to the thoughts of the 1990s, rejecting anything connected to Western values and not being traditional Russian:

"I should say it openly as a patriarch who must only tell the truth, not paying attention to the political situation or propaganda, you (Putin) personally played a massive role in correcting this crooked twist of our history."⁶¹

The view of Russia as the last bastion of Christianity is firmly recognised by the Russian population who to a great extent rejects Western values. Another example of the Orthodox Church's

(57) Marwick, R. (2017) A New Cold War? Arena Magazine, (online) available at: <https://arena.org.au/a-new-cold-war-by-roger-markwick/> (accessed 25-06-2017)

(58) Melton, M. (2017) Russian Orthodox Church's Flawed Syria Policy, Providence,

(59) Al Arabiya (2015) Russian church: The fight in Syria is a 'holy war', Al Arabiya, (online) available at: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/09/30/Church-says-Russia-fighting-holy-battle-in-Syria.html> (accessed 04-05-2016)

(60) Bryanski, G (2016) Russian patriarch calls Putin era "miracle of God", Reuters, (online) available at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-putin-religion-idUKTRE81722Y20120208> (accessed 04-05-2016)

(61) Ibid.

role in promoting the policy of the power elite is found in a TASS article from 17 February 2017 in which Patriarch Kirill said:

“All interested in conquering terrorism forces should act together and coordinately, pursuing the aim they openly declare.”⁶²

This quote promotes the Russian objective of establishing a Joint Terrorism Operation (JTO) with the US in Syria. For a further analysis of the JTO, please refer to Analysis III. In this connection, Kirill stated the following to RT on 18 November 2016 in relation to President Trump's statements on improving dialog with Russia:

“This kind of rhetoric opens opportunity for cooperation and I hope that this will be the way, in which Russia and the US cooperate in order to resolve the threat [of terrorism].”⁶³

The same narrative was expressed by Archbishop Ilarion who was interviewed by RT on 25 February 2016:

“Global leaders ought to overcome political dissent and close the ranks in fighting international terrorism as the challenge to mankind at large.”⁶⁴

The author attended a side event on Russian religious diplomacy in Syria held by the Russian Federation and the World Russian People's Council during the 34th session of the Human Rights Council. During the side event, it was stressed that the multi-religious Russia has the best potential to solve religious conflicts in the ME. This statement was supported by illustrations of the efforts to rebuild churches and mosques, and by stressing Russian improvements with respect to strengthening religious interrelations, something that cannot be compared to other countries. Russia, despite draw down, shipping more to Syria than removing

The Church assists the power elite in providing stability by promoting the power elite's policy in exchange for funding, property, and portraying the Church positively in the media. The strategic value of this unholy alliance is illustrated by the increased number of people who identify with Christian Orthodoxy, a number that has doubled since the 1990s. Now, it is estimated that 75% are Orthodox. However, one should be cautious with respect to these numbers as a study from 2008 shows that only 7% attended church once a month.⁶⁵

(62) TASS (2017) (online) Developments around Syria may trigger global conflict, fears Patriarch Kirill. Available at: <http://tass.com/world/857231> (accessed 25-06-2017)

(63) RT (2016) Trump's pre-election remarks 'give hope' for dialog with Russia - Patriarch Kirill to RT, (online) available at: <https://www.rt.com/news/367453-russian-patriarch-trump-interview/> (accessed 25-06-2017)

(64) RT (2016) World needs single antiterrorist coalition – Russian Orthodox Church spokesman, (online) available at: <https://www.rt.com/news/333573-russian-church-antiterrorist-coalition/> (accessed 25-06-2017)

(65) Strokan, M. (2016) Church-State Relations and Property Restitutions in Modern Russia, Center of International Studies

ANALYSIS II

Chechnya

Russia is one of the largest providers of foreign fighters to Syria, many of them originating from Caucasus and Chechnya. Fighters returning from Syria to Chechnya are likely to cause instability and act as a threat to Russian security. From this perspective, Russia's engagement in Syria can be explained as counterterrorism abroad, in the sense that Chechens and other Russian Muslims fighting with ISIS in Syria should be neutralised before they return home.

