

How to Sell Death and Destruction.
Russian Media Coverage of Putin's War in Syria

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Abstract

This thesis examines the way the Russian media covered the war in Syria from the moment Russia officially joined the armed conflict in September 2015. The Russian government propaganda machine had to invoke all the tools in its possession to cover the Syrian war and come up with new tools catering for modern media demands. The officials had to make sure that only government-approved messages would reach the Russian public. An ambitious goal given the modern media diversity and openness.

An inability of most Russian citizens to obtain any kind of information other than available in the Russian language, as well as virtual destruction of independent media organisations in Russia created a perfect opportunity for the government to control all incoming information a Russian citizen could glean on the topic of the Syrian war. This thesis examines the reasoning behind getting into war in Syria (e.g., the repercussions of the war unleashed in Ukraine in 2014 and failing approval ratings and ambitions of president Putin) and the specific media coverage of the Syrian war.

After the war in Ukraine (2014), which became increasingly unpopular among Russian citizens, the Syrian war became a welcome distraction and a way to prove Russia's special place in the world, Russia's greatness. This thesis examines in depth the tools that were used by Russian media to *sell* the war in Syria to its citizens, as well as reiterate that Russia is one of the mightiest countries in the world in terms of military power and geopolitical influence. This research finds that exact tools used by this propaganda machine are universal and can be applied on any occasion the public needs to be persuaded to approve aggression.

The main finding of this research is: as chaotic as the media coverage of the Syrian war seemed to an untrained eye, it was, in fact, an incredibly structured, disciplined and ultimately successful propaganda programme, full of strict rules and policies media organisations and journalists had to follow to get the desired result. Not only Putin's ratings correlated with media wins in the coverage of the Syrian 'project,' but the public also itself felt patriotic and righteous in terms of Russia's participation in the Syrian war.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Research topic

This thesis critically examines the strategies employed by Russian media in reporting on the Syrian war, focusing on the period from September 2015, which marks Russia's direct military involvement in Syria, to 24 February 2022, coinciding with the onset of Russia's military actions in Ukraine (Reid 2022). This analysis is pivotal in understanding the media's role in shaping public perception and foreign policy narratives during international conflicts.

During the progression of this thesis, a significant geopolitical event unfolded: Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This conflict, garnering substantial media attention, is likely to become a focal point for future academic research, particularly given its occurrence in Europe—the first large-scale European conflict since World War II. This situation presents a unique opportunity to examine the mechanisms of Russian media propaganda, which are being extensively deployed to shape public perception of the war. It is anticipated that scholars examining the media dynamics in this conflict will identify a continuity of propagandistic techniques. These techniques, although prominently observed in the context of the Ukrainian conflict, are not novel. They were initially developed, refined, and effectively utilised during the Syrian War. This earlier conflict, notable for being the first major war in the era of social media and instantaneous news reporting, provides a critical reference point for understanding the evolution of media propaganda in modern warfare, as highlighted by Patrikarakos (2017). This analysis contributes to the broader understanding of media's role in shaping public opinion during wartime, offering insights into the strategic use of information in contemporary conflicts.

Understanding the media portrayal of the Syrian war is imperative, particularly in examining its depiction by Russian outlets. This analysis is not merely a retrospective exercise; it is essential for comprehensively grasping the strategies employed by the Russian media, both in contemporary contexts and in future scenarios. A detailed exploration of the mechanisms utilised by Russian media to represent the Syrian war, and to disseminate this portrayal to the Russian populace as well as to a global audience, is crucial. Such an investigation reveals how these narratives potentially foster dissent among international audiences against their respective governments, thereby inadvertently aligning them with the objectives of Russian propaganda. This phenomenon underscores the need for a methodologically rigorous approach in dissecting media strategies, emphasising the importance of critical engagement with existing literature on media influence and propaganda techniques. It is vital to consider the ethical implications of media manipulation in conflict reporting, particularly in terms of its impact on public opinion and international relations.

The role of Russian media in framing the Syrian war, juxtaposed with the concurrent war in Ukraine, presented a complex challenge. Initiated by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Ukrainian conflict had significantly undermined President Vladimir Putin's approval ratings (Grant 2015). In response, the Syrian war was strategically portrayed by Russian media outlets as a pivotal event. This portrayal was aimed not only at diverting public attention from the Ukrainian conflict but also at rehabilitating Putin's diminishing popularity. According to Borshchevskaya (2021), while the Ukrainian war detrimentally affected Putin's public image, the Syrian war conversely served to enhance it. This dichotomy highlights the instrumental role of media in shaping public perception, particularly in the context of international conflicts. The manipulation of media narratives in this instance underscores a critical intersection of media

studies, political science, and public opinion, offering a profound example of the media's power in influencing national sentiment during times of conflict.

This research aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the Russian media landscape, with a particular emphasis on the public's consumption of news related to the Syrian war. The study endeavours to understand the nuanced ways in which the Russian populace processes and interprets information about the conflict. This investigation is crucial in illuminating the role of media in shaping public perception and discourse within the context of international conflicts.

The thesis examines the historical context in which Russia, under President Putin's leadership, approached the brink of involvement in the Syrian war. It is essential to comprehend both the geopolitical dynamics and the domestic atmosphere prevailing during this period, particularly in relation to the Russian media. This study aims to delineate the stringent regulations imposed by the Russian government, the presidential administration, and President Putin on the Russian media. These measures were designed to craft a specific narrative of the Syrian war, one that would resonate favourably with the Russian public and align with the interests of the primary beneficiary of this media strategy, President Putin. This narrative construction is pivotal in understanding the interplay between political power and media influence in Russia, particularly in the context of international conflict.

The Russian media undertook a formidable challenge in legitimising the Syrian war to its domestic audience. This involved articulating a narrative where the war was portrayed not only as a justifiable endeavour but also as beneficial to both the Russian state and its citizens. For instance, an article in the Russian edition of Forbes Magazine posited several advantages:

‘testing new military technologies, economising on domestic defence and anti-terrorism efforts, and exerting influence over the global oil market’ (Жоцев 2016). This strategic communication reflects a broader geopolitical and economic rationale, wherein the Kremlin seeks to justify its foreign policy decisions through a combination of national security interests and economic gains. However, such arguments necessitate a critical examination of the ethical implications and the long-term consequences of military engagement, particularly in terms of international relations and human rights.

This thesis rigorously investigates the implicit regulations governing media organisations in post-Soviet Russia, particularly in the context of war coverage, where these guidelines are shaped collaboratively by media entities and the presidential administration. Despite the absence of an officially documented set of rules for Russian media outlets concerning war reportage, the findings of this study are substantiated through a systematic analysis of 39 original interviews. These interviews were conducted with a diverse range of media professionals, encompassing both government-affiliated and independent outlets. The participants, including Russian journalists, editors, and media managers, were intricately involved in reporting the Syrian war. Their insights and justifications for their reportorial approaches offer a unique perspective into the operational dynamics of Russian media during wartime, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the interplay between media practices and state influence in authoritarian contexts.

This study aims to demonstrate that it is feasible to persuade the public to accept any level of catastrophe, including death and destruction, by adhering to a stringent set of media guidelines. This research posits that such strategies can effectively propagate any concept to the audience. A particularly poignant discovery of this thesis is the diminished media attention

towards the Syrian war. Despite prior extensive coverage by both Russian and international media organisations, the Syrian war, as of February 2023, has largely vanished from the forefront of global news. This decline in media attention is not reflective of the war's actual status, which continues unabated. The focus of this thesis is the disjunction between the ongoing nature of the Syrian war and its disappearance from media narratives, exploring the mechanisms and implications of this shift.

1.2 A Personal Reflection on Conflict Reporting

With over two decades of experience in the media industry, my professional journey encompasses extensive roles across various Russian media platforms. My career trajectory includes positions as a correspondent, section editor, social media editor, managing editor, and editor-in-chief, media consultant. This experience is substantiated by my authorship of over 600 publications, featured in prominent outlets such as Russian Newsweek, Russian Financial Times, and the BBC World Service. Significantly, my expertise facilitated the launch and revitalisation of more than ten Russian print and digital media entities, including Yunosheskaya Gazeta, Free Time City, Moskovsky Sokol, Vash Dosug, Ot Vinta, Tekstilnaya Promishlennost, Conference and BT, Expert, Pulse, Gazeta.ru, Kommersant, and Sergio. This undertaking not only illustrates my proficiency in media management but also reflects the dynamic nature of media evolution in Russia. Transitioning to a role in marketing and media consulting, I have collaborated with a diverse range of organisations, encompassing NGOs, for-profit enterprises, and intergovernmental bodies.

Between 2016 and 2018, during my tenure providing media assistance to participants of the UN-led Syrian Peace Talks in Geneva, I focused on strategies for communicating

effectively with the Russian public, circumventing the prevalent official Russian propaganda. This involvement afforded me an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms governing news dissemination within Russia, offering a perspective that was both unique and directly relevant to my research. My analysis is informed by first-hand observations of the impact of war on individuals and how media, particularly in Russia, exacerbates conflict through the amplification of death and destruction narratives. This experience was instrumental in shaping the methodological approach of my study. My extensive background in the Russian media landscape was pivotal in securing access to otherwise restricted content, resources, and insights, as well as facilitating interviews with Russian media professionals. This access has not only enriched the empirical basis of my research but also ensured a comprehensive understanding of the media's role in conflict. This analysis is critical, not only due to my personal investment in the subject but also due to its broader implications for understanding media influence in conflict zones. The insights gained are integral to my thesis, which examines the interplay between media narratives and conflict escalation, with a particular focus on the Russian media's role in the Syrian war.

Journalism, as a profession, inherently presents a complex array of psychological challenges. The inherent role of a journalist, often positioned as an observer rather than a participant in events, can lead to a desensitisation towards human suffering and a potential drift towards narcissism. This detachment is frequently exacerbated by the confirmation of one's predictions or perspectives, fostering a sense of superiority (Godler and Reich 2013). Such a mindset, emerging from repeated validations of one's viewpoints, may engender an inflated sense of intellect, distancing the journalist further from the subjects of their reporting. The dynamic of being an observer, particularly in scenarios involving tragedy and devastation, contributes to a developing sense of detachment. This detachment, while it serves as a coping

mechanism, raises ethical concerns about the objectivity and humanity of journalistic practice. The ongoing exposure to adverse events, coupled with the necessity to remain emotionally uninvolved, poses significant ethical dilemmas, questioning the psychological impact on journalists who regularly encounter such scenarios. It is crucial to understand that while journalists are not the direct agents of the tragedies they report, the cumulative exposure to these events necessitates a critical examination of the psychological effects and ethical responsibilities inherent in the profession.

In the context of journalistic coverage of armed conflicts, there exists a perceptible risk of developing a sense of superiority over those directly involved in the events, particularly those responsible for causing death and destruction. While there may be instances where this perception holds true, it is imperative to recognise the hazards associated with such a mindset. For journalists, there is a fundamental duty not to participate in conflicts but rather to ensure objective reporting on them. This professional detachment requires continuous self-reflection and an unwavering commitment to journalistic standards. It is crucial to consistently challenge one's own biases and privileges, striving to maintain the highest level of professionalism in reporting. This commitment entails producing coverage that exemplifies the utmost professional integrity, a principle underscored by Fahmy and Johnson (2005). Such rigorous standards are essential not only for the credibility of the journalist but also for providing an accurate and ethical portrayal of the conflict.

In the process of conflict coverage, journalists confront the gradual erosion of professional standards, a phenomenon that is under-discussed in existing literature. This deterioration is characterised by minor lapses in fact-checking and objectivity, which cumulatively diminish the quality of reporting. Far from being passive observers, journalists,

through these lapses, inadvertently contribute to misinformation and bias. This issue gains particular significance in conflict zones, where upholding journalistic integrity is both essential and challenging. Allan and Zelizer (2004: p. 201) elucidate this dilemma:

‘Objectivity is a prized status within journalism. The institutionalized and thus professional phase of journalism started with the elevation of objectivity to the dominant ideology within the profession. Objectivity became the foundation for the social responsibility claims of the journalistic identity. In war corresponding the principles of detachment are a key element in the social construction or formation of identity. But it is there that problems emerge. Correspondents face criticism in two ways. By following the tradition of detached reporting, journalists are censured or condemned for their dispassionate stance often in the form of accusations of a lack of patriotism and for eschewing the perceived national interest. At the same time the ‘journalism of attachment,’ the human, emotional face of war corresponding, has been criticised for opening the door to mistaken accounts of the conflicts, and for being ‘self-righteous’ and ‘moralizing.’’(Allan and Zelizer 2004: p. 201)

This quote highlights the dual criticism faced by journalists in conflict zones - the challenge of maintaining detachment without being perceived as unpatriotic, and the risks of 'journalism of attachment' leading to biased or inaccurate reporting. This research examines the gradual decline in journalistic standards in conflict zones, aiming to contribute to the development of guidelines for ethical and accurate reporting in such challenging environments.

In the realm of journalism, prolonged exposure often correlates with a diminishing sense of optimism and excitement regarding the impact of one's work. There emerges an

inescapable sentiment that, irrespective of the quality of reporting, it scarcely alters the readers' perspectives or their willingness to engage with the information presented. This realisation is particularly disheartening for journalists who, unlike those who rely on viral reports, directly witness and report from conflict zones. The apathy of readers towards such first-hand accounts can instigate a sense of futility, prompting introspection about the purpose of reporting on issues that neither personally affect the journalist nor seem to resonate with the audience. Despite these challenges, journalists persist in their endeavours to provide comprehensive coverage amidst death and destruction, although this often feels like an effort in vain. This scenario illustrates the potential decline of a journalist in a liberal Western democracy. Now, consider this predicament intensified by the circumstances of being born in a country with limited freedoms. In such a setting, becoming a journalist not only involves the risk to constitutional liberties but also, as Schnauffer (2017) highlights, a direct threat to one's life.

Envision a scenario in which every written word, every produced content, has the potential to impact the author at multiple, profound levels. Such a situation not only affects the individual journalist but may also extend to their family, even posing threats to their lives. This is not a hypothetical situation; since 2000, the year Vladimir Putin assumed power in Russia, 24 journalists have been murdered, a stark statistic reported by the Committee to Protect Journalists (2022). In this environment, journalists may initially make minor adjustments to align with government-sanctioned narratives. Subsequent modifications often follow, leading to a gradual, yet significant, alteration of their reporting style. This incremental self-censorship, born from the perceived apathy of readers, spirals into a detrimental cycle. Readers, in turn, criticise the media for perceived indifference, lack of professionalism, and bias. These accusations contribute to a perception of journalists as committing 'deadly media sins' on a regular basis, a concept explored by Feinstein (2013). This dynamic exemplifies the complex

interplay between media freedom, governmental influence, and public perception, highlighting the ethical dilemmas faced by journalists operating under authoritarian regimes.

The prevailing distrust between media consumers and producers is a critical issue; readers often express scepticism towards journalists, perceiving their work as inconsequential and failing to engage with it. This perception stems from a belief that journalistic content is trivial, untrustworthy, and excessively focused on sensationalism rather than substantive issues. Conversely, media professionals critique their audience for their apparent disengagement and preference for superficial content, characterised by a limited attention span and a propensity for distractions such as trivial internet memes. This ongoing conflict, irrespective of its origin, contributes to a detrimental cycle of mutual disdain between the producers and consumers of media. Such an environment fosters a society that is both uninformed and disengaged, perpetuating a relentless blame game with seemingly no resolution. The importance of media in a democratic society is underscored by the notion that the true value of a right is often realised only once it is lost (Atkin, Burgoon, and Burgoon 1983). As confidence in the media erodes, so too does the foundation of democracy. Dautrich and Hartley (1999: p. 15) eloquently summarise this predicament, stating:

‘Lower levels of confidence in the media may deprive the public of some of the essentials of democracy: a source of current information and public education that it can trust and a watchdog for public officials in which it has confidence. Without a trustworthy source of information, the public is left without the ability to discern the important issues of the day, the differences between candidates in elections, and whether what the candidates and advertisers are telling them is accurate. And a public that does not know which candidate stands for what may

be less likely to vote and more likely to become cynical regarding elections.’

(Dautrich and Hartley 1999: p. 15)

In Western contexts, journalists, having typically developed their careers in environments where fundamental rights are presumed secure, may not fully appreciate these freedoms. This lack of visceral appreciation stems from their limited exposure to situations where such rights are imperilled. It is crucial to acknowledge the vulnerability of seemingly steadfast rights; no right is impervious to erosion or revocation. This concept, while challenging to internalise for individuals in societies where freedoms of speech and expression have been sacrosanct for centuries, is vital. The ephemeral nature of the free press in Russia exemplifies this vulnerability. This historical example serves as a stark reminder that the loss of rights, often perceived as unassailable, is a tangible threat.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the consequent emergence of press freedom, Russian journalists, in a somewhat naive optimism, believed firmly that this newfound liberty was irreversible. This belief stemmed from the perspective that, having endured the constraints of Soviet-era censorship, no media professional would willingly relinquish the hard-won rights to free press and freedom of expression. Such freedoms were previously non-existent under Soviet rule, where journalism was strictly controlled and censored (Wolfe 1997). This newfound conviction was rooted in the assumption that society, now aware of the value of being informed, would staunchly oppose any regression. Contrary to these expectations, however, this freedom was relinquished, surprisingly without substantial resistance. This unforeseen development is poignantly encapsulated in the words of an independent media professional interviewed in 2022: ‘We never thought we’d lose the freedom

to do our job, the freedom we obtained in the 90s. Truth be told, Putin surprised all of us in this regard' (Interviewee 2, 2022).

The situation, no matter how dire, can always deteriorate further. It is a critical error to complacently believe that our rights are inviolable. Equally important is the recognition that some individuals might willingly relinquish these rights. In the context of post-Soviet Russia under President Putin's administration, the erosion of the right to be informed stands out as a particularly egregious example. This right, crucial to the functioning of a democratic society, suffered significant setbacks. Oates (2007), Ferguson (1998), McNair (1994), and Shleifer (2005) provide extensive analyses on how this right, once seemingly secure, was systematically compromised. Arutunyan succinctly captures this trajectory: '...the Russian press was given considerable liberties only to see those liberties taken away' (Arutunyan 2009). This decline illustrates a broader pattern of rights erosion, raising questions about the mechanisms of power consolidation and public compliance in new political orders.

In contemporary marketing theory, a cardinal principle is the recognition of corporations and their consumer bases as more than mere impersonal entities. A corporation constitutes an assemblage of individuals; hence, decisions are ultimately made by people, not by the abstract entity of the corporation itself. This understanding is crucial for effective marketing strategies: when promoting a product or concept, one should target the individual decision-makers within a corporation rather than the corporate entity as an amorphous whole (Levinson 1993). This principle holds equal validity in the realm of journalism. Journalism, analogously to a corporation, comprises individuals—each journalist bringing unique personal histories, values, and biases to their work. Acknowledging this, one cannot extricate a journalist's personal background from their professional actions. Comprehending their

reportage necessitates an understanding of both their professional competencies and personal motivations (Gyldensted 2011; Donsbach 2004). This dual perspective provides a more nuanced understanding of why journalists cover stories in particular ways, underscoring the intersection of personal and professional realms in shaping journalistic narratives.

In the domain of journalism, a troubling dichotomy exists between professional conduct and the influences of personal and societal biases. Traditionally, journalistic integrity hinged on objectivity, a principle vigorously upheld in academic teachings. This objective approach, widely accepted and advocated within the journalism community, required reporters to detach personal biases from their reporting, thereby ensuring neutral and unbiased news dissemination (McIntyre and Gyldensted 2018). However, the landscape of journalism has shifted significantly. Deuze (2005) observes that modern journalism not only tolerates but often encourages the expression of personal opinions and biases, reflecting a broader societal trend where journalists are expected to articulate definite stances on various issues.

This shift towards opinionated journalism poses a significant ethical challenge, as it requires a balance between traditional objective reporting and the contemporary expectation to mirror the readership's viewpoints. Such a balance is precarious, as aligning too closely with audience biases may compromise journalistic integrity. In this context, Kim and Pasadeos (2007) provide a pertinent insight:

‘Even as partisan readers find the content of a balanced news story problematic for their partisan position, they may, ideally, find those contents credible. That is, they may not dispute the facts presented in the balanced news story, but still dislike the fact that the story contains facts that are against their position.’ (Kim and Pasadeos 2007)

This statement underscores the complexity of modern journalism, where maintaining credibility and factual accuracy in a balanced news story is paramount, even as the trend towards partiality grows. It highlights the ongoing tension between journalistic integrity and the evolving expectations of news consumers in a polarised media landscape.

In the contemporary media landscape, the moment a journalist delineates their stance, they often become a target for criticism. This environment problematises the concept of objectivity; it is frequently misconstrued as indifference, which in turn is perceived as a lack of empathy. Such perceptions can influence readership, as empathetic engagement often attracts more readers than objective reporting. However, this emphasis on emotive engagement can erode journalistic professionalism. Journalists are increasingly confronted with a dilemma: whether to report based on factual accuracy and objective truth, or to choose angles and narratives that guarantee greater audience engagement and measurable outcomes, such as higher readership or social media traction (Molyneux and Coddington 2020). This tension highlights a significant ethical challenge in modern journalism, where the pursuit of truth can be at odds with the demands of audience engagement.

Regardless of the desired outcomes, whether they pertain to increased readership, higher click-through rates, or the advancement of particular agendas, the pursuit of such goals can detrimentally influence journalistic coverage, potentially rendering it counterproductive despite ostensibly noble intentions (Chen, Conroy, and Rubin 2015). The inherent complexity of news stories often means that a comprehensive understanding of the entire narrative, including the absolute truth, remains elusive. However, the moment journalists compromise on the fragments of truth they are privy to, solely to achieve specific results, they diverge from

their journalistic ethos. This deviation transforms them from impartial reporters into active participants in a propaganda apparatus, whether it is orchestrated by governmental entities or self-engineered to propagate personal beliefs. This shift not only undermines the foundational principles of journalism but also raises significant ethical concerns about the role and responsibility of journalists in shaping public discourse.

The obligation to suppress personal biases in journalism is a formidable expectation, particularly for those professionals navigating the intricacies of their roles in times of peace. In such times, the imperative of objectivity may appear less critical, seemingly posing minimal risk. Nonetheless, this era witnesses a discernible shift in media practice: journalists may increasingly relinquish their commitment to impartiality, aligning instead with the burgeoning faction of opinion-makers. This trend, where journalists compete with social media influencers, such as those on TikTok, for audience engagement, marks a significant departure from traditional journalistic principles. This evolution, though seemingly innocuous in peaceful times, raises profound questions within the media community about the future direction of journalism and its impact on societal guidance (Kovalev 2020). The phenomenon underscores the necessity for ongoing discourse in media ethics, particularly regarding the balance between objective reporting and opinion-based journalism.

During periods of conflict, the aspiration for journalistic objectivity and professional perfection becomes profoundly challenging, often verging on the unattainable. In such contexts, the unintended consequence of journalistic work may be the infliction of harm. Globally, thousands of journalists cover wars and conflicts, and it is unrealistic to expect that all possess the requisite skills to navigate these complexities with the necessary care, professionalism, and objectivity. This erosion of journalistic standards typically manifests not

as an abrupt departure, but as a gradual process. It often begins with minor deviations – small justifications or compromises made in the name of a perceived greater good. These initial concessions, seemingly insignificant, can insidiously undermine principles of professional integrity (Galtung and Fischer 2013; Hanitzsch 2004).

The peril in journalism often lies in inadvertently succumbing to what might be termed the 'greater good fallacy.' This fallacy entails utilising any available means to champion what is perceived as a noble cause, thereby potentially compromising the fundamental principle of journalistic objectivity. Such a deviation, albeit unintentional, typically emerges from a conviction of moral or intellectual righteousness. This conviction is increasingly facile to develop in contemporary discourse, as counter arguments can be readily dismissed if they originate from sources that one ideologically opposes, distrusts, or deems intellectually inferior. This facile dismissal of opposing viewpoints, however, runs contrary to the ideal of journalistic integrity, which mandates a steadfast commitment to impartiality. In this context, it is imperative for journalists to critically evaluate arguments on their merit, irrespective of the source, and to maintain a steadfast dedication to objectivity, thereby upholding the ethical standards of their profession. In addressing the relationship between argument quality and perceived validity, it is crucial to recognise that a poorly articulated argument does not inherently invalidate its underlying premise, nor does it automatically affirm the opposing viewpoint. Contemporary society, increasingly characterised by a proliferation of distractions and activities that compete for attention, faces a significant reduction in available time for deliberative thought (Dreher 2009; Tavis and Aronson 2020). This temporal contraction has consequential implications: individuals often exhibit diminished capacity or willingness to engage thoroughly with perspectives that diverge from their own. The critical issue here is not merely a lack of time but also a deficit in patience, stamina, and, crucially, the discipline

required for comprehensive engagement with contrarian viewpoints. The tendency towards immediate gratification exacerbates this situation, leading to a propensity for echo chambers where one predominantly encounters confirmatory arguments, thus reinforcing pre-existing beliefs (Dreher 2009; Tavis and Aronson 2020).

The susceptibility of journalists and media professionals to societal trends is a noteworthy phenomenon. This group often mirrors their audience's expectations, responding in a manner that garners approval. This dynamic has led to a situation where journalists' hysterical reactions are not only socially sanctioned but also equated with correctness. McGregor (2019) argues that within this framework, the intensity of a journalist's emotional response—be it outrage, appal, hysteria, or insult—is often misconstrued as a marker of veracity. This conflation presents significant implications for journalistic integrity and the public's perception of media objectivity. In contemporary media discourse, particularly in the context of armed conflict, the intensity of emotional expression often dictates perceived veracity. Loud and assertive articulations of negativity tend to be equated with correctness, overshadowing arguments presented with caution, patience, professionalism, and an objective courtesy. This dichotomy, while a potential topic for discussion during peaceful times, gains a more critical dimension in the context of war. Vasterman (2005) notes the brevity of peaceful periods, suggesting a continual prevalence of this phenomenon. This issue is vividly illustrated in the realm of war journalism, as described by an independent media interviewee:

‘Consider the portrayal of journalists who discuss the war on Russian television. Among these commentators, those who receive the highest viewership ratings are typically not the most measured or thoughtful, but rather those who exhibit the most bombastic and sensational behaviour. These journalists often engage in loud, hysterical outbursts, pandering to the crowd with theatrical antics

reminiscent of daytime television dramas, where sensationalism reigns and the content often revolves around trivial domestic disputes, such as a husband's infidelity. Previously, such theatrics were confined to daytime show programs, but now, this style of exaggerated, sensational journalism occupies prime time slots. It has shifted focus from personal scandals to serious matters of war coverage, reflecting a significant change in the programming landscape and perhaps, in public taste or demand. This transition highlights a broader trend in media consumption where the lines between entertainment and serious journalism increasingly blur, leading to a spectacle-driven approach in the coverage of even the most grave and consequential events' (Interviewee 2, 2022).

This statement underscores how the sensationalist style, once confined to trivial daytime shows, has infiltrated serious news coverage, particularly that of war. In the context of professional obligations to cover armed conflicts, the norms and practices that seemed relatively harmless during peaceful times transform into potential tools of misinformation and bias in wartime. This shift underscores the need for a re-evaluation of journalistic standards in the context of conflict, a task that requires both methodological rigour and a critical engagement with existing media practices.

1.3 Research Questions and Objectives

This thesis explores five critical research questions to unravel the complexities of Russia's media narratives concerning its involvement in the Syrian war. Firstly, it examines the rationale presented by Russian media for Russia's, and specifically Vladimir Putin's,

intervention in the Syrian war. Secondly, it explores the characteristics of the Russian media landscape during the onset of Russia's military involvement in Syria, focusing on the dynamics between the government and media entities in mobilising public support for the war. Thirdly, the thesis analyses the portrayal of the Syrian war in Russian media outlets. Fourthly, it identifies and scrutinises the specific strategies employed by Russian media to garner public backing for the war. Lastly, it evaluates the efficacy of these media strategies and the resultant impact on public opinion and policy.

To adequately address the research questions posed, it is imperative first to establish the significance of investigating Russian media's portrayal of the Syrian war. While it may initially seem insensitive to analyse such a devastating event as the Syrian war merely as a research subject—given the extensive death and destruction it wrought—this conflict presents an almost ideal case study for dissecting and comprehending the nuances of Russian media coverage and journalistic practices within Russia (Brown 2014). The Russian media's depiction of the Syrian war is comprehensive, employing a wide array of propagandistic techniques that echo those used during the Soviet era, alongside contemporary journalistic tools, thus providing a rich tapestry for analysis (Kazun and Kazun 2019; Strovsky and Schleifer 2020).

This particular instance of war coverage is especially pertinent for understanding Russian media dynamics, as it involves an international context, engaging not only Russia but also the broader Western world. While domestic events, such as the Beslan school siege, might offer similarly striking examples of media manipulation, their internal nature limits their applicability for this analysis (Zaytseva 2015). In contrast, the Syrian war, recognised and reported on globally, allows for a comparative analysis of Russian media strategies against a backdrop of international journalism. This comparative aspect is vital, as it affords readers an

opportunity to juxtapose the Russian narrative with the coverage they encountered in their own countries. The unresolved nature of the Syrian war, with Bashar al-Assad remaining in power as of 2024 despite the tragic loss of over 593,000 lives (SOHR 2022), underscores the complexity and enduring relevance of this media discourse. The enduring Syrian crisis, therefore, not only serves as a critical lens through which to examine Russian media but also highlights the broader implications of media influence in shaping public understanding of international conflicts.



Figure 1.1: How many people killed during Syrian Revolution (SOHR 2022)

From the perspective of journalism, our primary objective is to comprehend the complexities of the Syrian war and its portrayal in Russian media. This understanding is crucial for adjusting our expectations and perspectives regarding the role of journalism in

contemporary armed conflicts. A significant aspect of this context is the public's fluctuating interest in the conflict. As evidenced by online engagement metrics, initial surges in clicks for news about Syria gradually gave way to a decline in interest, ultimately impacting the extent of coverage. Interviewee 3 from the independent media sector elucidates this trend:

‘As with other important events, clicks surge first and then they plummet, followed by surges, drops and other surges. Eventually surges happen less and less frequently until the clicks come down to zero. It’s customary to blame the reader for not clicking, yet the editor also grows tired of publishing the same thing.’ (Interviewee 3, 2022)

This statement underscores the intricate and reciprocal relationship between audience engagement and editorial decision-making, particularly in conflict zones where the stakes are extraordinarily high. Audience interest levels can significantly influence editorial choices, dictating which stories are pursued and highlighted. For instance, a spike in readership or viewership for certain topics can prompt editors to allocate more resources to those areas, impacting not only the quantity but also the depth and breadth of coverage. Conversely, a drop in engagement might lead editors to deprioritise certain stories, which can alter the public's perception and understanding of ongoing events.

This interplay is especially critical in conflict zones, where the information presented can have immediate real-world consequences. The media's focus and journalistic priorities in such areas are not merely matters of audience preferences but become integral to the broader narrative of the conflict. As such, editorial decisions in these regions are heavily scrutinised and imbued with ethical considerations, balancing public interest with responsible reporting.

Moreover, the dynamics of this relationship are influenced by a myriad of factors including geopolitical contexts, the availability of reliable information, security concerns for reporters on the ground, and the overarching political climate. Editors must navigate these complex landscapes while trying to maintain journalistic integrity and objectivity, often under pressure to attract and retain an audience. In essence, the connection between what the audience chooses to engage with and what editors choose to publish creates a feedback loop that continuously shapes and reshapes media focus and journalistic priorities. This dynamic is crucial for understanding how narratives are constructed, which stories gain traction, and how public perceptions are formed and informed, particularly in the sensitive and volatile environments of conflict zones.

The conflict in Syria has continued unabated, with ongoing instances of repression, tyranny, war crimes, and human rights violations, including the use of chemical weapons, radicalisation, and oppression (Human Rights Watch 2015). Despite the persistence and severity of these issues, public attention has notably dwindled. This shift in focus, moving away from the grim realities of the Syrian war to more sensational news stories, highlights a concerning trend in public engagement with global crises. It underscores the need for sustained media coverage and public awareness, even when the novelty of a crisis fades, to ensure that critical issues do not escape the international community's attention.

1.4 Thesis Outline

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review. This chapter provides a foundational exploration of key theoretical debates and perspectives relevant to Russian media

and conflict reporting. It will delve into the historical and political context of Russia, the Russian government, and President Vladimir Putin's influence on media coverage of the Syrian war. The chapter also examines the structure of the Russian media, highlighting its unique aspects compared to Western media.

Chapter 3: Methodology. This chapter details the revised research design and methodological approach, including recruitment and interview protocols, ethical considerations, and data analysis techniques. It aims to ensure clarity and robustness in the research process.

Chapter 4: Syria in the Russian Media. This chapter explores the rules established by the Russian government for media coverage of the Syrian war and the tools used to facilitate this coverage, unpacking the narrative strategies employed by Russian media.

Chapter 5: Analysis of Russian Media Rules in War Coverage. Focusing on the main rules and tactics used by Russian media to shape the Syrian war narrative, this chapter provides insights into media manipulation and control mechanisms during international conflicts.

The thesis concludes with **Chapter 6: Conclusion**, which synthesises the main findings and arguments, offering a comprehensive understanding of the Russian media's coverage of the Syrian war and proposing questions for future research.

Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Topic and Objectives

The examination of media's role in conflicts, especially within the unique context of Russian media, requires a nuanced understanding that only a thorough theoretical framework and comprehensive literature review can provide. This chapter aims to dissect the intricate relationship between media practices and conflict reporting, grounding the analysis in a blend of seminal and contemporary theories from the field of media studies.

Objectives:

1. **Identify and Discuss Key Theoretical Frameworks:** This involves an exploration of foundational theories such as McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting theory (McCombs and Shaw 1972), which posits the media's power in influencing what issues are deemed important, and Entman's framing theory (Entman 1993), which examines how media shapes perceptions through emphasis, exclusion, and presentation. These frameworks are pivotal in understanding the mechanics behind media influence in the context of conflicts.
2. **Explore Scholarly Debates on Media's Influence in Conflicts:** The focus here is on delving into the nuanced debates around the media's role in conflict zones. Insights from Gadi Wolfsfeld on the conditions under which media can influence political outcomes (Wolfsfeld 2022), and Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's seminal work, 'Manufacturing Consent,' which argues that media serves as propaganda for elite interests, will be particularly relevant (Herman and Chomsky 2021). These discussions will illuminate the complex dynamics of media influence, especially in authoritarian contexts like Russia, where media operates under different constraints and motivations.

The chapter will not only engage with Western theoretical contributions but also incorporate perspectives from Russian scholars and practitioners to provide a holistic view of the media's role in conflicts. By examining literature from both Western and Russian sources, the chapter aims to uncover the multifaceted ways in which media, state power, and conflict intersect, offering a balanced understanding that transcends cultural and political boundaries. This comprehensive approach sets the stage for an in-depth exploration of Russian media's distinctive strategies in conflict reporting, contributing to the broader discourse on media studies and conflict analysis.

2.2 Key Theoretical Debates and Perspectives

The field of media studies and conflict reporting occupies a critical juncture in understanding how media outlets shape perceptions of international conflicts. It underscores the influential role of media in constructing narratives that influence public opinion and policy, particularly in geopolitical conflicts. Theoretical frameworks within this domain are essential for dissecting the complex interplay between media narratives and practices, offering insights into how media portrayal can alter perceptions, mobilise public support, or dissent, and ultimately impact conflict dynamics. This analysis is indispensable for grasping the nuanced ways media contributes to the shaping of geopolitical landscapes.

Central to the analysis of media and conflict reporting are theories of propaganda, notably Jowett and O'Donnell's 'Propaganda and Persuasion,' which delineates the mechanisms through which media disseminates persuasive messages to influence masses (Jowett and O'donnell 2018). Equally pivotal is Entman's 'Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,' which examines how media framing shapes understanding and

interpretation of events (Entman 1993). McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting theory (McCombs and Shaw 1972), illustrating media's power in prioritising public issues, is crucial for understanding the selection and emphasis of conflict narratives. These theories collectively provide a foundation for analysing how media narratives are constructed, disseminated, and received, offering a lens through which the strategic presentation of conflicts can be understood, particularly in their capacity to shape public opinion and policy orientations.

Exploring media influence on public perception and policy during conflicts, Gadi Wolfsfeld's contributions underscore the symbiotic relationship between media and political conflict (Wolfsfeld 2022), highlighting how media coverage can both reflect and shape conflict dynamics. Philip M. Taylor's concept of 'media as a weapon of war' further elaborates on the strategic use of media to support warfare and political agendas, emphasising the role of media in legitimising or delegitimising conflict actions (Taylor 1992). These perspectives shed light on the potent capability of media to act as a catalyst or a counterforce in the context of political and military conflicts.

In the Russian context, the application of these theories is vital for understanding the state-controlled media apparatus and its global narratives, as examined by Volkmer (2014), and internal censorship practices, highlighted in Hutchings and Tolz's research (2015). The distinct characteristics of Russian media, marked by a high degree of state control and propaganda, necessitate tailored theoretical approaches to dissect how media narratives are engineered and propagated. Such analysis is critical for unravelling the strategies employed by Russian media in framing conflicts, influencing public opinion, and navigating the complexities of international diplomacy and internal governance.

These theoretical frameworks will guide the examination of Russian media's portrayal of the Syrian war, aligning with the research questions to explore the strategies and impacts of media narratives. The application of these theories will enhance understanding of the role of Russian media in shaping public perceptions of international conflicts, contributing to the broader discourse on media influence in geopolitical conflicts.

Understanding the diverse scholarly debates surrounding the media's role in conflict zones is crucial. These debates centre on media's dual capacity to act as a tool for state propaganda and a medium for ethical journalism, significantly influencing public perception and policy regarding international conflicts.

The media's role in propagating state narratives, especially in conflict zones, is well-documented. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's seminal work, 'Manufacturing Consent,' underscores how media serves state interests by shaping narratives in conflicts (Herman and Chomsky 2021). This dynamic is evident in various conflicts, where media outlets have played pivotal roles in aligning public opinion with governmental policies. In the Russian context, the state-controlled media's portrayal of conflicts, such as in Syria, illustrates the strategic use of media as a propaganda tool, aligning public perception with state interests and framing the narrative in a manner conducive to governmental agendas.

The concept of hybrid warfare, as detailed by Frank G. Hoffman, highlights the integration of conventional, irregular, and cyber warfare strategies, with media serving as a critical component in these multifaceted approaches (Hoffman 2007). Media's role in hybrid warfare is exemplified by its ability to disseminate disinformation, manipulate narratives, and influence public opinion across national borders. Russian media strategies in international

conflicts, particularly in Ukraine and Syria, showcase how state-backed media can be leveraged to support hybrid warfare efforts, blending traditional news with cyber operations to achieve strategic goals and disrupt societal cohesion in targeted countries.

The ethical dilemmas in conflict reporting are profound, challenging journalists to navigate between reporting truthfully and avoiding becoming propaganda tools. Stephen J.A. Ward's 'Ethics and the Media' discusses these dilemmas, emphasising the importance of maintaining objectivity, ensuring accuracy, and considering the impact of reporting on public opinion and policy (Ward 2011). However, in practice, reporters in conflict zones face significant challenges in adhering to these ethical standards, often due to pressure from governmental or military sources, the urgency of news cycles, and the inherent human bias, all of which can inadvertently contribute to skewed narratives and misinformation.

Despite the wealth of theoretical insights into the role of media in conflict reporting, a notable gap persists in the literature with respect to the evolving dynamics of digital media. Traditional models of propaganda and media influence, while foundational, often fall short in fully encapsulating the complexities introduced by digital platforms. The rapid proliferation of social media, online news outlets, and digital broadcasting has transformed the landscape of media and conflict reporting. These digital mediums offer new avenues for the dissemination of propaganda, necessitating updated theoretical models that can account for their unique characteristics and impacts.

Current theories on propaganda and media framing primarily focus on traditional media forms, with limited emphasis on how digital platforms amplify, reshape, and sometimes subvert traditional media narratives. The interactive nature of digital media, alongside its capacity for

viral content dissemination and user-generated content, introduces novel mechanisms for propaganda and misinformation. This is particularly pertinent in authoritarian contexts like Russia, where state-controlled media leverage digital platforms to extend their reach and influence. The absence of a comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates the role of digital media into the analysis of propaganda and conflict reporting represents a critical gap in existing literature.

The nuanced ways in which digital media contributes to the agenda-setting and framing of conflicts require deeper exploration. The dynamic, user-driven nature of digital platforms complicates traditional understandings of gatekeeping and narrative control, challenging scholars to reconsider the mechanisms of media influence in the digital age. This gap underscores the need for research that not only applies existing theories to the digital context but also critically evaluates and expands these frameworks to address the complexities of digital media's role in contemporary conflict reporting.

By highlighting these theoretical gaps, this research seeks to contribute to the development of a more nuanced understanding of media's influence on public perception and policy in the context of international conflicts. Specifically, it aims to elucidate the strategies employed by Russian media, across both traditional and digital platforms, in shaping narratives around the Syrian war. In doing so, this study will offer new insights into the role of digital media in modern propaganda efforts, providing a foundation for future theoretical and empirical work in this rapidly evolving field.

Scholarly perspectives on media's impact in conflict zones vary widely, from critical views highlighting the media's role in exacerbating conflicts to more optimistic assessments of

its potential for facilitating peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Simon Cottle's work on 'Mediatised Conflicts' and Johan Galtung's peace journalism framework offer insights into these divergent views (Cottle 2006; Ward 2011). While some scholars argue that media can deepen divisions and fuel violence, others suggest that responsible journalism can contribute to understanding, dialogue, and peace, underscoring the complex and multifaceted role of media in contemporary conflicts.

Despite extensive scholarship, gaps remain in fully understanding the nuanced role of Russian media in international conflicts. This research aims to address these gaps, offering new insights into how Russian media strategies influence public perception and policy, thereby enriching the discourse on media's role in conflict zones and contributing to a more nuanced understanding.

The Russian media landscape is marked by its unique dynamics, which play a pivotal role in the dissemination of information, especially in the context of international conflicts. The overarching influence of state control and censorship shapes media narratives, significantly impacting public perception both domestically and abroad. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for grasping the complex interplay between media, public opinion, and state policy in Russia. The state's involvement in media operations ensures a carefully curated portrayal of events, aligning with governmental objectives and narratives, thus underscoring the importance of scrutinising Russian media strategies to comprehend their influence on global perspectives.

In Russia, the extent of government influence over media is profound, with state ownership and control over major media outlets serving as a cornerstone for the dissemination of state-sanctioned narratives. According to Becker's analysis, state-owned media act not just

as news providers but as instruments for the Russian government to mould public discourse in ways that support its policies and image (Becker 2000). Toepfl's work further elucidates how the Russian state shapes public discourse, leveraging media to cultivate a unified narrative that supports its geopolitical objectives, especially in international conflicts (Toepfl 2018a; Toepfl 2018b). This centralised control ensures that media narratives serve as extensions of state policy, reinforcing the government's perspective and suppressing dissenting voices.

Censorship in Russia operates through a combination of legal restrictions and self-censorship among journalists, with Oates' study highlighting how media freedom is systematically curtailed. Gehlbach and Sonin's research on media manipulation tactics reveals a nuanced framework of control, where legal measures and indirect pressures coerce media organisations and professionals into compliance (Gehlbach 2010; Gehlbach, Sonin and Zhuravskaya 2010). This environment stifles the diversity of perspectives and critically undermines the plurality of voices essential in a democratic society. The impact of such censorship is a media landscape where information is not just controlled but sanitised to fit the narratives approved by the state, significantly limiting the scope for critical engagement with government policies.

The concept of 'sovereign democracy' is pivotal in understanding the Russian approach to media control. As articulated by Surkov and analysed by scholars like Wilson and Giles, 'sovereign democracy' posits a model of governance where sovereignty is prioritised as the foundation for democracy, justifying extensive control over media narratives as a mean to protect national interests (Wilson 2017; Ash *et al.* 2023; Giles 2016). This concept provides the ideological backing for Russia's management of media narratives, framing state actions, especially in international conflicts, as efforts to uphold national sovereignty against external

influences. It underscores an internally coherent justification for media practices that support state objectives, casting Russia's involvement in international affairs in a protective light.

The exploration of key theoretical debates, particularly those surrounding media framing, propaganda, and agenda-setting, lays the groundwork for addressing the nuanced role of Russian media in international conflicts. This theoretical foundation directly informs the research questions guiding this study, which seeks to uncover how Russian media narratives about the Syrian war are constructed and disseminated, and what implications these narratives have for public perception and international policy.

Given the identified gaps in the literature—specifically, the underexplored area of Russian media's strategic use of these theoretical constructs in conflict reporting—the research questions are designed to probe the extent and manner in which framing, propaganda, and agenda-setting theories manifest in the coverage of the Syrian war. This entails investigating not only the content of the media narratives but also the underlying strategies that guide their production and distribution, aspects that have been less examined in existing studies on Russian media practices. By linking these theoretical perspectives to the research questions, we aim to achieve a comprehensive understanding of:

1. The Construction of Media Narratives: How does Russian media employ framing and propaganda techniques to construct narratives about the Syrian war?
2. The Prioritisation of Issues: In what ways does agenda-setting theory elucidate the selection and emphasis of certain narratives over others within Russian media?
3. The Impact on Public Opinion and Policy: How do these media strategies influence Russian and international public opinion and policy regarding the Syrian war?

This direct linkage ensures that our investigation is grounded in robust theoretical frameworks while addressing the critical gaps in existing research. Through this approach, the study contributes not only to the theoretical discourse on media and conflict but also offers empirical insights that have significant implications for understanding the dynamics of media influence in geopolitical conflicts.

The application of these theories becomes particularly evident in the portrayal of international conflicts within Russian media. Research by Hutchings and Tolz on media coverage of events like the Syrian or Ukrainian conflicts showcases how state control, censorship, and the narrative of sovereign democracy coalesce to shape public opinion and international perceptions of Russia (Hutchings and Tolz 2015). These strategies ensure that international events are framed in a manner that aligns with Russian state interests, emphasising themes of defending sovereignty and justifying Russia's actions on the global stage. Specific instances, such as the coverage of the Syrian war, highlight the effectiveness of these media strategies in moulding public perception, illustrating the critical role of Russian media dynamics in the international portrayal of Russia's geopolitical manoeuvres.

Media reporting on international conflicts plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions and influencing policy decisions. The narratives constructed by media outlets can significantly impact how conflicts are understood and responded to by the global audience. Theoretical approaches to analysing conflict reporting are crucial for unpacking the strategies used by the media to present events. These frameworks help in understanding the mechanisms through which media can shape, reinforce, or challenge prevailing perceptions of conflicts.

Framing Theory, as developed by Robert M. Entman, provides a lens through which the impact of media framing on public perception can be examined. Entman posits that by selecting certain aspects of a perceived reality, media frames shape and define the way events are interpreted and understood (Entman 1993). For instance, in the context of the Syrian war, Russian media may frame the situation emphasising the legitimate intervention of Russia against terrorism, thereby highlighting Russia's role as a stabiliser in the region while excluding narratives that critique its military actions. This selective presentation of information has profound implications for public understanding and policy, as it can significantly influence perceptions of legitimacy, victimhood, and the necessity of intervention in conflicts.

Agenda-Setting Theory, introduced by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, suggests that the media has the power to influence the public agenda by choosing which issues to highlight (McCombs and Shaw 1972). In conflict reporting, this means that media outlets can shape public concern and attention towards certain conflicts over others. For example, Russian media's extensive coverage of the Syrian war may elevate it in public discourse, potentially overshadowing other international crises. This selective focus can alter the international community's response priorities, demonstrating the media's powerful role in setting the agenda for public and policy engagement with conflicts.

Gatekeeping Theory, as conceptualised by David Manning White, explores how news items are selected or discarded by editors or media gatekeepers (White 1950; DeJuliis 2015). This theory is particularly relevant in conflict reporting, where decisions regarding which aspects of a conflict are reported can significantly impact public awareness and understanding. In countries like Russia, state control over media can act as a gatekeeper, influencing which news about conflicts is disseminated. This control over information can limit public exposure

to diverse perspectives, thereby shaping the narrative in favour of state policies and perspectives on international conflicts.

