

## Политология. Международные отношения

УДК 327.8

*D. Averde*

### RUSSIA'S 'STRATEGIC NARRATIVES': THE CASE OF SYRIA AND THE 'ARAB SPRING'

Russia's governing elite promotes a distinctive set of strategic narratives to influence how it is perceived in the world and positively influence public opinion abroad, advancing a Russian vision of the international system, while aiming to reinforce its legitimacy at home. These narratives have often explicitly or implicitly challenged the narratives and policies of the Western liberal democracies, in terms of international legal norms, of social-ethical values and of Russia's status in the international order. Western academic and policy sources have devoted increased attention to the Russian government's use of information tools and strategies in support of its political and diplomatic efforts to promote these narratives. This article aims to examine how information management, carefully targeted at the operational level to promote Russian interests in specific situations, is linked with the dissemination of strategic narratives that seek to underpin key broader policy objectives in the case of the Arab Spring and the conflict in Syria.

*Keywords:* Russia, strategic narratives, Arab Spring, Syria, sovereignty, security, disinformation.

DOI: 10.35634/2587-9030-2019-3-3-317-325

#### Introduction

Russia's governing elite promotes a distinctive set of strategic narratives to influence how it is perceived in the world and positively influence public opinion abroad, advancing a Russian vision of the international system, while aiming to reinforce its domestic legitimacy. These narratives have often explicitly challenged the narratives and policies of the Western liberal democracies, both in terms of international legal norms and of social-ethical values.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the Western academic and policy sources have also devoted increased attention to the Russian government's use of information tools and strategies in support of its political and diplomatic efforts [7; 20; 10; 12; 6; 4; 21]. Commentators have described this phenomenon variously as 'disinformation', 'information warfare', 'perception management' or 'strategic communication', arguing that in the Russian context 'disinformation' entails the 'active creation and communication of meaning that is "synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power"' [17, P. 32]. At the same time, leading Russian officials frequently point to the West's own information campaign, aimed at undermining Russia's sovereignty and threatening its security.<sup>2</sup>

This article aims to examine how information management, carefully targeted at the operational level to promote Russian interests in specific situations, is linked with the dissemination of strategic narratives that seek to influence the target audience's view of the world and underpin key broader policy objectives. Following Pynnöniemi [16, P. 216], we refer to this phenomenon as the Russian government's 'information counter-struggle' (*informatsionnoe protivoborstvo*) and analyse it in the context of the Arab Spring, and in particular the conflict in Syria. We focus on three aspects of Russia's strategic narratives, in the area of international law, international society and the international order.

This subject presents difficult methodological challenges to scholarly research. The first is assessing empirical information and subjecting it to proper critical analysis. 'Disinformation' activities can be difficult to trace and identify; carefully selected ideas and opinions may be interwoven with factual narratives, making it difficult to assess the veracity of open-source information. Second, Western policy commentators and practitioners have tended to view Russian information activities as 'constituting an exceptional security threat', so that 'the issue is often studied according to a particular logic which is often isolated from the broader strategic context in which it features'[15]. Relatively little research has been done on establishing a conceptual and methodological framework that takes account of the future evolution of the link between strategic

<sup>1</sup> Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's speech to the UN General Assembly on 23.09.2016 sums up many of the arguments put forward by Russian officials since the onset of the Arab Spring; see [Appendix](#) below.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Zakharova's comment on the OPCW inspectors' visit to Douma, Syria, 21.04.2018, at [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3185241](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3185241)

narratives and the ‘information counter-struggle’. How can the ‘coercive tool’ of information [16, P. 216] be understood within the conceptual framework of strategic narratives? The modest aim of this paper is not to assign blame to the protagonists in the political disputes that have bedevilled the Syria conflict but to examine how these phenomena have unfolded and to draw some initial conclusions which might inform further study on the topic.