There are Muslim groups in many others part of Russia and most of the radical Islamist insurgent groups (in Northern Caucasus) have sworn allegiance to ISIS and thus pose a terrorist threat. However, the Chechen nation represents the most archetypical example of Russia's problem with its Muslim minorities.⁶⁶ Chechnya has fought two recent wars with Russia for independence and the fear of secession still looms strongly among Russians. In addition, many Chechens appear to have become radicalised by the experience of the two wars. Although the degree of radicalisation is open for debate, the grievances against Russians are certainly present in the mind-sets of both the younger and older generations. The old generation carries memories and experiences from the deportation of all Chechens to Central Asia in 1944, and the youngest generations of Chechens have experienced nothing but war and destruction.⁶⁷ Caucasus is the most conflicted area in the former USSR with this region seeing five out of nine conflicts.⁶⁸ Magnusson points out some common patterns in the Caucasian conflicts including Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia/South Ossetia and Georgia, Chechnya and Russia, and North and South Ossetia. The conflicts are frozen, unresolved and interstate conflicts, including the conflict in Chechnya although Russia claims that the situation has been normalised. The conflicts cannot be limited to the respective borders, as growing tensions spread to other regions and areas. An example is the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 in the conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia. In addition, Russian authorities are blaming the Georgian government for providing Chechen insurgents with a safe haven in the Pankisi Valley.⁶⁹ There is a considerable religious dimension to these conflicts as some radicalised extremists seek to establish a caliphate in Caucasus.⁷⁰

(66) International Crisis Group (2016) The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad? International Crisis Group (online) available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/north-caucasus/north-caucasus-insurgency-and-syria-exported-jihad> (accessed 25-06-2017)

(67) Magnusson, L. (2005) Conference Paper Searching for peace in Chechnya – Swiss initiatives and experiences, Swiss Peace, (online) available at: <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?ots591=0c54e3b3-1e9c-be1e-2c24-a6a8c7060233&lng=en&id=26646> (accessed 07-03-2016) p. 10

(68) Magnusson, L. (2016) Conflict Cases in the Caucasus. Characteristics, Consequences, Causes and CR (Conflict Resolution), Malmö Högskola, (online) available at: https://www.academia.edu/22147383/Conflict_Cases_in_the_Caucasus._Characteristics_consequences_causes_and_CR_Conflict_Resolution._Web_lecture_Caucasus_Studies_9_February_2016_Malm%C3%B6_University (accessed 07-03-2016)

(69) Magnusson, L. 2005, p. 10

(70) Magnusson, 2016

Four common vital factors can be pinpointed in the Caucasus region as an explanation for the conflicts: the structural factor, the political factor, the historic factor, and the external factor. The structural factor is based on the collapse of the USSR and the subsequent new rivalling state building projects (Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia). In the creation of the three new states, the historical right to sovereignty of some areas were not recognised, including Abkhazia, Chechnya, Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Politically, the self-determination projects have also been used rhetorically by leaders to obtain selfish goals. In some cases, the leaders were social entrepreneurs rather than leaders of an independence movement. Therefore, the self-determination card has been used for local elites to fight for power and scarce resources. Historically, the external factor dates way back as Russia, Turkey, and Iran have competed for influence in Caucasus many times throughout history. In the current situation, we can see how Turkey wants to establish links to the Turkish Azerbaijan and Iran's ambitions to re-establish links to Southern Caucasus. Also, the US has shown interest in Caucasus in terms of energy and strategic military bases and in relation to Georgia's desire to obtain NATO and EU membership.⁷¹