Integrating Framing, Agenda-Setting, and Gatekeeping Theories provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the coverage of conflicts by Russian media. These theories collectively elucidate how news about conflicts is selected, presented, and interpreted, offering insights into the strategic use of media to influence public perception and policy. By applying these theoretical frameworks, this research aims to uncover the mechanisms through which Russian media shapes the narrative of international conflicts, such as the Syrian war, highlighting the interplay between media strategies and geopolitical objectives.

Propaganda, as defined by Edward Bernays in his seminal work 'Propaganda' (1928), is the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist. This concept, deeply embedded in the annals of history, has evolved to become a cornerstone of information warfare in contemporary conflicts, where the battleground extends beyond physical territories into the vast and malleable landscapes of media and public opinion. The relevance of propaganda and information warfare today underscores their power in shaping narratives, influencing public sentiment, and swaying political outcomes, marking them as critical tools in the arsenal of modern statecraft and non-state actors alike.

The evolution of propaganda techniques has been marked by significant milestones from World War I to the Cold War era, with Harold Lasswell's pioneering analysis laying the groundwork for understanding the mechanisms and effects of propaganda (Lasswell 1950; Lasswell, Lerner and Speier 1979; Lasswell 1951; Lasswell 1971). Lasswell's exploration of

propaganda techniques and their psychological impact highlighted the strategic deployment of messages to influence public opinion and mobilise support for wartime efforts. The transformation of propaganda with the advent of television and the internet has only expanded its reach and sophistication, a transition meticulously chronicled by Philip M. Taylor in his historical analyses (Taylor 1992). These advancements have facilitated a more direct and immediate connection with audiences, enabling propagandists to leverage the latest technological tools to craft and disseminate their messages.

In the digital age, information warfare strategies have diversified to include cyber warfare, social media manipulation, and the proliferation of fake news, reflecting the changing dynamics of global conflict and diplomacy. Keir Giles' insights into Russia's approach to information warfare reveal a sophisticated strategy aimed at exploiting the vulnerabilities of the digital ecosystem to influence public opinion and geopolitical landscapes (Giles 2016). Simultaneously, Anne Applebaum's analysis of Russian disinformation campaigns highlights the role of state-sponsored media outlets and the internet in spreading disinformation, illustrating the comprehensive approach taken by states to assert their influence beyond their borders (Applebaum 2021b; Applebaum 2021a; Applebaum 2018; Applebaum 2020). These contemporary strategies underscore the complexity of information warfare in the 21st century, where the lines between truth and falsehood are increasingly blurred.

The efficacy of propaganda and information warfare in shaping public opinion is further elucidated by Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory (1993), which posits that individuals may refrain from expressing minority views due to the fear of isolation. This dynamic is crucial in understanding how pervasive media narratives can silence dissent and shape a consensus reality. The impact on international relations can be seen through Joseph

Nye's concept of 'soft power,' where information warfare becomes a tool for states to maintain or enhance their global standing without resorting to physical coercion (Nye Jr 2011; Gomichon 2013; Nye Jr 1990). The strategic use of information to influence international perceptions and policies underscores the significance of propaganda and information warfare in the contemporary geopolitical arena.

The theoretical insights discussed herein provide a robust framework for examining the coverage of international conflicts by Russian media. This analysis will specifically apply the concepts of propaganda and information warfare to understand the strategies employed by Russian media outlets in shaping narratives around the Syrian war, directly linking these theoretical perspectives to the research questions at hand. This approach will facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the role of Russian media in contemporary information warfare, highlighting its impact on public opinion and international relations.

Comparative media analysis serves as a critical tool in dissecting the intricacies of conflict reporting across the globe, illuminating both the distinctive and shared characteristics of media practices. By juxtaposing Russian media strategies with those employed in other countries, we gain invaluable insights into how geopolitical narratives and public perceptions are sculpted. This comparative approach is particularly pertinent in examining Russian media, whose coverage of conflicts such as the Syrian war offers a unique lens through which to understand the interplay between media and state power, setting the stage for an in-depth analysis of the singularities and commonalities in global media reporting on conflicts.

The contrast between Russian and Western media's approach to conflict reporting is stark, underscored by differences in framing, agenda-setting, and the deployment of

propaganda. According to Hallin and Mancini's models of media systems, Western media, typified by the practices in the United States and the United Kingdom, often exhibit a 'liberal' model, characterised by a degree of separation between the state and the media, with a focus on professional journalism and market-driven news (Hallin and Mancini 2015; Hallin and Mancini 2013; Hallin and Mancini 2017). In contrast, Russian media, operating under a more 'polarised pluralist' or even 'authoritarian' model, displays closer ties to government, with media outlets frequently serving as instruments of state policy. This dichotomy reveals not just varied journalistic practices but also differing degrees of media freedom and government intervention, offering a nuanced understanding of how conflicts are reported and perceived.

When comparing Russian media's portrayal of conflict with that in other authoritarian regimes, such as China and Iran, several similarities and differences emerge. Like Russia, these countries exhibit tight state control over media, employing censorship and propaganda to shape public discourse. However, Russian media's tactics, including the strategic use of digital platforms to influence both domestic and international audiences, highlight a sophisticated blend of traditional and new media strategies. Deborah L. Wheeler's work on digital media in authoritarian regimes elucidates this trend, showing how governments harness online spaces to consolidate power and control narrative (Wheeler 2016; Wheeler 2004; Wheeler 2017). Despite these commonalities, variations in the extent and methods of control, rooted in different political and cultural contexts, underscore the complexity of authoritarian media landscapes.

Examining Russian media practices alongside those in non-Western democracies such as India and Brazil reveal further layers of complexity in how international conflicts are reported. These countries, navigating the challenges of democratic governance alongside deep-rooted political and cultural idiosyncrasies, offer contrasting case studies in conflict reporting.

Rajagopal's analysis of media in emerging democracies sheds light on how political culture shapes media narratives, with media in these democracies often caught between state interests, market pressures, and democratic ideals (Rajagopal 2019; Rajagopal 2017; Rajagopal and Rao 2017). This comparison underscores the diversity of media practices in reporting conflicts, influenced by a confluence of political, economic, and cultural factors.

This comparative analysis enriches our understanding of Russian media's distinctive approach to conflict reporting, situating it within a broader global context of media practices. By examining the nuances of Russian media in relation to Western models, other authoritarian regimes, and non-Western democracies, we uncover a multifaceted landscape of media strategies in conflict reporting. These insights not only augment the theoretical framework of this study but also deepen the inquiry into the specificities of Russian media practices, offering a comprehensive perspective that informs the subsequent analysis of Russian media's portrayal of the Syrian war.

The theoretical framework for this thesis integrates several key theories essential for analysing the portrayal of international conflicts by Russian media. Predominantly, framing theory, propaganda models, and agenda-setting theory serve as the foundation. These theories are pertinent because they offer a comprehensive lens through which the strategic presentation of the Syrian war in Russian media can be examined. Framing theory elucidates how media shapes perception by emphasising certain aspects of complex issues, while propaganda models explore the influence of political and economic pressures on media content. Agenda-setting theory further complements these by highlighting the media's role in determining which issues are deemed newsworthy. Together, these theories provide a robust methodological approach

for dissecting the narratives and tactics employed by Russian media in the context of international conflicts.

Each theory selected informs the research questions in distinct yet interrelated ways. For example, framing theory is instrumental in understanding how Russian media employs specific narrative techniques to depict the Syrian war, offering insights into the construction and propagation of particular perspectives. Scholars like Robert Entman have demonstrated the utility of framing theory in unravelling the nuances of media influence on public opinion and foreign policy, making it highly relevant for this analysis (Entman 1993). Similarly, the propaganda model, as elaborated by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (2021), aids in examining the systemic biases and constraints within which Russian media operates, especially in the portrayal of geopolitical events. Agenda-setting theory, introduced by McCombs and Shaw (1972), provides a lens to assess the prioritisation of news stories and their impact on public discourse. By applying these theories, the research will delve into how Russian media narratives are shaped and their implications for understanding the Syrian war.

The chosen theoretical framework shapes the methodology by guiding the selection of media texts for qualitative content analysis, informing the design of interview questions for journalists, and setting criteria for evaluating media narratives. The integration of framing theory, for instance, necessitates a focus on how certain aspects of the Syrian war are highlighted or omitted in media reports. This approach is complemented by the propaganda model, which influences the analysis of content through the lens of potential systemic biases and agendas. The methodology also incorporates agenda-setting theory by examining the prominence of specific narratives within the media landscape. Relevant methodological studies, such as those by Kimberly Neuendorf in content analysis, support the chosen approach,

ensuring a systematic and rigorous examination of Russian media coverage of the Syrian war (Neuendorf 2002; Neuendorf and Skalski 2009; Neuendorf 2017).

In the analysis and interpretation of data, framing theory will be applied to identify the specific frames Russian media uses to depict the Syrian war, while the propaganda model will help in discerning underlying biases and motivations behind the coverage. Agenda-setting theory will be utilised to understand the prioritisation of stories related to the Syrian war. This multi-theoretical approach allows for a nuanced analysis of how Russian media narratives are constructed and their potential impact on public perception and policy. By employing these theories, the research aims to reveal the strategies of Russian media in shaping narratives about the Syrian war and the broader implications for international media studies.

The application of framing theory, propaganda models, and agenda-setting theory provides a comprehensive theoretical framework that not only underpins the research methodology but also positions this study within the larger discourse on media and conflict. This research is expected to contribute to the field by offering a detailed analysis of Russian media's portrayal of the Syrian war, bridging gaps identified in the literature, and enhancing understanding of the role of media in international conflicts. By systematically applying these theories, the thesis will illuminate the mechanisms through which Russian media influences public perception and policy, contributing to a deeper understanding of media dynamics in geopolitical conflicts.

The scholarly discourse on media's role in conflict reporting offers substantial insights into how narratives are constructed and disseminated, with seminal works by Entman (1993) on media framing and Wolfsfeld (2022) on the media's integral role in conflicts shaping much

of the current understanding. However, despite these foundational contributions, research often overlooks the distinct characteristics and strategies of the Russian media landscape in the context of international conflicts. This oversight limits the applicability of existing theories, particularly in understanding the nuanced ways through which media serves not just as a reporter of conflicts but as an active participant in shaping narratives and public perceptions.

Existing literature predominantly navigates the terrain of media's role in conflicts with a broad brush, seldom delving into the specificities of Russian media coverage of international engagements. Notably, there is a pronounced gap in research that critically examines Russian media through the lenses of propaganda, media framing, and agenda-setting in contemporary conflicts. This lacuna is especially evident in the context of digital media's rising influence, where the mechanisms of state control and the efficacy of propaganda are increasingly pivotal yet underexplored. Empirical analyses that marry theoretical frameworks with in-depth examinations of Russian media practices—particularly in newer, less-covered conflicts—are conspicuously scarce. This gap hinders a comprehensive understanding of the state's sophisticated control over media narratives and the complex dynamics of propaganda in the digital age.

This research ventures beyond existing paradigms by applying theoretical frameworks such as agenda-setting and media framing to dissect Russian media's portrayal of conflicts, offering novel insights into the orchestration of narratives. By doing so, it addresses a significant theoretical gap, elucidating the nuanced strategies employed by Russian media to support state objectives within the context of international conflicts. This study not only reinforces the relevance of established theories in understanding media's role in conflicts but

also adapts these theories to the peculiarities of the Russian media landscape, thereby broadening the theoretical toolkit for analysing media practices in authoritarian contexts.

Through a meticulous empirical investigation, including content analysis and interviews, this study illuminates the operational mechanisms of Russian media in conflict reporting, unveiling the intricacies of propaganda and media framing. The original data gathered offers unprecedented insights into the strategic deployment of narratives, the selective use of language, and the management of public discourse. By uncovering the specific content and strategies utilised, this research enhances our understanding of how Russian media navigates and influences the complex landscape of international conflict, challenging and potentially extending existing theoretical frameworks on media's role in shaping public opinion and foreign policy narratives.

The findings from this study underscore the need for further theoretical and empirical exploration into media's influence on conflict perception, especially within authoritarian regimes. By elucidating the strategies of Russian media, this research contributes valuable perspectives to the development of media policy, aiming to mitigate the impact of propaganda in conflict reporting.

The propaganda model provides a critical lens through which the content and structure of Russian media narratives can be analysed, especially in identifying the systemic biases and operational mechanisms that underpin the dissemination of state-sanctioned narratives. This theoretical perspective will inform the qualitative analysis of media content, guiding the identification of propaganda techniques and their impact on public perception and policy discourse.

By integrating these theoretical insights into the methodological framework of this study, a comprehensive approach to analysing Russian media's portrayal of the Syrian war is established. This approach not only facilitates a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms of media influence but also ensures that the research findings contribute meaningfully to the broader discourse on media, conflict, and geopolitical strategies. The methodological implications of these theoretical frameworks underscore the importance of a multidimensional analysis, paving the way for the detailed empirical investigation outlined in the following chapter.

2.3 Russian Media Landscape and Conflict Reporting

Russia's historical portrayal by Western countries has often been marked by misunderstanding. This tradition, stretching back centuries, saw foreign leaders periodically proclaiming their perceived insights into Russian politics and culture. For instance, British envoys to Queen Catherine II boasted in letters about their supposed understanding of the Russian monarch, a sentiment echoed across different eras (Raeff 1972). This pattern persisted into the 21st century, particularly during Vladimir Putin's tenure as Russia's president. While Putin, with a background in intelligence, ostensibly enjoyed misleading successive Western leaders, the reality of Western understanding of his motives remains questionable. Contrasting Putin's prolonged leadership with the regular turnover of Western leaders due to democratic processes like succession orders, constitutions, and justice systems highlights a stark divergence in political cultures. Such differences, reflective of Putin's disregard for these democratic principles, present a unique analytical challenge in comprehending Russian political dynamics.

Roberts (2017) posits that comprehending Putin necessitates a serious consideration of his narrative on Russian identity. This narrative, influenced by perceived Western neglect and Russia's distinct connection to its kin in borderlands, shapes Russian foreign policy, as evidenced by the 2014 actions in Ukraine. Roberts suggests that Putin's articulations, often dismissed as mere rhetoric, should be examined as expressions of Russia's priorities and potential future actions. This approach underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of Russia's internal narrative and external relations. This analysis contributes to the broader theoretical framework of media studies and political communication by underscoring the complexities in the West's perception of Russian politics. It challenges the often-simplistic portrayal of Russian leadership in Western media, advocating for a more in-depth and critical approach to understanding the nuances of Russian political identity and its implications for international relations.

The challenge of comprehending Russia's motives, especially under Vladimir Putin's leadership, is amplified by his intelligence training and the deeply ingrained Russian pride in the enigmatic nature of the 'Russian soul.' This cultural pride, steeped in historical and literary narratives, posits Russia as a unique entity beyond the grasp of foreign understanding. This notion is eloquently captured in Fyodor Tyutchev's 19th-century poem, which resonates deeply within Russian culture (Яндекс 2021; Lyrics Translate 2022):

‘You don't grasp Russia with one's mind.

No measure to this foreign place.

She is one off. One of a kind.

With Russia – one's reduced to faith.’

However, the inscrutability of Russia does not imply it is beyond understanding. While political, economic, and moral analyses may seem futile, they are essential in deciphering the complexities of Russian governance and societal dynamics. This discussion aligns with the concept of Godwin's Law, articulated by Mike Godwin in 1990 (Moore 2018), which posits that prolonged discussions inevitably lead to comparisons with Nazis or Hitler (Teigrob 2019). In the Russian context, this invariably shifts to Putin, highlighting the sensitivity and centrality of his figure in Russian discourse.

This phenomenon is notably reflected in the media landscape. My experience working with prominent Russian news outlets, Kommersant and Gazeta.ru, revealed an unwritten yet rigid rule against drawing parallels between Putin and Hitler. This rule, believed to be created by the president's administration, underscores the intricacies of navigating media freedom and governmental influence in Russia. An interviewee from a government-controlled media outlet shared:

‘We had this rule which, according to a rumour, was rendered by the president’s administration, to never ever compare Putin to Hitler. There were talks this would upset Putin. We laughed at the fact this rule existed. It’s not like we had a queue of people willing to make that comparison, yet the rule persisted.’
(Interviewee 5, 2023)

This anecdote serves as a revealing case study into the nuanced mechanisms of control that shape media narratives, particularly within the context of Russian media. It sheds light on the pervasive influences of both censorship and self-censorship, highlighting how these practices permeate the operations of media organisations that, on the surface, appear independent. This dynamic illustrates the complex interplay between maintaining journalistic

integrity and the pragmatic considerations of political expediency, a balance that Russian media outlets must continually navigate.

The practice of censorship in this context often involves overt directives or constraints imposed by governmental bodies or agencies, which directly influence what can be reported and how it is presented. However, equally significant is the role of self-censorship, where media outlets and individual journalists anticipate potential repercussions and modify their reporting and editorial decisions accordingly. This self-censorship is not merely a result of direct intimidation but can also stem from economic pressures, where media organisations depend on government advertisements or fear losing business partners aligned with government interests.

This delicate balancing act has profound implications for the shaping of public discourse in Russia. It affects which stories are told and how they are framed, which in turn influences public perception and opinion. The extent to which media outlets manage to navigate these challenges is indicative of their commitment to journalistic standards versus their susceptibility or responsiveness to external pressures.

Ultimately, the anecdote underscores a broader theme of how power dynamics within the media landscape influence the flow of information and the construction of reality. It reflects a situation where media outlets are caught between the ideals of objective reporting and the pragmatic necessities imposed by external powers. This tension defines the media environment in Russia, shaping not just the output of journalistic endeavours but also defining the contours of cultural and political discourse within the country.

In a forthcoming section of this chapter, we delve deeper into the motivations behind Russia's engagement in global conflicts, particularly its involvement in Syria. This exploration seeks to unravel the complexities behind the seemingly straightforward yet profoundly intricate question: 'Why is Russia acting in such a characteristic manner in Syria?' While numerous plausible explanations exist, they essentially converge on two central tenets: Putin's belief in the necessity of Russian involvement in Syria and his perception of the feasibility of such engagement.

The question of why Putin deems it necessary for Russia to intervene in Syria can be linked to his personal political standing. Putin's legitimacy and seriousness as a leader are, in his view, contingent upon Russia's active participation in global affairs. This perspective aligns with a broader national belief, shared by many Russian citizens, in Russia's status as a world leader and a decisive force in global destiny (Allison 2013). This belief is not just a reflection of Putin's personal doctrine but resonates widely across the Russian populace. Even amongst those who oppose Putin on other grounds, there is a common agreement on this principle: the greatness and significance of Russia (Galeotti and Bowen 2014).

This discussion integrates within the broader theoretical frameworks of international relations and political psychology, examining how national identity and leader perception shape foreign policy decisions. It highlights the necessity of considering both individual leadership psychology and collective national consciousness in understanding state actions on the international stage. Such an analysis is vital in comprehensively assessing Russia's motivations and strategies, moving beyond simplistic or one-dimensional interpretations.

The polls ask this question regularly — Is Russia a great superpower?

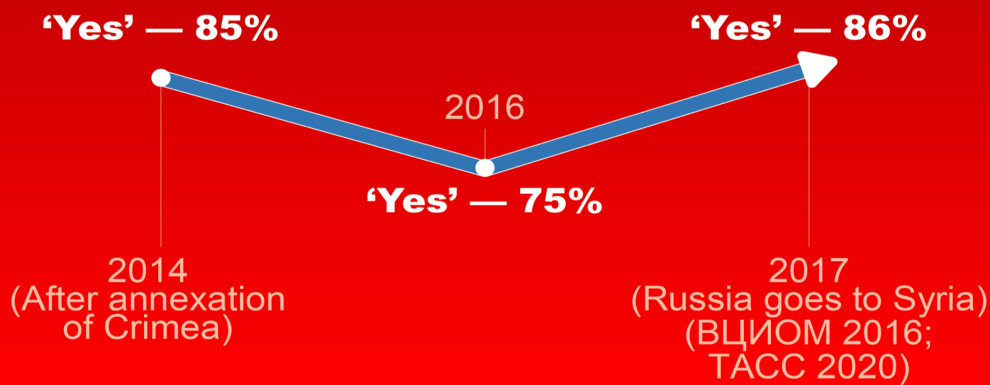


Figure 2.1: Is Russia a great superpower? (ВЦИОМ 2016; TACC 2020a)

The prevailing sentiment in Russia, underpinned by the belief that the nation should not be disregarded on the global stage, underlines the importance of Russia's involvement in world affairs. This perspective posits that excluding Russia from international decision-making is perceived as a sign of disrespect. However, gaining insights into President Putin's personal views on this matter remains challenging, as he rarely participates in unscripted interviews, thus avoiding direct questioning on his perspective of Russia's greatness. Public opinion polls often ask Russian citizens why they believe their country is great, with common responses highlighting 'culture,' 'literature,' and 'nuclear weapons' as sources of national pride (TACC 2018).

This pride in Russian culture and history, however, appears somewhat paradoxical. For instance, despite the national pride in Russian literature exemplified by classics like Leo

Tolstoy's 'War and Peace,' surveys indicate that only about 10% of Russians have actually read the novel (Lenta.ru 2019). This irony points to a disconnection between the professed cultural pride and actual engagement with the culture. Similarly, the pride in Russia's nuclear arsenal, as highlighted by citizens and Putin himself, reflects a compensatory narrative for perceived shortcomings in living standards and development compared to Western countries (Lucas 2009; ЛЕОНТЬЕВ 2005). Putin's rhetoric and demonstrations, such as his 2018 declaration regarding Russia's nuclear capabilities, further reinforce this narrative (Putin 2018a).

The gap between public sentiment and practical reality raises questions about the true desires of the Russian populace. An interview with a member of the government-controlled media (Interviewee 6, 2022) suggests that the average Russian prioritises national pride over personal well-being, a sentiment that resonates with Putin's public persona and actions. This was exemplified in 2018 when Putin showcased a computer simulation of a new Russian nuclear weapons system targeting Florida (BBC 2018).

While incorporating this analysis into the broader context of international relations and political psychology, it becomes evident that the Russian identity is intricately tied to perceptions of power and pride. This narrative shapes not only domestic attitudes but also Russia's foreign policy and international relations. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending the complexities of Russian actions on the world stage and their implications for global politics.

The perception of Russia's global significance, underscored by a prevalent national pride in cultural and military achievements, invites a nuanced analysis. The lack of unscripted media interactions with President Putin contrasts sharply with the opinions of Russian citizens,

frequently canvassed in polls. These polls often cite 'culture,' 'literature,' and 'nuclear weapons' as primary sources of national pride (TACC 2018). Yet, this pride appears paradoxical, particularly in cultural engagement. Despite the national veneration for Leo Tolstoy's 'War and Peace,' a seminal work in Russian literature, a mere 10% of Russians have ever read the novel (Lenta.ru 2019). This disparity between the celebration of cultural heritage and actual cultural participation hints at an inflated sense of nationalistic sentiment, reflecting complex layers in Russian identity.

Further, the pride in Russia's nuclear arsenal contrasts with the country's socioeconomic challenges. The glorification of nuclear prowess often overshadows critical issues like living standards, health, and education, where Russia trails Western nations (Lucas 2009; Леонтьев 2005). Putin's rhetoric, such as his 2018 assertion about martyrdom in nuclear warfare, amplifies this narrative: 'We will go to heaven as martyrs, and they will just drop dead' (Putin 2018). This posture prompts questions about public reception of such sacrificial rhetoric, an aspect yet to be explored in polling. In this context, Interviewee 6's observation becomes particularly poignant:

'What do you think a Russian person needs? To be honest, does he want to live better? No. The only thing that a Russian wants is to be proud. Preferably, without doing anything himself. Just turn on the TV and be proud' (Interviewee 6, 2022).

This sentiment articulates a critical observation about the nature of national pride, suggesting that it is frequently a passive experience for many individuals. Instead of arising organically from personal achievements or direct contributions to society, national pride is often fuelled and shaped by narratives that are propagated by the state. These narratives are

designed to foster a sense of unity and identity among citizens, but they do so by directing attention to collective achievements or historical events that may not involve active participation from the individual.

The idea of national pride being driven by state narratives raises important questions about the authenticity and depth of such sentiments. When pride is based on externally supplied stories and achievements, it may lack the personal connection that comes from individual accomplishments and direct contributions to one's community or nation. This type of pride might be easily swayed or manipulated, as it depends heavily on the portrayal of the nation's identity and history by those in power.

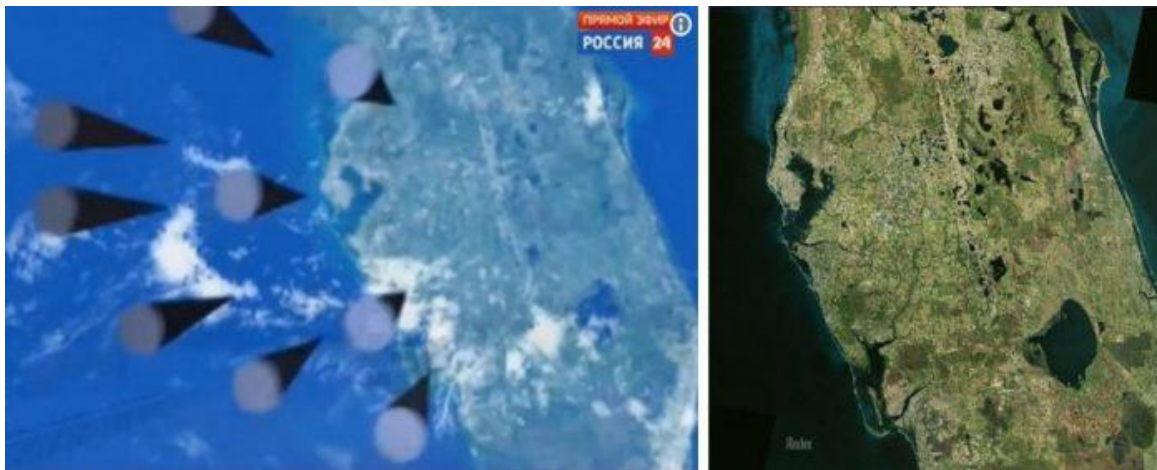
Furthermore, this characterisation of national pride suggests that it can serve as a tool for political or ideological agendas. By curating and disseminating specific narratives, states can influence how individuals perceive their nation and their place within it. This can lead to a unified sense of national identity, but it can also suppress individualism and critical perspectives about the nation's past and present.

The passive nature of this kind of national pride also implies a certain detachment from the active pursuit of national betterment. Instead of being agents of change or active participants in national achievements, individuals are positioned as recipients of a predefined national identity. This can discourage personal initiative or critical engagement with national issues, as the state-driven narratives provide a ready-made sense of belonging and pride that does not necessarily require individual effort or scrutiny.

Expanding on this sentiment reveals a complex interplay between individual identity, national narratives, and the construction of pride. It invites a deeper exploration of how national

identities are crafted and maintained by states and how these identities influence the personal and collective lives of citizens.

Putin's demonstration of a computer-simulated Russia-made nuclear weapon system targeting Florida (BBC 2018) is another manifestation of this narrative, symbolising the use of nuclear capability in constructing national identity. Such examples necessitate a critical examination of the Russian media landscape and its role in shaping and reflecting national identity and pride, integral to the theoretical framework of this research.



(BBC 2018)

The portrayal of Russia's nuclear capabilities, particularly in the context of recent geopolitical events, underscores a complex interplay of national pride and international perception. The incident where Putin showcased a computer-simulated nuclear attack on Florida not only became a source of Internet memes, suggesting a lack of seriousness in public perception, but also revealed a deeper narrative about Putin's mindset. This act can be seen as a reaffirmation of Russia's assertive stance on the global stage, aligning with the theory that

Putin views nuclear weapons as a crucial element of Russia's international stature (Киселев 2014; Яндекс 2022).

The intensification of nuclear rhetoric on Russian media, especially post the Ukraine and Syria events, reflects a deliberate strategy to assert Russia's power. This increased focus on nuclear capabilities serves as a reminder of Russia's potential threat, resonating with Putin's belief in the country's greatness. However, this narrative of power and respect through fear reveals a concerning aspect of Russian diplomacy. The West's apprehension regarding Russia's nuclear arsenal, stemming from concerns about the ageing infrastructure and security of these facilities, is mistakenly interpreted by Putin and Russian citizens as a sign of respect for Russia's greatness (Allison *et al.* 1996).

This misinterpretation feeds into a cultural belief prevalent in Russia – that respect is inextricably linked with fear. Putin's numerous declarations of Russia's greatness and his conviction of its special role in world affairs (Vesti 2012) highlight this mindset. However, this approach has led to increasing diplomatic isolation, with foreign leaders becoming increasingly reluctant to engage with Putin unless absolutely necessary, as evident from the fallout after the events of February 24, 2022. Interviewee 7 from independent media captures this sentiment succinctly:

‘How could we not impose ourselves in Syria given our pride? Are we any worse than America? Aren’t we as great? Nothing should happen in this world without our involvement’ (Interviewee 7, 2022).

This statement illuminates a profound and enduring belief held within Russia about its rightful place as a dominant power in the global arena. This conviction is deeply embedded in

the national consciousness and has historical roots that trace back through centuries of Russian history, from the times of the Tsars through the Soviet era to the present day. It is a belief that not only defines how Russia views itself but also significantly influences its actions on the international stage.

The perception of Russia as a preeminent global power is a key driver behind many of its foreign policy decisions and strategies. This encompasses a broad range of actions, from its assertive military interventions in neighbouring countries to its strategic alliances and oppositional stances in international bodies. Russia's approach to international relations is often characterised by a strong desire to assert its sovereignty and influence, reflecting an underlying drive to return to or maintain the status akin to that of a global superpower. This belief also impacts how Russia interacts with other nations. It seeks to project power and influence.

The conviction of its global stature informs Russia's stance on international law and norms. It selectively engages with international institutions when it aligns with its interests, but it is also quick to reject external interference or criticism that it views as infringing on its sovereignty. This behaviour underscores a broader strategy of leveraging international law and norms in a way that reinforces its perceived status as a major global actor.

The integration of this deep-rooted belief into Russia's national identity and its reflection in foreign policy also plays a crucial role in domestic politics. The government often uses its international posture and activities to bolster national pride and unity, framing Russia as a besieged fortress that stands resilient against external pressures. This narrative is a powerful tool for consolidating political support and justifying government actions, both domestically and internationally.

The exclusion of Russia from the G8 marked a significant diplomatic setback, deeply affecting President Putin and the national psyche. Russia's initial inclusion in the G8, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, was a pivotal moment symbolising the country's potential for democratic progression and alignment with Western standards of living. This inclusion, largely attributed to President Yeltsin's efforts, was perceived as a beacon of hope during the tumultuous post-Soviet years, symbolising a possible bright future for Russia (Hajnal 2019; Penttilä 2013). Thus, the subsequent exclusion not only wounded Putin personally but also symbolised a regression, stoking fears among the intelligentsia of the nation's backward slide (Сулакшин 2014).

Putin's response to this diplomatic rebuff was manifested in the state-controlled media's coverage. Following the exclusion, there was a noticeable shift in governmental media narratives, effectively negating the existence of the G7 and refocusing public attention on Russia's role in the G20. Interviewee 6, from government-controlled media, revealed this strategic shift:

‘When we were ousted from G8, there was an instruction to stop writing about it and shift the people’s focus on G20 where we build coalitions and rule the world’ (Interviewee 6, 2022).

This directive serves as a vivid illustration of the Kremlin's strategic approach to managing public perception and directing the national focus towards alternative narratives that emphasise Russia's influence on the global stage. By actively curating the content that the public consumes, the government not only shapes the citizens' understanding of world affairs but also moulds their sense of Russia’s role and status internationally. This is part of a broader

media strategy that seeks to consolidate power internally while projecting strength and sovereignty externally.

The Kremlin's manipulation of media and information extends beyond mere censorship, venturing into the territory of narrative construction and the promotion of specific viewpoints that align with state interests. This involves highlighting stories that portray Russia as a pivotal player in global politics, while downplaying or reframing news that could undermine its desired image. The intent is to create a perception among the Russian populace that their nation is not only relevant but essential to solving key global issues, thus fostering a sense of pride and legitimacy in the government's actions on the international stage.

This approach includes the use of state-controlled media outlets to disseminate these alternative narratives, ensuring that the government's perspective dominates the public discourse. This strategy effectively redirects the focus of the national conversation away from potentially critical domestic issues or unfavourable international developments. By doing so, it seeks to stabilise the internal political landscape by uniting the populace under shared themes of national prowess and global relevance.

This manipulation of information and narrative is critical for maintaining a cohesive national identity that supports the government's foreign policy objectives. It helps to legitimise the Kremlin's actions on the world stage and to justify its often aggressive foreign policies to its own people. By controlling the narrative in this way, the Kremlin not only directs how Russians see the world but also how they see their own place within it, continuously reinforcing the belief in Russia's indispensable role in global affairs. This strategic redirection and control

of public perception are pivotal for the Kremlin as it navigates the complex landscape of international politics and seeks to maintain its authority at home.

Putin's assertive stance on Russia's place in the world was further articulated in his press conference statement: 'Who needs a world without Russia in it' (Беляев 2018). This rhetorical question underscores his belief in Russia's indispensability on the global stage, echoing a sentiment that Russia would rather see the world destroyed than allow itself to be undermined or marginalised.

This perspective is not isolated to the G8 incident but permeates Russia's broader foreign policy, as evidenced by its involvement in Syria. Putin's determination to ensure Russia's participation in global affairs is a driving force behind such foreign interventions. This involvement, however, is not solely for asserting Russia's importance; it also reflects the complexities of international politics and Russia's strategic interests.

Putin's long tenure in power, combined with his personal background, has led to a conflation of personal respect with national respect. This perspective is evident in his responses to international criticism, where he perceives personal slights as affronts to Russian dignity (РИА Новости 2019а). His approach to such perceived disrespect often involves retaliatory measures, reminiscent of a schoolyard bully's tactics: seeking inclusion through destruction rather than diplomacy (Rumer 2017). This behaviour suggests a complex interplay between personal pride and national honour in Putin's diplomatic strategy.

The analogy with schoolyard dynamics extends to international politics, where Putin's retaliatory actions are framed as defences of national honour, rather than personal vendettas.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the context of Russia's involvement in the Syrian war. Reports have frequently highlighted Putin's attempts at engaging with world leaders, often met with indifference or outright exclusion from crucial informal international gatherings, which are pivotal for behind-the-scenes diplomacy and decision-making (РИА Новости 2018a). Interviewee 2 from independent media captures this sentiment:

‘At some point, nobody even wanted to talk to Putin. And then we invaded Syria and the West picked up the phone again when their friend Vladimir was calling. Here you go. This means they fear us. This means they respect us.’ (Interviewee 2, 2022).

This quote captures the intricate relationship perceived between military assertiveness and achieving international recognition, shedding light on the nuanced interplay of fear, respect, and communication within the realm of international relations. It suggests that the demonstration of military strength is often seen not merely as a tool for safeguarding national security but as a strategy for garnering respect and influence on the global stage. This approach rests on the assumption that power, particularly military power, commands attention and can coerce or persuade other nations into recognising a country's status and interests.

The quote underscores the role of communication in navigating these dynamics. Effective communication in international relations involves not only the conveyance of intentions and capabilities but also the management of perceptions and expectations. How a country communicates its military capabilities and intentions can significantly influence how it is perceived internationally. Poorly managed, it can lead to misunderstandings and heightened tensions, whereas strategic communication can enhance a country's influence and ability to shape international discourse.

This perceived linkage between military might and international recognition also speaks to broader themes within international relations, such as the balance of power, the role of deterrence, and the strategies nations employ to project strength and stability. These themes are central to understanding how nations construct their foreign policies and interact on the world stage.

The quote highlights the complexity and risks involved in leveraging military assertiveness as a means of gaining international recognition. It points to a broader strategic calculus that nations must consider as they navigate the intricate web of international relations, balancing their desires for security and influence against the imperatives of global cooperation and peace.

President Putin's habitual lateness in meetings with global leaders, including Queen Elizabeth II and the Pope, has been well-documented (Walker 2015; Batchelor 2017). This pattern extends beyond a mere personal trait, symbolising a deliberate political statement about Russia's standing in the global hierarchy. As Putin consistently makes world leaders wait, he reinforces the notion of Russia's exceptionalism and dominance. This behaviour can be interpreted as a strategic move to assert Russia's significance, demanding acknowledgment, and respect on the world stage.

Sergei Markov, a political analyst with ties to the Russian authorities, endorses this perspective, stating: 'Putin is almost always late for meetings. I know how and why that happens and I fully support Putin in this. He's actually right in what he's doing. These delays happen when he meets bureaucrats, community leaders, politicians. They deserve it' (Куркин

2020). This view suggests that Putin's tardiness is a calculated tactic, aimed at establishing a power dynamic in his favour.

This notion of superiority was challenged when the prime minister of Singapore notably departed rather than waiting for Putin, an event that resonated significantly within Russia and signalled a potential shift in international dynamics (Deutsche Welle 2018). Such instances indicate a growing resistance to Putin's tactics and a changing global perception of Russia.

Putin's conduct in personal encounters, like his interaction with Angela Merkel when she was visibly scared of Putin's dog, and he wouldn't call it off and was seen enjoying this scene, underscores a more personal aspect of his approach to international relations (Business Insider 2017). These actions, perceived as power plays, highlight Putin's intention to command respect and assert dominance, even in informal settings. In the context of these observations, Interviewee 8 from the independent media notes:

‘It's not like that in Putin's head. He doesn't think he's a bad guy. On the contrary, he thinks: ‘All of you in the West are for sale, you are no better than me. I stretched out a hand to you, you didn't want to be friends. Now I'll force you into it. You will call me, beg me and you'll be scared.’ Putin thinks if he was insulted, Russia was insulted. He hasn't distinguished these two concepts for a long time. In Syria, he will take revenge for himself and Russia. Where else if everyone is in Syria now?’ (Interviewee 8, 2023)

This quote delves deeply into Vladimir Putin's personal worldview and his interpretation of Russia's relations with the West. It reveals that Putin does not perceive himself as the antagonist in global politics. Instead, he holds a contrasting view, seeing Western

countries as morally equivalent, believing that they are just as susceptible to corruption and self-interest as anyone else. According to this perspective, Putin feels that his overtures for friendship and cooperation have been spurned by the West. Consequently, he adopts a more coercive stance, aiming to force Western nations into a position where they will have no choice but to engage with him, even to the extent of begging for his cooperation or intervention.

The quote further illustrates how deeply personal this geopolitical stance is for Putin. He does not distinguish between personal affronts and national insults, interpreting any slight against him as an affront to Russia itself. This conflation of his personal ego with national pride is a critical aspect of his leadership and influences his foreign policy decisions. It is particularly evident in contexts like Syria, where Putin sees an opportunity not just to expand Russia's influence but also to avenge personal and national slights. His actions are portrayed as both a retaliation and a reassertion of Russian power in a region where many international players are involved.

This mindset underscores the complex interplay between personal leadership styles and national foreign policy. Putin's approach is characterised by a blend of realpolitik and personal vendetta, where geopolitical strategies are deeply intertwined with personal feelings and perceptions of respect and power. The narrative that emerges is one of a leader who operates within a framework of power politics, where interactions are zero-sum games, and relationships are leveraged to maximise national gain based on a personal interpretation of slights and friendships.

This quote provides a window into the motivations and perceptions that drive Putin's actions on the international stage, highlighting a leadership style that is profoundly influenced

by personal experiences, perceptions of honour, and the desire for respect and recognition, both for himself and for Russia. This blend of personal conviction and strategic manoeuvring continues to shape Russia's engagements and relationships with Western nations, with significant implications for international stability and diplomatic relations.

Putin's evolving strategy in international relations reflects a shift from seeking friendly ties to demanding respect, regardless of the means. This approach, marked by a mix of calculated political moves and personal assertions of power, illustrates a complex interplay of personal characteristics and strategic geopolitical manoeuvring, critical to understanding Russia's current international posture.

The Syrian war represents a pivotal global event, and Russia's involvement can be analogised to an unexpected appearance at a high-profile event. This analogy underscores Russia's strategic manoeuvre to regain its global significance, particularly following the international isolation it faced after the Ukraine crisis in 2014. Charap's (2013) analysis provides a basis for this interpretation, suggesting that Russia's intervention in Syria was not just a response to a geopolitical crisis but also a calculated move to reassert its influence on the world stage.

Putin's decision to intervene in Syria can be likened to an uninvited yet impactful entry into the 'political Met Gala' of the time. By asserting its presence in Syria, Russia effectively compelled international leaders, who had previously distanced themselves following the Ukraine incident, to re-engage with Moscow. This involvement necessitated renewed diplomatic interactions, with world leaders seeking Putin's opinions and including Russia in critical discussions and meetings regarding the Syrian situation. This shift illustrates the

dynamic nature of international relations, where geopolitical actions can significantly alter diplomatic alignments and power structures.

Russia's assertive stance in Syria, therefore, served multiple purposes. It not only addressed the immediate geopolitical situation in the Middle East but also strategically repositioned Russia as an indispensable actor in global politics. This approach highlights the complex interplay of international diplomacy, where global events like the Syrian war become arenas for nations to assert influence, negotiate power, and reshape diplomatic relations.

Vladimir Putin's tenure as a Russian leader presents a paradox. Despite a marked decline in the quality of life in Russia over the last 20 years, as evidenced by various metrics, his opposition remains remarkably weak. This phenomenon reflects a broader societal resignation; the Russian populace, disillusioned and fatigued by Putin's prolonged rule, shows little inclination to actively seek change. The ineffectual nature of protests in Moscow and other cities underscores this sentiment of resignation and scepticism about the potential for improvement post-Putin (Greene 2014). Contrasting sharply with Western aspirations for generational progress, the Russian outlook is tinged with pessimism, with few expecting better futures for their children in terms of education, healthcare, or societal fairness (Vesti 2010).

This pervasive sense of fatalism is key to understanding Putin's enduring political dominance. The common belief among Russians is not that life will improve without Putin, but rather a fear that it could deteriorate further. This aligns with Putin's own political philosophy, which prioritises national grandeur over domestic well-being. Russians, thus, find solace in their nation's perceived global power and respect, despite personal hardships (Новопрудский 2019).

Putin's disinterest in domestic policy is evident. He recognises the deep-rooted corruption and organised crime within the state, problems that are not only endemic to his regime but have historical precedence (BBC 2014). The complexity and entrenchment of these issues, exacerbated by the vested interests of Putin's close allies who benefit from Russia's resources, make reform an almost insurmountable challenge (Markus 2017).

A pivotal element in understanding President Putin's strategic objectives is his pursuit of historical significance. Recent years have seen a discernible shift in his focus towards actions that will cement his legacy in history. This is aptly summarised by Alexey Venediktov, editor-in-chief of the 'Echo of Moscow' radio station: 'Putin's main objective is making history. The future history textbooks will say that Khrushchev lost Crimea, and Putin got it back. Putin is only interested in events that will get him in the history books.' (Венедиктов 2017). This pursuit of historical recognition overshadows more mundane but crucial national issues like healthcare and education, which, though essential, are unlikely to guarantee a place in history books.

As Putin ages, his actions increasingly reflect a desire to achieve historical immortality, often at the expense of addressing contemporary societal needs. His fixation on legacy is evident in his repeated references to the Soviet Union's collapse as the 20th century's greatest tragedy (inosmi.ru 2016). Putin's views, firmly rooted in historical and geopolitical narratives, often seem disconnected from the economic realities of the modern, post-industrial world.

In this context, Putin's goal to expand Russia's territory and influence mirrors the strategies of the former USSR. This includes supporting regimes opposed to Western interests,

as evidenced by the Kremlin's tactics in Syria (Dimpleby 2010). Syria, as tragic as its situation is, represents a mere component of Putin's larger strategy. The intervention in Syria is not an end in itself but a means to gain leverage in global politics. This approach, which regards the immense human cost as collateral damage, reflects a broader geopolitical calculus (Stent 2016).

The West's response to these developments, or lack thereof, also plays into Putin's calculations, as will be discussed in the subsequent section. However, it's essential to delve deeper into Putin's motivations for intervention in Syria, as they reveal a complex interplay of strategic and historical ambitions that transcend mere opportunism.

The discourse surrounding President Putin's personal wealth has intensified over the years, with some reports speculating that he might be among the world's wealthiest individuals (Wile 2017). Media attention often focuses on his penchant for expensive accessories, drawing a stark contrast to the austere lifestyle of Joseph Stalin, a figure who continues to command respect in Russian polls (РИА Новости 2019). Unlike Stalin, Putin's lifestyle and the rumours of his immense wealth have been subjects of considerable public interest, though concrete evidence remained elusive until recently.

The financial system in Russia can be described as bifurcated, comprising an official, lacklustre economy and an unofficial one, colloquially known as 'the pool.' This pool, as Латынина (2016) describes, is a reservoir of funds used to remunerate those loyal to Putin. The existence of this pool, a common topic in discussions about Russian corruption, was relatively easier to corroborate due to the sheer number of people involved and their growing reluctance to maintain secrecy. Notably, many individuals from Putin's personal and

professional circles have amassed substantial wealth during his tenure, a point highlighted by Gessen (2013).

The Panama Papers scandal brought a new dimension to the understanding of global financial practices, including those potentially linked to Putin. This leak provided a disappointing revelation: numerous high-profile individuals worldwide were minimising tax liabilities through offshore accounts (Esoimeme 2016; Obermayer and Obermaier 2016). While holding an offshore account isn't illegal in most jurisdictions, the moral implications of such practices have been a point of contention, particularly when it involves public figures perceived as otherwise reputable.

The revelation of government officials, including five members of the UK's House of Lords and Commons, in offshore financial dealings has sparked significant public outrage (Chohan 2016). This scandal, stemming from just one offshore country, raises troubling questions about the extent of undisclosed assets by world leaders, hinting at a potentially widespread issue in global governance.

Focusing on Russia, the case becomes more intriguing. Notably, President Putin himself was not listed in these offshore accounts. However, his close associates, including Sergei Roldugin, a professional cellist and godfather to Putin's daughter, were implicated. Roldugin's reported wealth of nearly \$2 billion (Hoskins and Shchelin 2018) has become a subject of both humour and scrutiny in Russia, challenging the conventional perceptions of a musician's earnings.

When questioned about Roldugin's wealth, Putin nonchalantly remarked that ‘there is nothing wrong with a man who did good for himself’ (Новая газета 2016), a response that did little to dispel the controversies surrounding these financial revelations.

Journalist and political analyst Yulia Latynina provides further insight into what she describes as 'Putin's pool.' According to her analysis, revealed through the Panama Papers, Roldugin's offshore accounts, replete with \$2 billion, suggest a complex financial network involving Russian companies funnelling money to these accounts. Latynina raises the critical question of the true beneficiary behind Roldugin's wealth, hinting at a larger, unofficial financial system at play within the Kremlin (Латынина 2016). This ‘pool’ of funds, as she terms it, seems to function as an informal budget for the Kremlin, underscoring the opaque nature of financial dealings in Russian political circles.

The Panama Papers leak, extensively covered in the Russian media, paradoxically seemed to benefit President Putin more than it harmed him. In Russia, the general perception of government and presidential corruption was already widely acknowledged. However, the revelation that corruption was a global phenomenon, as evidenced by the Panama Papers, reinforced a narrative often propagated by the Russian media: the ubiquity of corruption worldwide. This narrative was used to diminish the significance of Russian corruption by presenting it as a universal issue (РИА Новости 2016). Interviewee 9 from independent media reflects on this sentiment:

‘The Panama papers were a huge blow, of course. It turned out everyone in the world is dishonest and unethical, not just VIPs in Russia. In a way it turned out that Putin was right when he chastised the West. And if he’s right in this regard, maybe he’s right about everything else?’ (Interviewee 9, 2022).