### **Strategic narratives: the case of Syria and the Arab Spring**

The concept of strategic narratives has been developed to examine the promotion of international influence in the contemporary environment and examine how narratives can be integrated into theoretical arguments about structure and agency in the international system. Through strategic narratives, major actors try to shape understanding of international affairs and justify their actions in order to achieve their political objectives, as well as persuading other actors to accept their views on the international environment. The concept also acknowledges that strategic communication in international affairs is often a matter of contestation, not just benign attraction [15], as recognised in the concept of ‘soft power’. Debates about Russia’s role in the contemporary international order and how shifts in this order affect Russia’s behaviour – its views on who the main actors are in this order, how this order should function, and how Russia should address major challenges or crises – may be examined within this strategic narratives framework [13, P. 111-112]. With deliberation about the evolution of the current world order becoming increasingly important in global political discourse, sovereign countries able to influence discourse among states may occupy a privileged position in deciding the rules and norms within international society [3, P. 217, 223].

### **International law**

We argue that, while Russian narratives have not developed into a coherent ideology, they do aim to promote certain legal norms within a pluralist international order. One of the key aspects of Russia’s strategic narratives in the Syria conflict, and in the Arab Spring more generally, is its criticism of the Western liberal democracies’ attempts to undermine the key legal norms of sovereignty, non-intervention and sovereign equality, which accord to all states governance rights in the international system, and thus investment in the rules of international society, and rights of domestic autonomy, including self-determination and non-intervention [18, P. 71]. In Russian eyes, the interpretation by Western governments of the Arab Spring as primarily a struggle for democracy was flawed, as it did not take into account the ambitions of sectarian extremist groups in the wider region, and the potential implications in terms of the collapse of Syria’s sovereignty. Russian narrative consistently expressed ‘fears over the possible disintegration of Syria as a sovereign, independent, multiconfessional and multiethnic state that regime change may bring about’ [2, P. 820].

As the Syria conflict has unfolded during the third and fourth presidential administrations of Vladimir Putin, the broader implications of Russia’s position on sovereignty and intervention, and its differences with the liberal human rights norms appealed to by the Western democracies, have become a central issue. Foreign minister Sergei Lavrov has argued that interpreting human rights standards should rest with sovereign states and not be imposed by external states and organisations, and has repeatedly called for commonly accepted international legal norms to be observed to ensure sovereign equality among states (see [Appendix](#)). The UN has become an arena for bitter dispute, with Russia calling for the legal norms enshrined in the UN Charter and contemporary international law [2, P. 830] to be observed. The refusal of Russia’s governing elite to accept that external standards of legitimacy may be invoked to justify attempts by the Western powers to influence or change the political structure of states has become a *leitmotif* of Russian foreign policy narratives as Moscow’s relations with the West have deteriorated.

### **International society**

As established by the English School of international relations theory, there is a ‘society of states’ in the international system; order among sovereign states ‘is sustained via international institutions that involve established social practices of interaction’ [3, P. 222]. Russia defends the legitimacy of its ideas and beliefs as central to these social practices. Having been denied integration into Western clubs, Russia has not only turned to competitive policies but has also tried to ‘develop new, more positive images by contributing to global governance while maintaining distinctive identities’ [11, P. 67]. Engagement in international social practices

also has an influence on domestic society in terms of forging a consensus; one scholar suggests that the strategic narrative which emphasises rivalry with the West ‘has a constitutive effect on interests and collective identity among the elite and the public alike, which means the narrative’s power is also of the *structuring* kind’ [20, P. 577]. It is worth noting that the Russian Federation Information Security Doctrine of 2016 – as well as counteracting information campaigns for military and political purposes which ‘seek to undermine the sovereignty, political and social stability and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation and its allies, and pose a threat to international peace, global and regional security’ – also emphasises the aim of ‘neutralizing the information impact intended to erode Russia's traditional moral and spiritual values’ [16, P. 221]<sup>3</sup>. Put simply, in seeking to develop a specific Russian model based on unique national traditions widely shared in society, Russia’s political elite ‘has adopted a strategy of identity management... with the result that Putin now presents Russia as superior to Western nations on a new dimension of comparison, which claims to be oriented toward traditional ethical norms as the criteria for assessment in the international arena’ [5, P. 404].