Potential Uprising in Chechnya in the Near Future

If Assad's forces are defeated, Syria could be transformed into an anarchy of rivalling war lords, criminal factions and terrorist groups. Such anarchy could be a hot spot for terrorist attacks targeting Russia and might also serve as a safe haven from which terrorist attacks could be planned and staged.⁷² Even if the regime survives, foreign fighters returning from Syria to North Caucasus - and particularly Chechnya - could pose a severe security threat to Russia. The conflicts in Syria and Iraq have attracted more than 2,000 jihadists from Caucasus and the second most spoken language among foreign ISIS militants is Russian.⁷³ Many of these are leading figures among the Islamic fighters and have sworn allegiance to ISIS. Some have already returned to Caucasus joining terrorist cells and many more will return within the coming years. The combat experience jihadists will have by this time pose severe complications for the communities which they return to. Kramer estimates that the current, relatively stable situation in Chechnya (compared to the beginning of the 2000s) may turn into a potentially large-scale conflict as the influx of ISIS-affiliated jihadists increases. Additionally, the influx might also inspire radical Islamic terrorist groups in Chechnya and other groups affiliated with the Caucasian Emirate (CE). There is a risk that the activities may

(71) Ibid.

(72) Staun (2016) Ruslands indenrigspolitiske interesser i Syrien, Rusland i Mellemøsten, ed. C. Jensen, Forsvarsakademiet, Copenhagen

(73) Sokolov, D. (2016) Russia's other Pipeline: Migration and Radicalisation in the North Caucasus, the Wilson Center Kenan Cable No. 17, (online) available at: http://www.kennan-russiafile.org/2016/08/29/russias-other-pipeline-migration-and-radicalization-in-the-north-caucasus/?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiWkdNMlpURTBNeK5sTnpabClsluQiOiJBRmg1K0VxcFBcL01KQ1YzMTZxUTJRbVFRSGFBTO9XRTNoa3VBXC9vMGdPM0hKbGpod3h0cTZVclRldDNuTjhtcXF6WHZmZmFkMTZLSiFzNDZZM2xYXFrZ2dvdKJ3Z0t6NEJVM_GJqeIJTM0wwPSJ9 (accessed 26-09-2016)

even reach an international level. The CE has been associated with the planning of terrorist attacks in Germany, Belgium, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, the US, Turkey, and Denmark.⁷⁴

Kramer points out that Syria and Iraq have been a safe haven for those who have been in danger of being killed by Russian security forces. Others are motivated by the possibility of a Russian humiliation in the case of an Islamic victory. Still others perceive Syria and Iraq as core battle-grounds in the broader attempt to found an Islamic Caliphate in Caucasus and enforce Sunni dominance in the regions in Caucasus which are temporarily dominated by Shia political elites.⁷⁵ The journey from Chechnya to Syria includes crossing the borders of Azerbaijan and Turkey. The foreign fighters have joined a wide spectre of Islamist groups, but the only group affiliated with CE is Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA). The group is fighting in the Aleppo province. JMA is led by Salahuddin al-Shishani, and the group mainly includes Chechens and fighters from North Caucasus.⁷⁶ However, many Chechens have left JMA and joined ISIS, mainly for two reasons: 1) ISIS appears more dynamic and prestigious, and 2) it is easier to fight for a caliphate in Syria rather than Caucasus for the simple reason that ISIS-controlled substantial territory has impressive conventional military capabilities and a large economic income.

The Chechens' reputation is also noteworthy. The Chechens have gotten a fear-inspiring combat reputation and are considered to have contributed greatly to the success of ISIS.⁷⁷ As a consequence, Chechens have risen in ranks within the ISIS hierarchy, such as the prominent field commander Abu Umar al-Shishani, Muslim al-Shishani (who is described as having "Che Guevara status" among the Chechens) and Akhmed Chatayev.⁷⁸ Chatayev fought in both Chechen Wars and currently functions as a recruiter of Caucasian fighters.⁷⁹ The fact that Chechens have reached high-ranking positions may make it easier for them to direct terrorism towards Russia. In December 2014, 25 people were killed and 40 wounded in Grozny as security forces clashed with guerrilla fighters affiliated with the CE. Soon after this incidence, a leading figure within the CE, Emir Hamzat swore allegiance to ISIS. Hamzat and other leading figures are trying to organise fighters returning from Syria in an effective fighting force. In the long term, this force may be able to enrol into a full-scale civil war, not only in Chechnya, but throughout Northern Caucasus.⁸⁰