The Panama Papers, when they were released, served as a significant revelation, unmasking widespread dishonesty and unethical behaviour not just among the elite in Russia but across the global stage. This extensive leak of documents revealed intricate details about the offshore financial activities of a myriad array of public figures around the world. The fallout from these disclosures was profound, casting a spotlight on the pervasive nature of tax evasion, money laundering, and evasion of financial oversight by influential figures worldwide.

This exposure had a deep impact, particularly in the context of international perceptions and the moral high ground often claimed by Western nations. Vladimir Putin's frequent critiques of the West for hypocrisy were seemingly validated by these revelations. He had long criticised Western leaders and institutions for moral corruption while positioning Russia as straightforwardly defiant of what he portrayed as Western moralism. The Panama Papers incident echoed his narrative, suggesting that the West was no less corrupt than others, thereby supporting his broader criticisms of Western moral and ethical standards.

In this light, the implications of the Panama Papers went beyond financial misdemeanours, touching on geopolitical narratives and the credibility of nations on the international stage. For some observers and commentators, the revelations lent weight to Putin's assertions and posed provocative questions about the veracity and integrity of his other claims and positions. If Putin was correct in his accusations about Western corruption, people began to wonder whether his other positions might hold more truth than previously acknowledged.

This line of reasoning reflects a broader theme in international relations, where the legitimacy and credibility of a nation or leader can be significantly affected by revelations of

hypocrisy or misconduct. The Panama Papers were not just a blow to individual reputations but also to the collective moral stance of entire regions, particularly the West, thereby altering the dynamics of international dialogue and potentially reshaping alliances and oppositions based on newly perceived or realigned ethical and moral standings.

This incident not only validated Putin's frequent criticisms of the West but also seemed to legitimise his governance approach in the eyes of the Russian public. The Panama Papers leak thus played a significant role in shaping Russian public opinion and foreign policy perceptions.

Putin's connections with individuals in the oil industry, alongside the oil-rich nature of Syria, suggest economic motivations behind Russia's involvement in Syria. The sanctions imposed on Putin's circle following the annexation of Crimea had significant financial repercussions. Journalists Латынина (2017) and Smirnova (2014) detail how Putin promised to compensate his oligarch friends for their losses through avenues like the Syrian war. This strategy not only aimed to consolidate Putin's political legacy with the Crimea annexation but also served as a means to maintain loyalty and support from influential oligarchs affected by Western sanctions.

The Syrian war represents a convergence of geopolitical strategy and economic interests for Putin, offering a means to reinforce his domestic and international stature while simultaneously providing financial compensation to his inner circle. This complex interplay of motivations underscores the intricate nature of Russian foreign policy under Putin's leadership.

The annexation of Crimea stands out as a pivotal moment in President Putin's tenure, arguably seen by him as a crowning achievement (Treisman 2016). This action aligns with Putin's broader vision of restoring Russia's grandeur, reminiscent of the Soviet era. His ambition seemingly extends to reincorporating former Soviet states, despite the inherent challenges and international repercussions. This goal aligns with Putin's perception of the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a major geopolitical tragedy, a sentiment that has significantly influenced his political strategy.

Igor Yakovenko, Chairman of 'Zhurnalistskaya Solidarnost' [Journalist Solidarity] Union, articulates this perspective: 'Putin and the USSR. Putin lives his life with his head turned to the 90s where, as Putin put it himself, the greatest geopolitical catastrophe happened, and the Soviet Union collapsed. Thus, his greatest aim is to rectify that catastrophe and bring the Soviet Union back and to put a badge of land gatherer on himself.' (Яковенко 2019). Yakovenko's observation underscores Putin's nostalgia for the Soviet era and his desire to revive its legacy.

The annexation was not a spontaneous decision but a long-considered plan that materialised at an opportune moment (Forsberg and Pursiainen 2017). This strategic move was not driven by public demand in Russia; rather, it was an initiative that gained public approval post-facto, a testament to the Kremlin's ability to shape public opinion and nationalistic sentiment.

While this historical account of Crimea's annexation provides important context, it diverges somewhat from the central focus of this thesis, which is to examine Russia's role in the Syrian war through Russian media's lenses. Nonetheless, understanding the annexation is

crucial, as it set a precedent that has had far-reaching implications for Russia's international conduct, particularly evident in its actions in 2022 in Ukraine.

The annexation of Crimea by Russia marked a pivotal moment in President Putin's tenure, catalysing a surge in his approval ratings. This increase in popularity, as noted by Aron (2017), was unprecedented, breaking a longstanding stagnation due to Russia's economic woes linked to plummeting oil prices. The day after Crimea's annexation, Putin's popularity soared to new heights, even among those typically critical of his domestic policies. This event was perceived as an embodiment of Russia's resurgence, acquiring significant territorial prestige.

Understanding the context of Crimea's annexation is crucial. The region, part of Ukraine, was strategically important for Russia, housing its Black Sea fleet and ageing but vital naval assets. Ukraine's resistance to Russia's use of this harbour exacerbated tensions (Mankoff 2014). Additionally, a notable proportion of Crimea's residents held Russian citizenship, a status reportedly easier to obtain in Crimea than elsewhere, reflecting an informal policy to reinforce Russian presence in the area.

Internationally, the annexation was condemned as illegal and aggressive. Yet, it is argued that, had a formal vote been conducted, the majority in Crimea, many of whom were Russian citizens, would have favoured joining Russia (Dunn and Bobick 2014). This move, while controversial, strategically positioned Putin in Russia's historical narrative as a leader who expanded its territories, reflecting his obsession with his legacy.

The 'Crimea anaesthetic' phenomenon, as termed by 'Голос Америки' [Voice of America] (РС «Голоса Америки» 2014), momentarily diverted the Russian public's attention

from economic hardships, fostering a renewed sense of national pride and appreciation for Putin. This boost in approval ratings was significant, as Putin achieved heightened popularity with seemingly minimal effort, a testament to the potent symbolism of Crimea's annexation in the national psyche.

However, the third aspect of this situation, arguably less impactful domestically but highly significant internationally, warrants focused analysis. The global response to the Crimea annexation revealed complex geopolitical dynamics and had far-reaching implications, reshaping Russia's international relations and altering global political narratives.

The global response to Russia's annexation of Crimea was marked by significant outrage and harsh judgement from world leaders. Notably, only a few countries, such as Nicaragua, acknowledged Crimea as Russian territory (РИА Новости 2018). This section will delve into the economic sanctions imposed, elucidating their scope and impact in greater detail.

Despite the international uproar, tangible actions against Russia were limited. Western countries maintained diplomatic relations with Russia, and notably, no military intervention was initiated to defend Ukraine. This inaction underscores John Mearsheimer's argument that Ukraine was not perceived as a core strategic interest by the United States and its European allies. Mearsheimer posits that the reluctance to use military force in Ukraine's defence demonstrates the impracticality of extending NATO membership to a country that member states are unwilling to defend. He warned against the potential risks of such expansion, suggesting it could lead to a direct conflict between Russia and the West (Mearsheimer 2014).

From Putin's perspective, the absence of a robust Western military response signified a tacit allowance to act according to his own agenda. This perceived Western indifference, particularly in the case of Ukraine, was interpreted as a green light for further actions.

Even Germany, with its significant political and economic ties to Ukraine, did not intervene in a meaningful way to protect Ukraine (Sollai 2017). Angela Merkel's reluctance to confront Russia militarily is emblematic of the broader European stance. In Putin's view, this lack of decisive action equated to an opportunity to pursue his objectives unimpeded.

The implications of the Crimea annexation extended far beyond the region itself. This event set a precedent that resonated in subsequent international crises, including the Syrian war and the escalation of tensions in Ukraine in 2022. The 'Crimea phenomenon' of 2014, as it came to be known, represents a significant historical and geopolitical milestone with long-term ramifications. On this matter, Anna Rose, a journalist from Echo of Moscow, remarks:

‘The German chancellor shows that she does not have a strict position or any long-term plan in dealing with Putin, which was numerously proved during the Crimea ordeal and continues to be proved with Syria. Merkel just makes up the plan of dealing with Putin as she goes, and that inability to make precise decisions and harsh choices led to the fact that Russia had an ability to show a stronger position in Ukraine with Crimea and in Syria. Yes, there were sanctions, but Merkel was not prepared to do anything more. It turns out she was not even prepared to ostracise Putin after Ukraine, as between the Ukrainian and Syrian ordeals, Merkel called Putin at least four times. Merkel has shown that she can not ignore Russia and has also shown that she can not or has no will to stop Russia. So, Merkel decided that this is what she will be showing to the

world. She can not ignore Putin, so she will not. She can not stop Putin, so she will not.’ (Поля 2018)

This event has shaped not only the fate of those in Crimea, Russia, and Ukraine but also has broader implications for international relations and global security, demanding thorough analysis and understanding.

The perception of Western responses to President Putin's actions underscores a significant lesson in international politics. According to Treisman (2016), Putin has discerned a fundamental truth: the nations of the so-called civilised West appear unwilling to take substantive risks to counteract his manoeuvres. This realisation seemingly emboldens his geopolitical strategies, giving him a sense of unbridled autonomy in the global arena. This sentiment is echoed by Interviewee 2 from the independent media, who critically assesses the West's reaction to the annexation of Crimea: ‘What did the West do to Putin for Crimea? Nothing. Just expressed its concern yet another time. Why not go to Syria after that? People love watching battles on TV, they just adore it. Why not cheer up the people?’ (Interviewee 2, 2022). This statement highlights a perceived passivity in Western responses, suggesting that such inaction may have further incentivised Putin's involvement in Syria. It reflects a cynical view of public reception of international conflicts, implying that televised warfare may serve as a form of entertainment, thereby garnering public support.

The effectiveness of Western-imposed sanctions on Russia has been a subject of considerable debate. Peter Rutland (2014) poses the question of why these sanctions did not achieve their intended impact. President Putin's perspective provides a critical insight into this issue. According to Putin (2017), Russia has historically faced sanctions whenever perceived

as a threat or a potential equal by Western powers. He argues that the sanctions, whether in response to Crimea, Syria, or other issues, are merely pretexts used by the West to limit Russia's growth. Putin acknowledges the impact of sanctions but contends that they have not harmed Russia significantly. Instead, he claims that sanctions have spurred economic innovation and growth within Russia, with the adverse effects being more pronounced for the sanctioning countries.

Further, Putin's narrative suggests that the sanctions have had unintended positive consequences for Russia. These include forcing economic diversification and innovation beyond reliance on oil. He asserts that this adversity has led to a rise in exports and overall economic improvement. However, he also acknowledges the broader negative implications of these sanctions on the global economy, while maintaining that Russia has benefited from them in some ways. This viewpoint is mirrored in the Russian media's portrayal of the situation, which often aligns with Putin's perspective. The narrative perpetuated is one of external aggression against Russia, fostering a sense of national unity and support for Putin as a defence against perceived hostile actions. The constant emphasis on external threats and the need for consolidation around Putin is a strategic tool for maintaining his political position and justifying his policies (Путин 2020).

The sanctions, while intended to penalise Russia, have been framed by Putin and Russian media as evidence of unwarranted aggression, thereby bolstering internal support for Putin's leadership. This reframing has significant implications for understanding the dynamics of Russian politics and its interactions with the global community.

The imposition of international economic sanctions on Russia offers a dual advantage from the Kremlin's perspective. Firstly, these sanctions bolster the narrative that Russia is besieged, a notion deeply ingrained in President Putin's belief system (Радио Свобода 2019а). This perspective serves not just as a defensive tactic but reflects Putin's genuine worldview. Secondly, these sanctions provide a convenient scapegoat for Russia's internal economic struggles, allowing the government to attribute the country's financial hardships to external forces rather than domestic policy failures (РИА Новости 2019b).

The state-controlled media plays a significant role in propagating this narrative, positioning the West as the antagonist responsible for the economic difficulties faced by Russian citizens. Putin acknowledges the poverty and lower living standards in Russia compared to the West, but he steadfastly refuses to link these issues to his governance. Instead, the sanctions are presented as the sole culprit for these hardships. Interviewee 6 from the government-controlled media articulates this strategy: 'There was an instruction to blame all the troubles on sanctions. Russia is insulted, Russia is attacked, Russia is surrounded by the enemies. They are trying to strangle us, but Putin won't let them' (Interviewee 6, 2022).

This rhetoric finds resonance among the Russian populace, further aided by coincidental timing with domestic policy changes. Notably, a new law on food production aimed at achieving self-sufficiency in Russia exemplifies this. The law, ostensibly simple in its intent to reduce dependence on imported goods, led to the prohibition of imports that could be domestically produced. A striking example is the decision, led by Putin and his inner circle rather than agricultural experts, to ban tomato imports, under the guise that Russia could sustain its own tomato production. This led to the dramatic and public destruction of imported goods,

reinforcing the narrative of self-reliance and resilience against perceived Western aggression (Шароградский 2019).

The enactment of food import restrictions in Russia, a policy that sharply limited the availability of foreign-produced food, vividly illustrates the dissonance between political decisions and public welfare. This abrupt policy change, as highlighted by Connolly and Hanson (2016), starkly contrasted with the agricultural realities of Russia, a country unprepared for such a sudden cessation of imports. The consequence was a tangible reduction in the variety and availability of food items, a change acutely felt by the average Russian consumer accustomed to a diverse selection of imported goods. This scarcity not only affected the availability of nutritious food but also rekindled a Soviet-era custom where food, particularly rare or foreign items, became a valued gift, a symbol of luxury and appreciation.

However, the restriction extended even to personal imports, leading to incidents at Moscow airports where individuals were prohibited from bringing in food items like cheese for personal use. This extreme measure, eventually rolled back due to its impracticality, reflects the self-inflicted nature of these 'food sanctions.' As 'Радио Свобода' (2019a) reports, the media campaign surrounding these sanctions skilfully exploited the sentiment of being under siege, obscuring the self-imposed origin of these hardships. This strategy reveals a complex interplay between political manoeuvring and public perception, where the media's portrayal significantly influenced public understanding and acceptance of these policies.

In this context, the 'food sanctions' serve as a poignant example of how policy decisions, driven by broader political narratives, can have immediate and profound impacts on everyday life. The irony of these self-imposed restrictions, framed as a defensive measure but resulting

in tangible public hardship, underscores the nuanced relationship between political rhetoric and reality in contemporary Russia.

Public perception in Russia regarding the impact of international sanctions, particularly following the annexation of Crimea, reflects a nuanced manipulation of narrative. Polls indicate a general lack of awareness that these sanctions are a direct consequence of Russian foreign policy. Instead, the populace predominantly associates the reduction in the variety of goods available in supermarkets solely with international sanctions, absolving Putin's administration of responsibility (РИА Новости 2017). This misunderstanding underscores a successful redirection of public sentiment, wherein the tangible effects of policy decisions – such as reduced food variety – are perceived as external impositions rather than domestic policy outcomes. This misperception has inadvertently benefited Putin's political stance. According to Interviewee 10 from independent media: ‘With the aid of his media machine, Putin managed to make all these Crimea sanctions work in his favour’ (Interviewee 10, 2023). This comment highlights how the Russian media, under Putin's influence, has effectively reframed the narrative of sanctions to bolster political support, turning a potentially negative consequence into a tool for garnering public approval.

The evolution of these sanctions to target specific individuals, primarily Russian oligarchs, has had unforeseen advantages (Gould-Davies 2018). By focusing on individuals with close ties to Putin, these sanctions have instilled a sense of apprehension among the oligarchs who owe their fortunes to their relationship with the Russian leader. This shift in the nature of sanctions has reinforced Putin's dual social contracts: one with his citizens and another with the oligarchs. Historically, this contract with the oligarchs has been straightforward – political allegiance in exchange for economic privileges and the freedom to

enjoy wealth abroad, including investment in foreign properties and elite education for their children (Rutland 2003).

During the initial decade of President Putin's tenure, Russia experienced a phase of economic prosperity, primarily driven by high oil prices. However, despite this financial boom, Russia failed to diversify its production to meet international demand, continuing to rely heavily on commodities for export (Gidadhubli 2003). This lack of economic diversification led to Russia losing its competitive edge to Europe and, more significantly, to the United States. The prosperous years, abundant with financial resources, ended without establishing sustainable economic growth or diversification, leaving Russia with diminishing wealth and a cadre of oligarchs accustomed to higher earnings (Shevtsova 2010).

This economic downturn coincided with increasing international sanctions, particularly personalised ones targeting Russian elites. These sanctions have significantly impacted the lifestyles of these individuals, making it increasingly challenging for them to enjoy luxuries abroad (РИА Новости 2019b). In response, Putin and Russian media have propagated the narrative that Russians are neither safe nor welcome outside their homeland, a tactic aimed at discouraging international engagement and promoting nationalistic sentiment.

Contrasting with this narrative, the reality, especially concerning dual citizenship, tells a different story. Historically, acquiring a second citizenship has been a status symbol among affluent Russians, offering freedom of travel not afforded by a Russian passport alone. Despite no substantial barriers to participating in investment citizenship programs at the time, Russian state media perpetuated the notion that obtaining a second passport was fraught with risks,

including the potential revocation of the new citizenship and safety concerns abroad (Dearden 2018).

The Russian media landscape was rife with stories falsely claiming discrimination against Russians in the realm of citizenship and immigration (Lenta.ru 2020). This misinformation campaign has had tangible effects, as illustrated by the director of a major British investment migration agency. Despite the availability of accurate information online, many potential Russian clients begin their inquiries with concerns about discrimination due to their nationality. This reflects a broader narrative within Russian media that portrays Western countries, particularly the UK and EU, as hostile and biased against Russians.

These concerns extend to the high-profile realm of investment immigration, popular among wealthy individuals from countries with constrained international rights, such as Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia (The Guardian 2018). The director of a renowned immigration law firm comments on the unique challenges faced by Russian clients, emphasising the Russian media's role in perpetuating fears of discrimination and the need to reassure clients about the fairness and legality of immigration processes in Western countries. The pervasive myth of Western hostility towards Russians is further highlighted by Interviewee 11, an authority in this field, who notes:

‘The thing I am always asked, whether a client is seeking a simple tourist visa to the UK or investment citizenship is: ‘Am I going to be refused because I'm Russian?’ The first thing I ask them is why they would think so and if any of their acquaintances have ever had troubles getting visas. The answer is always ‘No, but I read about it’ or ‘I've seen it on TV.’ It is obvious that the Russian media are taking their best to reinforce the myth that the West in general, and

the UK and the EU in our case, are specifically hostile and racist against Russian people. What is the biggest surprise my clients encounter? It is a great surprise for them that being Russian is actually not a crime. No one is gearing up at you despite what the media and the government have taught you.’ (Interviewee 11, 2023).

This analysis reveals that the tactic of scaremongering is effective within Putin's inner circle, fostering a belief among his close associates that their safety and prosperity are inextricably linked to him. They perceive a life outside Russia as fraught with risks, including loss of rights, wealth, and dignity. This narrative has been instrumental in Putin's ability to maintain loyalty and emerge seemingly unscathed from international sanctions. A crucial question arises: if Western sanctions were to cease, how would Putin then account for Russia's economic struggles to his citizens?

Understanding Putin's knack for turning dire situations to his advantage is essential. If the harshest measure the West has employed against Russia is sanctions – which Putin has effectively neutralised – it emboldens his geopolitical strategies, such as military involvement in Syria. This perspective is critical, especially considering that the West's 'worst' sanctions have not only failed to intimidate but have been repurposed to Putin's benefit.

Ukraine marked a pivotal moment for Putin, particularly in relation to his decision to intervene in Syria. It was not just a lesson in the limitations of international response but also the genesis of what Russian citizens began to perceive as the thrill of 'hybrid wars' (Kofman and Rojansky 2015). This concept is aptly defined by Cullen: ‘The International Multinational Capability Development Campaign (MCDC) organisation defines hybrid warfare as: the

synchronised use of multiple instruments of power tailored to specific vulnerabilities across the full spectrum of societal functions to achieve synergistic effects. A hybrid warfare actor can synchronise its military, political, economic, civilian, informational (MPECI) instruments of power to vertically and horizontally escalate a series of specific activities to create effects. A hybrid warfare actor can either vertically escalate by increasing the intensity of one or many of the instruments of power, and/or horizontally 'escalate' through synchronising multiple instruments of power to create effects greater than through vertical escalation alone' (Cullen 2017).

The concept of a hybrid war, often termed as 'couch wars,' presents a unique phenomenon in modern conflict. It is characterised by a narrative of national triumphs broadcasted to citizens, who absorb this information in the comfort of their homes, insulated from the actual horrors of war. This phenomenon significantly influenced public opinion and President Putin's ratings in Russia (Charap 2015). The portrayal of conflict in such a manner creates a skewed perception where only the victories are highlighted, leaving the Russian media consumer oblivious to the real costs of war.

In the case of the conflict with Ukraine (2014), Russia's involvement exemplified hybrid warfare. Officially, Russia denied having troops on the ground, instead supporting fighters in a manner that was ambiguous to the average television viewer. This narrative framed the situation as a win-win for Russian citizens and Putin, emphasising Russian victories without requiring personal sacrifice or involvement from the populace.

However, the realities on the ground contrasted starkly with this narrative. Ukrainian forces, fighting on their own territory, demonstrated a willingness to sacrifice their lives, a

commitment not mirrored by the Russian-backed partisans. This discrepancy eventually led to challenges in maintaining the narrative of a Russian victory, especially as the initial euphoria over Crimea waned, exposing deep-seated economic dissatisfaction within Russia (McFaul, Sestanovich, and Mearsheimer 2014).

The economic repercussions of the Crimean annexation were significant, with the Russian Ruble losing 41% of its value, leading to a sharp increase in the cost of imported goods and making travel prohibitively expensive for many who previously could afford it (Игуменов and Тофанюк 2015). This economic downturn had a pronounced impact on the 19% of Russians who have travelled abroad, primarily to popular destinations like Turkey and Egypt. Notably, this group represents the most economically active segment of Russian society (ФОМнибус 2014). The erosion of a tacit social contract in Russia, wherein political acquiescence was exchanged for leisure benefits, has become evident with the diminishing buying power of the Ruble. This economic downturn has rendered foreign vacations, previously a symbol of middle-class prosperity, unattainable for many families. Destinations like Turkey, once popular and affordable, are now out of reach for the average Russian family.

This shift coincides with a growing public awareness of declining living standards, challenging the previously successful narrative of 'couch war' victories used by the Putin administration. The situation in Ukraine, where Russian forces have been unable to secure quick and decisive victories, further exposes these domestic shortcomings. Notably, Ukrainian forces have been gaining ground in significant, albeit small, battles, contradicting the Kremlin's narrative (Riabchuk 2016). The conflict with Ukraine is particularly complex, given the shared Slavic roots, Orthodox Christian faith, and close historical ties between the two nations. The

current animosity and desire for distinction on the part of Ukrainians marks a dramatic shift from their historically fraternal relationship with Russians.

The issue of discrimination in Russia, particularly in the real estate sector, offers an insightful perspective on nationalistic attitudes. Despite existing anti-discrimination laws, they are often disregarded. This is evident in the widespread discriminatory practices on Russia's largest real estate website, www.cian.ru. By December 2021, approximately 60% of rental listings included discriminatory phrases such as 'no Caucasus' or 'only Slavs.' The platform's response, advising potential non-Russian renters to attempt negotiations regardless of these biases (PBK 2021; ID: 23954928 2019), reflects a deep-seated issue of ethnic discrimination. This discrimination is indiscriminate of whether the individuals are from regions within the Russian Federation, like Chechnya or Dagestan, or from independent Caucasus nations like Georgia or Azerbaijan.

Discriminatory housing practices in Russia, particularly against citizens of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, reflect deeper societal biases. Historically, these biases extended to preferences for Slavic tenants, with Ukrainians often included in this favoured category. This is partly rooted in the intertwined histories of Russia and Ukraine, where Kyivan Rus,' the mediaeval state, symbolises the shared Slavic and Orthodox heritage, positioning Kyiv, now the Ukrainian capital, as a crucial cultural origin point for Russia. Surprisingly, in just a few months, the Russian media significantly shifted public sentiment against Ukrainians, a testament to the media's power in shaping perceptions and exacerbating nationalistic tendencies. As noted by Kuzio (2016), this shift was so profound that landlords who previously favoured Ukrainian tenants began explicitly excluding them, mirroring the increase in media-fuelled racist and xenophobic rhetoric. This change in attitude towards Ukrainians parallels Russia's broader

socio-economic challenges, including a stagnating economy and military struggles. The absence of triumphant narratives for domestic consumption, alongside the challenges in sustaining animosity towards culturally akin Ukrainians, has led to a strategic pivot in Russian foreign policy.

Enter Syria: a geographically distant, predominantly Islamic nation unfamiliar to most Russians and rich in oil. The strong anti-Islamic sentiment in Russia (Laruelle and Yudina 2018) makes Syria a more viable target for external aggression and a convenient distraction from domestic issues. The strategic importance of Syria on the international stage, coupled with perceived Western inaction, presents an opportune moment for Russia to assert its global influence. This analysis underscores the complex interplay of cultural identity, media influence, and geopolitical strategy in shaping Russia's domestic and foreign policies. The Syrian intervention not only reflects Russia's quest for international relevance but also highlights the use of external conflicts to manage internal narratives and nationalistic sentiments.

In the realm of Russian journalism, certain restrictions stand out for their specificity and symbolic significance. One such rule, directly mandated by the presidential administration, prohibits journalists from comparing President Putin to Adolf Hitler (Фoхт 2015). This restriction is particularly notable given the absence of a widespread trend in the Russian media to make such comparisons prior to the implementation of the rule (URA.Ru 2007). While Putin and Hitler are fundamentally different in many respects, the mere existence of this prohibition raises questions about its underlying motivations and significance.

This directive acquires deeper connotations when considered in the context of Russia's portrayal in international affairs, such as its involvement in Syria. Putin's aversion to being compared to Hitler is not merely a reaction to personal defamation but also reflects his sensitivity towards the historical narrative surrounding World War II. Putin perceives attempts to reinterpret the Soviet Union's role in the war, particularly discussions questioning the causes of the conflict, as a direct challenge to Russia's historical legacy (Wood 2011).

In response to perceived threats to this legacy, Putin enacted legislation criminalising the 'falsification of history,' particularly narratives that contradict the official Russian stance on key historical events. This law makes it a criminal offence to assert, for instance, that the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union contributed to the outbreak of World War II, or to acknowledge Stalin's plans to divide Eastern Europe with Hitler – views widely accepted outside of Russia (Kirby 1996; Aropa 2018). The law's enactment reflects Putin's concerted effort to control the historical narrative within Russia, a move that has significant implications for academic freedom and historical discourse.

Highlighting these points in the context of this research offers a complex picture of media freedom, historical interpretation, and political power in Russia. It underscores the extent to which contemporary political narratives are shaped by, and in turn shape, historical understanding, especially in the context of Russian involvement in international conflicts like the Syrian crisis. Such analysis can potentially lead to significant legal risks within Russia, as evidenced by the aforementioned laws, yet it remains a crucial aspect of understanding the interplay between media, history, and politics in the country.

President Putin's profound engagement with the narrative of the Second World War is evident in his series of articles, notably '75 Years After Victory.' In these writings, he intertwines personal family experiences during the Leningrad siege with his historical analysis of the war's causes. Putin attributes the emergence of the war primarily to Europe's disregard for rising fascism in Germany, singling out Great Britain and France as key players in exacerbating tensions, particularly in the context of Czechoslovakia (Putin 2020).

‘...in case of the Munich Betrayal that, in addition to Hitler and Mussolini, involved British and French leaders, Czechoslovakia was taken apart with the full approval of the League of Nations. I would like to point out in this regard that, unlike many other European leaders of that time, Stalin did not disgrace himself by meeting with Hitler who was known among the Western nations as quite a reputable politician and was a welcome guest in the European capitals.’
(Putin 2020a)

This perspective resonates deeply with many Russians, reflecting a common sentiment that the Soviet Union's role in the war has been misrepresented. This notion is encapsulated in a popular Russian saying: 'Russia is a country with an unpredictable past.' (НОВЫЕ МНЕНИЯ 2015). Putin's commitment to defending Russia's honour in this historical context led to the incorporation of an article in the 2020 Russian Constitution amendment, safeguarding the country's historical narrative, especially regarding the Second World War (ТАСС 2020b; EurAsia Daily 2019).

The broad formulation of this law, initially intended to protect Russia's WWII legacy, now extends its reach to contemporary events. This sweeping legal framework effectively prohibits questioning any aspect of Russian history, as anything deviating from the official

stance of the Ministry of Defence is deemed a 'rethinking' of history. This approach effectively transforms today's news into immutable historical record, a development with far-reaching implications for academic, journalistic, and public discourse in Russia.

The evolution of Russia's legal framework concerning the portrayal of history, particularly under President Putin's regime, demands critical scrutiny. The 'falsification of history' law, initially aimed at preventing the distortion of Nazi history, has morphed into a versatile instrument against media and journalists, encompassing analyses of current wars, especially with a clause pertaining to war crimes falsification (Владимиров 2018). This broad application was further extended in 2022, amidst the Ukraine conflict, with the introduction of legislation penalising 'discrediting' the Russian armed forces, potentially resulting in sentences of up to 15 years (Lenta 2022).

Since the law's inception in 2014, over 6,000 individuals have faced prosecution, often for seemingly trivial actions like sharing a historical image of a Soviet soldier discarding a Nazi flag (Aropa 2018). The arbitrary nature of these prosecutions raises fundamental questions about the law's intent and application. It appears that the law's primary objective is not the eradication of Nazi propaganda, but rather the establishment of a climate conducive to arbitrary prosecution, a tool to foster fear and control. This tactic, reminiscent of strategies employed by historical totalitarian regimes like Hitler's (Langerbein 2004), serves to instil a pervasive sense of uncertainty and fear among those who might oppose the regime.

The lack of clear, consistent guidelines for compliance further exacerbates this climate of fear. Individuals, including journalists and bloggers, find themselves navigating a precarious landscape where expressing divergent views from official propaganda could lead to severe

consequences. This ambiguity creates a chilling effect, stifling freedom of expression and maintaining a state of unpredictability and intimidation (Луганская 2014). Such strategies, aimed at silencing dissent and controlling narrative, reflect a broader trend in authoritarian governance, crucial for understanding the dynamics of Putin's regime and its impact on Russian society and media freedom.

The Russian government's approach to media coverage of sensitive topics, such as the bombing of hospitals in Aleppo, parallels historical narratives like the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Independent international sources have provided substantial evidence confirming the Russian military's involvement in these bombings, leading to civilian casualties, including children (Gulland 2016). The gravity of these actions, characterised by deliberate attacks on medical facilities, underscores the severity of war crimes, a classification beyond dispute given the available evidence (Dyer 2017). However, recent legislation in Russia criminalises the mere mention of such incidents, reflecting a profound suppression of media freedom. The Russian Ministry of Defence has consistently denied any involvement in civilian casualties, creating a narrative that contradicts documented evidence and international condemnation.

The environment for Russian journalists reporting on such events is increasingly perilous. The scarcity of independent media outlets in Russia further complicates the situation. Even if a journalist finds a willing publisher, personal safety becomes a paramount concern, as articulated by Interviewee 12 from government-controlled media: 'You can decide to publish something about the bombings and go to jail – or not. Or you decide to forget this topic and stay out of jail for sure' (Interviewee 12, 2023).

This chilling effect on journalism is reminiscent of the fear instilled during Stalin's reign, where Soviet dissidents lived in constant uncertainty of arrest, as evidenced in their memoirs (Вольтская 2018). While Putin's regime may not mirror Stalin's in intensity yet, the tactics employed to instil fear among journalists are strikingly similar. Journalists must weigh the potential repercussions of their reporting on themselves, their subjects, and their families. These consequences may be immediate or never materialise, but the uncertainty itself serves as an effective tool of repression. A notable example is Anton Nossik, a Russian media creator fined 500,000 rubles (approximately 4,800 GBP in Q1 2021) for a publication about Syria, exemplifying the unpredictability and severity of the state's response (Свободная Пресса 2016; BBC 2016). This precarious landscape illustrates the Russian state's strategy of using fear to control media narratives, a tactic that effectively silences critical voices and shapes public perception, particularly regarding Russia's international military actions.

In exploring Putin's motivations for the military intervention in Syria, it is essential to examine the underlying power dynamics and geopolitical realities. The decision to invade, as extensively rationalised by state-controlled media, rests on a foundation where opportunity meets capability: Putin acted because there was a lack of effective opposition to his actions.

The concept of 'equality' in international relations is often theoretical rather than practical. Sunstein (2004) argues that the value ascribed to lives can differ based on nationality, country of origin, or wealth, creating a hierarchy of importance. In this context, the lives of Syrians, or Russians, are perceived as less significant compared to those from Western nations like the UK or the USA. This perspective is particularly evident when leaders prioritise the well-being of their own citizens over those of other nations, a decision-making process not uniformly applied across global leaders (McDaniel 1996).

Russia's history reveals a pattern of its rulers causing significant harm to their own people, sometimes exceeding the damage inflicted by foreign adversaries (Fitzpatrick 2000). This trend is exemplified in the words of Interviewee 13 from the independent media, who states:

‘Stalin never had compassion for his people and yet every year he joins the top of the most popular rulers of Russia. Why should Putin have compassion for his people if he wants to write his name in history? Someone who does have compassion doesn’t make history in Russia. That’s how Russia is.’ (Interviewee 13, 2022).

This perspective emphasises a historical pattern in Russian leadership where compassion for the populace has not necessarily been a hallmark of those who have left significant marks on history.

Building on this historical context, current leaders like Vladimir Putin, showing compassion towards the citizenry might not be seen as a prerequisite for achieving a revered place in history. According to this view, the ability to make tough, often ruthless decisions might be more valued in the annals of Russian history than the capacity for empathy and benevolence. This could inform Putin's approach to leadership, prioritising strategic and often hard-line policies over softer, more compassionate governance practices.

This perspective points to a broader cultural and political narrative in Russia, where power and strength are revered, and where the harsh realities of governance have often overshadowed more humanitarian concerns. It implies that in Russia, the making of history is

associated with the exertion of power, often at the expense of individual welfare. This aligns with a traditional view of leadership that values decisiveness and strength, traits that have often been celebrated in Russian history over softer leadership qualities.

The quote touches on a resigned acceptance of this leadership style among the populace, suggesting a cultural understanding that compassionate leadership might not be congruent with the historical narrative of effective governance in Russia. This could contribute to a cyclical pattern where leaders emulate the authoritative, uncompromising styles of their predecessors to align with these historical and cultural expectations.

Thus, the statement not only reflects on the historical disregard for citizen welfare among Russian leaders but also critiques the broader implications of such a governance style. It raises questions about the values that are celebrated in leadership within Russian society and the potential consequences of those values for the manner in which power is exercised and remembered in historical memory. This suggests a deeply embedded cultural and political ethos that influences how leaders are judged and remembered in Russia, potentially at the expense of fostering a more compassionate approach to governance.

In this scenario, leaders like Putin and Assad show little concern for the lives of their own citizens, willing to incur significant casualties to achieve their objectives (Carpenter 2013). This approach, devoid of ethical considerations for human life, underscores the complex interplay of historical precedent, nationalistic ambitions, and geopolitical strategy that shaped Putin's decision to intervene in Syria.

The geopolitical dynamics between Russia and Western powers, particularly in the context of the Syrian war, reveal stark contrasts in strategic priorities. The reluctance of the US and European Union to engage directly against Russia in Syria, despite the humanitarian crisis, underscores a fundamental dilemma in international politics. This hesitancy stems from a reluctance to risk lives in a conflict where the perceived gains are uncertain, a calculation well understood by Putin. As Latynina (2018) observes, this strategic conservatism gives Russia an advantage: ‘...And for that simple reason, he will always win the fight against the West.’

Historically, the plight of nations under attack, like Syria, highlights a grim reality of international relations. As Khatib (2014) notes, external help is often absent, especially when the government itself perpetrates violence against its own people. This principle has held true in Syria, where despite egregious human rights violations, external intervention has been limited, driven more by geopolitical interests than humanitarian imperatives.

The US's stance under Trump marked a slight deviation in this pattern, although this shift warrants a separate discussion (Rumer, Sokolsky, and Weiss 2017). Nonetheless, the fundamental reluctance to confront Putin and Assad on the ground persists, illustrating the complexities of international military intervention.

A secondary factor in the diminishing global response to the Syrian crisis is media fatigue. As Moeller (2002) points out, public and media attention to conflicts wanes over time. The ongoing tragedy in Syria, despite continuing into 2023 with ongoing casualties (Cockburn 2023; McIntyre 2020), has gradually receded from the forefront of global media coverage (Thompson 1999). This decline in attention reflects a broader trend in media consumption, where prolonged conflicts become normalised and less newsworthy, as noted by Pfau *et al.*

(2008) and Hoskins and Shchelin (2018). The repetitive nature of war reports leads to a desensitisation among audiences, diminishing sustained empathy for the affected populations.

The global landscape of armed conflicts, including those in Ukraine and numerous others tracked by the Global Conflict Tracker (2022), illustrates a complex interplay of human empathy and fatigue. Human nature's inclination to empathise is often counterbalanced by a fatigue of sustained emotional investment in distant conflicts, unless personally affected (Seib 2016). This phenomenon has notably impacted media coverage of the Syrian war, where attention has dwindled over time. The shift in media focus is not solely the media's initiative; it reflects the changing interests of their audience (Fridrich 2009). The diminishing media spotlight on Syria, and even more so on Yemen despite severe humanitarian crises (BBC 2019), exemplifies this trend.

Historically, public fatigue in response to prolonged conflicts is not unprecedented (Robinson 2005). A worrying consequence of this waning attention is the potential rise in war crimes in such neglected areas, particularly in Syria, involving Russian, Turkish, and Syrian forces. This situation raises critical questions about the definition and recognition of global conflicts. The term 'Third World War' is often invoked in media narratives, yet the protracted war in Syria, predating the 2022 Ukraine conflict, arguably embodies such a global conflict, unnoticed due to public disinterest (Pinker 2018).

The nature of warfare itself has evolved. Modern wars differ significantly from historical conflicts, with many countries abandoning conscription and moving away from traditional military structures (Tucker 2015). The link between regional conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and terrorist activities in Western countries is often underestimated,

reflecting a naivety in public perception (Yarchi *et al.* 2013). This underestimation fails to acknowledge the interconnectedness of global conflicts and their far-reaching implications, even as public attention wanes.

In the geopolitical landscape, the dynamics between President Putin and President Trump present a complex narrative, contrasting significantly with the previous U.S.-Russia interactions under President Obama. According to Weiss and Ng (2019), Trump's presidency unexpectedly disrupted Putin's strategies in Syria, marking a significant shift in international politics. Latynina offers a critical perspective on this, stating:

‘Donald Trump completely destroyed Vladimir Putin's reputation as the top international hooligan... Putin was planning to sell Assad to the highest bidder... but Assad... used Sarin gas on civilians in Aleppo... the worst casualty of that attack was... Vladimir Putin who now lost his bargaining rights...’ (Латынина 2017).

This analysis suggests a recalibration of Russia's foreign policy in the wake of Trump's unpredictable actions, particularly in response to the chemical attack in Syria. The swift military response by the Trump administration, involving the launch of Tomahawk missiles, starkly contrasted with the perceived inaction of the Obama era. This incident underscores a pivotal moment in U.S.-Russia relations, challenging Putin's previously unopposed manoeuvres.

Under President Obama, the U.S.-Russia dynamic was markedly different. Obama's tenure was characterised by firm but unenforced warnings to Russia regarding its international conduct, particularly in Syria (Valenta and Valenta 2016; Khalifa-Zadeh 2014). Obama's

approach, while diplomatically assertive, often lacked tangible repercussions, allowing Putin to cross established 'red lines' without significant consequences.

The transition from Obama's measured diplomacy to Trump's unpredictable and decisive actions represents a significant shift in U.S. foreign policy towards Russia. This change not only altered the strategic calculations of the Kremlin but also highlighted the differing approaches of U.S. administrations in dealing with international crises and adversaries. The analysis here is not intended to judge or decipher the motives behind the actions of Presidents Obama and Trump, but rather to assess their distinct approaches towards Russia and their consequences. Under President Obama, despite verbal condemnations, Russia seemingly enjoyed a degree of impunity in its actions, particularly in the Syrian war (Boeva-Omelechko, Kostenko, and Volodko 2016). This perceived leniency might have contributed to Russia's audacious international manoeuvres.

With the advent of President Trump, there was an initial Russian perception that U.S. international policy would maintain continuity, especially regarding its approach to threats and actions (Gregory 2017). However, the reality diverged significantly. President Trump's direct warnings to Putin, specifically concerning advancements in Syria, marked a departure from previous U.S. policies. Notably, Trump was the first Western leader to not only warn Putin against military advancements in Syria but also to act on these warnings (Champion and Arkhipov 2017).

A critical moment came in May 2017. Despite previous warnings from Western leaders, Putin had largely disregarded them without facing direct consequences. This changed when Trump enforced the consequences of crossing the Euphrates River in Syria, leading to the loss

of Russian lives as a result of American military action (Gibbons-Neff 2018). Commentator Latynina observed that this incident profoundly impacted Putin's perception of Trump, realising that his warnings were credible and consequential (Латынина 2017).

The significance of these events transcends the personal characteristics of the leaders involved. The critical aspect is the shift in the U.S. stance under Trump, characterised by a willingness to enforce threats, which arguably altered the dynamics of the Syrian war and potentially saved lives (Champion and Arkhipov 2017). This analysis highlights the importance of understanding the impact of leadership styles and decision-making processes in international relations.

The fluctuating focus of the United States on Syria during Trump's presidency, particularly amidst the distractions of re-election campaigns and impeachment hearings, warrants critical examination. Trump's preoccupation with defending himself against allegations of collusion with Putin ironically led to a diminished American interest in Syrian affairs. This shift in focus, as documented by Henriksen (2018) and Doucet (2018), suggests a consequential lapse in US foreign policy. The irony of Trump's situation lies in his efforts to disentangle himself from perceptions of Russian influence while inadvertently ceding geopolitical ground to Russia in Syria.

This change in U.S. foreign policy attention resulted in a potential second wave of geopolitical shifts, as Russia's unwavering interest in Syria filled the vacuum left by the United States. This scenario underscores the intricate interplay of domestic political challenges and international strategic interests, particularly in the context of the Syrian war. The U.S.'s waning attention, juxtaposed with Russia's consistent involvement, highlights a critical juncture in the

Syrian crisis, marking a significant shift in the balance of international engagement and influence in the region. This analysis sheds light on the complex dynamics of international politics, where domestic issues can significantly impact foreign policy decisions and their global repercussions. It also raises questions about the long-term implications of such shifts in policy focus, especially in conflict zones like Syria, where the interests and actions of global powers like the U.S. and Russia play pivotal roles.

The Western misinterpretation of Putin's rhetoric can largely be attributed to the nuances lost in translation. While the translators are highly educated and proficient in Russian grammar, potentially more so than the subject of their translation, they cannot fully convey the subtleties inherent in Putin's speeches to a non-Russian speaking audience (Schäffner 1997). This linguistic barrier hinders the international community's understanding of the Russian leader's intentions and the implications of his words.

This phenomenon extends beyond simple language translation. Understanding a native speaker involves not just the words spoken, but also the cultural and contextual nuances conveyed through their speech. For instance, a Londoner's accent can reveal much about their background, even within the same city (Strongman and Woosley 1967). This level of detail is often lost in translation, depriving the listener of a deeper understanding of the speaker's true message and intentions.

Historically, this issue was less pronounced as Russian rulers for over 300 years were fluent in dominant global languages and shared educational and social backgrounds with their foreign counterparts. This commonality in education and social circumstances bridged many

cultural and linguistic gaps, making their intentions and ideologies more transparent to the international community (Бокова 2011).

The current scenario, with Putin at the helm, presents a stark contrast. The linguistic and cultural disconnect between Putin and the international community complicates the interpretation of his policies and statements, especially regarding complex international issues like the Syrian war. This disconnect underscores the importance of not only linguistic translation but also cultural and contextual understanding in international diplomacy and communication. Until the 1917 Russian Revolution, Russian rulers were adept at conversing with foreign leaders, often in their native languages or in French, the lingua franca of European diplomacy at the time. However, this proficiency in foreign languages and diplomatic discourse significantly declined during the Soviet era. Soviet leaders, emerging from disparate socio-economic backgrounds compared to their international counterparts, often lacked the education and language skills necessary for direct diplomatic communication, as noted by Hatch (1987). This gap not only reflected the divergent values and beliefs between Soviet and Western leaders but also mirrored the widening chasm between the Soviet Union and the rest of the world. Using translators, while a common practice in international diplomacy, posed its own challenges. As Lipovetsky (2015) points out, reliance on translation often meant missing the nuances of direct communication, leading to misunderstandings. The essence of the spoken word was frequently lost, rendering Soviet leaders' efforts to articulate their positions less effective and often misinterpreted on the global stage.

This phenomenon was particularly evident in the case of Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the Soviet Union. Termed 'the Gorbachev effect,' this issue encapsulated the paradox of Gorbachev's international reputation. Despite the communication barriers, Gorbachev

gained significant respect and admiration globally. He is celebrated for his role in ending the Cold War, facilitating the fall of the Berlin Wall, and advocating against the use of nuclear weapons, as described by Lipatova (2013). Gorbachev's international acclaim starkly contrasts with the communication challenges he faced, highlighting a unique aspect of Soviet-era diplomacy and its perception on the world stage.

The perception of Gorbachev within Russia contrasts starkly with his international image, a dichotomy not solely attributable to the common phenomenon of political figures being underappreciated in their homeland. The disparity in reception is partly due to the linguistic nuances lost in translation. When Gorbachev's speeches were translated into English, his translator, proficient in both English and Russian, presented Gorbachev as articulate, insightful, and highly educated (Shlykov 2017). This translation significantly enhanced his international reputation.

However, within Russia, Gorbachev's speech, marked by his regional accent from Stavropolsky Kray, did not convey the same level of sophistication. In Soviet times, the Russian language was dominated by the pronunciation norms of Moscow and St. Petersburg, with these accents considered the standard for educated discourse. Government policies reinforced this linguistic hierarchy, marginalising regional accents and dialects (Милованова and Черникова 2018). Consequently, speakers of non-standard Russian dialects, like Gorbachev, were often perceived as less educated and their speech less credible.

This linguistic prejudice can be likened to attitudes towards regional accents in the United Kingdom. For instance, the Essex accent is often perceived as less prestigious compared to the Received Pronunciation (BBC English), leading to judgements about the speaker's

education and credibility, regardless of the content of their speech (Ranzato 2019). This comparison illustrates the broader socio-linguistic phenomena where accents and dialects influence perceptions of intelligence and authority.

Gorbachev's unique speech patterns, marked by a regional accent, frequent grammatical errors, and an overwhelming use of foreign words, distinguished his public addresses. This unusual amalgamation in his speech often necessitated the use of dictionaries by Russian audiences to grasp his intended message, contributing to his portrayal as a comic figure in popular culture (Vanhala-Aniszewski and Siilin 2013). The regional dialect, interspersed with foreign terminologies and grammatical inaccuracies, not only made his speeches a subject of humour but also detracted from the substance of his messages, affecting public perception of his credibility.

In contrast, Gorbachev's international communications, facilitated by high-quality translation, were received differently. An anecdotal example is Margaret Thatcher's purported admiration for Gorbachev's eloquence, a testament to the skill of his translator, Pavel Palazhchenko (Сальникова, Н.В. 2011). This discrepancy between domestic and international perceptions underscores the impact of language and presentation in political communication.

Turning to Putin, he encounters a different set of challenges in communication, although the effects mirror those of Gorbachev. Despite his clear and grammatically correct speech, attributed to his St. Petersburg upbringing and education, Putin is often misunderstood by international counterparts (Алышева 2012). This misunderstanding, however, stems less from linguistic issues and more from his background as an ex-KGB operative and his leadership style. By surrounding himself with less capable individuals, Putin has created an

echo chamber within his inner circle, leading to a lack of contradiction or challenge to his viewpoints for over two decades (Gessen 2013). This insular approach to leadership and communication may contribute to misinterpretations and misconceptions in international dialogues.