This is reflected in Russia’s strategic narratives on Syria. Lavrov has repeated the argument, well-rehearsed even before the Arab Spring, that competition has become global and must now take into account differing values and development patterns.<sup>4</sup> The promotion of its own distinctive norms and values, and its arguments about the primacy of national identity, traditions and culture, both reinforces Russian justification for its policy in Syria and is also intended to provide ideological support for its own standards of governance. Putin himself has compared Russia’s approach with the West’s promotion of supposedly more progressive development models; he has deplored the ‘destruction of traditional values from above’ and ‘regression, barbarity and extensive bloodshed’ arising from Western interventions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).<sup>5</sup> Russian officials have criticised the ‘politicisation’ of human rights and humanitarian aid by the Western powers and international NGOs and warned against attempts in the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to reinterpret human rights concepts, which may be used to enforce alien views that promote conflicts and divisions.

This narrative opposing Western liberalism co-exists with a positive Russian self-conception of a country which has achieved effective statehood and regained its legitimate place in international society as a great power [20, P. 585]. Despite the stinging criticism of the US and other Western states, Russian officials have emphasised the necessity of Russia’s cooperation with them to develop a shared understanding on coordinating counter-terrorism efforts, expanding humanitarian access and strengthening the ceasefire has been emphasised. The aim is to reinforce the image of Russia as a constructive and legitimate international actor seeking to mitigate the humanitarian crimes and pursue a political resolution of the conflict in Syria. The various efforts by Russia to engage in diplomacy through the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), co-chaired by Russia and the US and involving the major external and regional powers, as well as with Iran and Turkey in the Astana format, and bilaterally with other regional states and organisations in MENA, are frequently cited in diplomatic statements. Russia seeks to sponsor an effective political transition process and foster an inclusive dialogue among all ethnic and religious groups, including through the establishment of the Russian Centre for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in Syria, with the remit of fostering peace negotiations and coordinating humanitarian operations.<sup>6</sup>

## The international order

Russia’s approach to the Syria conflict reflects official perceptions about the international order that were prevalent before the onset of the Arab Spring. Official and expert narratives in Russia focus on a number of central challenges facing the country: structural shifts in the global system of states; the increasing use of military power in international relations; divisions among the Western powers, with an unpredictable

<sup>3</sup> Text of Russian Federation Information Security Doctrine at [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2563163](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2563163)

<sup>4</sup> Lavrov’s address and answers to questions from students and attendees of the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Moscow, 27.02.2015, at [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/971662](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/971662).

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Putin, Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, 12.12.2013, at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825>.

<sup>6</sup> Maria Zakharova briefing, Moscow, 25.05.2017, at [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2764894](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2764894).

US unable to offer global leadership; the emergence of intrastate, and sometimes new interstate, conflicts stemming from weak state governance; and the failure of security mechanisms in an anarchic international environment. In Russian eyes, these trends are reflected in the MENA region, where state institutions have been weakened and multiple cross-cutting conflicts have increasingly involved powerful non-state groups, with failing political and socioeconomic governance giving rise to transnational humanitarian emergencies and enabling the spread of terrorism [1].

Against this background, Moscow has exerted considerable efforts to demonstrate Russia's influence in Syria and the wider Middle East as an equal among a 'concert' of great powers managing security. At the same time, its narratives are aimed at structuring the international environment to the maximum benefit of Russia. In an international order where multilateralism is declining, 'minilateral' or ad hoc groups dealing with specific issues become the norm rather than the exception. One prominent Russian commentator, Dmitri Trenin, has suggested that Russian understandings of multilateralism can be reduced to the idea that the optimal structure for Moscow is one in which "several major powers co-operate among themselves and with others to bring about order in the world" [8, P. 42], a structure in which Russia plays an indispensable role. Lavrov has in fact spoken in favour of multilateralism, but this co-exists with a narrative of Russia's 'self-sufficiency and independence' as a major power and with emphasis on regional groupings such as the BRICS, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and on broader, non-institutionalised initiatives such as the global anti-terrorist front.<sup>7</sup> As mentioned earlier, Russia uses the UN as a forum for the contestation of international norms, appealing to its authority in the name of sovereign equality, sovereignty and non-intervention but subjecting it to criticism when it comes to investigating cases of alleged human rights crimes under international law or moves to suspend Russia from its seat on the UN Human Rights Council.<sup>8</sup> In an interview to CNN Lavrov called for a 'businesslike debate' between Russia, the US and the main regional powers instead of 'another [UN] General Assembly-like debate'.<sup>9</sup> Russia has participated in the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) – where the broad principles for a settlement are worked out and endorsed by the UN based on resolutions and statements reflecting international consensus (UN Security Council resolutions 2254 and 2268, the 2016 Munich and 2015 Vienna Statements of the ISSG, and the 2012 Geneva Communiqué) – but at the same time tries to shape the situation on the ground and manage shifting alliances through 'minilateral' formats such as the Astana process. In a situation where views are polarised and political differences have marked interaction in the MENA region, these formats appear to take precedence over genuine multilateralism.