One implication of changing sides from al-Qaeda to ISIS is access to the compelling amount of resources ISIS possesses compared to al-Qaeda, in terms of financial means and weaponry. In terms of countering the threat from ISIS, Kramer points out that security forces have few options

(74) Ibid., 2015

(75) Ibid., 2015

(76) Ibid., 2015

(77) Ibid., 2015

(78) Ali, H. 2014, Meet ISIS' new breed of Chechen militants, Al Arabiya News, (online) available at: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/analysis/2014/08/31/Meet-ISIS-new-breed-of-Chechen-Militants-.html> (accessed 07-03-2016)

(79) Kramer, 2015

(80) Ibid.

to eliminate the threat on the short run. He suggests that exploiting the rivalry between al-Qaeda and ISIS-associated groups might be the best option.⁸¹

ANALYSIS III

The Grand Strategy

The aim of this section is to put Russia's involvement in Syria within a greater context by looking at Russia's Grand Strategy. The definition of the Grand Strategy is as follows:

"The overall vision of a state's national security goals and determination of the most appropriate means by which to achieve these goals. Grand Strategy can be viewed as a three-step-process. First, foreign policy officials must determine their state's vital security goals. Second, they must identify the main source of threats to these goals. And finally, they must ascertain the key political, economic, and military resources that can be employed as foreign policy options to realize their national security goals."⁸²

Regarding this definition of Grand Strategy, the categories to look for are as follows: security goals, main sources of threats, and key political, economic and military resources. The Russian security goal is to re-establish Russia as a great power and thus be able to challenge the dominant position of the US in the international system. Russia promotes a multipolar world order that would allow Russia to exert influence on essential international issues. Within this desirable world order, Russia would seek out other great powers to recognise Russian dominance over non-NATO states in the former Soviet sphere.⁸³ According to the Russian security strategy from 2009-2020, the importance of the US's recognition of Russia is formulated as follows:

"Russia will strive to build an equitable and valuable strategic partnership with the United States of America, on the basis of shared interests and taking into account the key influence of Russian-American relations on the international situation as a whole."⁸⁴

The aim for a strategic partnership with the US is illustrated in the Russian quest for a Joint Terrorism Collaboration (JTC) which may be the final objective connected to the Russian engagement in Syria. The JTC would improve Russia's ability to fight terrorism as intelligence sharing and military coordination would be included. However, more importantly this would mean US recognition of Russia as a credible provider of security and tie Russian and U.S together.

Seen from Moscow's perspective, the main threat to such goals is the fact that Russia is not sufficiently recognised by the US and NATO as a great power with legitimate interests. Moreover,

(81) Ibid., 2015

(82) Schmidt, B. (2012) *Primacy of national security, foreign policy*: Foreign Policy, Smith, S., Hadfield, A. & Dunne, T., Oxford University Press, third edition, p. 210

(83) Trenin, 2016

(84) Vasilla 13 (2016) *Russia's National Security Strategy to 2020*, Wikidot, (online) available at: <http://rustrans.wikidot.com/russia-s-national-security-strategy-to-2020> (accessed 26-09- 2016)

in Russia's view, the West is trying to diminish Russia's sphere of interest, and the Ukraine crisis has exacerbated the suspicion towards the West in the sense that new NATO members and the US are suspected of working to increase the Alliance's potential of threatening Russia's sphere of interest.⁸⁵ It is also Moscow's perception that the West and Russia are engaged in a political struggle in which the West is trying to roll back Russia's sphere of interest. The Ukraine crisis has deepened Russia's suspicions of NATO, and Russia believes that NATO and the US are using the Ukraine crisis as a pretext to elevate the Alliance's potential of threatening Russia's sphere of influence.⁸⁶ Incidentally, the word "crisis" might fail to accurately describe the situation in Ukraine as crisis relates to a temporary situation rather than the more permanent state of conflict in Ukraine. The fear of NATO enlargement is formulated in the security strategy as:

"A determining aspect of relations with NATO remains the fact that plans to extend the Alliance's military infrastructure to Russia's borders, and attempts to endow NATO with global functions that go counter to norms of international law are unacceptable to Russia."⁸⁷

These functions and norms are manifested in the US's and EU's support for democracy and human rights which in Russia's view is a tool of foreign policy being more effective in destroying authoritarian regimes than constructing democratic rule in the ruins of these regimes.⁸⁸

"increasing global competition and the growing crisis potential sometimes creates a risk of destructive and unlawful use of "soft power" and human rights concepts to exert political pressure on sovereign states, interfere in their internal affairs, destabilize their political situation, manipulate public opinion, including under the pretext of financing cultural and human rights projects abroad."⁸⁹

The war in Iraq in 2003 was fought without a UN Security Council resolution, thereby signalling to Russia that the strongest state is not restrained by international law. That this war was initiated without a UN Security Council mandate reinforced Russia in its realist interpretation of a global state of anarchy, where only the strongest survive, and it was also a reminder that Russia's voice does not matter to the US. Furthermore, the US reasons for initiating the Iraqi War may have been a concern to Russia. George Bush declared in 2003 that the invasion of Iraq and the subsequent democratisation of the country would

(85) Danish Defence Intelligence Service Intelligence (2015) DDIS, Intelligence Risk Assessment 2015, DDIS, (online) available at: https://feddis.dk/SiteCollectionDocuments/FE/EfterretningsmaessigeRisikovurderinger/Risikovurdering2015_EnglishVersion.pdf (accessed 19-04-2016)

(86) Ibid., 2015

(87) Vasilla 13, 2016

(88) Trenin, 2016

(89) Putin, V. (2013) Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, (online) available at: http://archive.mid.ru//brp_4.nsf/0/76389fec168189ed44257b2e0039b16d (accessed 29-09-2016)

“be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution... Therefore, the United States has adopted a new policy, a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East. This strategy requires the same persistence and energy and idealism we have shown before.”⁹⁰

To an autocratic state, a global democratic revolution must be seen as disturbing news. Seeking to overcome the perceived threats, Russia has tried to demonstrate its capability and willingness to use military instruments to obtain its strategic goals. In this sense, the engagement in Syria aims at proving to the West that democracy promotion and regime change can be blocked or, *if successful*, will lead to a similar situation as in Iraq. In the ME, Russia is counteracting the US's capabilities by deploying and conducting strikes on the Syrian opposition, including groups in favour of the US.

Strategically, in terms of reducing NATO's attention and resources, Russian engagement in Syria serves to divide the European members of NATO concerning the question of what to prioritise – east (Ukraine) or south (the ME). This division was clear during the annual security conference in Munich 2016. The EU faces security challenges at its southern borders, brought about by turmoil in the ME. In regard to ISIS and the threat of terror attacks such as the recent Paris attacks, France's first priority is - perhaps not surprisingly - fighting ISIS and radicalisation everywhere, while Germany, the Nordic countries, the Central and some West European states see the refugee crisis as the primary existential threat to the EU, thus prioritising an end to the war in Syria. To many East European EU and NATO members, Europe's main threat lies in Eastern Europe - in the words of the Polish Prime Minister:

“we need more bases, and especially infrastructure of NATO in our part of Europe.”⁹¹

Russia exploits the European disagreement regarding prioritisation and lack of political unity for the purpose of creating disintegration in Europe.⁹² By disintegrating the EU, Russia would have an immense advantage, as it would be easier to influence a personal bilateral relationship than an institution-based European Commission. Thus, gaining influence in former Soviet areas becomes more achievable. The refugee crisis caused by the conflict in Syria benefits anti-EU parties,