The linguistic style of President Putin has been characterised by political analysts as a 'policeman's speech,' replete with vulgarity, sarcasm, and dismissive tones. These elements, typically lost in translation, contribute to a distinct perception gap. As noted by Шлемова (2017), when translated into English, Putin's harsh yet seemingly rational tone belies the vulgarity and sarcasm evident in his native Russian speeches. This linguistic dissonance engenders a sense of alienation and resentment among the Russian liberal intelligentsia, highlighting a pronounced class divide between Putin and this educated segment of society (Кокорин and Поляруш 2016).

This linguistic aspect of political leadership presents an intriguing area of study, particularly in how media and public perceptions are influenced by both content and delivery of political rhetoric. The case of Putin contrasts sharply with that of other leaders like Donald Trump, whose rhetorical style has often overshadowed the substance of his communication. Meeks (2020) notes that the global media's preoccupation with Trump's manner of speaking frequently led to a neglect of the underlying messages in his statements.

This dichotomy in understanding political figures like Putin and Trump reflects a broader challenge in political communication. With Putin, the non-Russian speaking audience may misinterpret his intent due to the lack of contextual cues in translation (Drozdova and Robinson 2019). Conversely, with Trump, the overemphasis on his delivery style sometimes

obscures the substance of his messages (Blankenship 2020). Such discrepancies underscore the complexity of accurately interpreting and understanding political discourse in an international context.

President Putin's distrust of the Internet is well-documented, rooted in his KGB background and a perception of it being a tool for Western propaganda. Preferring traditional sources, he relies heavily on information provided by his close allies and trusted generals (BBC 2019). This reliance on a select group of informants is illustrated by Venediktov:

‘Putin, discussing his views on the Internet, expressed scepticism about its reliability: ‘Look,’ he said, pointing to folders on his desk, ‘each of these is signed by a general. If they provide false information, I can hold them accountable, unlike the anonymity of the Internet’ (Венедиктов 2019b; Венедиктов 2019a).

This reliance on conventional information channels contrasts sharply with the growing Internet usage among Russian citizens, with an annual increase of 10% in usage and 82% of Russians regularly online (ВЦИОМ 2021; Zakem *et al.* 2018).

The discrepancy between Putin's information sources and the broader public's access to diverse viewpoints presents a stark contrast. Relying solely on a small circle for information, especially in a rapidly evolving digital age, risks a distorted worldview, even if the advisors are highly competent. This issue becomes evident in the context of widely publicised incidents where Putin was misinformed by the Ministry of Defence, particularly concerning Syria. These cases, extensively covered by Russian media, raise questions about the accuracy and intentionality of the information being relayed to him.

In this scenario, understanding the dynamics of information flow within the Russian leadership becomes crucial. The reliance on traditional, hierarchical sources of information in a world dominated by digital and diverse media channels highlights the potential for misinformation and the challenges it poses to decision-making processes. This aspect is integral to analysing the current Russian political landscape and its implications on both domestic and international fronts.

The credibility of Russia's military achievements in Syria has been called into question by two notable incidents involving misrepresented footage. The first occurred during a televised meeting between Defence Minister Shoygu and President Putin, where Shoygu presented a video purportedly showing Russian soldiers combating ISIS in Syria. This video, broadcasted on federal media channels, was later identified as old footage of American soldiers in Iraq (BBC2017). This error, publicly observed and compared by viewers, raises concerns about the veracity of reported military successes presented to the Russian president. In most countries, such a significant misrepresentation would likely lead to serious repercussions, including dishonourable discharges or dismissals. However, in Russia, this incident involving misleading footage did not result in any resignations, apologies, or disciplinary actions, which is indicative of the unique dynamics within the Russian military and governmental structures.

A similar situation arose during Oliver Stone's documentary production about Putin. In this instance, Putin showcased a video to Stone, claiming it depicted Russian military success in Syria. This footage, however, was later revealed to be of U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan (Meduza 2017). The recurrence of such incidents not only questions the authenticity of the Russian military's reported successes in Syria but also reflects on the broader issues of media

manipulation and propaganda within the Russian political and military narrative. The incident involving President Putin and the misrepresented videotape provided by the Ministry of Defence, showcased in Oliver Stone's interview, serves as a pivotal case study in understanding the dynamics of misinformation within Russian political structures. Despite the widespread media attention and public ridicule that ensued, no direct repercussions were evident, pointing to a deeper issue of accountability and information flow within the Russian government (Moses 2017; Соколов 2017).

This scenario not only reveals the susceptibility of even the highest levels of government to misinformation but also highlights Putin's steadfast approach to media criticism. As per Interviewee 9, an independent media employee:

‘In this case, Putin is not to blame. They gave him something, he showed it to Stone. Firing your defence minister over this means showing weakness, caving in to the public. Putin will never act as the public opinion requires him to. According to Putin, if someone made a mistake and the media covered it, the person cannot be fired under any circumstances.’ (Interviewee 9, 2022).

This statement articulates a critical aspect of Vladimir Putin's approach to leadership and public governance, particularly in how he handles criticism and media scrutiny. The suggestion that firing his defence minister over this incident would represent a capitulation to public pressure highlights a fundamental tenet of Putin's governance philosophy: the refusal to exhibit any form of weakness or to yield to external demands, especially those amplified by the media. Putin's approach as described here underscores his belief in maintaining a strong, unwavering front in the face of public opinion and media coverage. According to this perspective, making decisions that appear to be influenced by media critique or public

dissatisfaction is tantamount to showing weakness. This philosophy stems from a broader strategic stance that views the control of perception as essential to maintaining power. In Putin's view, to act on the demands set by public opinion or media narratives - particularly in cases where errors or missteps are exposed - would undermine the authority of his administration and the state.

This attitude reflects a deep scepticism or outright dismissal of media-driven narratives. Putin's approach suggests that he sees the media not as a constructive check on power but as a potential threat to the stability and image of his rule. Thus, resisting media pressure becomes not just a personal stance but a political strategy, reinforcing his image as a decisive and autonomous leader. This refusal to cave to media pressure also serves to reinforce the centralisation of power under his rule. By not allowing the media to influence key decisions, especially those involving high-profile figures within his administration, Putin ensures a consistent narrative of strength and independence from perceived external influences. This approach is intended to project stability and control, characteristics that are highly valued in Russian political culture. The statement thus not only sheds light on a specific incident involving Putin but also provides insight into his broader leadership style and political strategy. It reveals how Putin prioritises the projection of strength and resilience, viewing any deviation from this approach in response to media pressure as a dangerous precedent that could weaken his authority and the perceived robustness of his governance. This philosophy of resilience against media pressure is indicative of Putin's broader approach to power, characterised by a strong personal control over state actions and narratives.

The retention of Defence Minister Shoygu, despite the controversies and his ministry's failures in the Ukrainian war, exemplifies this principle in practice. It reflects a broader pattern

within Russian governance, where public opinion and media criticism are systematically disregarded in decision-making processes. This situation resonates with the historical narrative of 'The Czar does not know,' a notion that dates back to the 1905 Russian Revolution. The idea that Czar Nicholas II was unaware of the orders to shoot protesters in St. Petersburg, supposedly issued by military generals, has been a recurring theme in Russian history, used to absolve the leader of direct responsibility for governmental actions (Соколов 2017).

This incident not only provided insights into the misinformation channels within the Russian government but also highlighted a consistent strategy of disregarding public and media opinion, further entrenching the leadership's stance against perceived weaknesses. This aligns with historical patterns in Russian governance, where leaders distance themselves from controversial decisions to maintain a semblance of infallibility.

The persistence of a particular viewpoint in Russian political culture, transcending various regimes, warrants critical examination. Historically, this perspective has been prevalent, as evidenced during Stalin's regime when atrocities in the Gulag were reported. Many Russians firmly believed that Stalin was unaware of these crimes, absolving him of responsibility (Емельянов 2018). This narrative of an uninformed leader, detached from the realities of governance, persists in contemporary discussions about President Putin. Political analysts and the public often suggest that Putin is isolated, surrounded by untrustworthy advisors. Interestingly, this perception does not diminish Putin's reputation; instead, it elicits sympathy for his perceived plight (Burrett 2020).

This sentiment was particularly evident following a media exposure of misinformation provided to Putin. Contrary to expectations, this incident did not erode his approval ratings;

rather, it engendered public sympathy for him, viewed as a solitary figure battling a hostile world and unreliable subordinates (Полит.ру 2017). This reaction highlights a unique aspect of Russian political culture: the resilience of the leader's image despite potentially damaging revelations.

Further, the impact of media reportage on political dynamics in Russia reveals a significant deviation from typical patterns observed in other countries. The dissemination of factual information, as Tolz and Teper (2018) and Radikov *et al.* (2018) observe, does not necessarily lead to political change, or shifts in public opinion in Russia. This phenomenon underscores a broader disconnect between media narratives and public perception, challenging the assumption that access to correct information inherently leads to informed decision-making or changes in public sentiment.

Studying Russian media, particularly in the context of propaganda, is essential to comprehend the intricacies of information dissemination in Russia. This research necessitates a thorough investigation into the multifaceted aspects of Russian propaganda, including its media and social dimensions. Oates (2016) highlights a critical perspective: 'It is not so much who owns or controls the media that is key to understanding information control; rather, it is knowing who is constructing and disseminating the most compelling national narrative that holds the key to power in Russia.' This insight underscores the importance of narrative construction in the control of information.

To fully grasp the Russian media's coverage of the Syrian war, it is imperative to understand its structure. Questions central to this understanding include: the composition of Russian media, control mechanisms over information channels, usage patterns of these

channels by the populace, and the public response to the disseminated information. Rosenholm, Nordenstreng, and Trubina (2010) emphasise the necessity of comprehending the very texture of Russian media, indicating a deep-rooted structural analysis.

In the Russian context, it becomes crucial to understand public perception of media events, especially those as significant as a war. This understanding is vital in Russia, where the average media consumer faces limited access to non-Russian or international information sources. While Russia is not the most isolated country globally and maintains a functional internet and allows international travel, the linguistic barrier confines most Russian media consumers. Hallin and Mancini (2011) point out that the lack of proficiency in foreign languages among Russians largely restricts them to Russian-controlled information, highlighting the controlled nature of information within linguistic boundaries.

Russia presents a paradoxical media landscape: officially free yet practically constrained in terms of accessible information. This dichotomy is crucial for understanding the nature of Russian media, particularly the nuanced and often opaque supervisory structures. Such supervision, whether exerted directly by the presidential administration or indirectly through oligarchs who control major non-governmental media outlets, shapes the information environment (Schimpfoss and Yablokov 2014). This complex system of control and influence is fundamental to the research's exploration of Russian media dynamics. Strovsky and Schleifer's analysis underscores the implications of this media structure:

‘Ultimately, the coverage of the military conflict in Syria confirms the specifics of the current Russian media being politicised and unreliable in content and therefore manipulative. These lamentable shortcomings essentially remain hidden from outside view due to the legerdemain of journalists and editors who

process available information, and then present it in an emotive and effective manner to audiences who lack other means of obtaining the news. The Russian media are undoubtedly remarkable for their creativity. Nevertheless, this does not change the nature of the modern Russian information milieu.’ (Strovsky and Schleifer 2020).

Their insight reveals a media landscape adept at manipulation, using journalistic creativity to present biased and politicised content. This portrayal becomes particularly significant when considering the coverage of international events like the Syrian war, where the Russian media's approach significantly influences public perception and understanding. Such a situation calls for a thorough investigation into the methodologies and practices of Russian media, highlighting the need for deeper scrutiny in the context of media studies and international relations. In the realm of news consumption, the experience of the average Russian reader differs markedly from their Western counterparts. Western news consumers typically have access to a plethora of media outlets in their native languages, supplemented by their ability to comprehend news in foreign languages, thanks to relatively high levels of foreign language proficiency (Tavakoli, Nakatsuhara, and Hunter 2020). This linguistic versatility, combined with the practice of major media outlets producing content in multiple European languages and the traditionally high ethical and professional standards in Western media (Frost 2015), affords them a diverse spectrum of perspectives on any given topic.

Contrastingly, the Russian news consumer faces significant limitations. A mere 5% of Russians possess sufficient foreign language proficiency to access news in languages other than Russian (Levada 2014). This linguistic barrier effectively isolates them from international

news sources, confining their access to information predominantly within the Russian language sphere.

Attempts to bridge this gap, such as the inception of Inosmi.ru in 2004, initially appeared promising. This platform aimed to translate Russia-related news from the foreign press into Russian, ostensibly offering an alternative to state-influenced media. However, the revelation that Inosmi.ru, along with similar platforms, receives funding from the Russian government (The Economist 2014), raised concerns about the impartiality of these translations. Editorial biases become particularly evident during international incidents involving Russia, where selective translation practices are observed (EU vs Disinfo 2019).

This combination of limited foreign language proficiency and governmental influence over accessible foreign news content effectively creates an 'invisible firewall,' isolating Russian consumers from global perspectives. As Strovsky and Schleifer (2020) articulate, the Russian media's politicised and unreliable content, particularly in conflict coverage like that of Syria, remains obscured to its audience. The journalistic manipulation of information, coupled with the lack of alternative news sources, leaves Russian audiences largely at the mercy of government narratives.

The Russian media landscape, characterised by a lack of independent media outlets, is predominantly under governmental influence or controlled by government-affiliated oligarchs (Gambarato and Lapina-Kratasiuk 2016; Pasti, Chernysh, and Svitich 2012). This context is crucial to understanding the emergence and impact of opposition figures like Alexei Navalny. Navalny's evolution from a nationalist to a leading anti-corruption crusader, especially against

corrupt journalists and media personalities, reflects significant shifts in the Russian political discourse (Laruelle 2014).

Navalny's work, alongside his Anti-Corruption Foundation (ФБК 2020), compensates for the scarcity of quality political reporting and investigative journalism in Russia, a sector hindered by limited authority, resources, and professional expertise (Lipman 2005). Their investigations have revealed contradictions in the public personas of prominent pro-Putin media figures like Vladimir Soloviev, Dmitriy Kiselev, Ekaterina Andreeva, and Sergej Brilev, uncovering their luxury properties abroad and foreign residencies or citizenships (Навальный 2017). This dichotomy between their public rhetoric and personal choices highlights a disconnection from the experiences of average Russian citizens, as Navalny articulates: 'Their children live and are being educated abroad. They have no connections with Russia. Their parents – ministers, parliamentarians, propagandists despise Russia, and don't want their children to experience any of it. Nor do they want to retire here themselves' (tvernews.ru 2014).

Navalny's own story took a dramatic turn with his poisoning by a Novichok nerve agent on 20 August 2020, his subsequent treatment in Germany, and his arrest and sentencing upon return to Russia in 2021, leading to his imprisonment in a facility notorious for harsh conditions (Guardian 2022) and then death in prison in 2024. This sequence of events not only underscores the perils faced by opposition figures in Russia but also illustrates the broader challenges within the Russian media and political landscape, where freedom of expression and critical journalism are severely constrained.

Understanding the Russian government's utilisation of media power, particularly under President Putin, requires a nuanced examination of the dichotomy between state-owned and

private domestic media. This analysis is crucial for comprehending the mechanisms of government influence on the messages disseminated to the Russian populace (Arutunyan 2009). Despite the increasing prevalence of internet usage among Russians, television remains the predominant source of information, with 71% of the population engaging daily (Mickiewicz 2019). Internet use for news sources stands at 62%, while radio and print media are on a downward trend, stabilising at about 19% in recent years (ВЦИОМ 2020).

However, the distinction between offline and online media consumption holds limited relevance for this research. The fundamental question transcends the medium of news consumption. Debates about the social value of TV news viewers versus online news consumers, with the latter often being more educated (Yandex 2020), overlook a critical point: both groups wield equal electoral power. Whether consuming news through traditional television broadcasts or through a program's YouTube channel or social media page, the impact on democratic processes remains consistent.

Ellen Mickiewicz's research into the Russian media landscape provides further insight. She notes that wealthier and more educated Russians are more inclined to distrust TV news and seek information from Western online media sources. However, Mickiewicz (2008) observes that even these 'elite' viewers struggle to counterbalance the narrative propagated by national TV channels. This observation underscores the pervasive influence of state-controlled media, transcending socio-economic boundaries and shaping public opinion across diverse demographics.

Television remains a predominant medium in Russian media consumption for various reasons. Not only is TV regarded as the most credible information source by Russian citizens

(Oates 2006), but it is also viewed by the government, particularly Vladimir Putin, as an effective tool for message dissemination (RT 2013). This mutual reinforcement between the public and Putin underscores the pivotal role of television in shaping public opinion and political narratives. Burrett's analysis aligns with John Thompson's concept of symbolic power, which emphasises the significance of a leader's image in cultivating legitimacy and influencing public beliefs through symbolic forms (Burrett 2010). This symbolic power, leveraging assets like reputation and prestige, is fundamental in the political arena, directly impacting a leader's ability to exercise political power.

The widespread availability of television in Russia further strengthens its impact. State statistics indicate that 97.6% of the population owns a TV, making it an accessible source of information. The average Russian spends four hours daily watching television, predominantly state-owned channels like Channel 1 and Rossiya 1, followed by NTV, which, although not directly government-owned, is part of Gazprom Media Holding and thus government-affiliated (Levada 2016). These channels are known for their pro-Putin stance and general government orientation. Trust in television news varies annually, but on average, it remains high among Russians. This analysis reveals the intricate relationship between television, public opinion, and political power in Russia. The medium's widespread use and trustworthiness among the populace make it an invaluable tool for the government to sustain its symbolic power and influence public perception, thereby reinforcing Putin's political strength and legitimacy.

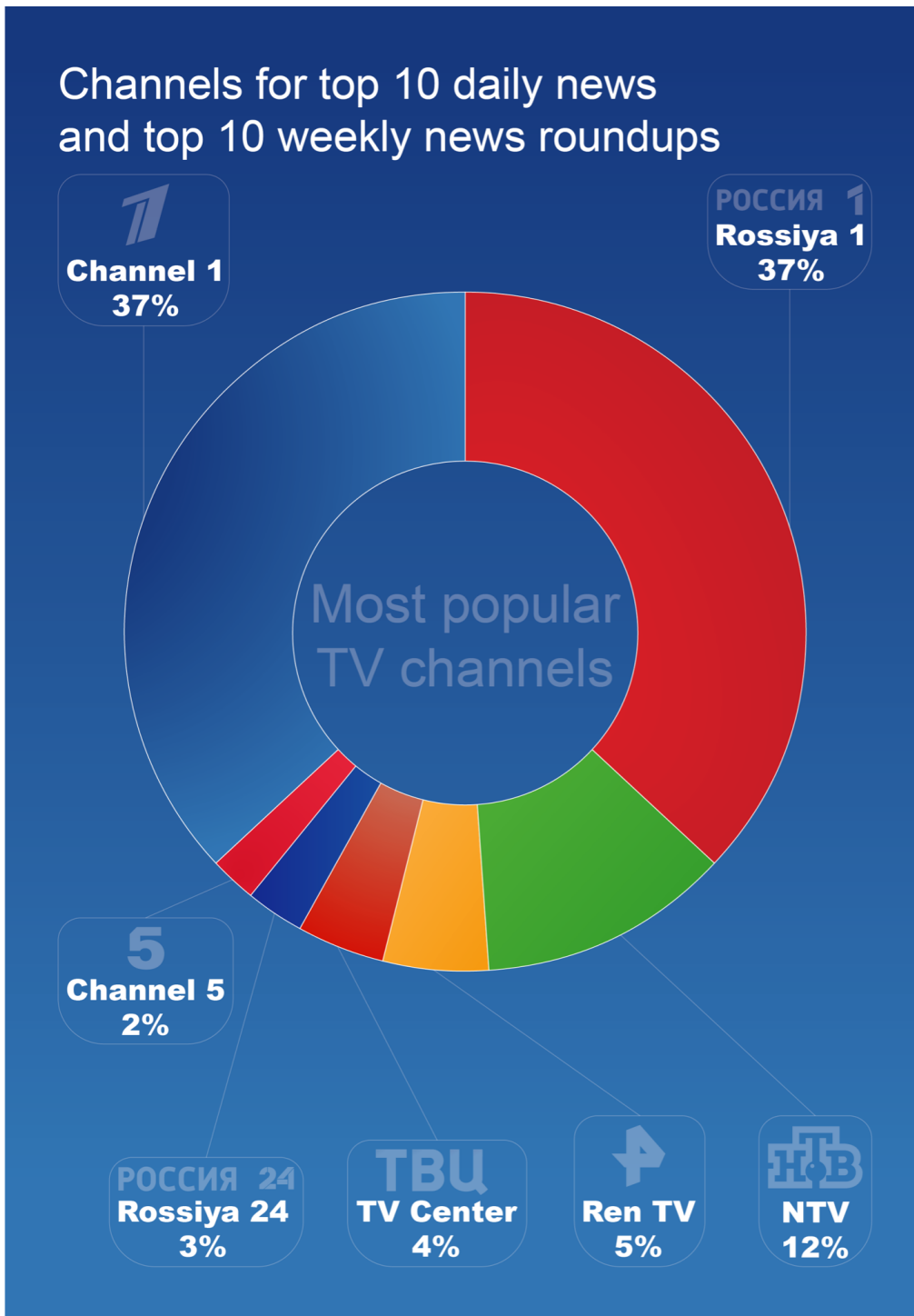


Figure 2.2: Top Russian news channels Source: (Zakem *et al.* 2018)

Yandex.ru, as reported by seoslim.ru in 2020, stands as Russia's most frequented search engine, boasting over 53 million monthly users. Remarkably, it is the largest Russian corporation without official government ties (Wayback Machine 2011). Historically, Yandex's

news generation tool, renowned for its unbiased algorithm, garnered popularity. Its algorithm promoted news based on user engagement, propelling stories into the Yandex Top News section. However, following several incidents, public campaigns amplified local government issues to national prominence. These campaigns encouraged mass engagement with specific news stories, catapulting them to the top of Yandex's news feed (Lefortier *et al.* 2013). The turning point came when Yandex's owners received a call from the presidential administration, after which the Yandex Top News feature was abruptly discontinued (Meduza 2019).

In the realm of radio broadcasting, excluding music stations, a limited number of Russian radio programmes offer news or political analysis, with most being state-owned, such as Radio Mayak and Vesti FM (Крестова 2019). Echo of Moscow, a semi-independent station closed down in March 2022, was notable for its critical political commentary, including criticisms of the government and Putin. Despite appearances, Echo of Moscow was under governmental control. It was a part of Gazprom Media, a state-owned entity (Эхо Москвы 2020). The station's editor-in-chief, Alexei Venediktov, acknowledged receiving directives from the presidential administration or Dmitry Peskov, the president's press secretary, in 'extreme situations' (Венедиктов 2009).

Venediktov took pride in the relative independence of his station compared to others in Russia, perceiving it as crucial for the presidential administration to reference free media, especially in response to international criticisms of press freedom in Russia (Zakem *et al.* 2016). It's important to recognise that Venediktov, and others in similar positions, were not merely passive figures in the governmental machinery. Venediktov, who counted Peskov among his friends, enjoyed privileges not afforded to most journalists (ВДудь 2018). This status

quo persisted until the government shut down Echo of Moscow following the Ukrainian invasion in 2022.

The landscape of print press in Russia, with its limited number of current affairs newspapers, offers a unique insight into the media consumption patterns and government influence in the country. As of 2009, only six newspapers were dedicated to reporting current affairs (Arutunyan 2009). Despite this, a 2014 poll indicated that 64% of Russian citizens, amounting to over 70 million people, read newspapers, although this figure encompasses those interested in various genres including cooking and sports (ФОМ 2014). The total circulation of newspapers focusing on daily or weekly news and political analysis stands at approximately five million (Герейханова 2019). An equivalent number of readers access these newspapers' content online, through official websites or social media platforms.

Ownership patterns in the print and online newspaper sectors mirror the broader Russian media landscape. Governmental influence is evident in publications like Rossiyskaya Gazeta, an official government news source mandated by law to publish new legislation, giving it legal legitimacy (IPBD 2021). Even newspapers perceived as independent, such as Kommersant and Vedomosti, have experienced government involvement, either through direct stockholding or via connections with oligarchs linked to President Putin or the presidential administration (Болецкая 2020).

In contrast, Novaya Gazeta stands as a notable example of independent journalism in Russia. It is one of the country's leading liberal media outlets, though its circulation and readership, around 200,000, are relatively modest compared to other news sources (Новая газета 2021). The gradual decline in print media circulation is counterbalanced by the growing

online readership of these organisations. In a significant acknowledgment of independent journalism in Russia, Dmitry Muratov, the editor-in-chief of Novaya Gazeta, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021 (Henley, Ratcliffe, and Sauer 2021).

This analysis underscores the complexities of the Russian print media sector, marked by a mix of government-controlled and independent outlets, and highlights the evolving nature of media consumption in the country.

No.	Name	Type	Website	Visitors, thousand people/day
1	Komsomolskaya Pravda	Newspaper	kp.ru	32,660
2	RIA Novosti	Information agency	ria.ru	31,403
3	Lenta.ru	Internet newspaper	lenta.ru	28,943
4	RBK (RosBiznesKonsalting)	Information agency	rbc.ru	27,684
5	Moskovskiy Komsomolets	Newspaper	mk.ru	22,593
6	Rossiyskaya Gazeta	Governmental media	rg.ru	21,988
7	Gazeta.ru	Internet newspaper	gazeta.ru	21,111
8	Russia Today	TV channel	rt.com	18,151
9	Izvestiya.RU	Daily newspaper	iz.ru	17,431
10	Vesti.ru	Internet channel	vesti.ru	17,073

Table 2.1: The most popular online media in Russia

In Russia, the media landscape is profoundly influenced by government oversight, both directly and indirectly. State-owned media are unequivocally under government control, with editorial policies directly shaped by the Kremlin. For privately-owned media, the influence is less overt but equally potent. As Rutland (2018) notes, the most influential media owners in Russia maintain close ties with President Putin and his inner circle.

‘The Russian media sphere is dominated by five businessmen: Vladimir Potanin and Alisher Usmanov in metallurgy, Alexander Mamut in banking, Yury

Kovalchuk in insurance, and Roman Abramovich in metals and oil. While their media outlets occasionally critique government officials or parliamentary decisions and serve to further their own business interests, they uniformly avoid direct criticism of Putin or straying from the party line. The guidelines for media content can be somewhat vague and at times almost humorous. For instance, Gazeta.ru, owned by Alexander Mamut, mandates referring to Vladimir Putin exclusively as 'President Vladimir Putin,' reinforcing his singular authority in the public's perception' (Interviewee 1, independent media 2023).

This quote illustrates how despite the appearance of diversity and occasional criticism of government policies or parliamentary decisions, the media outlets owned by these businessmen adhere to a clear and consistent policy when it comes to coverage of President Vladimir Putin. There is a uniform avoidance of any direct criticism of Putin, and a strict adherence to a narrative that supports and reinforces his leadership and the broader governmental agenda. This approach is indicative of the tightly controlled media environment in Russia, where true freedom of the press is compromised by the interests of its powerful owners who align closely with the state.

The control over media content extends to specific guidelines that may seem trivial but are highly symbolic and serve to reinforce the power dynamics within the country.

These media practices illustrate how the Russian media sphere functions not just as a business but as an integral part of the political machinery. The media owned by these oligarchs serves dual purposes: it furthers the business interests of its owners and maintains the necessary political atmosphere for their continued prosperity. This setup ensures that while some aspects

of governance may be critiqued, the core pillars of Putin's rule remain beyond reproach in the public discourse.

Overall, the control exerted by these businessmen over the Russian media landscape highlights the intertwined nature of business and politics in Russia. It reflects a system where media is used as a tool for political stability and control, ensuring that while some level of critique and discussion is permitted, it never threatens the overarching power structure that benefits the elite few. This structured media environment plays a critical role in sustaining Putin's image as an unchallenged leader, thereby maintaining a status quo that serves the interests of both the political and business elites in Russia.

Although there is no concrete evidence of Putin directly dictating editorial policies, the presidential administration exerts significant control over private media. Non-compliance with the administration's standards often results in direct intervention, either from the administration itself or via the media owner (Schimpfoss and Yablokov 2014).

Under Putin's regime, the Russian press has become adept at self-censorship, allowing the government to claim a lack of direct media control. Interviewee 14 from a government-controlled media outlet elucidates this:

‘No, nobody from the presidential administration calls me once in every 10 minutes, yet there are general settings and I understand which course I should follow. Of course, we receive instructions, or rather auxiliary guidelines, on how to communicate important nationwide events to the people, but not on a daily basis. That being said, it's not my first year in this position. There are many things that I don't need explained to me at this point.’ (Interviewee 14 2022).

This statement sheds light on the sophisticated mechanisms of media control and governance in Russia, where direct oversight is complemented by more subtle forms of influence, demonstrating a nuanced approach to shaping the narrative and public discourse. The interviewee, an individual well-acquainted with the operations within the Russian media landscape, clarifies that while there is no incessant oversight in the form of constant communication from the presidential administration, there exists a clear understanding of the general direction and expectations set by those in power.

This system operates on a foundation which provides a framework within which media professionals operate. These guidelines are not issued daily but are ingrained enough through ongoing communication and cultural understanding within the media ecosystem that they inform day-to-day operations. This method of governance allows for a level of autonomy in the execution of media duties, while still ensuring that the overarching narrative aligns with the interests of the state.

The speaker's admission of receiving instructions on how to communicate major national events further underscores the existence of a guided media strategy, albeit one that does not necessitate constant direct intervention. Instead, it relies on the professional acumen and the ingrained understanding of media personnel who have internalised the objectives and limits of their reporting through years of experience and cultural cues within their professional environment.

This approach highlights a sophisticated form of media control which might be termed indirect control or self-censorship. It involves a deep-seated self-regulation among journalists and media managers who, over time, become adept at navigating the boundaries of acceptable

discourse without the need for frequent explicit directives. This system allows for a semblance of independence in the media while ensuring that the content that is produced does not deviate from the state's desired narrative.

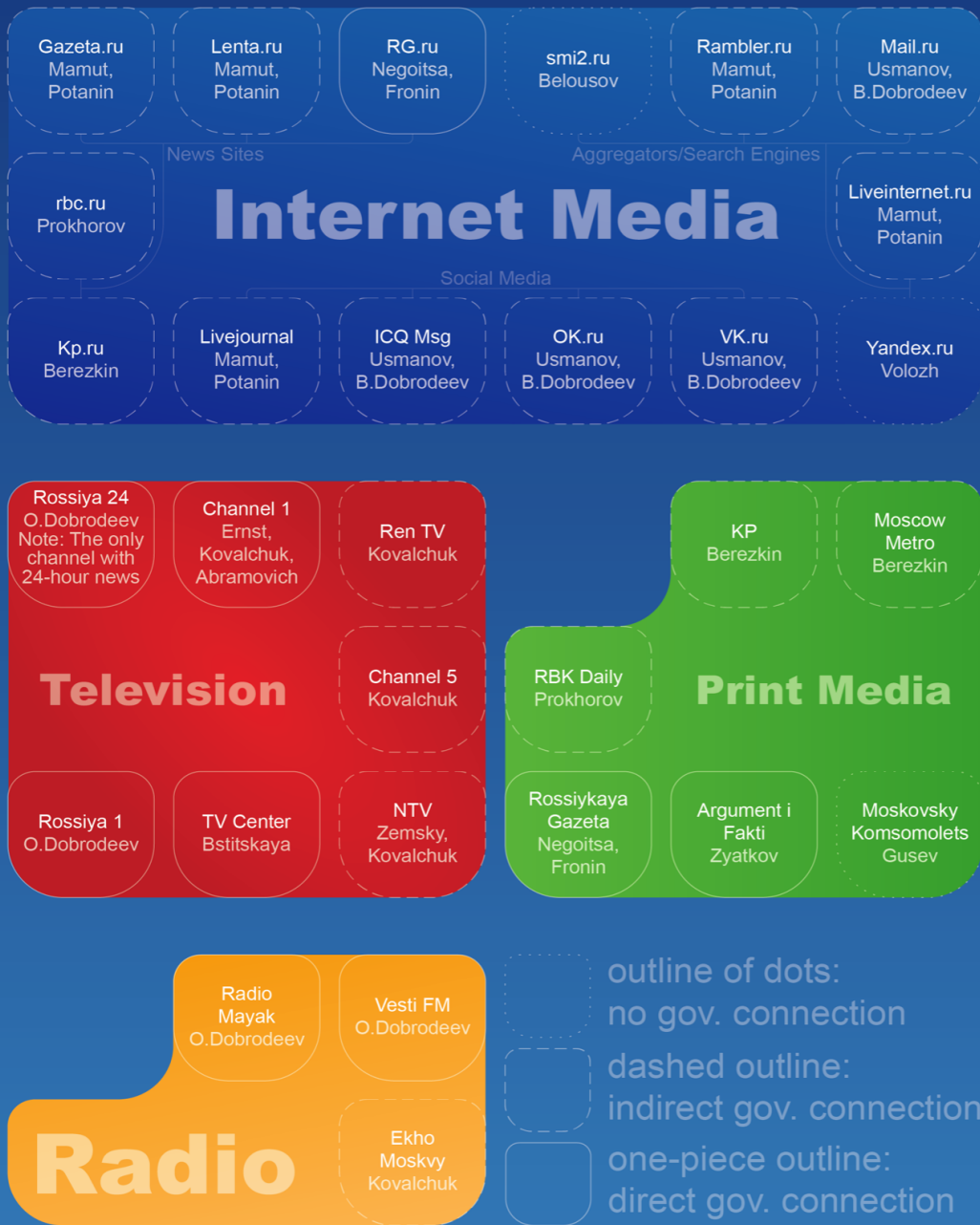
The complexity of this governance model lies in its blending of overt control mechanisms with subtler psychological and professional nudges. This creates a media environment where censorship is not just imposed from above but is also internally generated, reflecting a comprehensive understanding of the limits and expectations set by the authorities. Such a model is crucial for understanding how public discourse and perception are shaped in Russia, demonstrating how media governance in Russia subtly yet effectively ensures alignment with the political narratives preferred by those in power, while still allowing room for some level of editorial discretion. This balance between overt control and indirect influence is key to maintaining the state's influence over public opinion while masking the extent of its control, making the media a powerful tool in shaping not just public discourse but also the broader political and social landscape.

The dynamics of media ownership in Russia, particularly in the context of its intersection with large-scale commodity businesses, is a complex and sensitive subject. The case of Gazeta.ru, owned by Alexander Mamut, exemplifies the intricate ties between media ownership and political influence. Despite being financially unviable, these media outlets are often maintained as a result of directives from higher political echelons, rather than from a pure business interest (Misonzhnikov *et al.* 2015). This phenomenon reflects a broader pattern where media entities are not merely business ventures, but tools wielded under presidential or administrative command.

In exploring the nuances of private media ownership in Russia, the example of Gazprom Media Holding is particularly illuminating. Initially a part of Gazprom, Russia's state-owned oil and gas giant, control of Gazprom Media was subsequently transferred to GazpromBank. The key shareholders of GazpromBank include Gazprom and Gazfond, Gazprom's pension fund, highlighting the intertwined nature of state and private interests in Russian media (Lipman 2014). This entanglement makes it challenging to disentangle the 'special relationships' between the state, private companies, and media entities.

These cases underscore the complexity of Russian media ownership, where the lines between state control and private ownership are blurred. Such arrangements raise critical questions about the autonomy of media in Russia and the extent to which these outlets can operate independently of state or corporate influences. This interplay between political power and media ownership is essential for understanding the landscape of Russian media and its implications for objective reporting and freedom of press.

Popular media consumption in Russia by modality



Source: CNA. Data compiled using Alexa Website Traffic Statistics and the OSC Media Environment Guide on Russia(2016). Please note owners and editors are listed below each media outlet.

Figure 2.3: Popular media consumption by modality CNA (2016)

Oligarchs and their media holdings



Figure 2.4: Oligarchs and their media holdings. Source: CAN.

In the intricate landscape of Russian politics, the involvement of oligarchs with direct access to President Putin plays a pivotal role. These influential individuals are prominently featured in the Agency for Political and Economic Communications Report. The credibility of this report gains further strength from its corroboration with various models of Kremlin decision-making as disclosed by CNA. Established in the 1940s, CNA stands as one of the oldest U.S. non-profit research and analysis organisations. It's renowned for its commitment to empirical research and analysis aimed at assisting policymakers in crafting informed policies, enhancing decision-making processes, and augmenting the efficacy of program management. The intersection of these oligarchs in political processes, as identified in the report and validated by CNA's analytical models, underscores the intricate dynamics of power and influence within the Kremlin, offering valuable insights into the decision-making mechanisms at the highest echelons of Russian governance.

The role of Russian media in shaping both foreign and domestic policy under Vladimir Putin's regime is pivotal. Putin himself acknowledges the media as a crucial instrument in moulding public opinion and countering external influences. He articulately emphasises the need to challenge Western media dominance, stating: 'We must put up strong resistance to the Western media's information monopoly, including by using all available methods to support Russian media outlets operating abroad.' (Кремль 2016). This statement underlines the strategic use of media as a tool in what Putin perceives as an information war against the West.

The commitment to sparing no expense in support of government-controlled media reflects a broader strategy where domestic public support is deemed essential for maintaining Putin's dominance within Russian political elites (Burrett 2010). The influence of Russian media extends beyond Russia's borders. The linguistic and cultural ties across the post-Soviet

space mean that Russian media also reach audiences who share a Soviet heritage and are receptive to Russian narratives (Pavlenko 2008). This wider audience is a critical aspect of Putin's media strategy, reinforcing his long-expressed sentiment about the Soviet Union's collapse being a major 20th-century tragedy and positioning himself as a unifier of these culturally connected regions (РИА Новости 2017).

The Russian media landscape, as directed by Putin, serves a dual purpose: consolidating his internal power base and projecting influence across the Russian-speaking world. This approach is rooted in a strategic vision where media power extends beyond mere propaganda; it's an integral component of Russia's foreign policy toolkit, aimed at reasserting its sphere of influence reminiscent of Soviet-era dominance.

The allocation of significant resources by the Russian government to influence Western media and policymakers, while not overly prominent, plays a crucial role in their international strategy. This effort, as noted by Якунин (2017) and Harding (2013), provides reassurance not only to Putin but also to those who propose and execute these media initiatives. As per Interviewee 15 from the government-controlled media:

‘Budgets for foreign language projects are approved every year. It’s a big issue: the worse the ruble rate, the more money should be allocated. However, as these projects are of great importance to Putin, the budgets are approved, whatever trouble it takes. We can criticise our government all we want for their attempt to deliver their point of view to the Western reader directly, yet I’d like to note one thing: until recently, all major Western newspapers, including The New York Times and The Telegraph, published pages with Russian propaganda as sponsored content. At that, these pages were laid out according to the

newspapers' style guides so that the reader wouldn't notice the 'sponsored' disclaimer and deem this an integral part of the newspaper. Thus, the so-called incorruptible media can keep their criticism to themselves.' (Interviewee 15, 2022).

This statement offers a revealing glimpse into the strategic operations behind Russia's foreign language media projects, underscoring the considerable effort and resources dedicated to influencing international opinion. Funding for these projects remains a priority, reflecting their significant importance to President Vladimir Putin. The determination to secure budgets annually, regardless of economic hardships, highlights the strategic value placed on these initiatives as tools of soft power and international influence.

The interviewee's remarks also include a pointed critique of what they perceive as hypocrisy within the Western media. The willingness of reputable newspapers to publish sponsored content from Russian sources, despite its alignment with Russian propaganda goals, calls into question the integrity of these media outlets. This practice allows Russia to circumvent traditional barriers to media influence, embedding its narratives directly within respected publications. The criticism levelled at these Western media outlets suggests a disillusionment with the proclaimed incorruptibility of Western journalism, highlighting the complex, sometimes contradictory nature of global media practices. It paints a picture of a deeply interconnected and mutually influential relationship between global media practices and state-sponsored propaganda efforts, revealing the sophisticated tactics at play in the battle for global narrative dominance.

The Russian foreign policy doctrine, publicly accessible on the Russian Foreign Ministry website (Российская Федерация 2019), and Putin's decree on Russia's national security strategy, available through the Kremlin website (Кремль 2020), explicitly articulate the goal of establishing Russia as a global influence centre. These documents highlight Russia's stance against what is perceived as escalating aggression from the US and NATO, including their expansion towards Russian borders and participation in information warfare aimed at pressuring Russia.

Central to this strategy is the Russian media's role in undermining Western institutions, challenging the notion of a unified Western perspective sharing common values, and discrediting liberalism. This approach indicates a deliberate attempt by the Russian government to reshape global narratives and perceptions, underscoring the strategic use of media in international politics and the complex dynamics of Russia's global interactions.

The evolution of Russian media strategy from the Soviet era to the present day illustrates a significant shift in propaganda tactics. During the Soviet period, the media propagated the narrative of an idyllic Soviet life juxtaposed against a struggling West, rife with poverty and disease. Foreign correspondents were even directed to fabricate reports about empty store shelves in the United States, reinforcing this dichotomy (Mickiewicz 1990). The underlying message was clear: 'we live well; they live poorly.'

However, with the advent of open borders and increased international travel, maintaining such claims became untenable. Consequently, Russian media propaganda has adapted, now often portraying life in the West as even more challenging than in Russia. This narrative shift, encapsulated by phrases like 'It is even worse out there in the West than here in

Russia,' aims to assert that despite domestic hardships, Western societies, plagued by 'dying liberalism and permissiveness,' are on the brink of collapse, while Russia's 'strong values' will ensure its survival (Sputnik Таджикистан 2019). This rhetoric is exemplified by the enactment of anti-gay propaganda laws (Edenborg 2017), reinforcing the narrative of moral and societal superiority.

Despite exposés of corruption at the highest levels, such as those reported by Navalny implicating Putin (Навальный 2017), the popularity of major pro-government propagandists remains largely unscathed. The paradox of their anti-Western stance coupled with their personal ties to the West has done little to diminish their influence (Burrett 2020). This underscores the resilience and adaptability of Russian propaganda in maintaining its grip on public opinion.

The role of foreign-language media projects funded by Russia, like Russia Today, needs to be contextualised. As Navalny articulates, the primary objectives of these projects appear to be enriching their managers and pleasing Putin, rather than effectively influencing international viewership (navalny.com 2020). Despite their lacklustre performance, the continued financial support from the Russian government suggests that they successfully fulfil their true purpose: satisfying the expectations of their key viewer, Putin. This reveals a nuanced aspect of Russian media strategy, where external influence is secondary to internal political and economic dynamics.

The Russian media's narrative, both domestically and internationally, consistently portrays Russia as a formidable global power. This narrative encompasses several key themes: Russia's unmatched military strength, its nuclear capabilities acting as a global deterrent,

President Vladimir Putin's leadership and prioritisation of Russian interests, the admiration of post-Soviet countries towards Russia, the perceived threat from Western policies, the imposition of Western democratic values, the unreliability of international law organisations due to Western bias, and the preservation of Russian values and traditions against Western influence (Lankina, Watanabe, and Netesova 2020: p. 7).

This portrayal is not merely a strategic media construct but appears to be deeply rooted in Putin's own beliefs. This is evidenced by Putin's direct articulations, as noted in a statement where he aligns himself with traditional values, emphasising the importance of family, spirituality, humanism, and global diversity. He describes this stance as conservative, referencing Nikolai Berdyaev to underscore the idea of conservatism as a force against regression and chaos (Кремль 2013). Such statements from Putin provide a clear insight into the ideological underpinnings that guide the narratives in Russian media.

The consistency in messaging across different media platforms, regardless of the target audience, suggests a deliberate and systematic approach to shaping public perception and reinforcing a specific image of Russia on the global stage. The emphasis on traditional values, as asserted by Putin, plays a key role in this narrative, positioning Russia as a bastion of moral and cultural integrity in contrast to the perceived decay of Western influences. This approach is not only a reflection of Putin's personal convictions but also a strategic political tool, used to foster national unity and bolster Russia's standing internationally.

In light of these observations, the media portrayal can be seen as an extension of Putin's broader political strategy, wherein traditional values and global influence are interwoven to craft a narrative of Russian exceptionalism and resilience. This narrative strategy serves

multiple purposes: it legitimises Putin's leadership, rallies domestic support, counters Western influence, and positions Russia as a key player in shaping global dynamics.

The Presidential Administration plays a pivotal role in controlling the Russian media landscape, particularly within the Russian language press. While the Cabinet of Ministers, led by the Prime Minister, holds broader powers, it is the Presidential Administration that directs media strategy. This distinction is critical in understanding the institutional dynamics of media control in Russia.

Renowned Russian journalist and political analyst Leonid Radzikhovskii describes the Presidential Administration as a de facto 'ministry of propaganda.' He notes, 'The presidential administration, or rather the 'ministry of propaganda' is the one crafting the official message, both officially and unofficially distributing resources (not only budgets, but spokespersons, influencers, helping find the necessary angles to report), to enforce obedience and make sure no one strays too far away from the official message.' (ИД 'Собеседник' 2020). This characterisation underscores the administration's multifaceted approach to managing the media narrative, extending beyond mere content control to influencing the broader media ecosystem.

The administration's tactics include direct communication with media managers and organising exclusive events such as conferences and briefings for state-aligned journalists. These activities, purposefully inaccessible to independent media, ensure that state-owned press aligns with the governmental agenda. Media managers often engage in personal meetings with the Presidential Administration and occasionally with Vladimir Putin himself. These interactions are not merely for information dissemination but also serve as opportunities for media leaders to feel influential and integrated into the power structure.

According to Эхо Москвы (2019), Putin's strategy for media control relies more on persuasion than repression. He prefers to create an environment where compliance is seen as voluntary or, ideally, as an initiative of the media entities themselves. This subtle form of control reflects a nuanced approach to governance, emphasising the importance of 'charming the opponent' and encouraging self-censorship.

The Russian presidential administration exerts considerable influence over the media landscape through its control of government funding allocations. This power, centralised in the hands of the presidential administration and ultimately Vladimir Putin, operates in an unofficial and opaque manner, away from public scrutiny (Zakem *et al.* 2018). The criteria for funding decisions hinge on the perceived importance of media projects and their demonstrated loyalty to the administration and Putin personally.

In instances involving semi-independent media, the administration employs more indirect methods, such as 'requesting' loyal oligarchs to purchase advertising space in targeted media outlets (Твердов 2013). This tactic has gained prominence following the implementation of laws prohibiting alcohol and tobacco advertising, which adversely impacted many independent media enterprises, traditionally reliant on these sectors for advertising revenue (Российская Федерация 2006). As a result, surviving media entities, especially those covering current events and sustaining significant operational costs, find themselves increasingly dependent on state-controlled advertisers. Interviewee 16 from a government-controlled media outlet elucidates this predicament:

'I can't say our publication has ever had super profits, yet we've managed to keep afloat for many years. That being said, the anti-tobacco and anti-alcohol

laws have crushed us. Government corporations wouldn't advertise with us, and we wouldn't survive without vodka and cigarettes.' (Interviewee 16, 2022)

The statement from Interviewee provides a candid look into the economic challenges faced by their publication over the years. The introduction of stringent anti-tobacco and anti-alcohol laws has posed a significant threat to publication's financial viability. These regulations have had a profound impact by curtailing advertising revenues from alcohol and tobacco companies, which were evidently crucial financial lifelines for the publication. The Interviewee highlights that government corporations, typically seen as alternative stable sources of advertising revenue, do not engage with their publication. This lack of support from governmental entities exacerbates the financial strain, leaving the publication without its traditional revenue streams from the heavily regulated industries of tobacco and alcohol.

As governments implement stricter controls to combat the public health issues associated with smoking and drinking, publications that have traditionally depended on advertising from these sectors face heightened financial uncertainties. This scenario reflects the complex interplay between regulatory policy objectives and the economic realities of businesses within the media landscape, particularly smaller or niche publications that may lack the diversified revenue streams of larger conglomerates.