### **The 'information counter-struggle'**

As mentioned in the introduction above, in the recent period a number of Western scholars and policy analysts have examined Russia's use of 'disinformation' or the 'information counter-struggle' from a historical or operational perspective. Our concern in this article is to show how information strategies are integrated into diplomatic exchanges, the promotion of economic and cultural relations, or the promotion of 'strategic narratives' by officials which aim to shape the views of international audiences.

As analysed above, Russia's narratives focus on upholding statist legal norms against Western liberal norms and defending its cultural and ethical traditions against liberal values. It is worth mentioning here that Russia's strategic narratives, particularly the norms of sovereignty and non-intervention and the appeal for cultural-civilisational diversity and the primacy of national traditions, have wider resonance in global society. Relations with the West are portrayed as a 'competitive struggle', with Russia as one of the powers which are challenging Western primacy in the international system. The 'information struggle' waged by Russia has made increasing use of diplomatic statements, including at the UN, which are incorporated into a strategic metanarrative – virulently critical of the Western liberal democracies, and particularly the US – which highlights Russia's supposed marginalisation by the West in the post-Cold War period, the threats

<sup>7</sup> Lavrov's article 'Russia for Redoubling Efforts Against Terrorism Financing', published in the Financial Security Magazine, no. 16, 12.05.2017, at [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2753500](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2753500).

<sup>8</sup> Zakharova briefing, 16.03.2017, at [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2687802](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2687802)

<sup>9</sup> Lavrov interview with CNN, Moscow, 12.10.2016 at [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2497676](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2497676)

presented by an enlarging NATO or attempts to destabilise Russia through democracy and human rights promotion. Russia presents arguments about Western 'double standards' in order to justify its own military intervention in Syria.

These arguments can be summarised as follows:

– Russia's principal aim in Syria is to fight international terrorism and support the legitimate government of President Assad in order to maintain Syria's sovereignty, while the US and its allies favour opposition groups linked to terrorists in order to overthrow Assad and effect 'regime change'.<sup>10</sup> Foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova has even directly inferred that the US is defending Islamic State.<sup>11</sup> 'Blatant violations of international law' in Syria are compared to the interventions in Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011.

– Reports that Russia's military involvement has led to civilian fatalities as a result of air strikes have been rejected as 'fake' news.<sup>12</sup> Russian official statements have argued that casualties in areas held by opposition forces are the result of legitimate military actions directed against extremist Islamist groups, and have attacked the credibility of witnesses who have put forward evidence of air strikes against the civilian population, for example Amnesty International or the Syria Civil Defence organisation (otherwise known as the 'White Helmets'). Accusations that Russia is facilitating Assad's 'starve or surrender' tactic, restricting humanitarian and medical aid, to deal with resistance in opposition areas is referred to as 'planted information'. At the same time, Moscow cites independent reports which favour its position; despite the abovementioned criticism, Zakharova has applauded Amnesty International for reporting on atrocities committed by armed opposition fighters which have received support and aid from the US.<sup>13</sup>