(90) Bush, G. REMARKS BY PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH AT THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY, national endowment for democracy, (online) available at: <http://www.ned.org/remarks-by-president-george-w-bush-at-the-20th-anniversary/> (accessed 29-09-2016)

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(92) Foster, P. (2016) Russia accused of clandestine funding of European parties as US conducts major review of Vladimir Putin's strategy, The Telegraph, (online) available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/>

economically sponsored by Russia, e.g. Front National in France.⁹³ Another example is Hungary, where Viktor Orban's government and the opposition party *Jobbik* have demonstrated ideological proximity to Russia's political system, causing the US Congress to initiate a major review of the extent of Russian clandestine funding of anti-EU parties.⁹⁴

“One of the core issues of the Syrian conflict is the amount of competing interests. Domestically, the opposition groups are numerous and many of these groups are supported by various international actors. Internationally, we can see a wide range of great powers engaged in the conflict - some militarily, others economically or diplomatically. The point is that each engaged great power has distinguished interests in the conflict, and those who have or are close to having obtained their objectives come into conflict with those who have obtained nothing.”⁹⁵

Politically, Syria works to increase Russian political power as, besides Iran, Putin is the only ally of Assad and thus a vital key player in the negotiations of a peace settlement.⁹⁶ However, as the quote above illustrates, other engaged states will seek to obtain their goals too. Iran has managed to secure the corridor to Lebanon and thus its link to Hezbollah. Turkey has obtained a buffer zone in Northern Syria, while - as the prospect of Assad stepping down seems unlikely - Qatar and Saudi Arabia stand out as the big losers. With that said, this might also prompt Qatar and Saudi Arabia to continue their support of rebel groups in order to obstruct Russian and Iranian achievement. However, it might be that Russian diplomatic leverage may be bartered for Western concessions, e.g. that sanctions are lifted and Crimea recognised in exchange for Assad stepping down. This scenario would increase Russian influence along its borders, as it would support Russia's right to influence its former client states. At the same time, it might imply recognition of Russia's great power status due to the involvement in key issues and acceptance of Russian interests, and finally, a lifting of sanctions may help to stabilise the Russian economy.⁹⁷ Recent events imply that this scenario might unfold due to two drivers.

(93) Harding, Luke (2016) We should be aware of Russia's links with Europe's right. The Guardian, (online) available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/08/russia-europe-right-putin-front-national-eu> (accessed 05-05-2016)

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(95) Birladianu, N. (2017) Interview 11 March 2017, Geneva

(96) Madeira, 2016, Personal Email Correspondence

(97) Trenin, 2016

First, former French President Francois Hollande said that he wants the sanctions lifted⁹⁸ while the French lower house called for a stop to the sanctions.⁹⁹ Second, in 2012 the Russian ambassador in Paris said as follows about President Assad: "That is to say, he is accepting to go – but to go in a civilised manner."¹⁰⁰ The fact that the words comes from the ambassador may indicate that Russia wanted to test the response, and that the relation between Assad and Putin is unsatisfactory. It is in this context that the second reason for the declared withdrawal assumes an underlying message to President Assad that "you will do as you are told or else."

It is also a vital point that Russia is more flexible than Iran when it comes to a regime change. Iran needs a pro-Shiite leader who can ensure the Iranian corridor to Lebanon, while Russia simply needs a pro-Russian leader. Even though some EU states are in favour of lifting the sanctions, others are against, and the US may well oppose it. Therefore, Syria has become a battleground for an endurance power play between Russia and the US/the EU, which may only be ended by recognition of Russian great power status or by one of the two sides being forced to give up.