In this context, the survival of the publication becomes a poignant example of the challenges faced by media outlets operating under evolving regulatory environments. The financial pressures imposed by the loss of key advertisers due to public health regulations necessitate a re-evaluation of business strategies and revenue models.

Overall, the experience of this publication reveals the vulnerability of media businesses to shifts in regulatory and market environments, highlighting the delicate balance between maintaining operational sustainability and adhering to or being affected by public policy changes.

The presidential administration's control extends to directing large corporations, such as Gazprom, in their advertising decisions. The necessity of Gazprom's advertising, given its monopolistic position in the Russian gas market, raises questions about the actual purpose of such expenditure (Åslund, Guriev, and Kuchins 2010). This scenario exemplifies a form of budget reallocation, effectively used to reward, or penalise media outlets, reinforcing the lack of autonomy both in the media sector and within state-controlled corporations. In Russia, the government's control over media extends beyond financial pressures, employing a range of coercive tactics against non-compliant outlets, particularly those in the private sector. In extreme cases, this can involve the closure of media organisations, or the imprisonment of journalists deemed disloyal (Dougherty 2015). Another prevalent method is the orchestration of raids on news offices under the guise of discovering tax irregularities or fire safety violations in their premises. This latter approach is not only used against the press but is a common tactic for suppressing any form of business seen as unfavourable to the state. The effectiveness of these fire safety inspections stems from the antiquated nature of Russian fire safety laws. These outdated regulations are nearly impossible to comply with, creating a fertile ground for corruption and coercion. Many believe that these laws are deliberately left unmodernised to serve as a versatile tool against any perceived 'enemy' of the state. Consequently, adherence to these laws becomes a paradox, leading to a situation akin to a Russian Catch-22: compliance is unattainable, and the only path to avoid sanctions is unwavering loyalty to the State. Interviewee 17 from the independent media vividly describes this reality:

‘This might be an unexpected coincidence, yet hardly had we voiced specific topics, the fire inspection would pay us a visit and issue an inadequate fine. There was a year when these guys visited us several times a month.’ (Interviewee 17, 2022).

The testimony from Interviewee vividly illustrates how regulatory frameworks can be manipulated to exert control over media outlets and suppress dissenting voices. The frequency and timing of these inspections - occurring several times a month and often just after specific topics were raised by the publication - raise significant concerns about independence of regulatory bodies and their potential use as tools of state or political control. Instead of serving their primary purpose of ensuring safety and compliance, these regulatory actions appear to have been weaponised to create financial and operational burdens on the media outlet. The imposition of ‘inadequate’ fines further indicates that these actions were not just routine checks, but targeted measures intended to disrupt the publication’s activities and impose a financial strain, making it difficult for them to operate freely and sustainably.

This scenario underscores a broader issue within certain governance contexts, where regulatory mechanisms are exploited to enforce conformity and silence critical media. The use of regulatory bodies to indirectly control and censor media content through harassment and financial penalties is a tactic that can effectively stifle dissent without the overt appearance of media suppression. The testimony of interviewee is a stark reminder of the challenges faced by media outlets in environments where government agencies can be used as instruments of political pressure. It highlights the delicate balance media organisations must navigate when dealing with governments that may use regulatory frameworks not just for public welfare but also as a means to exert control over the public discourse. This manipulation of regulatory

powers is a critical concern, as it can covertly undermine media freedom and chill critical speech, thereby impacting the broader societal function of the media as a watchdog and a bearer of public truth. Russian courts often serve as a final resort for silencing resistant media outlets. A case in point is Meduza, an independent Russian-language media based in Latvia. Lacking a Moscow branch, Meduza presents a unique challenge to Russian governmental control. The government's lawsuit against Meduza, following their publication of a meme featuring a photoshopped image of Vladimir Putin, exemplifies the lengths to which the state will go to exert control over media narratives (Министерство юстиции РФ 2017).



(Малицкая 2017)

The enactment of the 'resistance to extremism' law in Russia has profoundly impacted media freedom, with the term 'extremism' broadly defined as any action potentially destabilising the government. Since its implementation, a staggering 115,706 media organisations, journalists, and private citizens have faced accusations of extremism. These charges, often leading to fines or imprisonment, have been levelled not only for producing content deemed 'anti-government,' such as articles, images, or memes, but also for engaging with such content on social media, including sharing, liking, or commenting (Кинякина 2018).

Vladimir Putin occupies a central role in shaping the Russian media narrative. Not only is he a predominant newsmaker, but he also exerts significant influence over media portrayal and content. Putin has openly acknowledged his direct involvement in media control in various interviews, rationalising the necessity of such 'manual control' as a means to bring order to the chaotic post-Perestroika Russian institutions. He has likened his approach to the rigid structures required for the reconstruction of Russia, stating, 'We are emerging from a serious systemic crisis, and are thus forced to do a lot in the manual regime' (Putin 2013). This stance is further compared to Franklin D. Roosevelt's response to the Great Depression, as reported by 1tv.ru (2019).

While the presidential administration typically handles the manual control of Russian media, instances arise where Putin personally intervenes (Zakem *et al.* 2018). According to the CNA, Putin perceives threats to his control over the political system, his political legitimacy, and his vision of Russian national interests, prompting such direct involvement (CNA 2019). The apparent inconsistencies in the Russian media strategy can be partly attributed to President Putin's extensive responsibilities. Initially, Putin may play an active role in shaping media narratives, setting parameters for media coverage. However, given his duty to govern, he often

steps back, allowing these established guidelines to guide subsequent media strategies (Zakem *et al.* 2017). This approach reflects a pragmatic balance between direct involvement and delegation, necessary for managing a nation's complex media landscape.

Putin's expertise in media manipulation, honed both domestically and internationally, resonates with the Russian public's historical acumen in interpreting political messaging. Stemming from the Soviet era, the Russian populace has developed a nuanced skill in reading between the lines, a cultural legacy that continues to influence contemporary media consumption and perception (Zakem *et al.* 2017). In this dynamic, Putin and the Russian people engage in a sophisticated interplay, each adept in the art of nuanced communication.

Putin's attention to the nuances of his communication, considering both content and audience, reflects a strategy rooted in Soviet-era practices. However, the advent of the modern, interconnected world, especially the ubiquity of the internet, poses new challenges to this approach. While Putin's intent may be to target domestic audiences, the global nature of digital media often extends his reach unintentionally to international audiences. This broader dissemination can lead to diverse interpretations, conflicts, misunderstandings, and at times, unintended comedic outcomes. A notable example is the widespread reaction to his bare-chested horseback riding photos, which became a subject of international commentary and humour (Wood 2016). This situation underscores the evolving complexities in global communication, particularly for figures like Putin, whose messages, intended for a specific audience, often reach a global platform, thus inviting varied perceptions and reactions. The Russian media strategy, therefore, reflects an ongoing negotiation between historical communication practices and the realities of a digitally connected world.



(Бережанский 2022)

The dissemination of President Putin's bare-chested image on horseback was strategically targeted at a specific demographic within Russia: middle-aged women in small towns. This image was crafted to showcase Putin's health, stamina, and vigour, starkly contrasting the prevalent issue of alcoholism among Russian men. This strategic portrayal was effective domestically, as evidenced by an increase in Putin's personal ratings post-publication (Interfax 2009). However, the international reception of these images was unforeseen by Putin's team. In the West, the image became a subject of humour and satire, frequently featured in political commentary and comedy shows like Saturday Night Live (SNL 2017). This unexpected reaction highlights the cultural disconnect in the perception of Putin's persona.

Smith provides an insightful analysis of this phenomenon: 'In common with their mothers and grandmothers, the young Russian women interviewed by the Independent also

declared Putin to be a sex symbol, and many said they would like to marry a man just like him (Usborne 2007).’ Smith notes that Putin's display of traditional masculinity was not solely aimed at female voters. His ‘action man’ persona, epitomised by the 2007 Siberia fishing trip photos, was also designed to appeal to male voters. This performance of masculinity was interpreted differently within Russia compared to the West. Russian media lauded Putin's physicality as ‘sexy and manly,’ inspiring a significant portion of Russian men to emulate his physique, as reported by *Komsomolskya Pravda* (Usborne 2007). In contrast, Western audiences found these displays comical rather than intimidating.

Putin's cultivation of a traditionally masculine image, tailored to resonate with specific gendered and cultural narratives within Russia, underscores the nuanced and multifaceted nature of political image-making. This case study reveals the complexities involved in crafting a political image that resonates differently across cultural boundaries, underlining the significance of cultural context in political communication.

The portrayal of President Putin in Western media, particularly concerning his masculine image, juxtaposes interestingly with Russian perceptions. An article in the *New York Daily* (Ridley 2007) highlighted this by comparing vacation photographs of Putin, shirtless, with those of George W. Bush and Nicolas Sarkozy, both fully clothed. While the paper humorously voted Putin as the ‘hottest head of state this summer,’ a closer examination of the text reveals an undertone of sarcasm, particularly in the comment ‘If we forgive him the man boobs.’ This not only reflects the Western media's approach to political figures but also points to differing cultural interpretations of masculinity between Russia and the West.

Further analysis of Western media responses to Putin's shirtless images reveals deeper cultural connotations. Commentators noted Putin's hairless chest, speculating about waxing—a gesture often stereotypically associated with narcissism and, in Western contexts, with homosexuality (Mackinnon 2003, 8). Comparisons were also drawn to the 'gay cowboy' film, 'Brokeback Mountain' (Smith 2016). Such interpretations contrast sharply with Russian ideals of masculinity, highlighting a cultural divide in the perception of political leaders.

Additionally, understanding Putin's communication style is critical, especially for non-Russian audiences. Hill (2016) emphasises that translations of Putin's speeches often miss the nuances of his language and tone. These subtleties, though overlooked in the West, are keenly observed by Russian media professionals who analyse Putin's words to discern his views, mood, and intentions. The disparity in interpretation underscores the importance of cultural context in political communication, revealing how messages can be perceived differently across linguistic and cultural barriers.

President Putin and his administration strategically utilise media messaging to control public perception, emphasising positive narratives while delegating negative news to others. This approach is not only employed in critical situations but also in everyday political life. Putin personally delivers 'good news,' leaving the dissemination of 'bad news' to governors and ministers, often through indirect methods like written statements for news anchors to read (Simons 2005). This policy is reflected in the Russian state TV guidelines, mandating that all programs start with positive news about Putin and Russia, relegating negative stories to less prominent positions in the broadcast. Interviewee 6 from government-controlled media elaborates on this strategy:

‘Every newscast should start with, first, Putin, second, good news, as everybody just watches the first 10 minutes. After that, you can do whatever you want. Since there is not enough ‘fresh’ Putin, ‘canned products’ are used: old videos featuring Putin are mixed with the new ones, and a narration may be added.’ (Interviewee 6, 2022).

The testimony provided by Interviewee offers a revealing look into the operational tactics and editorial strategies employed by Russian TV news divisions to maintain a consistent, favourable image of President Vladimir Putin.

The strategy of prioritising Putin and controlling the narrative around him reflects broader media manipulation tactics used to shape public perception. One such tactic, described by Latinyna (2017) as ‘news in the future tense,’ involves reporting on events that are expected to happen rather than those that have actually occurred. This technique creates a narrative of anticipation and potential, focusing on the promises of future developments rather than the realities of current events. The use of this narrative style can often lead to a lack of follow-up or accountability, as the news cycle moves on without revisiting the outcomes of the reported anticipations.

These editorial practices underscore the significant challenges faced by TV news divisions in Russia, where the imperative to portray the national leader in a relentlessly positive light leads to creative approaches in news production. The reliance on recycled content and speculative reporting highlights the constraints within which these news organisations operate, where the depiction of reality is often less important than the maintenance of a particular political image.

Overall, the described practices reveal a media environment heavily influenced by political priorities, where the construction of a favourable and authoritative image of the leader takes precedence over the diverse and critical portrayal of news. This strategy not only shapes public perception but also delineates boundaries of journalistic practice in environments with significant political oversight and control.

The concept of the 'West' in Russian media discourse is crucial for understanding Russia's global positioning. Historically used in Soviet press and currently in Russian media, the term 'West' encompasses English-speaking countries and European nations, often portrayed as adversaries to Russia (Ringmar 2002). This binary framing underscores the geopolitical narratives propagated by Russian media and politicians, shaping public understanding of Russia's place in the world.

The concept of the 'West' as a collective antagonist in Russian political discourse, particularly as articulated by Vladimir Putin, warrants a nuanced analysis. According to Feklyunina (2008) and Bugle (2016), Putin frequently employs the term 'West' to signify a broad alliance of countries perceived as adversaries of Russia. This generalisation amalgamates diverse nations like Germany, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Australia, and the United States into a singular entity. The usage of 'West' in over 10 million articles in the Russian segment of the internet, with an annual recurrence of approximately 10,000 times in discussions about Russia's global position, indicates a deliberate narrative strategy. Interviewee 18 from independent media elucidates this tactic:

'The enemy is, of course, the collective 'West.' Not Germany or France, the WEST. It's shameful to fight and lose a battle against only one country. It's not

shameful against the entire West. It's a worthy rival. That's why this term is encouraged in mass media and Putin propels it all the time. Not a single enemy, but one big enemy – the West.' (Interviewee 18, 2022)

This perspective highlights the strategic use of the term 'West' as a rhetorical device to create a formidable, unified adversary, rather than focusing on individual nations.

This denomination is not a product of ignorance or disinterest in global affairs but a calculated manoeuvre to homogenise and depersonalise Russia's perceived opponents. It diminishes the distinctiveness of these nations, emphasising instead a shared antagonism towards Russia. This narrative serves as a tool to explain various domestic and foreign policy challenges faced by Russia. Putin frequently invokes the 'West' to account for Russian economic struggles, foreign policy setbacks, and as a means to delegitimise the Russian opposition, which is portrayed as being financed by the West with intentions to destabilise Russia and undermine Putin personally (Putin 2021).

In this context, Russia's foreign policy actions, such as its involvement in Syria, are framed as efforts to counteract the West's purported agenda to destabilise the region. This framing is integral to understanding the geopolitical narrative constructed by the Russian state, where the 'West' is not only a geopolitical opponent but also a conceptual tool used to consolidate internal political support and justify Russia's international stance. In the narrative constructed by the Russian media, as observed by Putin and other political figures, the West is often depicted as the antagonist responsible for various adversities affecting Russia and other nations (Rumer and Stent 2009). This portrayal serves to position Russia not only as a self-protector but also as a guardian for countries perceived as vulnerable, such as Syria. The media

frequently singles out specific Western nations like Germany, the United States, or the United Kingdom, highlighting their actions — be it refusing oil pipeline projects, imposing sanctions, or expressing discontent over espionage activities — as examples of targeted hostility towards Russia. However, even in these specific instances, the overarching narrative of a unified Western agenda against Russia persists, suggesting a broad and coordinated effort to destabilise the country.

This discourse creates a mythologised image of the West as a formidable adversary, against which Russia is depicted as an equal, if not superior, contender. By framing the conflict as Russia versus the collective West, rather than individual nations, the Russian media amplifies the perception of Russia's global power and influence. This strategy is particularly evident when contrasting Russia's stance against smaller, allegedly weaker nations. The Russian political and media narrative often portrays these countries, especially the Baltic states, as aggressors or threats, despite their relatively smaller size and influence (Schnauffer 2017; Snyder 2018).

This approach serves a dual purpose in Russian foreign policy and domestic political rhetoric. First, it justifies Russia's aggressive stance towards smaller neighbouring countries by framing these actions as a response to Western provocation or as part of a larger geopolitical struggle. Second, it provides a convenient explanation for any internal shortcomings or failures, attributing them to external pressures from the West rather than to domestic policy flaws or governance issues.

The portrayal of Baltic countries in Russian media and political rhetoric, as analysed by Ekmanis (2020), reflects a broader strategy in Russia's foreign policy narratives. The

consistent framing of conflicts with Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania not as bilateral issues, but as part of a larger confrontation with the West, is a key element of this approach. Russian media narratives routinely deflect any direct tension with these nations, instead positioning Russia in opposition to a generalised 'West.' This rhetoric suggests that any challenges or disagreements with these countries are, in fact, orchestrated by Western powers, reinforcing the perception of an overarching struggle against Western influence.

Similarly, in the context of the Syrian war, Russian media, and official discourse, as observed by Wilhelmsen (2019), tend to generalise the opposition as being supported by an undefined 'West' rather than identifying specific countries. This homogenisation serves to simplify the narrative, casting the situation as a binary conflict between Russia and the West, rather than acknowledging the complexities of individual national involvements. Such framing supports the broader Russian foreign policy narrative of standing against Western hegemony, portraying Russia as a singular entity in a geopolitical struggle against a collective adversary.

This deliberate narrative strategy not only shapes domestic perceptions of international relations but also seeks to project a specific image of Russia on the global stage. By framing conflicts in terms of a larger struggle against the West, Russia positions itself as a key player in global geopolitics, countering Western influence and asserting its own power and independence.

2.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has introduced key theoretical frameworks, such as agenda-setting, framing, and propaganda, to dissect the complex role of media in the context of conflicts, with

a particular focus on the Russian media landscape. Through the exploration of seminal works and scholarly debates, we have delved into the intricate ways media influences public perception and policy, especially in authoritarian regimes. The unique position of Russian media, as both a tool for state propaganda and a participant in global media ecosystems, has been highlighted, offering insights into the mechanics of information control and narrative shaping in conflict situations.

The discussions have underscored the ethical dilemmas of conflict reporting, the strategic use of media in hybrid warfare, and the significant challenges faced by journalists and media organisations in maintaining integrity while navigating political pressures. These scholarly debates illuminate the critical role of media in shaping the realities of conflict, offering a nuanced understanding of its power and limitations.

The insights gained from the theoretical framework and literature review are foundational for the empirical research that follows. They not only enrich our comprehension of the complexities involved in Russian media reporting on international conflicts but also inform the methodological approach detailed in the next chapter. By establishing a solid theoretical base, this research is positioned to critically examine the specific strategies employed by Russian media in the portrayal of the Syrian war, thereby contributing to the broader academic discourse on media, conflict, and international relations. Transitioning to the methodology, the next chapter will detail how these theoretical insights guide the empirical investigation, linking theory to practise in the pursuit of understanding Russian media's role in contemporary conflicts.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Chapter Topic and Objectives

In this chapter we examine the methodologies employed to explore the portrayal of the Syrian war in Russian media, with a particular focus on journalistic practices and media framing. At the heart of methodological approach are in-depth interviews, designated as the primary data source due to their potential to yield nuanced insights into the cognitive and operational realms of journalism. These interviews are complemented by selective media content analysis which serves to broaden the context and support the findings derived from the interviews. The objectives:

1. **Selection of Methods:** To justify the primary use of interviews and the supplementary role of media content analysis. This section will detail why interviews are preferred over other methods for capturing first-hand insights from media practitioners about their experiences and strategies during the Syrian war.
2. **Methodological Rigour and Ethical Considerations:** To outline the rigorous processes involved in the selection and execution of methods, ensuring the reliability and credibility of findings. This includes a detailed discussion on the recruitment of participants, the development of the interview guide, and the ethical safeguards in place to protect participant confidentiality and ensure data integrity.
3. **Examination of Media Content as Supplementary Data:** To describe how media content analysis provides additional layers of understanding by tracing key events and revealing broader narrative structures that influence public perception and international policy.

Through this methodological exploration, the chapter aims to enhance the understanding of how Russian media narratives about the Syrian war are constructed and propagated. By integrating primary interviews with supplementary media content analysis, the research adopts

a comprehensive approach that allows for a deeper analysis of the interplay between media strategies and their impact on public discourse. This structured approach will ensure transparency and accountability throughout the research process, building a robust base for the subsequent findings and conclusions.

3.2 Research Design and Methodological Approach

This thesis scrutinises Russian media's portrayal of the Syrian war, particularly emphasising the mechanisms used to disseminate state-endorsed views to the Russian public. To navigate the complexity of this inquiry, the research employs a mixed-methods approach, prioritising interviews with media professionals as the main method, supplemented by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000) and content analysis informed by framing theory (Chong and Druckman 2007).

Interviews with journalists, editors, and media managers form the cornerstone of the study, offering direct insights into the operational and cognitive processes behind media framing and narrative construction. These discussions illuminate how professionals in Russian media navigate and possibly perpetuate state-driven narratives about the Syrian conflict. The candid nature of the interviews allows for an exploration of both individual and collective justifications for specific portrayal tactics, providing a rich primary dataset that reflects diverse perspectives and experiences.

To complement and enrich the insights gained from interviews, the study engages CDA as a secondary method. CDA, an interdisciplinary approach integrating linguistic, social, and critical theory, is adept at revealing the subtle and overt influences of language in shaping

societal power dynamics. By analysing texts such as news articles, speeches, and other media content, this method helps unearth linguistic patterns that reinforce societal realities and perpetuate power relations.

The analysis, therefore, operates at multiple levels:

- **Micro-level:** Examination of specific words and phrases to identify linguistic tactics used in media representation.
- **Meso-level:** Focus on recurring discourse patterns and themes that suggest systematic framing strategies.
- **Macro-level:** Contextualisation within broader socio-political discourses, which enhances understanding of the strategic positioning of media narratives.

The integrated use of interviews and CDA provides a comprehensive view of how narratives about the Syrian war are constructed and manipulated in Russian media. It allows the study not only to trace the linguistic markers of influence but also to connect these markers to the authentic voices within the media industry. This methodological synergy ensures a robust analysis of the portrayal of the Syrian war, reflecting both the micro-level influences of language and the macro-level impacts of societal structures and political contexts. This approach enables a robust and critical examination of the complex interplay between media, language, and power in the context of the Syrian war.

The primary data crucial to this research is derived from in-depth interviews with media professionals. These interviews are pivotal for understanding the personal, editorial, and organisational influences on journalists and media outputs during the coverage of the Syrian conflict. By integrating empirical insights from these interviews, the research deeply

investigates the behavioural dynamics crucial to comprehending Russian media operations (Burrett 2010; Pomerantsev 2014).

Supplementing these primary insights, the study also analyses a substantial corpus of media articles, (including written, video, and audio formats) published in Russia between September 2015 and February 2022. The articles were divided into two groups – coming from government-controlled or independent media sources. This extensive collection comprises 37,003 articles from government-controlled outlets and 8,151 from independent media sources. The selection and analysis of these articles support the findings from the interviews, offering a broader context and helping trace key events and shifts in the conflict's portrayal.

Acknowledging the limitations of the chosen methods is crucial for the integrity and robustness of this research. When employing CDA to scrutinise the Russian media coverage of the Syrian war, several constraints potentially affect the research's validity and reliability. These include:

Selection Bias: CDA's reliance on the availability and accessibility of texts for analysis might result in a selection that is not fully representative of the broader media landscape or the perspectives of the Russian populace. This selection bias challenges the comprehensiveness of the analysis, potentially skewing the interpretation of media coverage.

Limited Data: The inherent focus of CDA on text and discourse analysis might overlook other pivotal elements influencing the construction of power dynamics in the Russian media's portrayal of the Syrian war. Elements such as political pressure, media ownership, and economic influences are significant yet remain unaddressed by this methodological approach.

Complexity of the Russian Media Landscape: The intricate nature of Russia's media environment, characterised by a blend of state-controlled and privately-owned outlets with varied political and ideological stances, adds a layer of complexity to the analysis. This complexity poses a challenge to distilling a clear understanding of media narratives and biases.

A thorough understanding of the Russian media's structure is integral to this analysis. As reflected in the literature review, this complexity is similar to media landscapes in other nations but comes with uniquely Russian characteristics defined by the degree of government involvement. According to Malinina *et al.* (2015), Russian media can be categorised into three types:

1. Media under direct government control: These include entities owned by the government or subsidiaries of government-owned companies.
2. Ostensibly independent media: Although formally independent, these outlets are owned by oligarchs closely linked to President Putin, who owe their fortunes to his regime. While they lack official government ties, their editorial independence is often compromised by these connections.
3. Fully independent media: These are either self-financed or supported by businessmen unaffiliated with Vladimir Putin. Some may even oppose the regime actively, as highlighted by Simons (2010; 2014).

By correlating insights from direct interviews with the analysis of media content and understanding of media structure, this study provides a comprehensive view of the mechanisms through which Russian media influences public perception and state narratives concerning the Syrian war.

In this research, secondary data collection, particularly poll data from Russia, plays a supportive role, offering insights into public opinion trends that complement the primary interview data. Although poll data is not the primary source of information due to its potential biases, it is invaluable for understanding public sentiment, especially during critical periods such as the Syrian war.

The main mass polling organisations in Russia are outlined below, each with its implications for data reliability:

1. **VCIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Centre):** As the largest polling organisation in Russia, VCIOM is a joint-stock company wholly owned by the Russian government. The government ownership raises concerns about potential influence on its operations and data reliability (ТАСС 2017; VCIOM 2021; Семеркин and Алёнин 2019).
2. **Public Opinion Foundation (POF):** Originally a subsidiary of VCIOM, POF now functions as an NGO. Despite its non-governmental status, its primary client is the presidential administration, which may suggest indirect government control over its operations and outputs (ФОМ 2021; Семеркин and Алёнин 2019).
3. **Levada Analytical Centre:** Recognised for its independence, this NGO is not directly affiliated with the government. However, its designation as a 'Foreign Agent' due to receiving foreign funding complicates its status and might influence public perception of its neutrality (Levada 2021).

While two of these organisations are influenced by government affiliations, even independent sources like Levada Center reveal significant shifts in public opinion, evidenced by changes in President Putin's trust ratings during the Syrian war. These fluctuations, although

the specific numbers may be questioned, provide valuable context for analysis. For example, tracking trends in Putin's approval ratings in response to major events offers insights into public reactions under restricted conditions of media and polling transparency (Levada 2020; Росбалт 2020).

This study also incorporates analyses of transcripts from major Russian radio and television programs, which are converted into textual formats for detailed examination. This methodology allows for a comprehensive understanding of how media portrayal and public opinion during the Syrian war might align or diverge, adding depth to the analysis initiated through primary interviews and reinforced by secondary data on public sentiment.

The timeframe from September 2015, marking Russia's involvement in the Syrian war, to February 2022, when Russia escalated its presence in Ukraine, is critically analysed in this study. This period is significant as it captures the transition of media focus from the Syrian to the Ukrainian conflict. Comprehensive content analysis of media reports was performed not just to gather quantitative data but to unravel the nuanced language used to influence public perceptions during the war. This involved pinpointing specific words, phrases, and themes directly tied to the timeline and significant events of the conflict for in-depth examination.

This research identifies the emergence or disappearance of certain linguistic expressions within both government-controlled and independent media sources, utilising an inductive empirical approach. This method enabled the effective collation and examination of primary data, facilitating insights into causal relationships and public perceptions — central elements of this analysis. A key focus is to determine the effectiveness and mechanics of media portrayals from the perspective of Russian media consumers.

The research critically assesses the tonality utilised by government-affiliated media in televised and radio broadcasts. While communication specialists might better ascertain the exact impact of news anchors' tones on audience sentiment, this investigation highlights how report deliveries by Russian media entities, possibly driven by governmental strategy, aimed to shape public mood.

Merely analysing raw data would not suffice for a comprehensive understanding of the media's role in significant events such as the Syrian war. Thus, this study integrates contextual analysis, examining the frequency and implications of specific terms within news stories. For example, the prevalent use of 'terrorist' instead of 'freedom fighter' suggests a clear narrative bias. A historical lens is crucial for grasping the strategies media undertook before and during the Syrian conflict and their coverage implications.

The dissertation enriches its analysis through 39 interview excerpts with professionals from both state-controlled and independent Russian media organisations. These interviews are essential for uncovering the implicit rules of media coverage, enhanced by first-hand insights. Conducted through various platforms including in-person, Zoom, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Signal, they navigate the complexities introduced by Russian legislation against 'fake news.' Although all interview data is encrypted and participants are pseudonymised to ensure their safety amid stringent laws, these discussions are invaluable for understanding the internal dynamics during the Syrian war coverage.

The research acknowledges inherent limitations in its methodologies:

- **Subjectivity in Interviews:** While invaluable, interviews may carry biases as participants might present themselves favourably, impacting the objectivity of the findings.
- **Selection Bias:** CDA relies on available texts, which may not fully represent the broader media landscape or Russian public perspectives. This can skew interpretations.
- **Limited Data Scope:** CDA's focus on textual analysis could overlook other critical factors like political pressures, media ownership, and economic ties that influence media portrayal.
- **Complex Media Environment:** The multifaceted Russian media landscape poses challenges in clearly delineating narratives and biases.

By critically evaluating these methodologies and their potential biases, this study retains its integrity and contributes robust findings to the discourse on media's role in conflict settings.

Anonymity plays a crucial role in the methodological approach, especially when dealing with sensitive topics such as conflict reporting. Recognised widely for its potential to encourage frankness among participants, anonymity is pivotal in contexts involving sensitive, controversial, or potentially dangerous topics. Sieber and Tolich (2012) stress the importance of confidentiality in social research, noting its effectiveness in protecting participants. By ensuring anonymity, we mitigate risks associated with disclosing sensitive or controversial opinions, thus facilitating a more genuine and unrestrained dialogue. Participants are likely to share insights or perspectives that they might otherwise withhold, fearing professional repercussions or social stigma. This is especially relevant in the context of this study, where discussions on media strategies in conflict zones may involve political sensitivities or ethical dilemmas.

The shield of anonymity, while facilitating openness, also poses significant challenges. A notable concern is the presence of social desirability bias. This bias refers to the tendency of participants to alter their responses to conform to perceived social norms, even when their identities are protected. As discussed by Paulhus (1984), this inclination can distort the authenticity of data, adding a layer of complexity to its analysis and interpretation. This issue is particularly relevant to interview responses, where participants, despite anonymity, may opt for answers they consider more socially acceptable or less contentious. This bias can undermine the integrity of the data, potentially leading to underreporting of controversial opinions or overreporting of socially endorsed views.

The dual-edged nature of anonymity in qualitative interviews is evident. On one hand, it acts as a critical facilitator of open discussion, enabling the collection of data that might otherwise be inaccessible due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter. On the other hand, it requires a heightened awareness of the potential biases it introduces, particularly social desirability bias. This nuanced understanding of anonymity informs the analytical framework, guiding interpretation of data. It compels to navigate participant responses critically, ensuring that the insights derived are both authentic and reflective of the intricate realities of media reporting in conflict zones.

Self-presentation and social desirability bias, critical in understanding responses in interviews, are well-explored in social psychology. Erving Goffman's theory of self-presentation likens social interaction to a theatrical performance where individuals curate their image to be positively received (Goffman 1959). Similarly, Crowne and Marlowe (1960) define social desirability bias as the inclination to provide responses thought to be favourably viewed by others. To mitigate these biases, employing strategies such as indirect questioning

and reinforcing the confidentiality of the interview process is crucial. These methods, as suggested by Fisher (1993), are imperative for obtaining authentic and accurate responses from participants. These considerations are essential for interpreting the nuances of participant responses and for analysing data with an awareness of these psychological dynamics.

While qualitative interviews are a cornerstone of the methodological framework, we must remain vigilant. The subjectivity permitted by anonymity can significantly influence data interpretation, potentially reflecting societal norms more than genuine beliefs or experiences. This realisation necessitates a careful and critical approach to data collection and analysis to ensure that findings authentically represent the complex phenomena we aim to understand. To ensure the integrity of this research process and the reliability of its outcomes, several methodological strategies are pivotal. These strategies help directly address the challenges posed by subjectivity and bias in qualitative research:

Triangulation

Triangulation involves utilising multiple data sources, analytical methods, or theories to cross-verify data. This practice is integral to validating findings by establishing congruence among disparate data points, thus enhancing both validity and depth of the research (Maxwell 2004; 2008; 2022; Denzin 2012). By comparing and contrasting different data sources or theoretical perspectives, researchers can uncover consistencies and discrepancies, providing a more comprehensive understanding and helping circumvent biases inherent in any single approach.

Member Checking and Reflexivity

Member checking is a crucial step in qualitative research where findings are presented back to participants for validation. This process ensures that the researcher's interpretations accurately

reflect the participants' intentions and statements (Creswell and Miller 2000). It not only reinforces the data's reliability but also empowers participants by including them in the validation process.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity involves researchers engaging in critical self-reflection to recognize and mitigate their own biases. This self-aware approach is essential for maintaining objectivity and integrity throughout the analysis (Finlay 2002). Reflexive journaling is particularly recommended to foster transparency and enhance personal understanding of one's influence on the research.

Ethical Considerations and Interview Design

Adhering to ethical guidelines is paramount, especially when leveraging the potentially double-edged sword of anonymity in interviews. Anonymity can facilitate the revelation of sensitive or controversial insights by assuring participants of confidentiality, as highlighted in studies such as those by Lee (1993) on sensitive topics. However, it may also lead respondents to offer biased or overly curated responses due to perceived immunity from accountability.

To navigate these complexities, researcher must employ rigorous interview question design. Neutral, open-ended questions crafted as recommended by Rubin and Bellamy (2012) avoid leading participants toward socially desirable answers, thus promoting more authentic dialogues.

The nuanced role of anonymity in qualitative interviews presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, it is instrumental in uncovering deep, often concealed, insights. On the other, it requires careful handling to prevent the introduction of bias, where respondents

might feel shielded enough to skew their responses. This delicate balance necessitates a mindful approach, leveraging the advantages of anonymity while remaining vigilant against its potential pitfalls.

Employing a combination of triangulation, member checking, reflexivity, ethical adherence, and careful interview design forms a robust framework for addressing potential biases. These methodologies ensure the collection of data that is not only deep and comprehensive but also reliable and reflective of genuine participant experiences and perspectives. This structured approach underscores the commitment of this research to methodological rigour, essential for navigating the complex dynamics of qualitative data analysis in sensitive research areas like conflict reporting.

3.3 Recruitment and Interview Protocols

In qualitative research, particularly when examining complex subjects like Russian media's coverage of international conflicts, the meticulous selection of participants and the establishment of robust interview protocols are foundational. This holds especially true for exploring the dynamics of media coverage during events such as the Syrian war. Purposeful recruitment targeted at individuals with direct experience or specialised knowledge is critical for gathering data that is not only rich and nuanced but also informed by first-hand insights.

The recruitment process serves as more than just a method for participant selection; it's a strategic exploration into the narrative techniques and political as well as ethical dynamics employed by Russian media. This understanding is crucial for comprehending the impact of these narratives on public perception and policy. To maintain a high standard of data collection,

structured interview protocols are pivotal. These protocols ensure consistency and reliability, adapting to the varying experiences and viewpoints of participants, thus allowing for the examination of complex topics while maintaining focus and coherence during interviews.

Patton's (2014) concept of purposive sampling is instrumental in this research, emphasising the selection of information-rich cases that are particularly relevant to the purpose of the study. Furthermore, the interview methodology is shaped by the principles set out by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), which provide a robust framework for exploring participants' experiences and viewpoints in depth. Ethical considerations in recruitment and interviewing, as outlined by Sieber and Tolich (2013), uphold the research's commitment to respecting the dignity, privacy, and autonomy of participants, ensuring informed consent and ethical integrity throughout the process.

In order to prevent bias, the decision was made to not use participants the researcher has personal relationships with. To identify potential participants, the study employed a strategic approach focusing on platforms, networks, and communities central to the field of journalism in Russia. This included outreach through professional journalism networks, engagement on relevant social media platforms. This multifaceted recruitment strategy, underpinned by the principles of purposive sampling, targeted the selection of individuals deeply embedded within the Russian media ecosystem and experienced in conflict reporting. Noy (2008) underscores the significance of navigating the complexities of sampling from specialised populations, a consideration that was meticulously integrated into this recruitment strategy.

The criteria for participant selection were carefully crafted to include individuals with substantial relevance to the study's focus. All participants were in charge of covering the war as correspondents/editors/media managers. Key factors considered included years of journalistic experience, roles within media organisations, and direct involvement in covering international conflicts, especially the Syrian war. This approach, following Creswell and Poth (2016), aimed to identify information-rich cases that could contribute depth and detail to the study, vital for an in-depth qualitative exploration of media practices and policies.

By integrating these methodological and ethical considerations, the research aspires to construct a comprehensive understanding of how Russian media navigates the intricate landscape of war coverage. This approach not only aligns with the overarching goals of the study but also sets a precedent for methodological rigour and ethical responsibility in qualitative research on media and conflict.

Obtaining informed consent was rigorously carried out to ensure that all participants were fully aware of the study's objectives, the intended use of the data, and their rights within the research context. Ethical adherence was paramount, guided by the principles set forth by the American Psychological Association and the British Psychological Society. Participants were made aware of voluntary nature of their involvement, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures in place to protect their anonymity and personal data. This process demonstrated unwavering commitment to ethical research practices, ensuring that participants' contributions were secured and respected throughout the study. Preprofessional media actors themselves, all participants were fully equipped to judge the measures put together to protect their anonymity and source materials as well as the interview style and implementation. All participants gave their consent to use the data and were satisfied with the process.

This comprehensive approach to recruitment and interviewing was purposely designed not just to align with established research norms but also to aptly tackle the unique challenges posed by investigating media practices within authoritarian regimes. Such an approach provided a robust and ethically sound foundation crucial for examining the complex dynamics of Russian media in the context of conflict reporting.

To ensure thoroughness and consistency in the interview process, significant preparation was undertaken for both the interviewer and the interviewees. An interview guide, anchored in the foundational principles of qualitative research as outlined by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), was developed. This guide served as an essential tool to steer the interviews, promoting consistency, and ensuring that each session delved deep into pertinent issues. Each interview took around two hours with 30 minute to an hour long debrief to give the participants an opportunity to add/retract. The interviews included a series of open-ended questions crafted to draw out rich, detailed responses, thereby facilitating a robust understanding of the participants' views on the Russian media's portrayal of the Syrian war.

Efforts were made to choose appropriate locations for in-person interviews that offered privacy, comfort, and minimal distractions, helping participants to express themselves freely and without reservation. Some interviews were conducted during media conferences and gatherings; therefore, the exact dates of interviews are hidden to ensure full anonymity. For online interviews, technical checks were conducted in advance to resolve any issues with connectivity or software functionality, ensuring uninterrupted execution of the interview process.

Participants were thoroughly briefed on the interview's scope, purpose, and relevance to the broader aims of the research project, following the approach advocated by Rubin and Bellamy (2012). The briefing covered the topics to be discussed, the estimated duration of the interview, and reassurances about confidentiality and anonymity. This preparatory stage was pivotal in building trust and rapport, which encouraged candid and complete participation from the interviewees.

Given the exploratory nature of this research, a semi-structured interview format was chosen. This format allowed for flexibility in exploring emerging topics in-depth, while still steering the discussions towards the research objectives. Interviews were primarily conducted over Zoom and Skype, accommodating the geographical spread of participants, and overcoming logistical challenges associated with face-to-face meetings (Bryman 2016). This method allows for capturing nuanced insights into participants' experiences and viewpoints effectively.

The design of interview questions is a key step in qualitative research, crucial for guiding discussions directly connected to the study's objectives. Our development process was grounded in a comprehensive literature review of Russian media and conflict reporting, incorporating both theoretical frameworks and empirical findings from previous studies. Following Patton's (2014) recommendations, questions were open-ended yet focused, aimed at eliciting rich, detailed responses that directly engage with the research questions.

A pilot testing phase was essential for refining these questions. A small cohort of participants was selected to interact with the initial set of questions, allowing the collection of valuable feedback on their clarity and effectiveness. This iterative process of adjustment, in

line with Patton's (2014) guidance, ensured that the questions were optimised to probe deeply while being comprehensible and capable of retrieving the desired information. This fine-tuning enhanced both the reliability and validity of interview protocol, aligning it closely with the overarching aims of the study.

Ethical integrity was prioritised throughout the interview process. Drawing on the frameworks provided by Sieber and Tolich (2013), informed verbal consent from all participants was obtained. This included detailed discussions about the research's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the robust measures in place to protect their anonymity and confidentiality. The interviews were conducted in a manner that respected each participant's dignity, rights, and welfare.

To further uphold ethical standards, the protocol was implemented that allowed participants to withdraw from the study anytime or skip questions they preferred not to answer. These practices reflect the ethical codes of professional bodies in media and conflict research, underscoring commitment to respectful and sensitive engagement with all participants.

The recruitment of interviewees was strategically planned to encapsulate a diverse array of perspectives on the Russian media's portrayal of the Syrian war. Contacts were approached with an informative overview of the study, highlighting its purpose and significance, and what their participation would entail.

Scheduling was streamlined using tools like Doodle Polls, which allowed participants to choose interview times that suited them, factoring in different time zones, especially for

those in Russia. This thoughtful organisation significantly boosted participation willingness and efficiency.

Interviews began with a structured introduction to reiterate the study's objectives, reaffirm the voluntary nature of participation, and reconfirm the confidentiality and anonymity promised to all participants. To establish rapport and set a conducive atmosphere for open dialogue, an informal conversation based on the principles laid out by James Spradley and Irving Seidman (Spradley 1979) was initiated. This preliminary engagement was crucial in creating a relaxed environment that encouraged candid discussions.

The recording of interviews was conducted with explicit consent, using digital audio devices for in-person interactions and built-in recording functions on virtual platforms. A semi-structured interview guide steered the collection of data, allowing flexibility in responses while ensuring comprehensive coverage of topics pertinent to the Russian media's portrayal of the Syrian war.

To keep the interviews focused yet productive, they were anchored around key themes identified from the literature review, with scope provided to delve into emergent topics that enhanced the richness of the data. Deviations from the interview guide were allowed if they contributed valuable insights, with the interviewer steering the discussion back to align with the primary research questions. This strategy ensured a thorough exploration of the predefined topics while accommodating the discovery of new, valuable perspectives.

After each interview, a debriefing session was offered to clarify any participant queries about the study and to allow them to add additional comments or retract any previously shared

information they preferred to keep confidential. The process of transcribing interviews began immediately, adhering to intelligent verbatim transcription protocols. This method captures the essence of the spoken word while omitting redundant filler words and non-verbal cues, striking a balance between the accuracy of the data and the readability of transcripts.

Throughout the transcription and subsequent analysis stages, confidentiality and data integrity were maintained scrupulously. Measures included anonymising transcripts by replacing names and potentially identifying details with pseudonyms or generic descriptors. All data was stored on encrypted drives, accessible solely to the researcher, ensuring compliance with ethical standards for handling sensitive information, as recommended by Michelle O'Reilly and Nicola Parker.

These post-interview procedures were instrumental in preserving participant trust and safety, as well as ensuring the reliability and validity of the data collected. The rigorous adherence to these processes laid a strong foundation for the subsequent analysis, which was crucial for maintaining the integrity of our research findings.

Research involving human participants inevitably encounters unexpected challenges, which require a high degree of flexibility and an unwavering commitment to ethical responsibility to resolve. Recognising and adeptly addressing these challenges is fundamental to preserving the overall integrity of the research process. This commitment ensures that the study adheres to the highest standards of academic and ethical rigour, providing valuable insights into the complex dynamics of media coverage in conflict zones.

Recruiting participants for this study presented several challenges, primarily due to the politically sensitive nature of the topic- Russian media's portrayal of the Syrian war. Some potential participants were hesitant to engage, fearing repercussions or breaches of confidentiality. Bryman (2016) highlights similar challenges in politically sensitive research, emphasising the critical role of transparent communication and reassurance about robust data protection measures. Additionally, logistical issues such as scheduling conflicts and accessing certain groups within the media industry were significant barriers to comprehensive participant recruitment.

The interview phase also brought its own set of challenges. Technical issues with recording equipment and online platforms occasionally compromised the quality of data collection. Furthermore, the probing nature of some questions led to participant discomfort - a common issue in qualitative research involving sensitive topics, as noted by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). Keeping the interviews focused was another hurdle, with some participants diverting from the central topics, necessitating navigation to maintain the relevance and depth of the discussion.

In response to these challenges, methodological adjustments were crucial. To improve recruitment outcomes, strategies were broadened to include more extensive outreach through professional networks, accompanied by clearer communication about the study's objectives and the stringent confidentiality safeguards in place. Modifications to the interview protocols were also made, allowing for greater flexibility in the phrasing and sequencing of questions to better accommodate participant comfort levels, while still preserving data integrity. Additionally, the use of backup recording devices was implemented to mitigate risks associated with technical failures.

These methodological adaptations, rooted in ethical considerations, aimed to enhance participant engagement, and ensure the reliability of the data collected. The decision to navigate these challenges with flexibility and ethical mindfulness was crucial to the success of this research, enriching the quality and depth of the data and supporting a more comprehensive analysis of Russian media practices.

The diversity of participants, which included frontline reporters, editors, and media analysts, both from government-controlled and independent media outlets significantly enriched the data collection process, providing a broad spectrum of insights into the Russian media landscape during the Syrian war. This variety was crucial for painting a comprehensive picture of the media environment and ensuring the findings reflected a wide range of experiences and perspectives.

The deliberate inclusion of media professionals from both independent and government-aligned organisations was a strategic choice designed to capture the full gamut of journalistic practices and viewpoints. By integrating voices from varied media affiliations, the study fostered a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics shaping media discourse in Russia. This approach not only recognised the heterogeneity of the Russian media environment but also underscored the importance of embracing diversity in scholarly inquiry to elicit robust analyses and insights.

The stringent adherence to ethical standards throughout the recruitment and interviewing processes bolstered the integrity and credibility of the research. These efforts ensured that the study's conclusions were firmly grounded in ethically gathered, high-quality

data. The meticulous design and execution of recruitment and interview protocols have been foundational in navigating the challenges inherent in research involving human participants, particularly in settings marked by tight control and suspicion. This diligence has been instrumental in laying a solid foundation for the subsequent analysis and conclusions, affirming the significance of ethical and rigorous qualitative research methods in exploring complex topics such as media strategies in conflict reporting.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

In academic research, ethical considerations form a bedrock, ensuring not only the integrity of the study but also safeguarding participants' rights and well-being. Beyond complying with regulatory standards, these considerations are fundamental in fostering trust between researchers and participants, which is crucial for the validity and broader acceptance of research findings.

The ethical framework for this study is constructed around core principles of autonomy, beneficence, justice, and integrity, as delineated in seminal ethical guidelines such as the Belmont Report (US Department of Health and Human Services 2013) and the Declaration of Helsinki (Shrestha and Dunn 2019). These principles guide the conduct of ethical research:

- Autonomy involves respecting participants' rights to make informed decisions about their involvement.
- Beneficence directs the research to do no harm and maximise potential benefits.
- Justice ensures the fair distribution of both benefits and burdens of the research.
- Integrity mandates honesty and accuracy in all research endeavours.

Throughout the study - from design through to execution and analysis - these ethical principles were stringently applied. Measures such as informed consent, confidentiality assurances, and minimising potential harm were integral. The design was carefully planned to treat all participants equitably and to handle reporting responsibly, ensuring no exacerbation of existing conflicts or dissemination of misinformation.

Guided by the American Psychological Association's Ethics Code and the guidelines for research involving human subjects, the study diligently complied with ethical norms, especially given the sensitive geopolitical context and the involvement of media professionals. This adherence was crucial not only for ethical compliance but also for respecting the rights and dignity of all participants.

The practical application of these ethical principles was evident in the methodological rigour and transparent reporting of findings. Protocols were developed to address ethical dilemmas, such as potential psychological distress from discussing sensitive topics, allowing participants to withdraw without penalty. This facilitation underscores the commitment to beneficence and autonomy, prioritising participant welfare throughout the research.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the potential risks associated with participation, particularly within the context of Russian media and journalism, informed consent was obtained verbally. This strategy was deliberately chosen to avoid creating any documentation that could link participants to the study, thus enhancing the safety and security of participants by maintaining strict confidentiality and anonymity. This decision reflects a deep commitment to prioritising the well-being and protection of participants, recognising the

potential vulnerabilities and legal repercussions they might face by participating in such research.

The ethical framework of this research is not just a procedural necessity but a deeply ingrained aspect of the study's execution, reflecting a profound commitment to upholding the highest standards of research integrity and respect for human dignity. This comprehensive and thoughtful approach ensures that the research not only adheres to the highest ethical standards but also contributes valuable, ethically gathered insights into the complex dynamics of media portrayal in conflict zones.