– In a similar way, allegations about the use of chemical weapons by Assad's forces have been routinely dismissed, and alternative explanations – mainly, their use by terrorists – have been put forward, backed by 'proof' supplied by Moscow. The use of chemical attacks is presented as a pretext by the Western powers, citing humanitarian considerations, to legitimise intervention in contravention of international law and UN Security Council authorisation. In trying to force the UN to adopt Chapter VII enforcement measures in response to chemical weapons attacks, the US is using the UN Security Council 'to their own PR ends'.<sup>14</sup> Again, specific items of information are used to support its argument. Official Russian statements have attacked the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) for mistakes in its methodology and procedures in carrying out investigations, suggesting that there is bias in the OPCW in the form of politically motivated decisions favouring the Western powers<sup>15</sup>, while at the same time praising the same organisation for its reports which form the basis for decisions taken by the UN.<sup>16</sup> Lavrov had earlier acclaimed cooperation between Russia and the US for jointly resolving the Syria chemical weapons problem after the attack in Ghouta in August 2013 by persuading Syria to join the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and sponsoring the destruction of its research and production facilities [2].

The language employed by Lavrov, Zakharova and other leading officials has been uncompromising and has often gone beyond diplomatic constraints in challenging the legitimacy and veracity of Western claims. They have spoken of 'the continued manipulation of facts and deliberate distortion of reality' by some Western officials.<sup>17</sup> Western reports are dismissed as 'test-tube propaganda'.<sup>18</sup> Russian accusations are

<sup>10</sup> Zakharova briefing, 18.05.2017, at [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2761759](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2761759)

<sup>11</sup> Zakharova briefing, 18.09.2016, at [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2444387](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2444387)

<sup>12</sup> Lavrov interview with BBC, Moscow, 16.04.2018, at [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3172318](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3172318)

<sup>13</sup> Zakharova briefing, 07.07.2016, at [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2348943#3](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2348943#3)

<sup>14</sup> Zakharova briefing, 31.08.2016, at [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2417306](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2417306)

<sup>15</sup> Comment on US statement on use of CW, 30.06.2017, at [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2805160](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2805160)

<sup>16</sup> Zakharova response to media questions, 17.04.2018, at [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3174906](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3174906)

<sup>17</sup> Maria Zakharova's comment on the OPCW inspectors' visit to Douma, Syria, 21.04.2018, at [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3185241](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3185241)

directed against a ‘disinformation campaign launched in the Western media’<sup>19</sup>, with fake news planted in the media by the US, France and the UK as Russia’s main political antagonists in the Syria conflict, and against the distortion of the ‘facts on the ground’ by Western (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch) or what Moscow claims are Western-linked organisations such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which ‘are known to be financed, among other countries, by the United Kingdom’.<sup>20</sup> Moscow also frequently points to Western provocations; a ‘hysterical campaign of lies’ is directed against Russia and the Western information campaign has ‘reached the point of a psychosis’, even to the point of inciting hostile forces to attack Russia.<sup>21</sup> Zakharova has frequently launched long tirades against the ‘lies and dirt – from minor fantasies to the global manipulation of public opinion’ - by the West and Western media, rarely attempting to distinguish between them.<sup>22</sup> The cumulative effect of these official statements is to turn Western criticism – represented by Russian officials as the manipulation of facts and deliberate distortion of reality - of Russia’s information campaign on its head.

## Conclusions

The introduction to this article referred to the importance of understanding the strategic context in which the ‘information counter-struggle’ is being conducted. Power is becoming more diffuse globally and is being exercised by multiple regional, state and non-state actors [14, P. 1]; decision-making is fragmented, with some issues managed at the level of international institutions, including the UN, while others are handled between groups of regional state actors or in partnerships between states and private or non-state organisations [13, P. 112]. Russia is engaged in a sustained struggle to defend its preferred international legal norms, its views on the constitution of international society, and its interests within a turbulent international environment in which the future global order is fluid and uncertain. At various levels, common understandings and the simple interpretation of facts are often subject to dispute and reciprocal recriminations. At a time of systemic change, when international agreements and regimes are under threat, differing understandings of and approaches to multilateralism have emerged. The European Union proclaims its adherence to a ‘rules-based order’; however, both Russia and the US under Donald Trump favour limited multilateralism and the pursuit of national interests focused on specific issues. We argue that Russia is not unequivocally ‘revisionist’ but favours ad hoc coalitions and partnerships on specific issues in an attempt to steer decision-making in its own interests.