Despite Russia's success in breaking its strategic isolation and the advance in Syria against ISIS and the Syrian opposition in general, the situation might change. Although the Syrian Army is advancing, the six-year-long civil war has impacted the army's manpower and limited the room for mistakes.¹⁰¹ The Syrian regime is de facto dependent on continuous assistance from Russia and Iran. At the moment, there appears to be little risk of a renewed Afghan syndrome, as casualties are low and not having a significant impact on the population. In this sense, the breaking point might be remote, but another crucial consideration is the relation between time and funds: for how long will Russia be able and willing to keep investing in the Syrian War?

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(99) Vinocour, N. (2016) France Lower House calls on the EU to lift Russian sanctions, Politico, (online) available at: <http://www.politico.eu/article/frances-lower-house-calls-on-eu-to-lift-russia-sanctions-russian-prime-minister/> (accessed on 03-04-2016)

(100) Ahram Online (2012) Assad is ready to leave, Russian ambassador in Paris says, Syria denies, Ahram Online, (online) available at: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/48217/World/Region/Assad-is-ready-to-leave,-Russian-ambassador-in-Par.aspx> (accessed 29-09-2016)

(101) DDIS, 2015

CHAPTER III

Conclusion

- *What explains the Russian power elite's support for Russia's involvement in Syria?*

Putin is the key decision-maker within the Russian power elite which consists of a small group loyal to Putin, based of client-relations with loyalty towards the group being a key practice. Putin and the power elite also share the same mind-set which embraces the restoration of Russia's greatness and the notion that the US is the main rival. While the Soviet Union's legitimacy was supported by the organised ideology of Communism, the current regime needs the support and legitimacy provided by the organised ideology of great power status. The engagement in Syria helps sustain and increase this status.

- *Is the Russian engagement in Syria utilised to divert the attention of the Russian population from the current economic crisis by conducting great power foreign policy in Syria?*

The Russian regime is pursuing an information strategy for the purpose of diverting the attention of the Russian population from the economic crisis by appealing to the increasing status of great power, provided by the engagement in Syria, in order to bolster the regime's legitimacy. In doing so, the regime must balance between demonstrating great power capabilities and convincing the population that these actions do not affect the national budget. The regime might be tempted to further foreign engagements, as the deprived Russian economy challenges Putin's ability to deliver on the social contract to the population.

- *Can fighters returning from Syria to Chechnya cause instability?*

Fighters returning with combat experience and radicalised ideas have at this point started to create problems to the communities which they have returned to. In case of a defeat of Syrian government forces, Syria might turn into an anarchy of rivalling warlords and terrorist groups which may organise attacks that target Russia. In addition, given that Chechens have reached high-ranking positions it may make it easier for them to direct terrorism towards Russia. Even if the regime survives, more than 2,000 foreign fighters returning from Syria to North Caucasus and particularly Chechnya could pose a severe security threat to Russia.

- *How can the involvement in Syria be understood in relation to a broader understanding of the Russian Grand Strategy?*

Russia's Grand Strategy goals include a re-establishment of great power status, capable of matching the US in the desired context of a multipolar world in which the US recognises Russia interests, great power status, and Russia's right to dominate and influence non-NATO states within the former sphere of the Soviet Union. The perceived main threat to these goals includes a NATO expansion that would increase the threat-potential of NATO against Russia while the lack of great power recognition would threaten Russian interests.

Despite the economic crisis and sanctions, Russia has shown willingness to fight and has gained leverage in the Syrian negotiations which can be used to obtain and defend these main security goals. Syria functions as a battleground for a protracted power play between Russia and the US/ the EU, which may only be ended by recognition of Russian great power status or by one of the two sides being forced to give up.

In conclusion, Russia's motives for involvement in Syria may – seen from a domestic point of view - be explained by a survival instinct to sustain great power identity and territorial integrity and – from an international point of view – by a desire to sustain and increase its great power status. On balance, Russia seems quite successful in managing these motives. Given the economic crisis, the structural challenge, and the threats in Caucasus, Russia is punching above weight while staying afloat – but for how long?

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