Implementation of Anonymity and Confidentiality Measures:

1. **Data Anonymization:** All identifiable information was removed from the collected data. Pseudonyms were used where necessary to further ensure participant privacy.
2. **Secure Data Storage:** Data was stored on encrypted equipment with strict access control. These preventive measures protect against unauthorised access and maintain confidentiality throughout and beyond the study's duration.
3. **End-of-study Data Handling:** Plans for the secure destruction of sensitive data post-study were established to prevent any potential future compromise.

Given the heightened risk of data breaches in the digital age, the research incorporated rigorous security protocols, including regular audits and the latest cybersecurity measures. All data was stored on air-gap equipment.

Types of Risks Encountered:

- **Psychological Risks:** Exposure to distressing content during the research process.

- **Social Risks:** Potential for professional ostracization or negative social repercussions due to participation.
- **Legal Risks:** Risks arising from discussing or disclosing sensitive information in restrictive political environments.

Strategies for Risk Mitigation:

- **Participant Anonymity:** Ensured to protect against social and legal harms.
- **Secure Communications:** All interviews and correspondences were conducted through encrypted channels to safeguard the identities and information of participants.
- **Continuous Monitoring:** Regular assessments throughout the research process to adapt and reinforce safety measures as necessary.

The framework for these strategies draws from the scholarly work of Israel and Hay (2006) and Iphofen (2009), who emphasize the significance of meticulous ethical planning in sensitive and high-risk research environments.

A thorough benefit-risk analysis is crucial when conducting research into contentious areas like media portrayal of international conflicts. This analysis ensures that the pursuit of knowledge does not impose undue harm on participants, balancing the potential insights gained against the risks involved.

Direct Insights: Enhanced understanding of the strategies employed by Russian media to influence public perceptions and policy during international conflicts. **Indirect Benefits:** Contributions to media studies scholarship and potentially informing policy formulation

through a deeper understanding of framing and media influence on public opinion, using theoretical frameworks from scholars like Entman (1993) and Hallin (2008).

This approach to ethical considerations, from ensuring anonymity and confidentiality to conducting a comprehensive risk assessment and benefit-risk analysis, underscores the commitment of this study to uphold the highest standards of research integrity. These measures not only protect participants but also enhance the credibility and impact of the research findings, fostering meaningful contributions to the fields of media studies and conflict reporting.

In exploring the sensitive subject of Russian media's portrayal of the Syrian war, this research acknowledges potential risks such as emotional distress from discussions on conflict, privacy breaches, and social repercussions for participants. Mindful of these challenges, the study integrates robust ethical frameworks to maintain confidentiality and prioritize the well-being of contributors, drawing from key ethical insights by Cohen (2011).

While inherent risks are present, the value of this research in delivering profound societal and scholarly insights into media's role in shaping conflict narratives is substantial. Following ethical principles outlined by Beauchamp and Childress (2019), the study posits that its societal and academic contributions justify the well-managed risks.

Adherence to data protection and privacy is a paramount concern, particularly given the sensitive nature of the information handled. This study follows the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) along with other relevant legal frameworks, embodying principles of confidentiality, integrity, and accountability in all data management practices:

Personal Data Handling: Transparent procedures explain the nature and purpose of data collection, adhering to data minimization principles to ensure only essential information is gathered. **Secure Data Storage:** All data is encrypted and stored securely. Physical copies are kept in securely locked locations. **Data Retention and Disposal:** Data is retained only as long as necessary for research purposes, with strict protocols in place for secure disposal including the deletion of electronic files to prevent any privacy breaches.

Obtaining ethical approval involved a detailed application to the University of Kent ethics committee, which included a comprehensive risk assessment and mitigation strategy tailored to the specifics of engaging with media professionals.

This research treads carefully within the realms of conflict reporting, political oppression, and media narratives on violence, ensuring that the complexities of such topics are approached with the highest sensitivity and ethical rigour. By addressing sensitive subjects, including war reporting and media censorship, with meticulous ethical consideration, the study not only contributes valuable insights but also ensures the protection and dignity of all participants. This careful approach helps maintain the integrity of the research and reinforces its value to both academic fields and the broader societal understanding of media influences.

The ethical approach is grounded in the work of renowned scholars such as Dickson-Swift *et al.* (2007), who provide methodologies for conducting qualitative research in sensitive areas, and Lee (1993), who discusses the ethical complexities inherent in researching sensitive subjects. These contributions are crucial in ensuring our methodology adheres to best practices established in the field, enhancing the integrity and credibility of our research findings.

The role of the researcher extends beyond methodological execution to encompass a broader ethical obligation. It ensures that investigations do not compromise participant welfare, the integrity of collected data, or the scientific merit of the findings. Adherence to ethical guidelines, including the Belmont Report and the Declaration of Helsinki, is paramount. These guidelines outline core principles like respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, serving as cornerstones for ethical research.

Understanding and respecting cultural norms and differences are essential, especially when engaging participants from diverse backgrounds. The study integrates culturally appropriate methodologies and communication strategies to respect and value the diversity of participant experiences, enhancing the relevance and applicability of our findings.

By embedding these ethical considerations deeply into the fabric of the research methodology, this study ensured a protective and respectful approach towards participant engagement. This ethical rigour significantly enriched the trust and engagement of participants, which was crucial for eliciting genuine, uninhibited responses. Ultimately, the ethical framework of this study not only reinforced the validity and reliability of the research outcomes but also underscored the importance of integrity and respect in advancing knowledge while safeguarding the well-being of participants and the broader community.

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis forms the cornerstone of this research, facilitating a nuanced examination of complex datasets to derive insights that directly address the research questions. This study

utilises a mixed-methods approach tailored to decode the intricate narratives and strategies employed within Russian media coverage of the Syrian war. The analysis techniques were selected to align with the qualitative nature of the research, guided by a theoretical framework rooted in media studies and propaganda analysis.

Thematic analysis was the technique used, enabling a detailed exploration of themes and patterns in media content. This approach was informed by Braun and Clarke (2006), who emphasize systematic identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns within data. Content analysis supplemented thematic analysis to quantify certain aspects of media narratives, following Krippendorff's (2018) guidelines for quantifying media content.

NVivo software was instrumental in organising, coding, and analysing the qualitative data, facilitating efficient handling and exploration of extensive media datasets. For quantitative data aspects, statistical software, guided by Leavy (2014), supported the analysis, enhancing the rigour and depth of findings.

The analysis process was designed to be systematic and reproducible, ensuring the validity and reliability of the findings. The research's methodological approach draws on foundational works such as Leavy (2014) and Plano Clark (2017) for effectively integrating mixed-methods research practices.

Data Sources and Analysis Integration:

Qualitative Data: Derived from 39 original interviews with Russian journalists, editors, and media managers, providing in-depth perspectives on editorial decisions and

narrative strategies. **Quantitative Data:** Encompassed content analysis of media articles, offering a broad view of media narratives.

These data sources were meticulously integrated, allowing for a balanced exploration of how narratives are crafted and perceived, which informs a multifaceted understanding of the media's role in shaping public opinion and foreign policy.

The study's analytical framework leverages insights from:

- Yin (2009) - Guided the case study approach for analysing media content.
- Field (2013) - Informed the statistical examination of media reporting patterns using SPSS.
- Patrikarakos (2017) and Borshchevskaya (2021) - Provided benchmarks for understanding media strategies in conflict zones, validating the data collection strategies.

The application of these data analysis techniques facilitated an insightful dissection of Russian media strategies, revealing a complex interplay of lexical choices and thematic framings that align with a coordinated media strategy. This research contributes to media studies, especially in contexts of state-led propaganda within authoritarian regimes.

In the context of the Syrian war, a multifaceted and highly complex war that has drawn global attention and intervention, certain pivotal topics have emerged as particularly significant for research and analysis. These topics include the peace talks aimed at resolving the conflict, the emergence of the Wagner Group as a notable private military company, the use of chemical weapons, the perceived withdrawal of Russian forces, and the repeated recapture of Palmyra, a site of both strategic and symbolic importance. Each of these topics provides a unique lens through which the dynamics and the impacts of the Syrian war can be studied and understood.

To conduct a thorough and nuanced analysis of these topics, it is crucial to consider the sources of the news. For this research, news sources were strategically categorised into two main groups: governmental and independent. This division is essential for several reasons.

Governmental sources often include official media outlets controlled or significantly influenced by the state. These sources tend to reflect the official stance and policies of governments, which can be particularly insightful when analysing topics like peace talks or military withdrawals. Such sources might provide an inside view on governmental narratives and strategies, although they might also embody biases by omitting certain facts or presenting information in a way that supports specific political agendas.

On the other hand, independent news sources are crucial for providing a more detached perspective. These sources are generally not affiliated with the state and strive to maintain journalistic independence and integrity. They are invaluable for investigating sensitive issues such as the use of chemical weapons or the activities of mercenary groups like the Wagner Group. Independent sources are more likely to report on human rights violations, opposition views, and other critical viewpoints that governmental sources might overlook or suppress.

By analysing these topics through the dual lenses of governmental and independent news sources, research can achieve a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of the Syrian war. This approach helps mitigate the biases inherent in any single type of source and provides a richer, more diverse narrative of the events. Such a methodological framework is not only beneficial for academic and policy-related research but also essential for creating an informed and nuanced public discourse surrounding the ongoing conflict in Syria.

Furthermore, this approach allows for a detailed comparison and contrast of how different narratives are shaped and propagated through various media channels. It highlights the role of media in conflict zones and the power dynamics involved in the control of information. This nuanced understanding of media influence in the Syrian conflict can lead to better-informed strategies for peacekeeping and conflict resolution, recognising the complexities and multiple perspectives that define modern warfare and geopolitics. Thus, the careful selection and analysis of these pivotal topics, through both governmental and independent news sources, are of utmost importance in comprehending and addressing the multifaceted challenges of the Syrian war.

The proliferation of media has exponentially increased the number of news sources, presenting significant challenges in media monitoring and analysis. To navigate this vast landscape efficiently, FinAllot News Analytics Engine was used as an advanced solution tailored to meet the complexities of modern news analysis. The engine is particularly valuable for research and analytics, where understanding and interpreting a wide range of information accurately is crucial.

Analysing news effectively was challenging due to several factors. Firstly, the sheer volume of available news sources makes it nearly impossible to cover adequately without significant resources. Traditionally, this would require a large team of analysts or the use of costly automated solutions, which might not always provide the depth and breadth of analysis needed. Moreover, many commercial news analytics tools currently in the market fail to deliver

actionable insights, focusing instead on general data aggregation rather than detailed, useful analysis.

FinAllot system addressed these challenges by providing a powerful, multifaceted analytics engine capable of sifting through thousands of news sources. This engine was not just a tool for large-scale data processing; it incorporated sophisticated analytical capabilities designed to add depth to the analysis. These include Topic Detection and Content Analysis, which help in identifying and understanding the main themes and details within large volumes of content.

One of the key features of FinAllot was its ability to find semantically similar news articles. This capability means that the engine can identify different articles that discuss the same event or topic, even if they are from diverse sources. This was particularly useful in understanding how different media might be portraying the same issue, which can be critical for comprehensive media analysis and research.

In addition to thematic analysis, FinAllot excelled in entity recognition and disambiguation. The engine identified and extracted various entities, such as words or phrases that are mentioned in the news articles. Each of these entities is then linked to a unique identifier, which clarifies what the phrase is referring to, thus eliminating confusion, and enhancing the accuracy of the analysis. This feature is crucial for tracking how specific topics or issues are discussed across different media outlets.

Sentiment analysis was another robust feature offered by FinAllot. This tool assesses the sentiment expressed towards entities mentioned in news articles, providing insights into the

general tone and public or media sentiment concerning those entities. This can be incredibly valuable for needing to monitor public image or for trying to gauge public opinion on various issues.

Operating within a serverless architecture, where AWS is responsible for managing and scaling the necessary infrastructure, FinAllot is relieved from the technical complexities of system management. This setup allowed to operate with high efficiency and scalability, focusing solely on delivering analytical performance without the burden of managing physical servers or system scaling. By leveraging sophisticated analytical tools, FinAllot News Analytics Engine was pivotal to news analytics. It transformed the daunting task of large-scale news data processing into a more manageable, precise, and insightful endeavour (Finallot 2023)

Looking forward, this research opens avenues for further exploration into the efficacy of media strategies in shaping public perceptions and international policy. It also suggests refinements in data analysis methodologies to capture media framing subtleties in various geopolitical contexts, which could yield significant methodological advancements in the field of media studies and conflict reporting.

3.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter mapped out the comprehensive methodological framework employed to explore Russian media's depiction of the Syrian war. The methodological foundation involved interviews with media professionals directly involved in covering the war and in-depth textual analysis across various media forms such as news articles, aiming to decipher the role of

language in influencing societal power dynamics and shaping public perceptions. This analysis extended from micro-level linguistic strategies to macro-level discourse patterns, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how media narratives interplay with societal realities.

A significant component of the data analysis involved sifting through a large-scale dataset of media articles. This secondary dataset was pivotal in unearthing the intricacies of Russian media coverage. The versatility of CDA was prominently featured, underscoring its effectiveness in probing the linguistic tactics embedded within media narratives and structured interviews with key media figures. This methodological approach shed light on the narrative construction processes and their alignment or confrontation with prevailing societal ideologies and power structures.

Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, ethical considerations were thoroughly woven into the study's fabric. This chapter elaborated on the extensive measures implemented to guarantee the safety and anonymity of participants, crucial in mitigating fieldwork risks. Systematic development of recruitment processes and interview protocols assured that data gathering was not only consistent and reliable but also sensitive to the diverse experiences and perspectives of participants.

Chapter 4. Syria in the Russian Media

‘War,’ observed the eighteenth-century Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz, ‘is nothing more than the continuation of politics by other means.’ As politics and society change so does the nature of war. In the twenty-first century politics is conducted via the mass media with the result that the ‘war on terrorism’ is a war that is also waged through the media. The way in which the mass media represent the conflict is part of the conflict. Media coverage has effects not simply on ‘the audience’ understood as a set of passive bystanders, but on those actually and potentially involved in the conflict. Shaping the perceptions of opponents, supporters and neutral groups influences whether they will become involved and how they will participate. Mobilising, informing, and persuading are integral to the conduct of war. The result is that attempting to shape the representation of the conflict becomes more important for the belligerents even as it becomes harder to do.’ (Thussu and Freedman 2021)

4.1 Chapter Topic and Objectives

Chapter 4 aims to elucidate the modalities through which Russian media portrayed the Syrian war. Given the critical significance of this media portrayal to President Putin's administration, it is essential to establish a foundational understanding of the media landscape that will be examined comprehensively in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

The public's role in media discourse, particularly in relation to the Syrian war, has been revolutionised by social media platforms, effectively equating ordinary people with professional journalists in certain respects (Halpern and Gibbs 2013). This transformation is

partly rooted in legislation seemingly unrelated to the Syrian war or its coverage. Specifically, it stems from a law enacted to prohibit the falsification of Russia's historical narrative and the justification of terrorism, as outlined in Article 205.2 of the Russian Criminal Law (Russian Federation 1996). The formation of the Presidential Committee to Counteract Attempts to Falsify History to Prejudice Russia's Interests in 2009 (RG.ru 2009) underscores the government's commitment to controlling historical narratives.

The primary objective of both the law and the presidential committee was to safeguard the Russian and Soviet legacy in World War II, a subject of particular sensitivity for President Putin (Mark Edele 2017). Putin firmly believes that Western nations are attempting to undermine the Soviet Union's role in the Second World War, a view substantiated by several sources (Владимиров 2018; Wood 2011; Goldman 2008).

The law's ambiguity concerning the specific historical events it covers, and the extent to which an event must be 'historical' to fall under its purview, presents a unique challenge. Theoretically, this law could extend to any news article mentioning Russia, including those covering Russia's involvement in Syria. Portraying Russia's role in the Syrian war in a manner divergent from the official narrative could be construed as a distortion of Russia's historical role. Such a portrayal is an offence punishable by imprisonment (Бочарников 2016), highlighting the law's potential impact on media coverage of the Syrian war.

The legislation in question did not explicitly target journalists reporting on Syria. Putin's strategy was not to prosecute journalists en masse under this or any other law. Rather, the intent appeared to be to leverage the threat of severe punishment as a means of ensuring compliance with the state's narrative. This approach allowed for selective media attention on

the Syrian war, enabling the Russian media to overlook or reinterpret events incongruent with their agenda.

Crucially, the actual dynamics of the conflict were subordinated to constructing an idealised portrayal of the war in the media. This perspective necessitates an examination not only of the content presented by Russian media regarding the Syrian war but also of significant omissions. A case in point is the underreporting of Russian casualties, particularly those incurred during the Deir al-Zour incident, as discussed in Chapter 2. In this incident, contrary to the common portrayal of adversaries in Russian media, the fatalities were inflicted by US forces, not by ISIS terrorists or Syrian opposition (Marten 2019).

This incident marked the first major direct confrontation between Russia and the US. Remarkably, the Russian government chose to downplay the event, despite the loss of over 300 Russian citizens to US military action. Contrary to expectations, Putin refrained from utilising this incident to escalate tensions or to propagate anti-US sentiments. Instead, Russian media conspicuously ignored the event. This information gap was filled by foreign sources, such as the New York Times, for those Russian citizens who sought alternative narratives (Vishniakov 2018).

The handling of this incident offers insight into Putin's media strategy and overarching objectives. While a narrative of victimisation could ostensibly serve as potent propaganda, Putin's media tactics prioritise narrative control over factual representation. In this paradigm, the loss of 300 soldiers, a significant event by any measure, is rendered inconsequential in comparison to the narrative crafted and disseminated through Russian media channels (Rizzotti 2019).

The notion that publicising the true cost of televised military victories, particularly in terms of human lives, especially those of fellow citizens, is a strategic error, warrants attention. Escalating aspects of a conflict where defeat is possible is ill-advised. While Putin may emphasise the Russian military's strength and its perceived superiority over the United States military, the prospect of direct confrontation with the U.S. presents a daunting scenario for him. Putin's reluctance to engage in actual warfare with America, even in Syria, is evident. His preference lies predominantly in cultivating a media narrative of Russian triumph in Syria, to the extent that if achieving this portrayal without actual military involvement in Syria were possible, he would opt for it (Tolz and Teper 2018).

The media coverage of the Syrian war offers profound insights into Russian political dynamics and Putin's governance style. The conflict in Syria has starkly revealed that Putin is not only a disseminator of falsehoods but also a victim of misinformation. Renowned for his distrust of the internet (Galeotti 2019), Putin abstains from using it and generally exhibits scepticism towards media. He prefers to receive information through reports, a practice rooted in his KGB background, where accountability for the content is ensured by the report's author (Lipman and McFaul 2001).

This preference has opened avenues for manipulation by Putin's inner circle. Although previously speculative, the Syrian war's media coverage has provided concrete instances of Putin being misled. A notable example, discussed in Chapter 2, occurred when Putin presented famous American Director Oliver Stone with a video claiming to show Russian forces combating terrorists in Syria. This incident, captured on television, allowed the public to see the footage on Putin's phone, which was later revealed to be unrelated to Syria or Russia,

instead showing American forces in Iraq. This episode highlighted how even Putin's own Ministry of Defence could present misleading information as a testament to Russia's successes in Syria (Sales, Bowden, and Stone 2017; Stone 2017).

The phenomenon of media propaganda, it appears, affects all, with Putin as susceptible to its influence as any Russian citizen, perhaps even more so. Unlike the average Russian, who might seek alternative information online, Putin relies solely on the information provided by his inner circle. Consequently, if the information is inaccurate, his understanding and decisions are similarly flawed (Myers 2015).

The discourse surrounding the term 'war' in Russian media exhibits a dichotomous representation, particularly in the context of the Syrian war. When referencing the involvement of Western nations like the U.S. and the UK, Russian media explicitly uses 'war' to characterise their actions. Conversely, coverage of Russia's own involvement often omits this term, opting instead for descriptors like 'peace-keeping mission' (Brown 2015). This dualistic portrayal effectively bifurcates the Syrian situation into two distinct narratives: one where Western powers engage in warfare, and another where Russia assumes a peacekeeping role.

Similarly, the fluctuating usage of terms such as 'terrorist,' 'rebel,' 'opposition,' and 'peace talks' further illustrates this selective linguistic approach. These terms, subject to manipulation, align with the prevailing political stance of the Russian government at any given time. They are strategically employed to denote varying groups or entities, thereby sustaining the overarching political narrative (Budaev and Tikhonov 2016).

This research also uncovers a concerning trend in both pro-government and independent media. Government-controlled or influenced media outlets consciously employ this lexical manipulation. In contrast, independent media, though not maliciously, exhibit a lack of attention to the nuanced linguistic coverage of the conflict. Independent journalists often fail to differentiate between 'war' and 'armed conflict,' or between 'opposition' and 'rebel,' thereby diminishing their reportage's analytical depth and precision. This oversight not only reflects a disregard for the complexities of the Syrian war but also a missed opportunity to inform the public adequately.

Governmental media's deliberate linguistic strategy aims to influence perceptions and outcomes favourably for Russia. However, the independent media's lackadaisical approach to terminology usage inadvertently contributes to a general lack of public understanding regarding the conflict's dynamics. Consequently, even avid media consumers in Russia struggle to grasp the intricacies of the conflict, including the identification of key actors and their respective roles (Budaev and Tikhonov 2016). This scenario underscores a broader failure within Russian journalism, where the professional responsibility to provide clear, comprehensive, and unbiased conflict coverage is not fully realised.

In the context of Russia's involvement in Syria, a dual-fronted struggle emerges: a tangible military conflict and a simultaneous battle over media narratives. A critical juncture in this dual engagement is the issue of Russian casualties in Syria. The precise number of Russian nationals killed remains unknown, underscoring a recurring opacity in Russia's military engagements; for instance, the exact number of Soviet casualties during the Second World War is still a matter of debate, with estimates ranging from 20 to 40 million (Черпанов 2017).

This lack of clarity is not merely a matter of historical record but reflects a broader issue of governmental transparency. In the case of the USSR, the casualty estimates exhibit a staggering discrepancy, suggesting a systemic neglect in acknowledging military losses (Желенин 2020). The situation regarding Russian casualties in Syria similarly demonstrates a pattern of non-disclosure. Initial media coverage did not report these losses, but over time, the existence of casualties became an unavoidable truth (Souleimanov and Dzutsati 2018).

This media scrutiny led to a significant development: the emergence of privatised military organisations in Syria, ostensibly replacing regular military forces. This shift contravenes the Russian Constitution, which expressly forbids the creation of private military entities (Reynolds 2019; Rondeaux 2019). Media portrayal of the conflict often necessitated the generation of positive narratives, particularly in the absence of favourable developments. This phenomenon is exemplified by the coverage of liberation Palmyra, an ancient Syrian city. The narrative of the Russian military's repeated recapture of Palmyra has been manipulated in such a way that it could serve as a case study in propaganda techniques. Each recapture was presented as a discrete, unprecedented success, deliberately omitting the context of previous losses to ISIS in the area (Cuneo *et al.* 2016; Plets 2017).

A critical component of the Russian media's propaganda apparatus has been the utilisation of the Russian Orthodox Church, a strategy not confined to the context of the Syrian war. This research elucidates that the Church's involvement transcends mere coverage of the Syrian war, serving as a universal tool in events bearing even marginal political significance. Specifically, in the Syrian war, the Church functioned as a pillar of moral validation, reassuring Russian citizens of not only President Putin's endorsement but ostensibly that of divine

sanction. This was exemplified through instances where Russian Orthodox clergy consecrated weaponry destined for use in Syria, including on civilian targets such as schools and hospitals. Such actions, receiving substantial media attention, were intended to persuade the Russian populace of the war's righteousness (Charap, Treyger, and Geist 2019).

The portrayal of chemical weapon use in Russian media represents a particularly ignominious chapter, revealing the psychological and ethical unpreparedness of the Russian public, irrespective of their stance on the war or Putin, to acknowledge their nation's culpability in employing chemical and other inhumane weaponry against civilians (Van Schaack 2016). Despite concrete evidence of these atrocities, a confluence of denial united both opponents and supporters of Putin. This unified denial persisted across diverse media narratives, whether from government-aligned outlets dismissing the use of chemical weapons or independent media presenting incontrovertible evidence.

This phenomenon was reflected in widespread public scepticism, as revealed by polls from the period, highlighting a deep-seated reluctance to recognise, and consequently accept responsibility for, Russia's engagement in war crimes. The enormity of this realisation seemed to surpass the capacity of even the most educated and critical segments of Russian society, leading to a collective dismissal of these realities, unaffected by the volume or nature of the evidence presented (BBC 2017; Lenta.ru 2018).

4.2 The war on the words 'war,' 'terrorists,' 'rebel' and 'opposition'

Countries engaged in armed conflict participate in dual wars: the physical conflict and the concurrent media war. Grove (2019) underscores this duality. Robin Anderson, in 'A

Century Of Media, A Century Of War,' illustrates the interplay between media portrayal and actual warfare, specifically during the Iraq War. The coverage of Operation Iraqi Freedom exemplified the synergy between media and military narratives, a phenomenon observable even before the invasion commenced. Anderson (2006) argues that war transformed into a cultural event, where the interpretation of combat operations in Iraq was manipulated through entertainment-driven frameworks. This approach rendered war imagery more appealing and persuasive, overshadowing the grim reality of warfare. The camera lens, akin to a video game viewpoint, offered an empowering perspective that paralleled the thrill of digital entertainment. Additionally, war reportage adopted stylistic elements from reality television, further blurring the lines between entertainment and conflict. Anderson terms this fusion as 'militainment,' a genre unique to 21st-century warfare, characterised by a disconnection from the lethal consequences of war, thus diluting public empathy and responsibility towards war victims.

The Russian involvement in the Syrian war provides a further example of media manipulation in warfare. As Russia commenced its operations, the government and pro-government media initiated a linguistic battle over the term 'war,' due to its negative implications and legal ramifications. This tactic, not exclusive to Russia, is also evident in Western narratives, where euphemisms like 'police action' and 'peacekeeping initiative' often replace the word 'war' (Franck and Patel 1991). However, in the Russian context, the avoidance of 'war' carries specific connotations, shaped by state-controlled media under government advisement (Strovsky and Schleifer 2020). This strategy serves to dissociate the Russian public from the conflict, as war evokes intense, large-scale, and frightening imagery, often linked to the traumatic memories of the Second World War - a concern particularly pertinent to Putin's administration (Edele 2017). The portrayal aims to convey the Syrian war as a distant event,

unlikely to disrupt or involve the average Russian citizen (Strovsky and Schleifer 2020; Banasik 2016).

In elucidating the Russian stance on military engagements, particularly in Syria, it is imperative to consider several dimensions. Firstly, the Russian media narrative, as encapsulated by Interviewee 19 (2022), emphasises the portrayal of Russia as a bastion of peace, distant and disengaged from conflicts like the Syrian war. This narrative strategically juxtaposes reports of military victories with benign, domestic news, reinforcing a perception of external conflicts as remote and inconsequential to Russian life:

‘Here’s an important clarification: war shouldn’t interfere with our regular life. After the newscast told the audience about our victories, kind and nice peaceful news should follow. Syria is somewhere far away, let it stay there. In Russia, everything is good. It’s important to remind people about it.’ (Interviewee 19 2022)

The quote provides insight into the editorial philosophy and media strategy employed by Russian newscasters to shape public perception and maintain a sense of normalcy amidst ongoing military conflicts. By first reporting on Russia’s victories, the newscasts aim to frame the conflict in a positive light, providing the audience with a sense of national prowess and success. This is followed by ‘peaceful news,’ which serves to further distance the realities of war from the everyday experiences of the Russian populace. This deliberate juxtaposition is designed to minimise any potential anxiety or unrest that might arise from the war coverage, instead fostering a sense of security and normalcy.

By keeping distressing realities 'far away' and focusing on domestic tranquillity, the media manipulates public perception to maintain a controlled and favourable image of the national situation.

This approach reflects a broader media manipulation tactic often utilised by states involved in conflicts, where the impacts of war are downplayed domestically to uphold governmental approval and prevent public dissent. The selective reporting and strategic placement of news items are instrumental in crafting a public narrative that supports the state's agendas while shielding the population from the harsher realities of war.

The quote reveals how state-influenced media operations use news programming not merely to inform but to shape public perception and sentiment in a manner that supports the state's objectives and preserves a facade of normalcy and control. This manipulation of news content highlights the power of media in influencing public mood and national sentiment, particularly in contexts where government interests dictate the framing of external and internal events.

Secondly, President Putin's consistent declarations position Russia as a fundamentally peaceful nation, averse to initiating war unless its borders or internal stability are directly threatened (RT 2015). Within this framework, the Syrian war is presented as misaligned with the criteria that would justify Russian intervention. Ermolaeva (2017) critically observes that this rhetoric effectively redefines the Syrian engagement, distancing it from the conventional understanding of 'war.'

Further, Interviewee 2 (2022), representing the independent media, critiques this official narrative. They argue that the Russian government, while perpetuating its peaceful self-image, adopts a defensive posture, rationalising interventions, as in Syria, under the guise of combating terrorism. This narrative manipulation, they suggest, is a tactic to justify military actions while maintaining the facade of a peace-keeping force.

Thirdly, the legal implications of the term 'war' are significant. Under the Geneva Convention, to which Russia is a signatory, 'war' invokes specific legal responsibilities and constraints, particularly regarding the permissible scope of military actions and targets (Barsalou 2018). Violations of these rules, such as targeting civilian structures – an act Russia has reportedly committed in Syria (Wainer 2020) – can constitute war crimes. The potential for future legal repercussions, including war crime tribunals, is a deterrent against the official acknowledgment of military actions in Syria as 'war' (Lavrov 1999).

The Russian government's narrative on the Syrian war and its reluctance to label its actions as 'war' are rooted in both strategic image management and legal avoidance. This approach reflects a complex interplay of domestic propaganda, international law, and geopolitical strategy.

The prevalent euphemism employed by pro-government media for 'war' includes terms such as 'fighting terrorism,' 'armed conflict,' or 'peacekeeping mission.' This choice of language is particularly ironic given that the term 'war' is not explicitly prohibited; its restriction applies solely when discussing Russia's involvement in Syria. In a stark contrast, these same media outlets readily use the term 'war' to describe the actions of allied forces in Syria. In essence, according to Russian media narratives, nations like Britain, America, Turkey, and Iran are

engaged in a war in Syria, whereas Russia is not depicted as such. This dichotomy is strikingly articulated by an independent media representative:

‘This is outright insanity, but only the opposition media called the war in Syria a ‘war.’ On government TV channels, the war is something that the West is engaged in. We are also in Syria, we also do the bombing, but for some reason it’s not war. We <our publication> called this war a ‘war’ from the very beginning, yet it didn’t really help at the end of the day. Very few people in Russia came to realise that Russia went to war in Syria.’ (Interviewee 20, 2022)

This statement starkly illustrates the divide in media coverage of Russia's military involvement in Syria, highlighting the contrasting narratives presented by opposition versus government-controlled media. This divergence underscores a significant issue in the Russian media landscape, where terminology and the framing of events are heavily influenced by political affiliations and government oversight.

In this case, the interviewee points out the peculiar situation where only the opposition media have been willing to directly refer to Russia's actions in Syria as a ‘war.’ Meanwhile, government TV channels carefully avoid the term, instead framing the conflict as primarily a Western engagement, despite Russia's active participation including military bombing operations. This narrative manipulation serves to downplay Russia's role and shield the general public from the harsh realities of their nation’s involvement in a foreign conflict.

The use of euphemisms or alternative descriptions by government channels is not merely a linguistic choice but a deliberate effort to control public perception. By reframing the conflict as something driven by Western forces, these channels aim to deflect responsibility

and potentially reduce domestic scrutiny or criticism of Russia's foreign policy decisions. This tactic aligns with a broader strategy to maintain a certain public image of Russia's role on the international stage, portraying it as reactive rather than aggressive. Despite the efforts of the interviewee's publication and others in the opposition media to label the situation accurately from the start, the impact of this straightforward labelling appears to have been limited.

Ultimately, this scenario highlights the challenges faced by media outlets in authoritarian contexts where government influence can significantly restrict the flow of information and shape narratives to suit political ends. It reflects broader issues of media control, censorship, and the struggle for narrative dominance, which not only affect public awareness and opinion but also impact the democratic process of informed decision making by the citizenry. The situation described by Interviewee reveals a deliberate obfuscation of Russia's involvement in Syria, illustrating how state power can be wielded to manipulate public perceptions of international affairs.

This linguistic manipulation has created a significant divide between pro-government and certain independent media outlets. The latter, which form a part of the media opposition, are the only ones to label the Russian involvement in the Syrian war as a war. So far, the government has not taken steps to curb this terminology, likely due to the limited influence of opposition media. This scenario reflects a broader 'media war' over the use of the word 'war,' a battle in which Putin and his administration appear to be prevailing. As per their narrative, whatever actions Russia undertakes in Syria are not classified as war, whereas the activities of the UN's allied forces, especially those of the U.S., are labelled as such (ntv.ru 2015).

The use of precise language in media coverage, especially in contexts like the Syrian war, is critical. Journalists' choice of words, even subtle changes in terminology, can significantly sway public opinion towards approval or disapproval of specific actions (Vázquez-Liñán 2017). This impact often exceeds what even the most integrity-conscious journalists might anticipate.

A poignant illustration of this is the term 'opposition' applied to Syrian opposition forces. As the conflict unfolded, it became evident that the factions involved were diverse and complex. Not only Russian media but also global media outlets demonstrated a lack of commitment to distinguishing among the various groups engaged in the conflict. This general disinterest was particularly evident in conflicts with multiple factions, as was the case in Syria, where a simplistic binary understanding proved inadequate (Schoon and Duxbury 2019).

The Syrian war's actors included the official Syrian government, supported by Assad and Russia, and the recognised Syrian opposition, backed by the US, UK, EU, and formally acknowledged by the United Nations. Additionally, various Kurdish groups played significant roles, differentiated by their affiliations - some native to Syria, others aligned with Iran, Turkey, or opposing Turkish involvement. Entities like ISIS added to the conflict's complexity (Mironova, Mrie, and Whitt 2020). This multiplicity of actors and alliances underscores the challenge of comprehending the full scope of the Syrian war.

In an effort to simplify complex narratives, the world media frequently resorted to a 'paint by numbers' structure to define the Syrian war, a method which, while initially effective, proved reductive as the situation evolved (Gulnar and Katman 2019). Initially, this structure identified key actors as: 1) Syrian government forces supported by Assad and Russia, 2) the

official UN-recognised opposition, 3) Kurdish forces, and 4) ISIS. This framework, though seemingly straightforward, gradually failed to capture the multifaceted nature of the conflict. It is important to note that this research does not aim to dissect the full complexity of the Syrian war, as that exceeds its scope. Rather, the focus is on the media's immediate response to the war, particularly their lack of effort in distinguishing the myriad parties involved.

In Russian government-controlled media, the portrayal of the conflict was further simplified, often reduced to two primary factions: Assad and Putin versus ISIS. According to this perspective, the complexity of the conflict was unnecessary for public understanding. As Interviewee 5 from the government-controlled media in 2023 stated:

'Everything became too complicated too soon with the conflicting sides in Syria. We didn't feel like unravelling it, and there was no need to explain it to the viewer. It's us and the terrorists, and that's enough. Why overload the people with information? Nobody will understand it anyway. To be honest, this attitude – that the people won't bother with the details – became an excuse for our editors so they wouldn't bother to understand either. We have the general line, and we're broadcasting it. TV people are generally proud of being cynical and knowing their viewers so well.' (Interviewee 5, 2023)

The reflections offered by Interviewee provide a candid look into the media practices surrounding the coverage of the Syrian conflict, specifically regarding the simplification of complex international events for public consumption. This commentary exposes a prevalent attitude within some segments of the media, particularly those aligned with government perspectives, where the intricate details of a multifaceted conflict are deliberately pared down

to a simplistic narrative of ‘us versus them’ - in this case, framing the situation as ‘us and the terrorists.’

The interviewee highlights a significant and somewhat cynical approach taken by TV editors and journalists who choose not to delve into the complexities of the Syrian conflict. This decision is partly based on the presumption that the audience would not appreciate or understand a more nuanced explanation of the events. Such a stance not only reflects a low estimation of viewer engagement and intelligence but also serves as a convenient justification for the editors themselves to avoid engaging deeply with the complexities of the situation. By opting out of a thorough analysis, the media thereby relinquishes its role as an educator and informer on critical international issues, instead opting to perpetuate a simplistic and possibly misleading narrative.

This approach is rationalised within the industry under the guise of not wanting to ‘overload the people with information,’ suggesting that keeping the public informed with detailed, accurate portrayals of global events might be less important than maintaining a manageable and coherent narrative. This perspective underscores a broader cynical view held by some within the TV industry, who pride themselves on understanding what they believe the audience wants - or more precisely, what they can handle intellectually - which in their view, does not include complex international affairs.

The interviewee's insights reveal a deeper malaise within certain media practices, where the avoidance of complexity in reporting is emblematic of a broader trend towards superficial media consumption. This trend is facilitated by media producers who prioritise alignment with predetermined editorial lines over fostering a well-informed public. Such practices undermine

media's foundational role in a democracy, where an informed populace is essential for the healthy functioning of society. Overall, the testimony sheds light on how media manipulation and the reduction of complex issues to binary narratives can serve to misinform the public and shape perceptions according to the strategic interests of those in power, rather than striving to provide a comprehensive and multifaceted view of global events.

The term 'opposition' began to surface in Russian media discourse only following the initiation of UN peace talks, a lexical shift driven by the unavoidable realities of these negotiations. As Al-Rashidi (2014) notes, Russia's involvement in these talks necessitated an acknowledgment of the opposition to Assad, a challenging narrative to convey given Russia's previous stances. Meyer (2018) captures the initial sentiment surrounding these talks, indicating a cautious approach to the newly acknowledged 'opposition.'

However, the expectation that the term 'opposition' would gain prominence in Russian media did not materialise as anticipated. Contrary to the forecasts of even the most independent Russian media outlets, the term's usage dwindled rapidly. The peace talks, making little progress and with Russia frequently side-lined, diminished the perceived necessity to engage with or acknowledge the opposition in the media narrative. Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay (2018) illustrate this shift, highlighting Russia's growing disinterest, particularly as it faced Western criticism over its military actions in Aleppo and Idlib. This criticism, focusing on the egregious impact of Russian air force bombings on hospitals, significantly influenced Russia's engagement in the talks and its media portrayal of the opposition to Assad.

In their media strategy, Russian government sources aimed to conflate the Syrian opposition with ISIS in the public's perception, a tactic described by Spaulding (2015). This

narrative posited that Russia and Assad were exclusively combating ISIS - labelled as terrorists - erasing the existence of any moderate opposition. This approach became particularly evident in the context of Aleppo and Idlib, both complex urban agglomerations with varied control dynamics. Casagrande and Weinberger (2017) note that at different times, western Aleppo was under the official opposition's control, eastern Aleppo was held by ISIS, and the northern part remained with Assad's forces. Russian media reports of airstrikes in Aleppo often generalised their target as 'terrorists,' a technically accurate claim given the presence of terrorist-controlled areas. However, this reporting strategy intentionally omitted specific geographic details, making it difficult to refute their claims, as highlighted by DeBardeleben (1997).

Despite this narrative, multiple sources, including Kofman and Rojansky (2018), provide evidence that Russian forces frequently targeted opposition-controlled areas, not just those under terrorist control. The media's portrayal of the situation in Aleppo and Idlib was notably muddled, reflecting the chaotic reality of the conflict. The term 'opposition' in Russian media reports was selectively used or omitted based on governmental directives. Any military action by Russia in Syria was commonly branded as an 'anti-terrorist action,' effectively removing the label of 'opposition' from the narrative, a practice documented by Karnazov (2015).

The Russian narrative regarding their military operations in Syria has consistently been framed around combating terrorism, unequivocally denying any engagement in civilian bombings or attacks on opposition-controlled areas, despite substantial evidence to the contrary (Guha-Sapir *et al.* 2018). This narrative, propagated by official Russian media, positioned Russia solely as an antagonist against terrorists in Syria, effectively omitting any other actors or targets from their discourse.

This portrayal significantly influenced public opinion within Russia. Polls indicated substantial support for the military intervention in Syria, with a majority of Russian citizens believing that Russia's actions were directed against terrorism and evil, thus placing Russia on the 'right' side of the conflict (Brown 2014; Allison 2013). This perception was not without consequences. Russia's military campaign was not limited to combatting terrorism; it extended to a broader war against the opposition. This was evidenced by Russia's exclusion from the official UN peace talks on Syria and its initiative to host alternative peace negotiations. These talks, not recognised by the United Nations, predominantly included pro-Russian factions, particularly pro-Egypt Kurdish forces, which were misleadingly represented as 'the Syrian opposition' in Russian media (Mühlberger 2017). Russia organised parallel discussions in Astana, Kazakhstan, inviting groups that were distinctly separate from the US and EU-backed Syrian opposition, further illustrating Russia's strategy of creating and controlling an alternative diplomatic narrative (Iltis 2017).

The Russian media and public demonstrated a marked indifference towards distinguishing between various Syrian peace negotiations. News coverage failed to differentiate between the official UN-sponsored talks and the unofficial Russian-led discussions, leading to a general apathy among the public. Such disinterest extended to the nuances within the Syrian opposition itself. The subtle distinctions between the official Syrian opposition, recognised by Western entities, and their counterparts in the Russian peace talks were largely ignored, as these details were deemed inconsequential by the average Russian citizen, particularly in light of the Western-recognised opposition's absence from media narratives (Cebeci and Üstün 2012). This lack of discernment underscores a broader

disengagement from the complexities of the Syrian war. Interviewee 21, from government-controlled media in 2022, encapsulates this sentiment:

'When the peace talks just started and Russia was somehow invited to take part, we began writing about the Syrian opposition. Then Russia was actually ousted, and what kind of negotiations can happen without Russia? Nothing in the world should happen without Russia. So, the talks in Astana took place, they were also called peace talks on Syria, and the Syrian opposition was there. The latter was ready to go to these childish talks and negotiate with Russia and not the UN. By sheer coincidence, the Astana talks took place at the same time as the UN talks. Why would the Russian viewer care to understand more? Syrians here, Syrians there, what's the difference? All the same. Talks are talks. When our media stopped reporting these negotiations in the UN, nobody even noticed.'

(Interviewee 21 2022)

The interviewee points out a critical aspect of the Russian public's reception to these developments - indifference and confusion between the different sets of talks. This apathy was attributed to the oversimplified and often dismissive way the media handled the complex dynamics of international diplomacy. By reducing the peace talks to a binary narrative of 'Syrians here, Syrians there,' the media failed to provide the Russian public with a nuanced understanding of the distinct goals, participants, and significance of the different negotiations. Consequently, when Russian media ceased reporting on the UN negotiations, the public barely noticed, underscoring a broader disengagement and lack of depth in public understanding of international affairs.

This scenario illustrates how state-influenced media can shape public perception through selective reporting and framing. By focusing predominantly on the Astana talks and minimising the significance of the UN-led efforts, Russian media not only shaped the narrative to Russia's advantage but also subtly guided public attention away from international forums where Russia had less control. This manipulation of media coverage reflects broader strategies of influence and control, where the complexities of global events are streamlined into narratives that support national interests and diminish the roles of international bodies perceived as less favourable to those interests.

The strategic utilisation of the term 'opposition' in media narratives significantly influenced public perception of the Syrian war. This approach effectively diminished the credibility of the term itself. Coinciding with the UN peace talks unofficial Russia-backed Syrian peace talks were strategically scheduled. This timing, as noted by Oligie (2019), was intentional, leading to confusion among the general public who, without in-depth engagement, struggled to differentiate between the two sets of talks and the distinct opposition forces involved.

The term 'opposition' was manipulatively employed to label any group accused of war crimes in Syria, provided they were not aligned with Russia. As a result, any negative incident, particularly those with video evidence, was used by news outlets to reinforce a narrative that dismissed the existence of a moderate opposition. Instead, these groups were frequently conflated with terrorists, alongside ISIS, a tactic detailed by Averre and Davies (2015). This rhetorical strategy not only influenced public opinion but also shaped the geopolitical discourse, blurring the lines between legitimate opposition forces and extremist groups.

The failure to accurately represent the complexity of the Syrian war was not confined to government media in Russia; it also extended to semi-dependent and independent media sources. This uniformity in coverage suggests that direct threats or control may not be necessary to influence media narratives. While government media might be accused of deliberate framing in their terminology, independent media sources demonstrated a lack of diligence and attention to detail. As Brown (2014) observes, these outlets often lacked the patience to accurately differentiate or explain the various factions within the conflict to their readership. Interviewee 2 from the independent media (2022) shed light on this phenomenon:

'The independent media coverage of the Syrian war was at the very least inadequate, but it was not a malicious act. It was not a government-controlled plan. There was no conspiracy involved at all. In a way, it would be very comforting, if not tempting, to think there is some evil mastermind lurking behind this media coverage. There is not. There is not an evil mastermind, and, in most cases, there is not a mind at all. Independent journalists just do not care enough to check their facts, to choose their words carefully. They also tend to be very self-obsessed and self-absorbed. The feeling that you are doing good corrupts you, as well as any other overwhelming, powerful feeling. They often compare themselves not to their foreign colleagues, but to the Russian pro-governmental media. Because, as bad as they can perform, they would never perform as bad as the governmental media. In a way, by being independent they absolve themselves of all potential sins of inadequate media coverage. Unfortunately, the Syrian war does fall into those cracks.' (Interviewee 2, 2022)

Interviewee 2 further highlights the professional shortcomings within independent media, noting their reliance on government news agencies for primary information, which often

led to uncritical repetition of terms like ‘terrorist,’ ‘opposition leader,’ or ‘rebel.’ This lack of critical analysis perpetuated a cycle of disinterest and misinformation, wherein journalists accused the leadership of apathy towards the Syrian war, reinforcing a disinterested readership. Consequently, the Russian public and independent media, unprepared to confront their complicity in the Syrian war, largely turned away from the harrowing realities of the conflict.

Even among the anti-establishment segments of Russian society, discerning the various factions within the Syrian war posed a significant challenge, especially for those without a direct personal connection to the events. The majority, realistically, lacked the incentive to deeply understand the nuances of the situation, as they were not personally affected by the conflict. This lack of engagement was evident among the average readers of opposition media, who struggled to differentiate between the multiple sides involved. A combination of limited knowledge and a general misunderstanding of the nature of the Syrian opposition contributed to a widespread perception. This perception, as documented by Григоренко and Юрченко (2019), was that Russia alone was combating terrorism in Syria, overshadowing other actors' roles.

The effectiveness of the Russian government's campaign against the term ‘opposition’ in the context of the Syrian war can be attributed to a foundational narrative established years prior to the conflict's emergence in the Russian news sphere. This pre-existing narrative framework played a crucial role in shaping public understanding and reception of the events in Syria, thereby influencing the domestic perception of the conflict.

The term 'opposition' had already acquired a negative connotation in Russia by the time of the Syrian war, largely due to years of hostile media portrayals (Lanskoj and Suthers 2013).

In the Russian public discourse, those opposing Putin were frequently depicted as criminals, spies, or agents funded by foreign adversaries intent on destabilising the Russian government. This narrative, compounded by the portrayal of Russia as a nation under siege, effectively branded any opposition to the government as fundamentally treasonous (Aburamoto 2019). Consequently, the term 'opposition' carried this tainted reputation into the context of the Syrian war. This sentiment is underscored by a statement from Interviewee 22, representing independent media in 2022: 'Don't forget that the word 'opposition' is derogatory in Russia. It's always someone who wants to break up the state. You can't call a decent person 'opposition'' (Interviewee 22, 2022).