Disentangling strategic narratives and the ‘information counter-struggle’ is difficult and is compounded by the deep reciprocal mistrust that currently prevails between the Russian and US defence and security establishments over the Ukraine conflict, alleged Russian attempts to interfere in the domestic affairs of the Western states, and other issues. A fundamental problem is that, in Western narratives, the Syria conflict has become part of a perceived paradigm shift from cooperation to confrontation in Russia-West relations, with the information campaign employed as a ‘coercive tool’ ([16, P. 216]. However, as Hutchings and Szostek [9, P. 193] argue, Russian tactics ‘should not be attributed to a purely cynical eclecticism (exploiting whichever political and ideological currents and trends that serve current needs, no matter what their provenance)... we should not ignore the (so far unsuccessful) efforts to knit the dominant narratives, despite all their many contradictions, into an ideological fabric capable of providing the basis for a coherent worldview and a stable sense of national identity’. Put simply, Russian’s strategic narratives, reflected in diplomacy exchanges and backed up by a concerted information campaign, serve a definite set of goals in a bid to convince both international and domestic audiences that Russia is – as Lavrov commented in the aftermath of the agreement on the chemical disarmament of Syria – ‘on the “right” side of history’ [2, P. 829]. Alternative narratives disseminated by Western actors – even those based on independent assessments of international state-based

<sup>18</sup> Zakharova briefing, 18.05.2017, at [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2761759](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2761759).

<sup>19</sup> Zakharova response to media question, 17.04.2018, at [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3174906](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3174906).

<sup>20</sup> Lavrov interview with BBC, Moscow, 16.04.2018, at [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3172318](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3172318).

<sup>21</sup> Zakharova briefing, 27.12.2016, at [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2581141](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2581141).

<sup>22</sup> Zakharova briefing, 08.06.2017, at [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2778888](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2778888).

bodies, non-governmental organisations and independent media – are relentlessly challenged. Russia is not alone in seeking to manage perceptions of international events.

The implications of the Syria conflict for Russia's relations with the West and for Russia's future role in the MENA region are yet to emerge. Some commentators have concluded that Russia's assertive actions in Syria and willingness to engage with regional actors have boosted its reputation in the region [8, P. 38]. Others have argued that Moscow's support for Assad has led to intense criticism, both in the West and in some parts of the Middle East, overshadowing its legitimate goal of maintaining Syria as a sovereign state and exacting a toll of reputational costs. Moscow's information campaign in response to Western 'fabrications' of reports of atrocities has been rejected by many. Further incidents involving the alleged use of chemical weapons by Syrian government forces, in April 2017 at Khan Sheikhoun and in April 2018 near Douma, have pointed to Assad's apparent failure to observe the commitments under the CWC, despite repeated Russian denials that Assad's forces were responsible, and have attracted renewed opprobrium, not to mention punitive missile strikes by the US, presenting a danger of escalation as Russian troops are embedded in bases at Tartus and Hmeimim. The lack of shared understandings that might form a basis of a resolution of the conflict and apparent lack of political will between Russia and the West to develop a common approach are reflected in continuing disputes at the diplomatic level.

However, we argue that extreme interpretations of Russia's use of 'disinformation' to support foreign policy 'adventures' and back up an unremittingly antagonistic ideology in international affairs are misplaced, or at least are yet to be substantiated. Competing norms and models of governance at the global and regional level, involving not only Russia and the West but all major actors in the international system, are reflected in competing narratives in which states try to respond to the challenges of a complex and fragmented international environment. Russia's use of strategic narratives and information tools are aimed at establishing and reinforcing its legitimacy and authority as a leading power in the international order and to project the image of a constructive actor in international society. To what extent it is successful is a topic for further research.