Despite awareness of the complexities involved, opposition media in Russia similarly fell into the trap of oversimplifying the Syrian war. Assigning blame for this oversimplification - whether to the inattentive opposition media, the propagandist government media, or the Syrian opposition's failure to effectively communicate with the Russian public—is a tempting but ultimately fruitless endeavour (Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva 2013). The end result remained unchanged: the moderate Syrian opposition, opposing Assad, was effectively invisible in the Russian public's perception, a view shared across pro- and anti-government spectrums (Casula 2015; Oligie 2019).

The Russian public's stance was unaffected by their opinions on their own government or President Putin. Widespread denial persisted regarding Russia's military actions in Syria, including the bombing of civilian targets and children (Wainer 2020; Press Association 2016; KUNA 2016). A general apathy prevailed over the use of taxpayers' money for these operations and the resultant harm to innocents. Surveys during the peak of Russia's involvement in Syria

showed a substantial majority of the Russian public supporting the military campaign, predominantly under the belief that their forces were combating terrorism (WCIOM 2016).

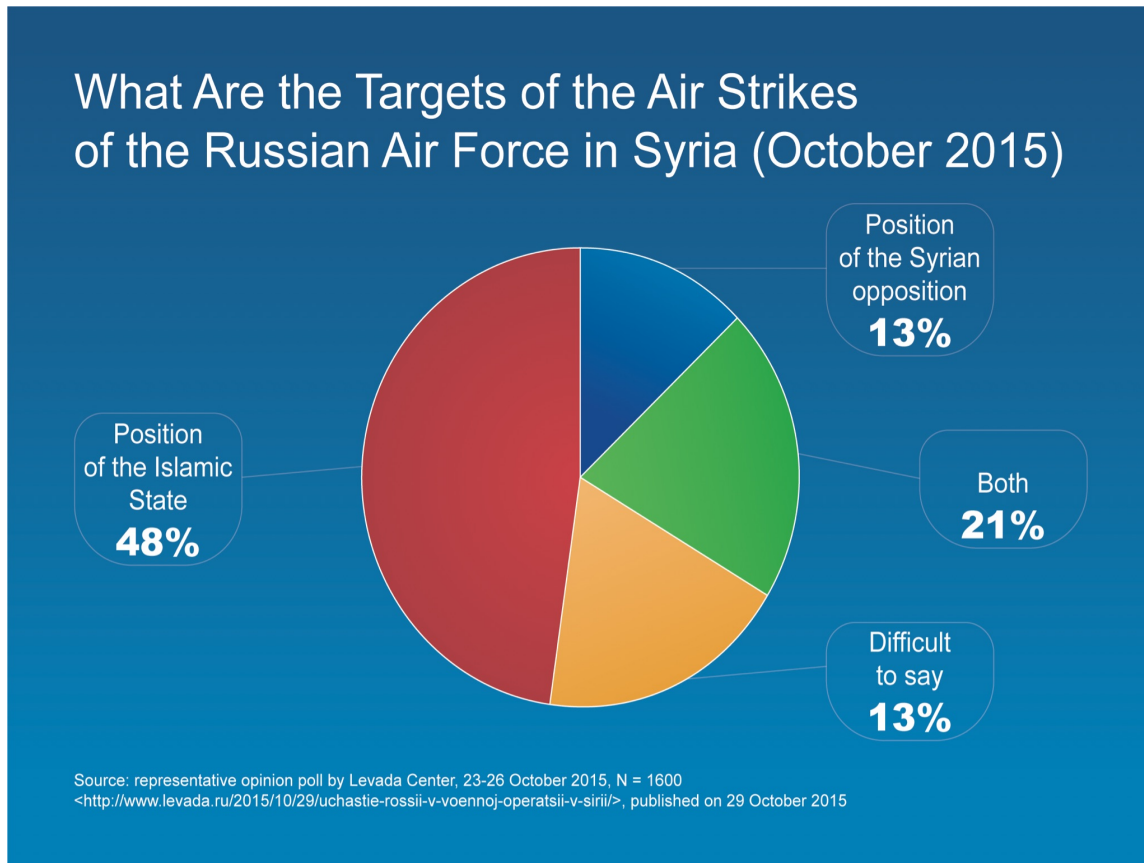


Figure 3.1: Russian air strike targets Casula, Philipp (2015)

The moderate Syrian opposition's struggle, both in the physical battlegrounds and in the media landscape, exemplifies a stark narrative of failure and demise. This group, once a pivotal term in the discourse, failed to secure a decisive victory in either the literal war in Syria or the concurrent media war, as highlighted by Bramsen (2020). The complexity and ethical dilemmas faced by journalists covering such conflicts become evident in the reflection of Interviewee 23 from the independent media. In 2022, they recollect with regret:

'It's a source of great shame for me and many of my colleagues. I talked to them about it. Now in 2022, when Russia is bombing Ukraine and we see it with our

own eyes – when a residential home is bombed and they tell you they bombed a military target, and Russia is obviously lying – I look back and recall how almost aggressively we reacted to the news from Syria. English-speaking media said that Russia had bombed a hospital and we said ‘Why would Russia waste a costly bomb on a hospital? It must’ve been Assad or the terrorists.’ How could we even verify this when everyone would lie and we didn’t have our own correspondents on the ground? We found thousands of excuses not to admit that our country used our taxes to bomb civilians there. Some of my colleagues watch what’s happening in Ukraine now and react as if it’s the first time they see something like that. To be honest with each other, we’ve already seen it in Syria. Back then we wriggled out of it, and now we can’t.’ (Interviewee 23 2022)

This introspective account not only underscores the challenges in media reporting during conflicts but also reflects a broader issue of ethical journalism and the responsibility of the media in conflict representation.

The capacity of independent media sources and their audiences to discern the complexities of the Syrian war was not markedly superior to that of pro-government media and its readers. This similarity extended to their reactions to the distressing notion that Russia, a nation to which they contributed through taxes, was actively involved in bombing civilian targets, including children, in Syria. The psychological burden of potentially being complicit in such atrocities was particularly profound within the Russian liberal community. The severity of this realisation led to an unexpected unification: those vehemently opposed to Putin's regime found themselves aligning with Putin's supporters in their denial of Russia's role in bombing Syrian civilians. This unusual convergence of opinion, as highlighted by Балакин (2017) and

Meduza (2020), underscores the complex interplay of political ideologies and moral dilemmas faced by the Russian populace.

In a 2016 survey targeting self-identified liberals, respondents were asked whether they believed Russia was engaged in the bombing of civilians in Syria:

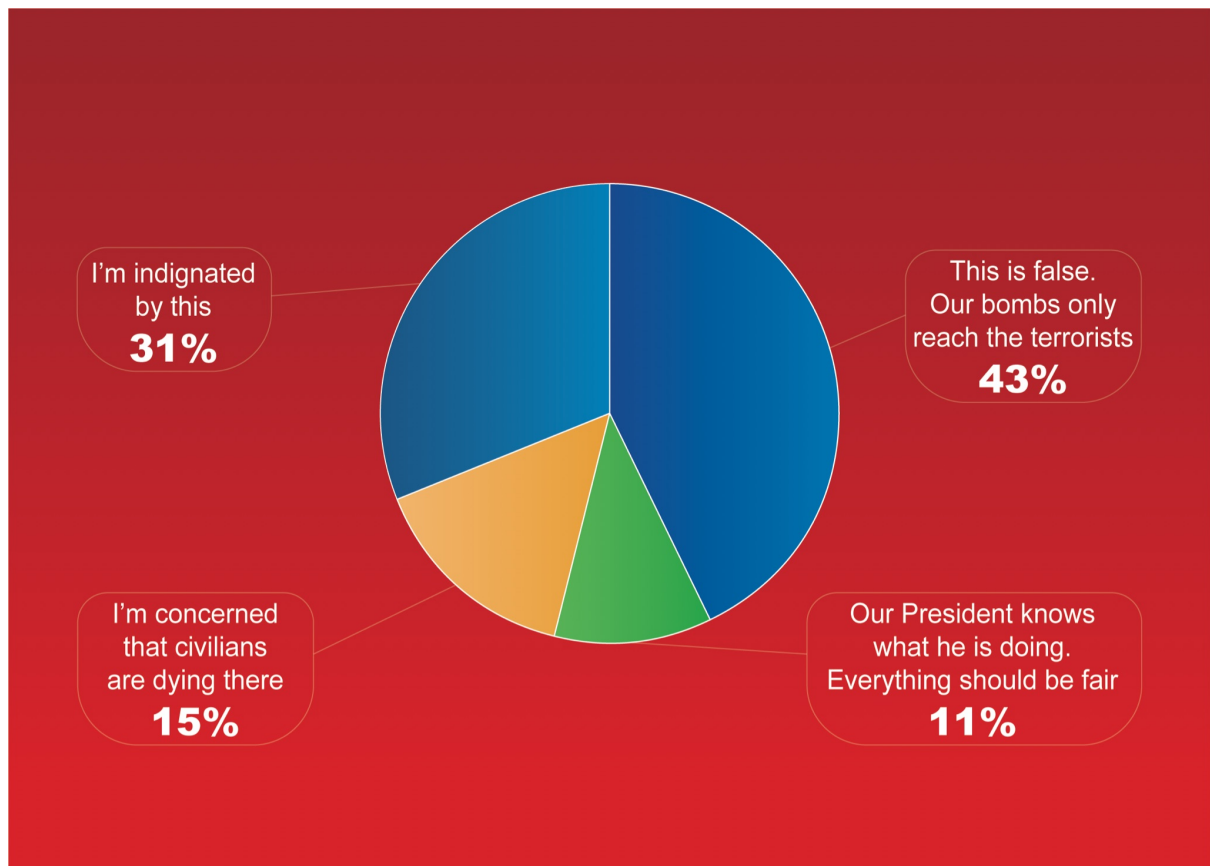


Figure 3.2: Is Russia bombing civilians in Syria? (Выжонов 2016)

4.3 Why the Syrian war was good for Russia, according to the media

In Chapter 2, the strategic benefits of the Syrian war for Putin's geopolitical ambitions were thoroughly examined. It is crucial, however, to delve into the reasons behind these benefits, particularly how they were communicated to Putin's domestic audience by

government-controlled media (Allison 2013). Despite these advantages being largely intangible and theoretical, the effectiveness of Russian media propaganda in presenting the war as pragmatically beneficial to the Russian public cannot be understated. This was a formidable task, given the public's likely apathy towards a war in a distant, economically struggling nation. In 2015, the year Russia intervened in Syria, 14.1% of Russia's population lived below the poverty line - a significant increase of 12.6% or 2.3 million people from 2014 (Перемитин 2015). The Russian populace was acutely aware that financial resources allocated to the Syrian war were resources diverted from domestic needs. This awareness presented a substantial challenge for the media in justifying the war, as every ruble spent in Syria was perceived as a ruble not invested in addressing pressing domestic issues.

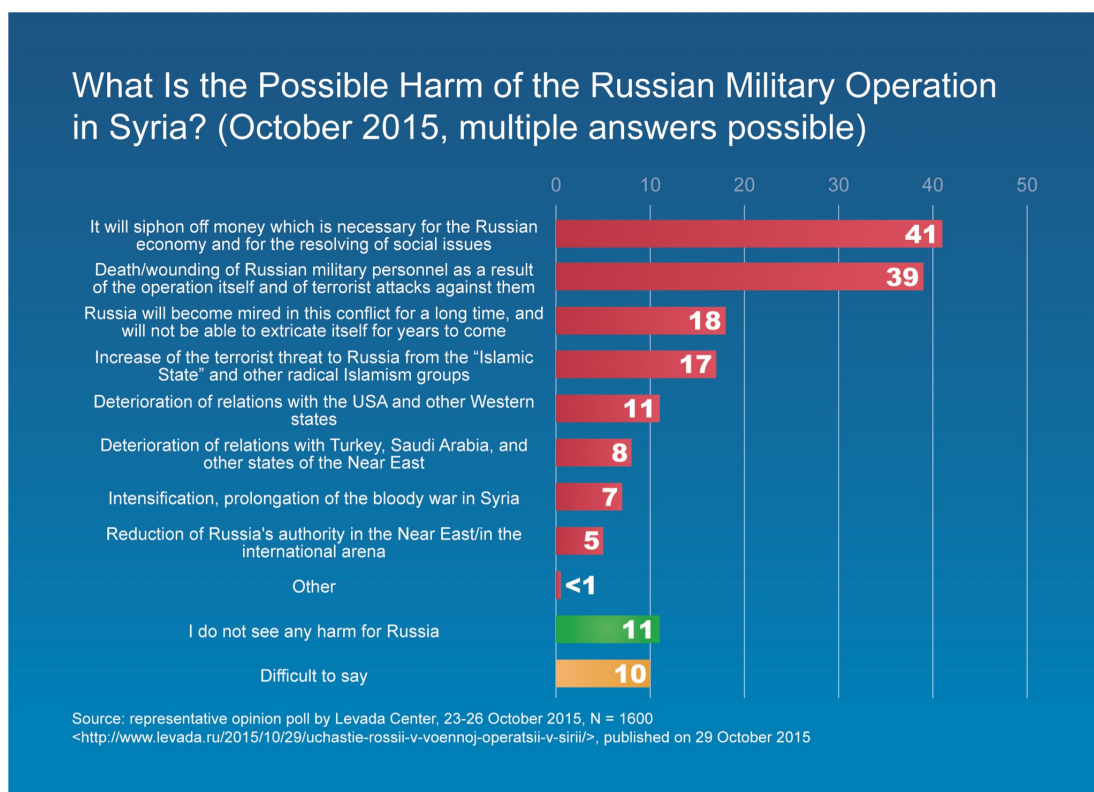


Figure 3.3: What is the possible harm of Russia's operation in Syria? Casula, Philipp (2015)

The primary theoretical counterargument within Russian society against the government's narrative on the Syrian war centres on the juxtaposition of geopolitical ambitions against domestic economic hardships. The discourse of Russia's global stature and strategic interests is often starkly contrasted with the realities of economic deprivation facing its citizens.

Despite the validity of these theoretical arguments, it was crucial to identify tangible benefits of the Syrian war for the average Russian citizen, as propagated by the government and state-controlled media. The foremost rationale presented is the existence of an inherent threat: the inevitability of terrorism. According to this viewpoint, terrorists exist universally, including within Russia, and their eradication is an unattainable goal. The narrative suggests that certain individuals are predisposed to terrorism, irrespective of their nationality or birthplace, and that this threat is inescapable. The Syrian war, as per this argument, offers a strategic diversion for such elements. By engaging these individuals in conflict outside of Russia, particularly in Syria, the risk of domestic terrorism is purportedly reduced. This narrative constructs the Syrian war not just as an external military engagement, but as a preventive measure safeguarding Russia itself from terrorist activities.

The prevalent narrative within certain Russian media circles posits a direct link between Russia's involvement in the Syrian war and a decrease in terrorist activity within its own borders. This perspective, underscored by various analysts (Allison 2013; Rich and Conduit 2015; Lukyanov 2014), suggests that many individuals classified as terrorists, particularly those of Muslim faith, were drawn to the Syrian war. Consequently, it's argued that their departure to Syria has ostensibly reduced the threat of terrorist attacks in Russia, particularly in historically volatile regions like the Caucasus. This argument gained traction among the Russian public, as noted by Souleimanov (2014) and Notte (2016), who observed a perceived

correlation between the active years of the Syrian war and a decline in terrorist incidents in Russia.

This narrative extends beyond the scope of national security, portraying Russia's involvement in Syria as a multifaceted strategy. Not only does this involvement position Russia as a key player in the international effort against ISIS, but it's also depicted as a tactic to indirectly mitigate the threat of local terrorists. As Borum and Fein (2017) explain, the subtext of Russia's military engagement in Syria includes the perceived benefit of ridding Russia of terrorists who have relocated to the Syrian battleground.

The argument, suggesting a significant presence of terrorists from the Russian Caucasus region within ISIS ranks in Syria, holds some basis in fact, as corroborated by independent international reports (Weiss and Hassan 2016). This reality lent credence to the narratives propagated by the Russian government and media, which were not entirely unfounded in asserting the involvement of Russian nationals with ISIS. The strategy of targeting these individuals in Syria, rather than allowing them to return to Russia, was seen as a practical approach to counterterrorism (EurAsia Daily 2017). However, this argument's validity is somewhat undermined by the fact that, for a period, Russian citizens were not actively prevented from travelling to Syria and returning, sometimes with families.

Despite these complexities, the overarching narrative remained consistent in Russian government circles, emphasising efforts to combat domestic terrorism by engaging in the Syrian war (Souleimanov 2017). Interviewee 24 from a government-controlled media outlet candidly acknowledged the origins and pragmatic adoption of this narrative:

'I even know who invented this point first. It was a colleague from another channel, but we also started using it, because, well, it was the truth. Would you prefer the Chechens to run around Moscow and yell 'Allahu Akbar'? Let them run around Syria and do what they please. The more of them they kill there, the fewer will get back to Russia. A win-win situation.' (Interviewee 24, 2023)

The statement from Interviewee 24 offers a revealing look into the stark and often controversial viewpoints that can pervade media narratives, especially concerning international conflicts and their impact on domestic security. The essence of this viewpoint is both pragmatic and chilling: it posits that it is preferable for Chechen militants to be occupied with conflicts outside of Russia, such as in Syria, rather than causing unrest and violence within Russia itself. The underlying logic is brutally utilitarian, suggesting that allowing these fighters to engage in foreign battlefields could effectively reduce the potential security threat they pose at home. This narrative frames the involvement of Chechen fighters in Syria as a strategic benefit for Russia, reducing the domestic threat by relocating it geographically.

Interviewee's casual recounting and acceptance of this rationale highlight a broader acceptance or resignation to such harsh strategies within certain segments of the media. The adoption of this narrative across multiple media outlets signifies a wider propagation of this idea, suggesting a certain level of normalisation of such views in public discourse. This raises profound ethical questions about the role of the media in shaping public perception and policy attitudes towards conflict and human life.

This testimony not only sheds light on the strategic narratives developed within Russian media to justify and rationalise involvement in foreign conflicts but also underscores the

sometimes-cynical nature of media discourse surrounding national security. It reveals how complex international and internal conflicts are simplified into utilitarian narratives that serve national interests, possibly at the cost of ethical considerations and human dignity. This approach reflects a pragmatic, if morally ambiguous, calculus that defines some aspects of geopolitical strategy and media coverage thereof.

The correlation between Russia's military involvement in Syria and a decrease in terrorist attacks domestically resonated with the Russian populace, aligning public opinion with the government's stance. This alignment was particularly evident in the context of security concerns; as reported by Vesti (2018), the prevailing sentiment was that eliminating potential threats in Syria, thereby preventing their return to Russian soil, was a justified measure for national safety.

Economically, the justification for continued involvement in Syria emerged as a counterpoint to growing public concerns over the financial burdens of the conflict. Despite attempts to downplay these concerns, even the less inquisitive segments of Russian society acknowledged them, a sentiment reflected in various polls. Reports from Russian military analysts, including conservative estimates, indicated substantial daily expenditures on the war, approximately \$2.5 million (Маетная and Чиждова 2018; РБК 2015).

The economic rationale was predicated on the legacy of the USSR's military production. In the aftermath of the Second World War and the Cold War, Russia inherited an extensive arsenal of ageing yet potent weaponry. The costs of maintaining this arsenal were escalating, particularly as older models were supplanted by newer technology. The argument posited that employing this arsenal in Syria, ostensibly against terrorist groups only, was more

cost-effective than its maintenance or demilitarisation in Russia. This perspective was supported by various sources, including Солопов (2015), Foma23 (2016), Петров and Закувасин (2017), Makdisi and Pison Hindawi (2017), Gunneriusson and Bachmann (2017), Rusnext (2016), and Степнов (2016).

Gerasimenko (2020) encapsulates this sentiment, highlighting the portrayal of Russia's military campaign in Syria as a success, thus legitimising its continuation. He cites a report from RT under the headline 'Syrian Air Force pilots say veteran Soviet fighter jets are effective against jihad,' which claimed that Syrian pilots were confident in their victory against ISIS using Soviet-era jets, further reinforcing the narrative of a successful and justified Russian military intervention in Syria.

The veracity of the argument that Russian military expenditures on the Syrian war are cost-effective is challenging to ascertain, given the classified nature of Russian military budgets (Perlo-Freeman, Ismail, and Solmirano 2010). The lack of transparency raises doubts, but relying solely on subjective assessments would be inappropriate in such a critical analysis.

The debate over whether it is more economical to engage in warfare or to maintain the existing stockpile of bombs in Russia remains unresolved. However, the ethical implications of this argument become starkly apparent in light of international reports. These reports indicate that the bombs were not exclusively used against terrorists, but were predominantly deployed in attacks on hospitals (Ri *et al.* 2019) and civilian targets, resulting in a significant number of civilian casualties (Breau and Joyce 2013). This strategy, while militarily efficient, raises profound moral questions.

Despite these ethical concerns, internal Russian polls over an extended period have shown (Anishchuk 2015) a public acquiescence to the use of existing munitions in Syria. This acceptance stemmed partly from a perception that utilising already stockpiled arms (Obozrevatel 2015) would prevent additional military spending and arms production for the Syrian war (Antidze and Stubbs 2015). Interviewee 25, from government-controlled media, recounted in 2022:

'I visited these Soviet arms warehouses. You can't imagine what they look like. They are so huge that you can only drive around them. Apparently, so much rotting armour needs to be out to use somewhere. Why not shoot some terrorists in Syria? Civil casualties? Well, it's a war. It doesn't happen without casualties. This point is disgusting, but it actually worked. Who could be against killing terrorists 'for free' as we already have the weapons?' (Interviewee 25 2022)

This commentary sheds light on a grim aspect of geopolitical manoeuvring, specifically relating to the utilisation of Soviet-era military stockpiles in contemporary conflicts such as the war in Syria. The interviewee's first-hand observations of these massive arms warehouses underscore the vast quantities of ageing, unused military equipment amassed during the Soviet era. These facilities, so extensive that they must be navigated by vehicle, represent not just remnants of past military might but also a current logistical and strategic challenge.

The decision to deploy these stockpiles in Syria is framed by the interviewee as a practical solution to the problem of excess military inventory. The rationale is straightforward yet stark: using the old armaments to combat perceived terrorist threats in Syria serves a dual purpose. It addresses the issue of surplus while engaging in what is seen as a justifiable military action against terrorism. The interviewee bluntly acknowledges the utilitarian calculus

involved in this decision, implying that the weapons would be better used than left to deteriorate further in storage.

This pragmatic approach is not without its moral and ethical implications, particularly concerning civilian casualties. The interviewee's remarks touch on the inevitable reality of war-related casualties, a point they describe as 'disgusting' yet pragmatically accepted within the context of military operations. This acceptance of civilian casualties as an unavoidable consequence reflects a jaded view of war's harsh realities.

The narrative that these actions are a cost-effective means of dealing with terrorists - since the weapons are already available and would otherwise go to waste - reveals a disturbingly casual attitude towards both human life and the use of military force. The notion of killing terrorists 'for free' using existing armaments simplifies complex moral issues into economic terms, reducing the human costs of conflict to a mere factor in a cost-benefit analysis.

This testimony exposes not just the logistical considerations of military engagement but also the deeper ethical dilemmas faced by those who decide how and where to use lethal force. It highlights the often-cold realities of military strategy, where the availability of resources can drive decisions with far-reaching consequences for peace, security, and international relations. The interviewee's candid acknowledgment of these dynamics offers a rare glimpse into the often-obscured intersections of military pragmatism, ethical considerations, and the human costs of conflict, providing a stark reminder of the complexities and moral burdens of warfare.

The third rationale for Russia's involvement in the Syrian war, deeply intertwined with military propaganda, presents a stark and controversial argument. Russia has consistently projected an image of itself as a peace-loving nation, ostensibly lacking frequent involvement

in armed conflicts. This narrative, while bolstering a specific international image, poses a significant challenge for the Russian military. For the development and refinement of defence capabilities, real-world combat experience is crucial. Testing new weapons and defence systems necessitates actual war conditions, which Russia, due to its limited engagement in conflicts, ostensibly lacks. Consequently, the Syrian war has been framed as an ideal opportunity for Russia to field-test its latest generation of defence technologies. This situation is portrayed as a critical necessity, underpinned by the belief that Russia is perennially at risk from hostile nations eager to undermine its security.

In this context, the Syrian war is not only seen as a valuable testing ground but also as a unique opportunity given Russia's limited involvement in other wars. The need to continuously upgrade and test military capabilities in response to advancements by potential adversaries is a recurring theme in Russian defence strategy. This perspective is extensively documented and analysed in a range of sources, including РИА Новости (2020), Францев (2015), Солопов (2015), Торвар (2017), Максимов (2017), Гальперович (2019), Свободная Пресса (2019), Giles (2017), Cordesman (2000), Kofman and Rojansky (2018), and Interfax (2015, 2017).

This line of argumentation, positing Russia's involvement in the Syrian war as a demonstration of military strength, resonated significantly with the Russian populace. It provided a rationale, albeit tenuous, for Russia's engagement in Syria, simultaneously bolstering the perception of Russian military prowess (РИА Новости 2019). Surveys indicate that the Russian military is a source of national pride (BBC 2019), with a substantial 75% of Russians believing in the ascending might of their military forces (Карина 2017; Дергачев and Нестеркин 2019). This narrative extended beyond the Syrian war, contributing to an increase in President Putin's approval ratings and a surge in patriotic sentiment among Russian

citizens (Коммерсант 2018). An independent media interviewee in 2022 encapsulated this sentiment: 'Our patriotism is always military for some reason. That's why the public liked it when they read, we were testing new weapons in Syria. That's the kind of a superpower we are, with the mightiest army' (Interviewee 20, 2022).

The most compelling argument for engaging in the Syrian war, as promulgated during Putin's two-decade tenure, was rooted in a strategy of fear mongering, a tactic that has proven remarkably effective. Central to this strategy is the constructed threat of 'the West,' a term extensively employed by the Russian government, President Putin, and pro-government media. As explored in Chapter 2, 'the West' is broadly defined to encompass the collective forces of the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union. Tsygankov (2008) notes that this term portrays these entities as a monolithic organism, perceived by Russian political narrative as acting with a unified stance against Russia.

This dichotomous portrayal simplifies the complex international landscape into a binary opposition: Russia versus 'the West.' Notably, this rhetoric fails to acknowledge the nuanced and varied relationships that exist between Russia and individual Western nations, as evidenced by Bagheri and Akbarpour's (2016) analysis. Such an oversimplified depiction overlooks the distinct diplomatic ties and interactions Russia maintains with different Western countries, painting them instead as a singular, undifferentiated entity in the geopolitical arena.

A pivotal argument for Russia's engagement in the Syrian war is encapsulated by the prevalent belief that the West is relentlessly endeavouring to undermine Russia. This narrative is evidenced by the occurrence of approximately 27,000 Russian media articles between 2015 and 2020, featuring the phrase 'the West is constantly trying to destroy Russia.' The notion of

Russia being besieged by adversaries, intent solely on its downfall ('Russia on its knees'), is underscored in an additional 10,500 articles from the same period. This perception of an inescapable conflict with the West underpins the strategy of confronting these challenges on foreign soil, rather than within or near Russian borders. Syria, in this context, is deemed an advantageous location for such a confrontation. This approach is intertwined with the portrayal of Russia as a 'peaceful nation' compelled to defend its sovereignty against Western aggression. The logic follows that if conflict with the West is inevitable, it is preferable to engage in it in Syria, rather than on Russian territory (Мартыненко 2016; Кочергина 2016; Будаев and Тихонов 2016; Тренин 2013; Степанова 2012). This viewpoint aligns with a broader narrative of Russia being encircled by hostile forces (BBC 2015). This framing found resonance with the Russian public, as polls indicated widespread agreement with President Putin's stance. In his own words, Putin (2021) elucidated this position:

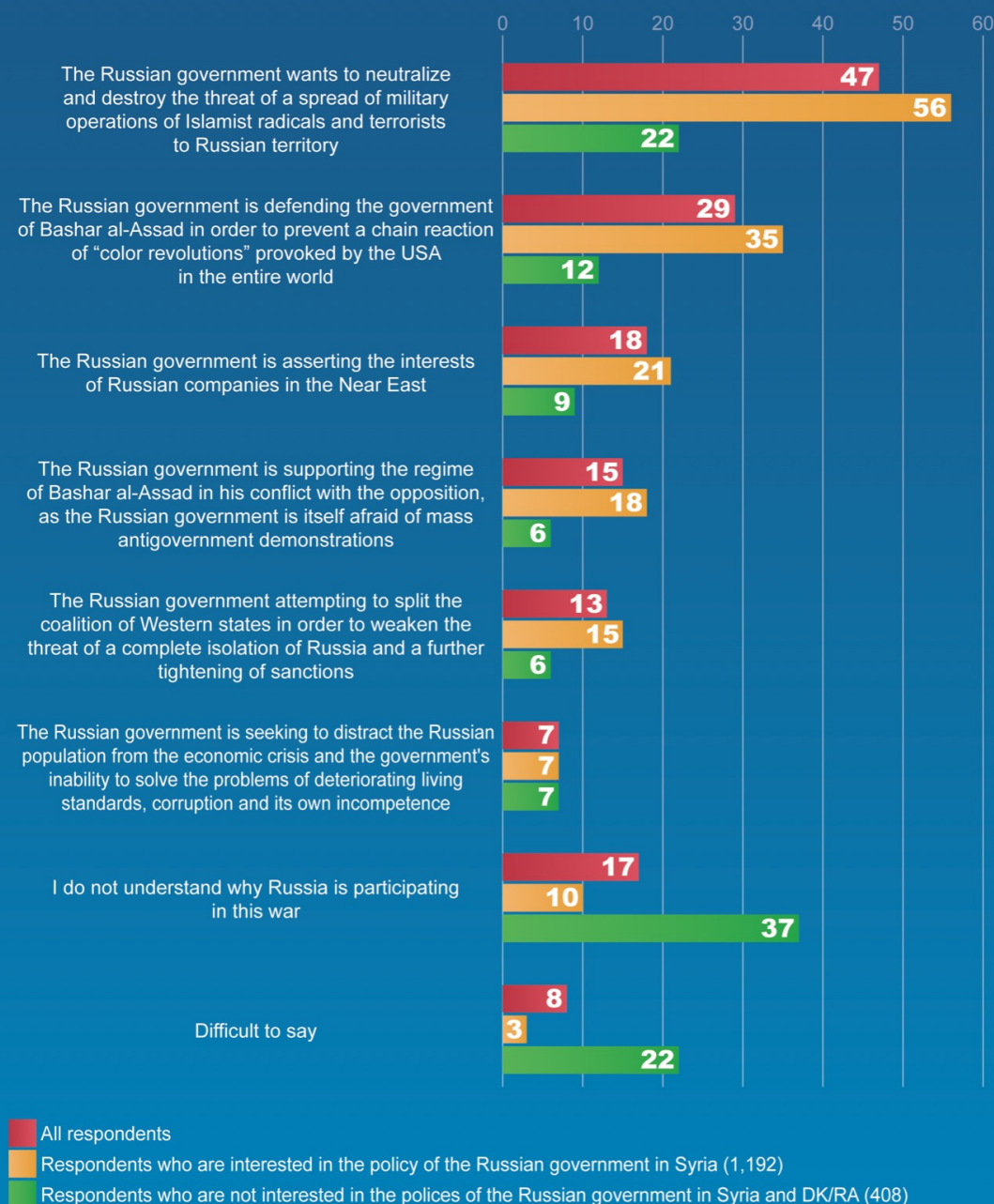
'Protecting Russia from outside harm is my priority. And we see from day to day and year to year, that the potential for other countries to do us harm is only rising. Not only we are facing problems like terrorism on the international arena. Our main problem and main focus is that our counterparts are practising the policy of restraint against Russia. And it goes much farther than the normal comradery and normal competition between countries. It is a very aggressive policy aiming to destroy our evolution, to create security risks for Russia, to provoke internal instability, and to rip away our values. They aim to weaken Russia and establish outside control over it. We know it, we see it, and I am not exaggerating this threat. Russia is the centre of the world's development. Russia is a victim of the informational campaign made to discredit its efforts in peacekeeping. And in any other field, we are leading the world.' (Putin 2021)

The statement made by Vladimir Putin in 2021 encapsulates a comprehensive narrative that has been pivotal in shaping Russian public opinion, especially regarding its foreign policy and military engagements, such as those in Syria.

By 2015, well before Putin's 2021 articulation, this narrative had already significantly shaped Russian public opinion regarding the nation's military objectives in Syria. The framing of the conflict and Russia's involvement therein was heavily influenced by the broader context Putin outlines - where Russia acts as a bastion against global antagonism, upholding not only its own security but also ostensibly maintaining global stability through its actions. This narrative construction has been instrumental in cultivating a domestic environment where Russian military actions, such as the intervention in Syria, are viewed not as optional foreign entanglements but as essential measures for national and global security.

Putin's discourse reflects a strategic use of nationalistic and protective rhetoric to foster public support for Russia's international endeavours. It encapsulates the government's approach to not only defending its actions but also actively crafting a perception of Russia as a besieged yet righteous global leader, continually striving to assert its rightful place on the world stage despite facing unwarranted opposition. This narrative is crucial for understanding the domestic support base for Russia's foreign policies, particularly its military involvement in conflicts like Syria, where it positions itself as both a peacemaker and a stalwart defender against international aggression.

In Your Opinion, Which Goals Is the Russian Government Pursuing by Its Involvement in the War in Syria? (multiple answers possible)



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 23-26 October 2015, N = 1600
<http://www.levada.ru/2015/10/29/uchastie-rossii-v-voennoj-operatsii-v-sirii/>, published on 29 October 2015

Figure 3.4: Russia's goals in Syria Casula, Philipp (2015)

Russia's military operation in Syria, initiated in September 2015, has been framed by the Russian government as both a strategic necessity and a moral imperative. The intervention, while controversial internationally, has been presented domestically as essential for multiple reasons, and it yields various benefits according to the Russian perspective:

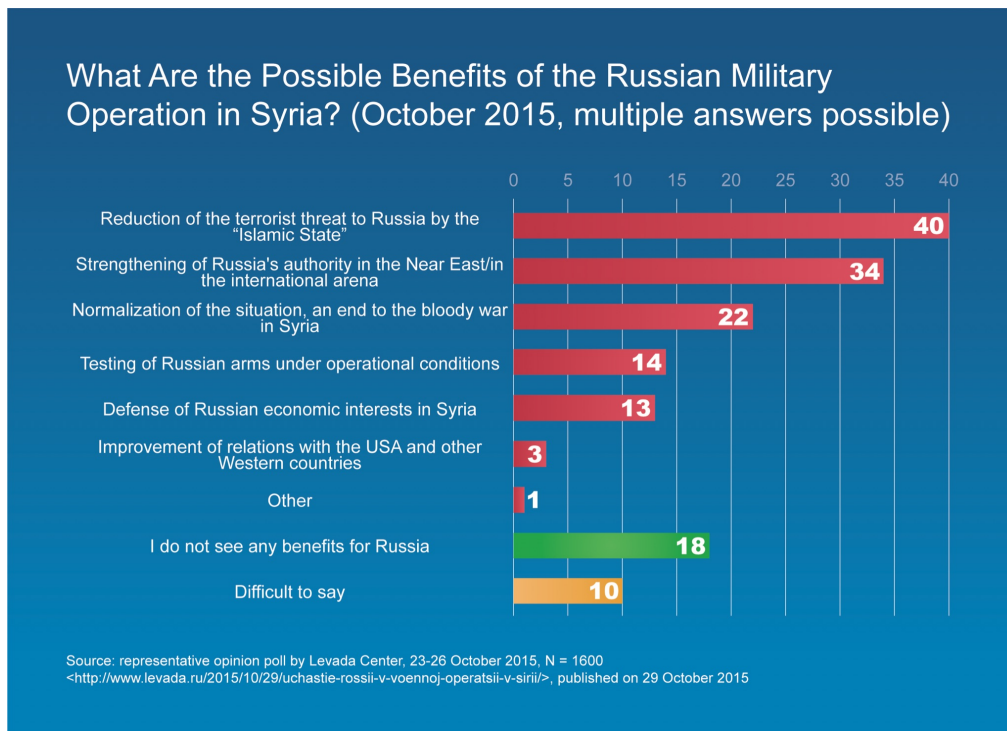


Figure 3.5: What are the possible benefits of Russia's operation in Syria? Casula, Philipp (2015)

The Russian public's perception of the war in Syria as being more beneficial than harmful for Russia is a multifaceted conclusion shaped by a combination of government narrative, strategic outcomes, and nationalistic sentiment. This perspective is deeply intertwined with the broader context of Russia's geopolitical ambitions and its portrayal in the media, which highlights several dimensions through which the conflict is seen as advantageous:

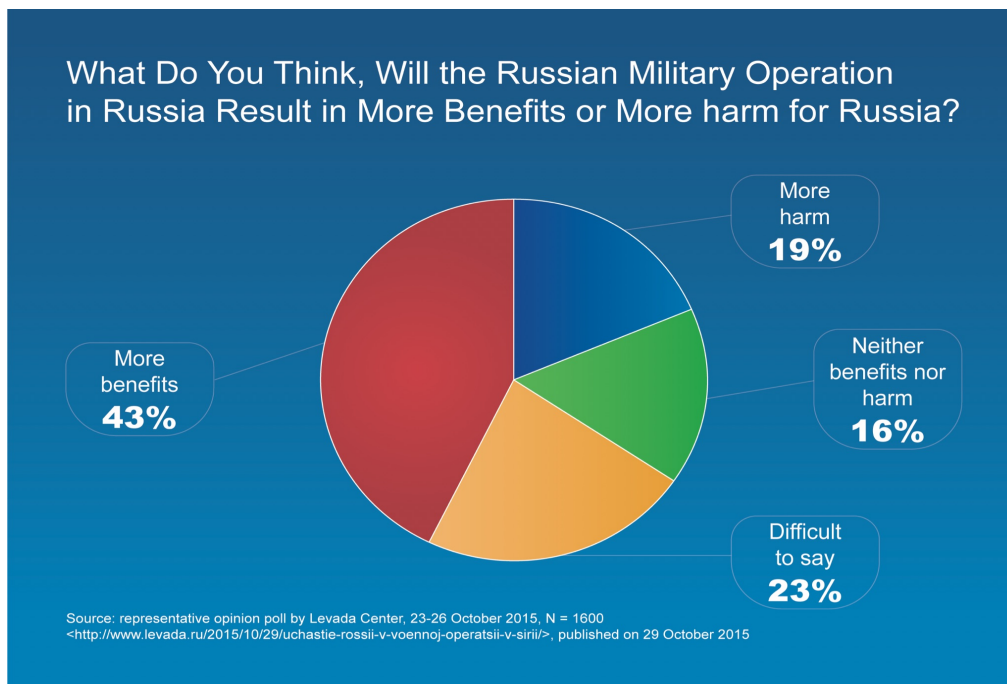


Figure 3.6: Will there be more benefits or harm from Russian operation in Syria?

Casula, Philipp (2015)

4.4 Wagner Group, the Russian private military company in Syria

‘The Wagner Group is a Russian private military company that has been active in Ukraine and Syria. In early 2018, reports of the combat deaths of over 200 Wagner personnel in Eastern Syria shed an important light on the grey zone of Russian military operations, in which such paramilitary forces are deployed. Meanwhile, Wagner’s ongoing expansion across the globe is providing key lessons for understanding the evolution and, likely, transformation of this type of organisation in the future. Given Moscow’s reliance on non-linear means of warfare and the frequent desire to maintain ‘plausible deniability’ in its operations abroad, exploring and analysing the Wagner Group offers a deeper insight into Russia’s role and modus operandi in conflicts across the world, especially when using Private Military Companies.’(Sukhankin 2018)

The initial euphoria surrounding Russia's military prowess and achievements in Syria, akin to the situation in Crimea, was not sustainable and eventually diminished (Железнова 2016). This shift in perception arose unexpectedly, suggesting a possible oversight by the Russian government. National media, as Kofman and Rojansky (2018) observe, consistently omitted reports of Russian military casualties. Consequently, societal discourse largely ignored these losses (BBC 2017), under the assumption that a country at war would inevitably suffer casualties (Пономарев *et al.* 2019). This absence of discussion was further reinforced by both government-controlled and opposition media, which refrained from reporting casualties due to the military's non-disclosure of such information.

Surprisingly, the change in perception originated from an unlikely source: small regional newspapers with limited circulations (Lenta.ru 2018). These publications, deeply integrated into the social fabric of local communities, focused on news directly impacting the residents of small towns and villages. Their close connection to local events made them more responsive to military casualties. When a soldier from a specific region fell in Syria, it was challenging to conceal their death in a small community where everyone knew each other. The visibility of funerals and the knowledge of the deceased's circumstances became a conduit for information that larger media outlets had neglected to report (Rusvesna 2020).

Initial reports on the deaths of Russian soldiers in Syria and their subsequent repatriation were first covered by regional newspapers, garnering little attention until opposition media, such as Meduza in 2020, highlighted these underreported stories. Interviewee 26, representing the independent media in 2022, shed light on this oversight:

'We're talking about regional newspapers with a circulation of 20,000 copies. Naturally, no one except the locals ever read them. It turned out that the ministry of defence said there were no losses, yet in the regions there were funerals every day, and these funerals were covered by the local media. Independent federal media paid attention to it and started re-publishing information from these sources, investigative journalists started using these regional funerals' statistics to try and estimate the real Russian losses in Syria. It turned out to be highly effective.' (Interviewee 26 2022)

This quote offers a profound insight into the significant role regional newspapers in Russia played in revealing the actual human cost of Russia's military involvement in Syria, contrasting sharply with official narratives from central authorities like the Ministry of Defence. These regional publications, though modest in circulation and typically confined to local readerships, became pivotal in shaping a broader understanding of the conflict's impact on Russian communities.

The Ministry of Defence might have publicly claimed minimal or no casualties, yet the reality on the ground, as reported by these local outlets, told a starkly different story. The coverage of frequent funerals for soldiers in these regional outlets provided tangible, poignant evidence of the ongoing human toll of the conflict.

This local reporting soon caught the attention of larger, independent federal media outlets, which began to see a discrepancy between the official reports and the events being reported at the local level. In response, these national media entities started to re-publish information from the regional newspapers, thus amplifying the stories of loss and sacrifice that

were initially confined to smaller audiences. This broader dissemination played a crucial role in challenging the official accounts and bringing the true costs of the war into the national conversation.

The detailed local reports of funerals provided data points for investigative journalists who were sceptical of official tallies of military casualties. Armed with information from these regional sources, journalists began to compile and analyse these scattered reports to estimate the real magnitude of Russian losses in Syria. This grassroots level of investigative journalism turned out to be highly effective in piecing together a more accurate picture of the conflict's human cost, contradicting the sanitised accounts from government sources.

As a result of these revelations, reports of Russian casualties slowly permeated the broader public discourse regarding the Syrian war. This growing awareness fuelled resentment towards the war. The government, as documented by Соколов (2017), resorted to rather ineffectual measures to quell this disapproval. Regional authorities received directives, as reported by Назарова and Барабанов (2018), to engage in private dialogues with the families of the deceased soldiers, aiming to prevent them from speaking to the media, a strategy further corroborated by Meduza (2020).

The Russian media faced stringent restrictions on discussing the circumstances surrounding soldiers' deaths in Syria, a policy outlined by Бадрутдинова (2020). Notably, it was prohibited to record the nature of these deaths on tombstones. This censorship extended to the point where acknowledging a soldier's death in Syria, or even identifying them as a soldier, was forbidden (Meduza 2016). Interviewee 26 from the independent media in 2022 sheds light on the journalistic response to these restrictions:

'It all came to a point when they stopped writing on the tombstones that the person died in Syria. Then our journalist investigators started paying attention to all funerals of men of military age and contacted the relatives to verify the cause of death. It became more difficult to work, but not entirely impossible.'
(Interviewee 26 2022)

The account given by Interviewee illuminates a significant moment in Russian journalism concerning the coverage of military casualties during the conflict in Syria. As government efforts to obscure the true cost of military operations intensified, journalists faced mounting challenges in reporting accurately on Russian losses.

This alteration in tombstone inscriptions represented a deliberate move by the government to minimise public awareness and scrutiny of the human toll of the Syrian conflict. It was likely intended to maintain morale and support for the military operations abroad by reducing the visible impact of the conflict on Russian families and communities. However, rather than deterring investigative efforts, this change prompted journalists to adapt their approaches, demonstrating the resilience and critical role of investigative journalism in authoritarian regimes. Families of the deceased were reportedly offered substantial benefits to dissuade them from speaking to the media, a practice documented by Belyaev (2019). The responsibility for managing these affairs was delegated to regional governments, which often failed to address them adequately. The federal government's lack of engagement with this issue led to rapid and significant repercussions. To fully comprehend the implications of these developments, an understanding of the overarching structure of the Russian military is essential.

The Russian army maintains a conscription system, as Thornton (2013) notes, mandating that all men over 18 are eligible for military service, barring certain exemptions. These exemptions primarily include severe illness or enrolment in higher education, although the latter typically only defers service. Notably, service deferment often hinges on the presence of a military department within the university, allowing students to fulfil their military obligations concurrently with their studies. This system disproportionately affects those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as Aliyev (2014) points out. Those unable to afford higher education, or without means to secure a medical exemption, are more likely to be conscripted. Consequently, this policy tends to draft individuals from poorer families into the Russian military.

The implications of this conscription policy extend to active conflict zones. For instance, at the time under discussion, draftees, including young soldiers aged 18, could be deployed to war zones such as Syria (Уралинформбюро 2018; Марченко 2013). This situation predominantly affected recruits from Russia's most impoverished regions, creating a 'perfect storm' of socio-political consequences. The regional press in these areas, often less influenced by federal control and more detached from Moscow, was more likely to report on the deaths of local soldiers in Syria. This coverage, as Lenta.ru (2018) indicates, increased the visibility of these incidents in public discourse about the Syrian war. Additionally, the government faced challenges in managing the families of deceased soldiers, particularly in providing information about the circumstances of their deaths. These families, already burdened by economic disadvantages, were often left without clear accounts of their loved ones' fates.

In an attempt to suppress information regarding military casualties, the Russian government reportedly failed to officially acknowledge many soldiers as having died in active conflict. This not only inflicted immeasurable grief on the families but also deprived them of substantial financial benefits due to this deliberate misclassification. According to the legislation of the Russian Federation (1998), families of soldiers killed in the line of duty are entitled to considerable privileges. These include housing assistance for families living in substandard conditions, a pension for the widow until the youngest child reaches 18, and preferential admission for children to colleges and universities. However, these benefits are contingent upon the official recognition of the soldier's death as having occurred in the line of duty. Interviewee 3 from an independent media outlet highlighted the gravity of this situation in 2022:

'The further we dug, the more difficult it became to conceal information about the deceased. Then the authorities resorted to yet another immoral act. These soldiers were not recognised as soldiers. They weren't counted in the ministry of defence's statistics, and their relatives didn't get any compensation for their losses.' (Interviewee 3, 2022)

The account provided by Interviewee offers a compelling insight into the escalating challenges journalists faced as they delved deeper into the investigation of Russian military casualties in Syria, and the subsequent measures taken by authorities to obscure these losses.

This strategy of non-recognition reflects a broader pattern of manipulation and control typical in authoritarian regimes, particularly in how they handle sensitive information related to military engagements. The denial of official status to deceased soldiers serves multiple government objectives: it keeps official casualty figures artificially low, thus maintaining

public support for the conflict by portraying it as less costly than it truly is; it reduces the financial burden on the state by withholding entitlements to the families; and it stifles dissent by complicating the efforts of journalists and activists trying to hold the government accountable for its actions. The consequences of these governmental tactics are profound, both ethically and practically. Ethically, they represent a severe abrogation of duty by the state to its citizens - soldiers and their families - who are made to bear the ultimate cost of state decisions without acknowledgement or support. Practically, these actions undermine trust in the government, as the manipulation of casualty statistics and the denial of rightful recognition and compensation can lead to public disillusionment and anger once such practices are brought to light. Ultimately, the investigative work of journalists in uncovering these practices highlights the essential role of the media in challenging governmental authority and striving for transparency and accountability.