#### Appendix<sup>23</sup>

A year ago, from the same rostrum at the anniversary session of the UN General Assembly, plenty of accurate assessments were made of the situation at this crucial stage of international development. The main theme was the recognition that humankind, in transitioning from a bipolar and unipolar international order to an objectively evolving polycentric, democratic system of international relations, is faced with challenges and threats that are common to all and that can only be overcome by joint efforts. It was rightly noted that there is a pressing need to change the philosophy governing relations between states and do away with attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of states and impose development models on countries and nations. Unfortunately, the ideas of mentorship, superiority and exceptionalism, as well as the pursuit of one's own interests at the expense of just and equitable cooperation, have become deeply ingrained among the political elites of a number of Western countries. We can see the results of unilateral reckless solutions, born of a sense of infallibility, in the bleeding region of the Middle East and North Africa. This erodes the foundations of global stability. It is high time to draw lessons and avert catastrophe in Syria. It was largely thanks to Russian military aid to the legitimate Syrian government in response to its request that the collapse of statehood and the country's disintegration under terrorist pressure was prevented... In today's world, it is unacceptable to be guided by the philosophy of antiheroes from George Orwell's dystopia *Animal Farm* where all animals are equal but some are more equal than others. In the enlightened 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is simply indecent to lecture anyone on what to do, while reserving the right to engage in doping, reckless unilateral actions without UN approval, geopolitical experiments that cost millions of human lives, or extraterritorial blackmail against everyone, including one's closest allies, whenever there is the chance of financial gain for one's own kind. Or even the right to set the criteria of greatness for one country or another. It is my belief that this is unworthy of the principles of liberty and equality that once formed the foundation of the great nations in whose name their elites are now threatening the whole world... There is no place for hegemonism in the future, if we want it to be fair and for people to be able to

---

<sup>23</sup> Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks at the 71st session of the UN General Assembly, New York, 23 September 2016, at [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2468262](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2468262)

choose their own path of development. This requires learning to respect partners, as well as the cultural and civilizational diversity of today's world. It's about returning to the path, norms and principles enshrined in the UN Charter and other documents of this world organisation. Russia reaffirmed its commitment to this approach by signing on June 25, 2016 a Russia-China Joint Declaration on the Promotion and Principles of International Law. The decency and legitimacy of any member of the international community should be measured by their respect for the principles of sovereign equality of states and non-interference in the internal affairs of others.

## REFERENCES

1. Averre, D. (2019). Russia, the Middle East and the conflict in Syria. In Kanet, R.E. (ed.). *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security*. Routledge.
2. Averre, D. and Davies, L. (2015). Russia, humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: the case of Syria. *International Affairs*, 91(4), 813-834
3. Chebankova, E. (2017). Russia's idea of the multipolar world order: origins and main dimensions. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 33(3), 217-234
4. Darczewska, J. (2014). The anatomy of Russian information warfare. The Crimean operation, a case study. *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich* Warsaw, Point of View no 42, May
5. Evans, A. (2015). Ideological change under Vladimir Putin in the perspective of social identity theory. *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 23(4), 401-426
6. Franke, U. (2015). *War by non-military means: understanding Russian information warfare*. FOI research report FOI-R--4065--SE, March, at <http://johnhelmer.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Sweden-FOI-Mar-2015-War-by-non-military-means.pdf> (accessed 1 April 2019)
7. House of Lords (2017). *The Middle East: Time for New Realism*. Select Committee on International Relations, 2nd Report of Session 2016–17, May, at <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201617/ldselect/ldintrel/159/159.pdf> (accessed 10 November 2017)
8. Hutchings, S., & Szostek, J. (2015). Dominant narratives in Russian political and media discourse during the Ukraine crisis. In Pikulicka-Wilczewska, A. and Sakwa, R. *Ukraine and Russia: people, politics, propaganda and perspectives*, E-International Relations Publishing, at <http://www.e-ir.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Ukraine-and-Russia-E-IR.pdf> (accessed 4 May 2018)
9. Kragh, M. and Åsberg, S. (2017). Russia's strategy for influence through public diplomacy and active measures: the Swedish case. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 40(6), 773-816
10. Hellman, M. and Wagnsson, C. (2017). How can European states respond to Russian information warfare? An analytical framework. *European Security*, 26(2), 153-170
11. Larson, D. W. and Shevchenko, A. (2010). Status seekers: Chinese and Russian responses to US primacy. *International Security*, 34(4), 63-95
12. Lucas, E. and Nimmo, B. (2015). Information warfare: what is it and how to win it?, Center for European Policy Analysis Infowar paper no. 1, November, at <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/elucas-bnimmo-cepa-infowar-paper-no1-information-warfare-what-it-and-how-win-it> (accessed 1 April 2019)
13. Miskimmon, A. and O'Loughlin, B. (2017). Russia's Narratives of Global Order: Great Power Legacies in a Polycentric World. *Politics and Governance*, 5(3), 111-120
14. Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B. and Roselle, L. (2014). *Strategic narratives: Communication power and the new world order*. Routledge
15. Moore, C. (2019). *Russia and disinformation: maskirovka*. Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, March, at <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/russia-and-disinformation-maskirovka-full-report/> (accessed 1 April 2019)
16. Pynnöniemi, K. (2019). Information-psychological warfare in Russian security strategy. In Kanet, R.E. (ed.). *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security*. Routledge, 214-225
17. Pynnöniemi, K. (2016). The Conceptual and Historical Roots of Deception. In Pynnöniemi, K. and Rácz, A. (eds). *Fog of falsehood: Russian strategy of deception and the conflict in Ukraine*. Ulkopoliittinen Instituutti
18. Reus-Smit, C. (2005). Liberal hierarchy and the licence to use force. *Review of International Studies*, 31(S1), 71-92
19. Roselle, L., Miskimmon, A. and O'Loughlin, B. (2014) Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power. *Media, War & Conflict*, 7(1), 70-84
20. Szostek, J. (2017). Defence and promotion of desired state identity in Russia's strategic narrative. *Geopolitics*, 22(3), 571-593
21. Thomas. T. (2014). Russia's Information Warfare Strategy: Can the Nation Cope in Future Conflicts, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 27:1



Dr. Derek Averre, Reader in Russian Foreign and Security Policy,  
Centre for Russian, European and Eurasian Studies, Department of Political Science and International Studies,  
University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, UK  
E-mail: d.l.averre@bham.ac.uk

*Д. Аверре*

**«СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКИЕ НАРРАТИВЫ» РОССИИ: СИРИЯ И «АРАБСКАЯ ВЕСНА»**

DOI: 10.35634/2587-9030-2019-3-3-317-325

Российская правящая элита продвигает особый набор стратегических нарративов, чтобы влиять на то, как ее действия воспринимаются в мире, и чтобы положительно воздействовать на общественное мнение за рубежом, продвигая российское видение международной системы, при этом стремясь укрепить свою легитимность внутри страны. Эти нарративы часто прямо или косвенно ставили под сомнение нарративы и политику западных либеральных демократий с точки зрения международно-правовых норм, социально-этических ценностей и статуса России в международных делах. Западные академические и политические структуры уделяют повышенное внимание использованию российским правительством информационных инструментов и стратегий в поддержку своих политических и дипломатических усилий по продвижению данных нарративов. Цель данной статьи – изучить, как управление информацией, ориентированное на операционный уровень по продвижению интересов России в конкретных ситуациях, связано с распространением стратегических нарративов, которые направлены на поддержку более широких политических целей, например, в случае «арабской весны» и конфликта в Сирии.

*Ключевые слова:* Россия, стратегические нарративы, «арабская весна», Сирия, суверенитет, безопасность, дезинформация.

Поступила в редакцию 06.05.2019

Д-р Дерек Аверре, эксперт по российской внешней политике и политике безопасности  
Центр российских, европейских и евразийских исследований,  
факультет политических наук и международных исследований  
Университет Бирмингема  
Эдгбастон, Бирмингем, Великобритания  
E-mail: d.l.averre@bham.ac.uk