In a bid to control information about casualties, the government, as reported by Lenta.ru (2019), began denying privileges to the families of soldiers who fell in Syria. Despite the government's efforts at control, it proved nearly impossible to prevent these families from speaking to the press, leading to widespread public awareness of the issue as reported by various sources including Коммерсант, Крутов, and Юшков in 2019. This exposure contributed to a noticeable decline in public approval of both the war and President Vladimir Putin's handling of it, as indicated by a Meduza poll in 2016.

As public disapproval threatened to intensify, the government reportedly found a subtle yet effective solution to mitigate this discontent through the establishment of private military companies, the most notable being the Wagner Group. Interviewee 4, another independent media representative, remarked in 2022,

'I'd like to point your attention to the fact that even the name of this private army refers to fascism which is so respected by Putin's highest ranks. During the war in Syria, we somehow missed it, and yet it became a foreboding of what is going on in Ukraine now.' (Interviewee 4, 2022)

This approach had multifaceted implications. Initially, the private company was comprised entirely of contractors, a strategy that necessitated voluntary participation and contractual agreement. This structure effectively reduced casualties among the official Russian military forces, particularly drafted personnel, who were predominantly reassigned away from the conflict's flashpoints. Instead, many were stationed at the Russian air base in Syria and other locations perceived as less perilous (Юшков 2017). Another significant aspect was the company's remuneration policy. The salaries offered to these private military contractors were considerably high by Russian standards, particularly appealing to individuals from economically disadvantaged regions. The monthly earnings of a soldier in this private company could equate to the average annual income in their home region, making the opportunity to join the company an attractive option for providing financial support to their families (РИА 'ФедералПресс' 2018). However, a notable drawback was the company's status outside the official Russian military framework. Consequently, if a contractor were to be killed in action, they would not be recognised as a fallen soldier in the official sense, and their families would be ineligible for the corresponding benefits. Many families contended that these benefits would be unattainable regardless, given the Russian government's alleged efforts to downplay military casualties in Syria. Public perception suggested that the loss of these benefits was somewhat mitigated by the substantial income earned by contractors while in service (Сирийский 2018). Interviewee 28, from a government-controlled media outlet, disclosed the initial media strategy regarding these contractors in 2022:

'At first, the instruction for government channels was not to publicise the work of the Wagners. Everyone was afraid that the people wouldn't like it, that a de facto creation of a private army would violate the Constitution. Yet after a certain period, public surveys revealed that the people didn't care, and we started making more stories on that. Seemed like a win-win situation: they were contractors, military professionals making a lot of money, while a regular draftee was safe.' (Interviewee 28 2022)

This quote reveals a nuanced approach to media management and public perception regarding the Wagner Group. The government's initial reticence highlights a sensitive balancing act: they needed the operational advantages offered by private contractors like the Wagner Group but were also mindful of the potential constitutional and ethical questions their acknowledgement might raise among the public. The existence of a private army operating in parallel with the national military could raise significant legal and moral concerns, potentially stirring controversy regarding the state's adherence to its own laws and the implications for state accountability and military oversight.

The portrayal of Wagner contractors in the media as 'military professionals making a lot of money' compared to regular draftees, who were implicitly framed as being kept out of harm's way, helped to further mitigate potential public concerns. This narrative framed the use of Wagner mercenaries as a practical solution that both leveraged skilled professionals in conflict zones and preserved the safety of conventional soldiers, thus presenting a win-win scenario for the state and the public. It suggests a strategic commodification of military service where risks are outsourced to willing, compensated professionals, thereby keeping the regular military forces in a less direct line of conflict.

This evolving approach to the Wagner Group illustrates a broader theme in state-controlled media and public management strategies: the careful construction of narratives to align with constitutional norms and public sentiment, while also fulfilling pragmatic military and political objectives. It highlights how governments may use media as a tool to shape public perception to accommodate and justify their strategies, ensuring that controversial practices are normalised or accepted through strategic communication. This case also sheds light on the complexities of modern warfare, where private armies and contractors play increasingly public roles, challenging traditional norms about military engagement and state responsibility.

In Russia, the prevalence of corruption within the government does not diminish with distance from Moscow; often, it intensifies due to diminished oversight. This reality manifests starkly in the context of private military companies (PMCs). Individuals, often deprived of their wages, are drawn to work for PMCs despite delayed or partial payment, as these positions offer significantly higher income than available alternatives in their regions (Хазов-Касина 2018). This economic incentive leads many families to consider employment in PMCs as a viable option.

At the federal level, however, the formation of PMCs like the Wagner group presents legal and constitutional challenges. The Russian Constitution explicitly prohibits the creation of private military organisations (Астахов 2018), rendering the establishment of such companies a direct violation of the law. Despite this, the opposition's critique of these organisations, such as those voiced by Sukhankin (2018) and Marten (2019), holds little sway in Russia due to their limited power and influence. An interviewee from the independent media in 2023 highlighted a critical aspect of this issue: 'Apparently, Putin understood that the vast

and corrupt Russian army is no reform material and just created a standalone army for himself – the Wagners' (Interviewee 8, 2023). This statement suggests that the creation of PMCs like the Wagner group may be a strategic response to the inefficiencies and corruption within the official military apparatus.

The existence of entities such as the Wagner group serves a dual purpose for the Russian government. On the one hand, as reported by Meduza (2018), it allows Putin to claim plausible deniability regarding certain military actions in Syria, asserting that these are the undertakings of private entities rather than state actors. On the other hand, it enables the Russian government to maintain the narrative of minimal Russian military casualties in foreign conflicts, as losses within PMCs are not officially counted as military casualties (BBC 2019). This approach allows for a distancing from direct involvement while still exerting influence in international affairs.

The primary contention against entities like Wagner companies stems from their inherent illegality. This aspect could be ostensibly dismissed, given that the Russian Constitution has historically held limited practical influence, reducing this argument to a largely theoretical stance (Vlasenko 2019). However, the reality of Wagner's operations and its implications cannot be overlooked so easily.

A more critical issue lies in Wagner's operational autonomy. Unlike conventional military units, Wagner does not operate under the direct supervision of the Russian Ministry of Defence. This detachment from official military oversight means that all directives issued to Wagner are conducted through informal channels. This structure not only eschews legal and military protocol but also positions Wagner in direct competition with the Ministry of Defence

due to its independent power structure (Sukhankin 2019; Sukhankin 2019). Such a dynamic raises significant concerns about accountability and the potential for conflict within the Russian military apparatus. Putin had to explain:

‘Let me tell you something about the Wagner group and what people do in those groups. First of all, everything has to be in the scope of the law. So, by law, it would be very unwise of me, of us, to ban the Wagner group or any other private security organisations. And I do not think it would be wise to do it. Because you journalists would be the first ones to start covering the protest of people who would be writing hundreds of petitions, demanding to reinstate this labour market of private security organisations. There are around one million Russian citizens who are involved in private security. And if the Wagner group is breaking the law in any way, the Prosecutor's Office should by all means investigate. And let me tell you something about the rumours that there is the Wagner group and similar groups operating outside of Russia. Let me repeat this one more time. If they are not breaking any Russian laws, they have a right to work the way they see fit and push their own business interests in any place on this planet.’ (Putin 2018)

This practice of creating competing administrative structures is a notable strategy in Russian governance, emblematic of President Putin's approach. For instance, in the Russian judicial system, there exists both an official Prosecutor's Office and the Investigative Committee, each performing overlapping functions and engaged in continual rivalry (Jlira 2019). Political analysts interpret this as a deliberate tactic by Putin, fostering what he perceives as beneficial competition to prevent any single subordinate from gaining excessive power or autonomy (Meduza 2016).

A parallel strategy was employed in Syria, particularly evident in the formation of private military companies alongside official military forces. This approach not only created duplicative power structures but also escalated stakes, with human lives directly impacted. In Syria, the official Russian military, accountable to the Minister of Defence and, ultimately, to Putin, coexists with private entities like the Wagner Group. This situation complicates accountability under international laws and conventions, of which Russia remains a signatory (Mullins 2011). According to Interviewee 27 from the independent media in 2022, this duplicity led to internal conflicts:

'The Wagners and the ministry of defence started fighting, first quietly, then using the mass media. It brought some perks to the opposition media, as more information leaks emerged. Government media didn't care, they just broadcast how we defeated the terrorists once again, and that's the end of the story. Who should the victory be attributed to – the ministry or the Wagners? The bosses will decide that.' (Interviewee 27 2022)

In addition to state military forces, a second key actor in the conflict is the privatised military sector, epitomised by entities such as the Wagner Group. This company operates in a nebulous zone of accountability, with unclear official reporting lines. However, substantial evidence suggests a direct link between the Wagner Group and the highest levels of Russian government, including President Putin himself (Marten 2019; Rondeaux 2019; Bukkvoll and Østensen 2020; Sukhankin 2019). This relationship is further complicated by reported tensions with the Russian Ministry of Defence, evidenced by instances where Wagner's actions on the battlefield directly contradicted the Ministry's directives, leading to strategic dissonance and heightened risks (NEWSru.com 2018; Маетная 2018). Notably, there have been instances

where Wagner personnel have reportedly abandoned their assigned positions or ignored orders from official military command, particularly when such orders conflicted with the company's primary objective in Syria: the lucrative control of oil reserves (Тумакова 2018).

The third issue with these militarised companies is intrinsically linked to their *raison d'être*. Initially established to reduce Russian military casualties and secure financial gains through oil reserves, these companies experienced a shift in their operational environment with the election of U.S. President Donald Trump. Trump's approach marked a departure from his predecessors, characterised by a readiness to act on threats of military engagement. This change significantly altered the operational landscape for Russian military endeavours in Syria, as Trump's administration demonstrated a willingness to engage militarily when Russian forces repositioned, directly challenging the previously unaccountable stance of Russian military activities in the region (Callaghan 2018).'

Contrasting with Obama's approach, Trump's administration took decisive actions that predominantly affected privatised military companies, notably the Wagner Group. As detailed in Chapter 2, independent reports indicated that a single U.S. attack resulted in around to 300 casualties among Russian military contractors (Ридус 2018; NEWSru.com 2018). These individuals, while not official soldiers, were Russian citizens whose deaths brought significant grief and economic hardship to families in Russia's economically challenged regions. The loss of these contractors, who had been primary income earners, left their families without compensation and fostered growing resentment towards the Russian government. This incident illuminated the challenges and public opinion issues surrounding Russia's use of private military companies.

The status of these contractors exacerbated the families' plight, as they were ineligible for the state benefits typically provided to families of fallen soldiers. This distinction underscored their vulnerability and contributed to a renewed and sustained public disapproval of Russia's involvement in the Syrian war. Subsequent polls reflected this change in sentiment; by 2017, only 30% of Russians supported continued assistance to Assad (Flammini 2017). This shift in public opinion is further elucidated by a statement from Interviewee 29, an independent media representative, in 2022:

‘When Americans shot the Wagners, nobody wrote about it in the first place. Russian journalists found out about it from the US media. Only then they went on to confirm the information and everything checked out right. I know it for a fact that several heads of the government media asked for instructions on how to cover this event. They were preparing to spark up propaganda hell against the US, yet the presidential administration delivered a very clear instruction: first, do not make any stories on this and do not talk about it; later, when it was impossible to conceal any longer, not to mention under any circumstances that it was the Americans. Terrorists – yes, Americans – no. Why? Because how can you explain to the people that the great Russian soldiers were killed in Syria by the Americans, and Putin didn't respond to it in any way? (Interviewee 29 2022)

The quote sheds light on the fact that this strategic silence and later obfuscation of the facts reflect broader themes in how states manage sensitive information, particularly in incidents involving national pride and international rivalry. The Russian government's handling of the media narrative post-incident reveals a calculated approach to information control, aimed at maintaining a facade of strength and invulnerability. By directing the media not to focus on the American role in the attack, the administration sought to minimise the potential domestic

backlash and preserve the image of Russia as a formidable global power unchallenged by external forces, especially by a rival power such as the United States.

The government's response also highlights the challenges faced by journalists in authoritarian contexts, where state directives heavily influence media narratives and limit the scope of independent journalism.

The incident involving the Wagner Group and American forces, and the subsequent Russian media response, provides a stark example of the intersection between national security, public perception, and media control. It underscores the lengths to which a state may go to protect its narrative, manage its international image, and control the information landscape in situations where national pride and international relations could be significantly impacted.

4.5 Palmyra

The discourse on Russian military prowess in Syria (Finch III 2018) began to wane in its impact on public opinion and Putin's ratings. In response, Russia shifted its focus, seeking a tangible victory to showcase. This shift led to a strategic redirection from targeting opposition-controlled areas to engaging in a concerted military campaign against ISIS, culminating in the recapture of Palmyra, a city renowned for its ancient heritage (Plets 2017).

This military success was not merely promoted as a triumph over ISIS; it was also framed as a humanitarian victory, preserving historic UNESCO-protected sites in Palmyra (Илгза 2018). The Russian media extensively covered the event, featuring a military parade and the portrayal of grateful Palmyra residents. The narrative was further embellished with a concert by Sergei Roldugin, a renowned cellist and close Putin associate implicated in the

Panama Papers (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2017). Roldugin's participation was symbolically linked to Putin's accomplishments.

However, this narrative of victory was undermined when ISIS briefly retook Palmyra, leading to multiple instances of capture and recapture. Russian media, each time, broadcasted these events as if they were the first liberation of Palmyra, conspicuously omitting any mention of previous 'liberations.' Notably, after the initial event, Roldugin did not return for subsequent celebrations (Cuneo *et al.* 2016). According to Interviewee 12 from government-controlled media in 2023, the Palmyra story was emblematic of Russian media practices:

'The Palmyra story was very exemplary. There were instructions to bloat a huge story out of the event. And how can you do that if it's, in fact, a small, undistinguished town whose whereabouts and landmarks are unknown to an average Russian person? For that reason, we were instructed not only to deliver the news of Palmyra's liberation, but also explain in detail the vast importance of this town for Syria and the whole world. We bloated the story even more with every following newscast, so Palmyra almost turned into the most important Syrian city. It was funny.' (Interviewee 12 2023)

The Russian media's coverage of the liberation of Palmyra exemplifies a key technique mandated by government-controlled media for events of interest to President Putin, notably the 'future tense' news approach as outlined by Latynina (2017). This method dictates avoiding references to past events, focusing instead on forward-looking statements. Latynina (2017) observes:

'Have you noticed that we are always treated to future tense news by the governmental media and the government itself? The idea is that all the news is always in the future tense, like Russia will do something. Russia will open, Russia will prevail, Russian economy will recover, Russia will become a leader. Somehow it never does. And not only it never does, but we never hear them retract any of this news. So, it becomes a game of wishful thinking that is never achieved, never retracted. And it is just becoming one of the instruments of the Russian political system. The Russian government never talks about the present. We always concentrate on Russia's past or Russia's future.' (Латынина 2017)

In this context, each recapture of Palmyra was portrayed in the Russian media as a significant victory, deliberately omitting the fact that its repeated recapture implied previous losses to ISIS. This narrative persisted over months, with various sources (Калинина, Федотова and Шелковников 2016; Meduza 2016; ЗвездаТВ 2016; Петров 2016; Жаворонков 2016; Петров 2017; Дубинин 2020) repeatedly broadcasting the 'breaking news' of Palmyra's liberation. Interviewee 6, from government-controlled media in 2022, shared insights into this repetitive cycle:

'Our editors learnt about losing Palmyra only after the message had arrived of Palmyra's liberation. Our editors exchanged looks and realised they'd already heard it somewhere. It turned into a joke: Russia liberates Palmyra every time it's your shift. Work-wise it was easier since we didn't have to explain what kind of city it was once again. We already had all the headlines, so we just edited them and put them back to the broadcast.' (Interviewee 6, 2022)

The Interviewee shared insights into how Russian media covered the recurrent capture and recapture of Palmyra, Syria. This anecdote points to a broader issue within media coverage of prolonged conflicts, where the repetition of certain types of news can lead to a routine treatment of significant events, potentially diminishing the public's understanding of the complexities and human costs involved. It also reflects the challenges that journalists and editors face in keeping the public engaged and informed about distant conflicts that have complex, recurring developments.

4.6 Russian Orthodox Church and the Syrian war

The instrumentalisation of the Russian Orthodox Church by the Russian media propaganda apparatus is not a novel phenomenon (Батищев, Беляев, and Линченко 2018). Post-Soviet Union, under Boris Yeltsin's presidency, there was a concerted effort to discover a unifying national idea that could resonate with the Russian populace. The Church emerged as a prominent symbol in this search, gaining popularity and influence, a trend that not only persisted into the next generation but also found resonance with President Putin (Zasanska 2019). Willerton (2017) notes various attempts during this period to incorporate the Russian Orthodox Church into this national narrative. However, these efforts were largely unsuccessful due to several factors. Russia's historical multi-religious identity, encompassing 12 different faiths, and the predominantly Muslim composition of its most problematic regions, posed significant challenges. Also, the actual level of religious adherence among Russians did not align with the envisioned centrality of the Orthodox Church (Морозов 2017).

Historically, the Soviet Union's relationship with the Orthodox Church and its followers ranged from persecution to indifference (Belikova 2019). Post-Soviet Russia did not witness

an immediate revival in church attendance. Despite government encouragement of religious practices (Anderson 2007) and the construction of new churches at a rate of over 900 annually (Сухарев 2014; Новин 2020), core believer numbers remained stagnant. In contemporary Russia, President Putin is often depicted as a devout Orthodox Christian, regularly appearing in church services during major religious holidays and referencing his faith in speeches. This portrayal extends to his close associates. The state's promotion of the Orthodox Church is evident, yet, as Christy (2018) points out, the Church's influence appears largely symbolic, lacking substantial power or impact on the populace. The portrayal of influential Russian government and business figures as religious adherents has emerged as a symbolic rite of passage. Agadjanian (2017) notes that ostensible religiosity significantly increases access to government grants and positions. However, this trend does not necessarily foster increased religious sentiment among the general populace. Contrarily, as more mistrusted, and disliked elite figures adopt a religious veneer, public motivation to embrace or exhibit religiousness diminishes.

Despite this, the strategy of utilising the Orthodox Church to garner public support for specific agendas persists. In the context of the Syrian war, the Church has been instrumentalised as a key tool, although the effectiveness of these efforts in gaining public approval remains unverified. Adamsky (2019) provides numerous examples of the Church's endeavours to rally support for the Syrian war. An interviewee from 2022 encapsulates this dynamic:

'The church in Russia is always leveraged for a good cause, i.e., to sell a new government idea to the Russian person. And in terms of the TV picture, it's very impressive – beautiful garments, grandeur, all very reputable. The TV picture turned out to be really good. And the church likes it as well – otherwise, the

state spends so much on it with zero outcome. This way, there is at least a feeling that this investment provides returns. So let the priest go bless the war.'

(Interviewee 30 2022)

The Russian Orthodox Church maintains a belief, fervently disseminated among its followers, that Russia's involvement in Syria represents a divine mandate. This perspective, upheld as not merely virtuous but sanctified, is perpetuated by media portrayals of Russian priests in Syria blessing soldiers, a ritual seen positively by both the Russian political elite and the public, regardless of their views on the war itself (Совгиря 2017). Hegumen Arseniy Sokolov, an official of the Russian Orthodox Church, elucidates this stance:

'The Russian Orthodox Church always has been and always will be for the war in Syria, as this war is war against terrorism. Those terrorists are trying to prevail on the Syrian territories and to establish the Muslim caliphate on those territories. They are covering their actions by the name of Allah. And they are spreading evil among people who are not Muslims, or not radical enough Muslims, as a way they understand the Quran. I'd say – misunderstand the Quran. So, all that hatred towards Christians in Syria is initiated by terrorists. And there are many different organisations fighting in Syria against the current regime. Some of them call themselves opposition and they are radicals. They are terrorists. It does not matter if they are against the official Syrian government in a soft way, or hard way. They are there to oppose the locally elected Syrian government and the Russian Orthodox Church would never agree to that.' (Соколов 2018)

However, ethical concerns arise when Russian Orthodox priests extend their blessings to military ordnance. Each Russian military unit in Syria is assigned a priest, mirroring practices of other military forces such as the United States in Afghanistan (Carver *et al.* 2014). While the presence of clergy in military units is not inherently controversial, the Russian Orthodox Church's practice of blessing bombs becomes contentious. This ritual involves priests, in full religious attire, sanctifying bombs with holy water, an act that is extensively covered by both government-controlled and opposition media due to its striking visual and symbolic potency (MSKagency 2015; Interfax 2020; Lenta.ru 2020). Such practices raise profound questions about the intersection of religion, ethics, and warfare, reflecting a complex and potentially problematic confluence of religious belief and military action.



(cont.ws 2022)

The cessation of a disturbing tradition within the Russian Orthodox Church, where bombs were blessed by its priests, became a subject of media scrutiny and internal discussion in 2020. The press secretary of the Russian Orthodox Church disclosed that deliberations were

underway regarding the continuation of this practice (BBC 2019). Debates among church officials about discontinuing this tradition were reported (Файстова 2019), yet the practice persisted throughout Russia's active involvement in the Syrian war (MSKagency 2015). The widespread media coverage of priests blessing bombs, which were used not only against ISIS but also resulted in civilian casualties in Syria, raises profound questions about its impact on Russian public opinion. Despite the gravity of this act, it did not seem to incite significant public outcry. Interviewee 31 from government-controlled media in 2022 vividly describes this phenomenon:

'What don't you like? The priest is very picturesque, he blesses the bomb, he blesses the soldiers. A perfect picture. The programme editor is happy. A great newscast was made. The people will watch and cheer. We are Russians, God is with us.' (Interviewee 31, 2022)

In considering the effect of these televised blessings on various public images, it appears they did not detrimentally impact President Putin, the Russian Orthodox Church, or Russia's military engagement in Syria. This observation is supported by media analysis (TOL 2016), suggesting that these rituals, at the very least, did not harm Putin's public perception.

4.7 Chemical weapons

'Let me stress this, neither Bashar al-Assad nor Russia ever used chemical weapons in Syria. First of all, Syria does not have any chemical weapons. And we have disposed of our arsenal in accordance with the international agreements we've signed. We also are aware of a huge political misinformation campaign that the West has launched, with the help of terrorist organisations in Syria,

aiming to frame the Syrian government and subsequently Russia by staging chemical attacks and blaming the Syrian government for executing those attacks. We know about all these efforts to discredit the Syrian government. And all I can say is, well, girls, it is boring to watch. You tell me you are sure that all those dead bodies are the consequence of the Syrian government actions, but that is not so. I know for a fact that all those casualties are either staged or are courtesy of the opposition forces. Terrorists commit those crimes specifically to blame Assad and us. I am absolutely sure that there were no dead bodies, or if there were dead bodies, which happens in war, it was not the fault of the Syrian government. And let me tell you that there was no proper investigation conducted in terms of the chemical weapons usage. Russia and Assad got blamed just for the sake of it.' (Putin 2018)

The media's portrayal of the use of chemical weapons by Assad and the Russian military in Syria generally adhered to the typical narrative structures observed in war reporting. Evidence of chemical weapon use, often reported by multiple independent sources, consistently indicated Russian involvement, not only in military engagements but also in attacks against civilians. However, Russia consistently refuted these allegations, dismissing the presented evidence as unfounded (Blix 2016; Brown 2015).

Despite the seeming uniformity in reporting, two aspects render the coverage of chemical attacks distinct. The first involves the Russian government's response to a high-profile incident: the botched poisoning of ex-KGB operative Skripal in Salisbury, UK (David 2018). This operation, marked by its lack of sophistication and widely documented by CCTV footage, resulted in significant embarrassment for the Russian government. Moscow's attempts

at denial only heightened the incident's notoriety, adding an element of ridicule to the situation (Манойло 2019).

The second distinctive element emerged in a counter-narrative originating from Syria. In what appeared to be a retaliatory move against the UK for its accusations in the Skripal case, the Russian Ministry of Defence orchestrated a disinformation campaign. They televised an alleged chemical attack in a village near Aleppo, attributing the act to Western allies, particularly the UK. As purported evidence, they presented shells from chemical bombs, claiming they were manufactured in Salisbury. This attempt to frame the UK not only underscored the complexities of information warfare in modern conflicts but also highlighted the lengths to which state actors might go to manipulate international opinion.

This narrative crafted by Russian propaganda sought not only to falsely attribute a grave war crime to the United Kingdom but also to create a circumstantial link between the alleged British production of chemical weapons and the city central to the Skripal incident. This insinuation was designed to suggest that the British were responsible for the poisoning of Skripal, an attempt to deflect blame from Russia (Корреспондент.net 2018; Взгляд 2018; ntv.ru 2018; zakon.kz 2018; Lenta.ru 2018; Смирнов 2017; Vesti 2018; Casalicchio 2018). Interviewee 32 from a government-controlled media outlet revealed in 2022,

‘We were instructed to link the chemical attacks to Western labs, especially British. I actually doubted up to the last moment that Russia had anything to do with the attacks. Most colleagues and I myself were sure it wasn’t us; it was actually Assad. But when the Skripal instruction arrived, we all started doubting if Russia really had nothing to do with that.’ (Interviewee 32 2022)

This case exemplifies the operational strategies of government-controlled media, guided by the principle that even marginal contributions can shape public perception. It was unlikely that the Russian, British, or Western public would fully believe this narrative. Nevertheless, this approach incrementally erodes the established truth, providing fodder for sceptics and conspiracy theorists. It offers an alternative narrative, however implausible, for those seeking to challenge the official account (Moravec, Minas, and Dennis 2018). Interviewee 33, also from a government-controlled media outlet, expressed in 2022,

‘I don’t think we convinced someone that it was the British who employed chemical weapons in Syria, yet if you want to sleep without nightmares, you can watch our newscast and tell yourself it was the Brits and go to bed again, and stop worrying about something as scary as Russians doing that instead of the British.’ (Interviewee 33 2022)

The linkage of the United Kingdom to alleged war crimes in Syria, particularly those involving chemical weapons, is a complex issue that, while not singularly decisive, contributes to the broader narrative. This connection is exemplified by the case of Salisbury, which has become infamously associated with chemical crimes, overshadowing its historical significance related to the Bill of Rights, as noted by Stone (2018).

The Western outcry and media coverage regarding the use of chemical weapons by the Russian military, and Russia’s subsequent denials, led to an unintended outcome that ironically benefitted President Putin. The portrayal of the Russian military employing chemical weapons against children, a claim reported by Meduza (2020), proved overwhelming for the Russian populace. This accumulation of reports acted as a tipping point. Remarkably, even the educated, informed, and typically anti-Putin segment of the Russian establishment found these

accusations difficult to accept. This scepticism was reflected in public opinion polls: Levada (2018) reported that 77% of Russians did not believe their country intentionally bombed civilian targets, and 82% denied Russia's use of chemical weapons in Syria. This scepticism led to an unprecedented convergence in approval ratings for Putin between opposition and pro-government citizens. Interviewee 20 from the independent media sector in 2022 reflects on this disbelief:

'I have to admit my colleagues and I didn't believe it until the very last moment. Our readers didn't either. How can you believe that your country is doing such a thing using your taxes? Naturally, we never thought it was the West, we were sure it was Assad.' (Interviewee 20 2022)

The revelation that their own nation, to which they contributed as taxpayers, was implicated in bombing children, was too harrowing for many Russian citizens to accept. This led to a widespread psychological reaction akin to trauma-induced denial. Even among the liberal intelligentsia, traditionally critical of Putin, the notion of their leader sanctioning attacks on children in their name was an unbearable concept. The backlash from the opposition was both intense and unexpected, catching the government and Putin himself off guard (McCain 2016; Xing 2012; Wainer 2020). As conveyed by Interviewee 3 from the independent media in 2022: 'I still can't imagine it was us. It was Assad's army, they'd benefit from something like that, not Russia. Don't blame Russia for all deadly sins' (Interviewee 3, 2022).

This scenario marked a pivotal moment when the majority of Russian citizens opted to place their trust in state-controlled media rather than independent reports or Western media narratives (Mercier 2016). They chose to believe Putin's denials of civilian casualties and the use of chemical weapons. This choice was less about being swayed by propaganda and more

about seeking psychological refuge from an unbearable reality. The necessity for an alternate historical narrative was paramount (Lenta.ru 2019), and this narrative was readily supplied by Russian pro-governmental media outlets (Valenta and Valenta 2016; Williams and Souza 2016; Lawless 2018). This phenomenon illustrates not only the power of state media but also the profound impact of cognitive dissonance in shaping public perception.

Contrary to expectations, the revelation that one's own country could be responsible for atrocities, such as killing children, often met with denial even among the staunchest liberals. This denial reflects a broader psychological tendency where individuals, regardless of their political affiliations, resist accepting responsibility for actions they find morally reprehensible. A prominent historical parallel can be drawn with the denial exhibited by many citizens in Nazi Germany, who refused to acknowledge the Holocaust despite overwhelming evidence of the mass extermination of Jews and other groups opposed to the Nazi regime (Lipstadt 2012). As Interviewee 34 from the independent media in 2022 elucidates:

'I have to admit that many of my colleagues from liberal media and myself were knocked down by the 'children' fact. It was just unbearable to think that Russia kills children in Syria using my taxes. We planted it on ISIS, Assad, chance, but we couldn't believe it was on purpose. Our readers weren't happy about the reports of child deaths and were blaming everyone from ISIS to Assad. Some of them even blamed Putin, of course, but they were gagged quickly. We were more naive back then. We thought Putin wouldn't do something that doesn't benefit him. And how bombing children could be beneficial? Our foolishness impacted our newscasts.' (Interviewee 34 2022)

This tendency to absolve oneself from traumatic or heinous realities is a pervasive aspect of human psychology. While individuals might consciously suppress feelings of shame and responsibility, it is still alarming to witness such denials. Despite the lessons ostensibly learned from historical events, humanity repeatedly encounters situations that demonstrate a lack of substantial change in this aspect. This pattern is evident in various instances of denial and historical amnesia, as explored in the works of Manalu, Pradekso, and Setyabudi (2018); Dimo (2019); MacDonald (2005); George, Skariah, and Xavier (2020); and Shermer and Grobman (2002). The war in Ukraine and the subsequent Bucha tragedy in 2022 serve as recent examples, underscoring the persistent nature of this phenomenon.

4.8 Russian Withdrawal from Syria

As time progressed, the Russian public's perception of their country's involvement in the Syrian war increasingly diverged from the narrative propagated by the state media and President Putin. This growing scepticism prompted a strategic shift in the Kremlin's communication approach. In response, Putin declared that Russia, having ostensibly achieved significant success against terrorists in Syria, would be withdrawing its military forces from the region, a decision purportedly aligning with the public's sentiment (Кремль 2016).

This declaration was formally made by Putin on December 11, 2017, during a visit to Syria, marking it as a momentous event (РИА Новости 2017). This announcement, potentially significant for both supporters and critics of Putin within Russia and internationally, was overshadowed by its familiarity. It was, in fact, the third time Putin had publicly announced a Russian withdrawal from Syria. The first announcement came in March 2016, where he praised the achievements of the Russian military in Syria and declared the withdrawal of forces (ntv.ru

2016). A similar announcement followed in December 2016, where Putin once again commended the defence ministry for its victory over terrorism in Syria (NEWSru.com 2016).

However, these declarations were met with scepticism, as evidenced by the numerous contradictory statements from the Russian Ministry of Defence, which itself had made over five separate announcements about military withdrawals (BBC 2017; Кремль 2016; Interfax 2017). This pattern of repeated declarations without substantive action raised questions about the credibility of these announcements and reflected the complexities of Russia's military and political engagement in Syria.

Notably, each pronouncement by Putin regarding troop withdrawals from Syria fails to prompt Russian media to reference any prior similar announcements. This omission aligns with a pervasive norm in Russian media coverage, which consistently eschews references to historical context, a topic further explored in Chapter 4. The reporting predominantly adopts a future tense narrative: assertions of what Russia will do, such as withdrawing from Syria or relinquishing control of a Syrian base. Rarely do these reports affirm that Russia has already completed these actions (РИА Новости 2017; Закувакин 2017). As described by Interviewee 20 from independent media in 2022:

‘By the time we first said we were getting out of Syria, people had already got tired of Syria, so nobody cared. Pulling out? Okay. Let’s get down to economics. By that time Syria hadn’t attracted any clicks for a long time. The withdrawal announcement entitled the Russian media not to write more about it. We withdrew after all. That’s it. Although we withdrew from there multiple times, it was technicalities that didn’t really interest our readers. Someone who remembered it wasn’t the first time just laughed.’ (Interviewee 20, 2022)

As of 2023, Russia maintains military personnel and an operational base in Syria. Reports from Western media and independent non-governmental organisations continue to document ongoing bombings in Idlib and Hama. However, global, and Russian public interest in these reports has significantly waned, diminishing the impact of such news compared to a few years prior (Lucas 2015; Slee 2020).

Global attention has progressively shifted away from the Syrian war, leading to a noticeable apathy even among the Russian public, despite ongoing reports of Russian casualties (Mummolo 2016; Chase, Genain and Karniol-Tambour 2014; Gans 2004; Tichenor, Donohue and Olien 1970). This phenomenon underscores a psychological limitation: the finite capacity of human empathy and concern, particularly for protracted crises. The protracted nature of the Syrian war has seemingly exhausted its prominence in international media narratives.

This widespread disinterest raises critical questions about the motivations and actions of political leaders. If the global and Russian publics are indifferent to the Syrian war, what impetus does Putin have to align his actions with public opinion, especially when such opinion is largely absent? This detachment is highlighted by the disproportionate attention given to smaller-scale conflicts, such as those in Ukraine prior to the 2022 war, which overshadowed the ongoing crisis in Syria (Lukyanov 2016; Burrett 2020).

Despite the waning media attention, the severity of the Syrian situation remains unchanged. The war persists, with continual bombings and civilian casualties. Assad's presidency continues as of 2024, with ongoing military movements by Turkey, Iran, and the lack of significant Allied Forces' intervention. The humanitarian crisis, especially the migration

issue, remains acute (Abbara *et al.* 2021; Tezcür and Besaw 2021). The repetitive nature of these news stories, however, has led to a widespread desensitisation, raising the question: if the public is indifferent, what incentive does Putin have to alter his approach? (Chunlin and Gunaratna 2020; Mironova, Mrie and Whitt 2020). Interviewee 35 from the independent media in 2022 captures this sentiment:

‘Putin won this war because he won this war on TV. None other war, including the real war in Syria, was of any interest to him. On TV, in the media, the war passed in flying colours. Putin overcame ISIS, Putin overcame the West, Putin didn’t kill a single child, yet he killed all the terrorists. A clear ideal victory. What happened for real didn’t bother anyone. It’s tempting to blame my colleagues from the governmental media for all sins – I don’t even want to call them my colleagues – but now I don’t think we did enough at the independent media to change things. We share the responsibility for this.’ (Interviewee 35 2022)

The Interviewee provides a critical perspective on the portrayal and perceived outcomes of Russia's military involvement in Syria, emphasising the disparity between the media depiction and the actual events. The real impacts and developments in Syria were overshadowed by a media narrative focused solely on enhancing Putin's image. Such coverage effectively turned the conflict into a tool for domestic propaganda rather than a matter of international or humanitarian concern. The success of this narrative on television and other media platforms indicated that the actual details of the military operations, including any Russian casualties or civilian harm, were of little concern to those crafting the media narratives. Interviewee also reflects on the role of the media in perpetuating these narratives. There's an expressed disappointment not only with government-aligned media, which the interviewee

hesitates to even classify as fellow journalists due to their role in disseminating state propaganda, but also with independent media. The interviewee acknowledges that independent media did not do enough to counteract the government's narratives or to adequately inform the public about the realities of the war.

This admission highlights a broader issue of media responsibility and the challenges faced by journalists in environments where the government heavily influences the narrative. It underscores the complexities of media work in authoritarian contexts, where independent journalism is crucial yet often restricted and where the impact of state propaganda can be overwhelming. The interviewee's reflections suggest a shared burden among all media practitioners in such settings: to strive for truth and accountability, even against significant odds.

4.9 Chapter summary

Chapter 4 primarily focuses on delineating the portrayal of the Syrian war in Russian media and elucidating the underlying reasons for this particular representation. Given the extensive duration of the conflict, spanning nearly nine years, it was impractical to analyse the entirety of the media coverage. Therefore, specific examples are selected that illustrate how the Russian media reported on the Syrian war. A key aspect was linguistic manipulation: the Russian media altered the entire narrative and historical context of the war through strategic word choices. This is exemplified in the coverage of the Wagner Group and other militarised organisations, where initial factual reporting gradually morphed into a tool for shaping public mood and perception regarding the conflict. The coverage of chemical and other UN-prohibited

weapons, frequently attributed to Russian and Bashar al-Assad's forces, further highlights this media strategy.

Importantly, the 'hybrid war' waged on television screens was deemed more crucial by Putin than the actual conflict in Syria. The on-ground realities in Syria were side-lined, with minimal effort and attention from Putin's administration. The predominant weapon in this scenario was not military might, but the Russian media, which played a pivotal role in crafting the narrative of the Syrian war. The real significance of the Syrian war, in this context, was its portrayal by the Russian media; the actual events in Syria were secondary. The war, in Putin's perspective, was primarily a battle for media dominance, a battle he effectively won using words and images as his main arsenal (Stent 2016; Valenta and Valenta 2016).

The Russian media bifurcated the events in Syria into two distinct narratives: Russia's actions, portrayed positively, and the activities of the 'enemy' or 'bad' forces, which surprisingly did not refer to ISIS or the Syrian opposition, but to Western entities like the US, the UK, Germany, and the EU. Here, Russia was depicted as a peacekeeper, while the Western nations were framed as aggressors.

The chapter concludes with a critical finding: the effective and skilful use of propaganda tools can indeed reshape facts, moulding the media narrative into a widely accepted historical account, and thereby influencing public opinion to align with the propagandist's perspective.

Chapter 5. Analysis of Russian Media Rules in War Coverage

'Free democratic societies curb some basic rights in times of war, but never all of them. For societies that place freedom of the press high on the agenda, efforts are certainly made by governments to win over the free press for their cause, but as a rule, there is no overt censorship or hard pressure on the media. Dictatorships use an external threat as justification for controlling the media so that a real war does not change the situation very much. One would expect, therefore, that press coverage of ongoing and past wars would reflect the character of politics in a specific country. Alas, empirical evidence shows that much more is involved than just unabashed censorship or pressure on the media to fall in line with their government's cause. The second remarkable fact about media coverage of wars is that so little systematic empirical evidence has been collected. When it comes to the US-led war on Iraq, for example, there was no systematic investigation of the elite media until 2008. Gelb and Zelmati carried out a comprehensive study of what they termed 'elite media' (e.g. New York Times (NYT), Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Time, and Newsweek) and arrived at the conclusion that the 'ultimate centurions of our democracy' failed to live up to their critical function: 'For the most part, the elite print press conveyed Administration pronouncements and rationale without much critical commentary.' (Gelb and Zelmati 2009)

5.1 Chapter Topic and Objectives

Chapter 5 delves into the foundational regulations governing Russian media's portrayal of the Syrian war, building upon the coverage analysis presented in Chapter 3. Despite the

apparent chaos, inconsistency, and aggression in the war reporting by Russian state-controlled media, these narratives are shaped by a stringent set of rules. The enforcement of these rules is not arbitrary but is instead directed by the discretion of both the media's official owners and the presidential administration (Oates 2007). This regulatory framework comprises directives from the presidential administration as well as self-imposed guidelines by media organisations engaging in self-censorship (Schimpfoss and Yablokov 2014). These guidelines, while not always explicitly defined, provide a foundation upon which media outlets develop their internal rules, effectively shaping their coverage of the conflict (Simons and Strovsky 2006). This chapter aims to dissect this complex interplay of imposed and self-regulated guidelines to better understand the media's role in framing the Syrian war narrative.

The observable uniformity in media reporting suggests that specific guidelines, likely issued by an authoritative entity such as the presidential administration, are in place to ensure media alignment with a certain political agenda. Robert Entman's insights are particularly relevant in this context. He states:

'Framing is the central process by which government officials and journalists exercise political influence over each other and over the public (cf. Riker, 1986). Successful political communication requires the framing of events, issues, and actors in ways that promote perceptions and interpretations that benefit one side while hindering the other. Understanding how frames work allows us to measure the distance between the White House's preferred versions of foreign affairs and the ways the media actually report them. Framing entails selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution. The words and images that make up the frame can be distinguished

from the rest of the news by their capacity to stimulate support of or opposition to the sides in a political conflict. We can measure this capacity by cultural resonance and magnitude (cf. on resonance Miller and Riechert 2001; Snow and Benford 1988). Those frames that employ more culturally resonant terms have the greatest potential for influence. They use words and images highly salient in the culture, which is to say noticeable, understandable, memorable, and emotionally charged. Magnitude taps the prominence and repetition of the framing words and images. The more resonance and magnitude, the more likely the framing is to evoke similar thoughts and feelings in large portions of the audience.' (Entman 2003)

The strict enforcement of these media guidelines is evident, with penalties for non-compliance extending from individual journalists and editors to the owners of media outlets. In the initial period of Putin's presidency, there were instances of media personnel openly defying these administrative directives. Such defiance often resulted in the journalist being dismissed or reassigned, leading to public controversies that captured widespread attention (Beumers, Hutchings, and Rulyova 2008; Belin 2002). These historical examples highlight the significant influence of media framing as a tool for political control and the importance of understanding its mechanics, as elucidated by scholars like Entman.

In the period preceding the Syrian war, the Russian media landscape had been meticulously sanitised of any dissenting voices, a process detailed in Chapter 2.3. By the time of Russia's involvement in the Syrian war, this media landscape was effectively homogenised. Media outlets were either directly owned by the government or controlled by oligarchs with close ties to Putin. As a result, most journalists who might have presented a rebellious or

independent stance were systematically deprived of their platforms. This consolidation of media control, as Oates (2006), Koltsova (2006), and White, Oates, and McAllister (2005) observed, ensured that the presidential administration maintained a stringent hold over the dissemination of information.

In such an environment, deviations from the government's narrative became virtually impossible. However, this did not imply a passive acceptance or the irrelevance of propaganda. On the contrary, as Simons and Strovsky (2006), Fedor (2016), and Vartanova (2012) argue, the purpose of the stringent media controls extended beyond merely silencing potential dissenters. These measures were primarily implemented to ensure that the public received and perceived the government's messages in the intended manner. This was particularly crucial for sensitive topics like the Syrian war. Even in an unchallenged media landscape, controlling the narrative remained a paramount concern for the Russian government, illustrating the significance they placed on the power of media in shaping public opinion. It might be presumed that television, having the largest audience, would be the primary focus of the presidential administration's media strategy (Lipman and McFaul 2001). Surprisingly, however, the administration does not exhibit such a bias; it applies a uniform set of rules across all media platforms, including print media. This all-encompassing approach is noteworthy, particularly in light of data indicating a steady increase in the number of individuals claiming either a decline in TV viewership or a complete avoidance of it, as reported in federal polls (ФОМнибус 2014; РИА Новости 2019).

Concurrently, there is a growing public sentiment of distrust towards journalists and the media in general (Филипенюк and Афонский 2019). One might expect that this diminishing trust in media would lead to a reduction in the government's media control.

Contrary to this assumption, however, the government's involvement in media affairs appears to be intensifying over time (Goldman 2008). This paradoxical situation leads to two possible conclusions: either the government's media strategies are becoming increasingly sophisticated, or public distrust does not significantly impact the government's approach to media control.

The Russian government exhibits scepticism towards its own polling as well as some independent federal polling companies (Langenohl and Schmäing 2019). This mistrust is not entirely surprising given the evident bias in these polls, particularly those concerning President Putin's approval ratings (Mendelson 2001; Frye *et al.* 2017). Notably, this bias tends to favour the government, casting doubt on the veracity of these polls. Such scepticism likely extends to surveys regarding TV viewership and public attitudes toward media. In contemporary Russian society, eschewing television is often seen as a mark of resistance against state propaganda, implying that one's political views remain untainted by government influence (Mickiewicz 2005). Despite the lack of precise polling data, it is a reasonable hypothesis that Russian citizens engage more with state-owned television than they publicly admit. Given the limited prevalence of satellite TV and the general populace's modest proficiency in foreign languages, state-controlled channels serve as a primary, if not the only, source of information for many. As Vartanova (2012) points out, 'However much you'd love to claim that you do not watch TV or trust the media, it is not like you have many alternatives or much choice.' Additionally, MacFadyen (2007) observes that state television is not only a crucial information source for most Russians but also remains one of the few accessible forms of entertainment.

While the official viewership of Russian television is declining and Internet audience numbers are increasing, the Russian government continues to favour traditional media over newer forms, a preference grounded in greater control over the former (Orttung and Walker

2013; Soldatov and Borogan 2017; Alexander 2004). This adherence to traditional media, despite its dwindling audience, is likely due to the government's inability to exert similar control over the Internet. As a result, it appears logical from their perspective to not only establish stringent regulations on war coverage but also to enforce these rules with the full extent of federal authority (Kazun and Kazun 2017).

Current research on the Russian audience's comprehension of the Syrian war through media representation is lacking, yet there are analogous studies in related fields. A particularly relevant study conducted by the Glasgow University Media Group, and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, illustrates this point. This research investigated how television news coverage affects public understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Initially, the study involved interviews with 12 diverse small groups (totalling 85 participants), inquiring about their perceptions of the conflict based on TV news. Subsequently, a questionnaire was distributed to 300 young individuals (aged 17-22), probing similar themes. The majority (82%) cited TV news as their primary information source, with newspapers also mentioned. Their responses predominantly reflected the central themes presented in the news: conflict, violence, and tragedy, as evidenced in common responses like 'Conflict, hatred, religion,' 'Palestinian kids being shot by tanks and artillery,' and 'War, murder, religious hatred' (Thussu and Freedman 2003).

5.2 Rule one. Avoid using certain words at any cost

This study underscores the significance of controlling the narrative, often termed the 'war on words.' The Russian government's strategy in managing the Syrian war coverage

exemplifies this approach, emphasising the power of media in shaping public perception and understanding of international conflicts.

The Russian government's strategy in depicting the Syrian war adheres to a simplistic, binary narrative. This portrayal positions the Syrian government, led by Assad and supported by Russia, as combating terrorist factions. These 'good guys,' as they are framed, include Assad's regime and Russian forces, united in their fight against terrorism. In stark contrast, the narrative categorises a diverse array of groups - ISIS, various opposition factions not affiliated with ISIS, and other terrorist entities - as the adversaries.

This dichotomy extends to the West - the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States - often depicted as either naively supporting terrorist groups, misled by a lack of astuteness compared to Russian leadership, or acting out of spite towards Putin and Assad for differing political motives. This reductionist view, as articulated, simplifies the complex situation into a binary conflict: on one side, the Syrian government and Russia, and on the other, a coalition of terrorist groups and Western nations accused of aiding them (Doucet 2018; Paul and Matthews 2016; Charap 2013; Valenta and Valenta 2016; Budaev and Tikhonov 2016).

This binary narrative, as Allison (2013) notes, is more easily digestible for the average Russian media consumer, framing the conflict as a clear-cut battle between the 'good' - Russia and its allies - and the 'evil' - the West and terrorists.

This portrayal, seemingly simplistic and digestible, starkly contrasts with reality. Russian state media has consistently propagated this narrative throughout the Syrian war.

Crucially, the term ‘opposition’ disrupts this oversimplified view, introducing a third dimension to the conflict. Acknowledging the ‘opposition’ necessitates an explanation of the various sides involved, one's stance, and corresponding actions towards these factions (Casula 2015; Pantti and Boklage 2014; Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013). The term 'opposition' is pivotal. As Interviewee 6 from government-controlled media describes:

‘We had a simple rule. The ‘opposition’ only appears when Russia is in talks with them. In all other cases, there is no such thing as the opposition. Only terrorists. If there is no possibility to avoid this term – e.g., there was an announcement that Russia reacted to, and this has to be covered – we were allowed to use the words ‘so-called Syrian opposition.’’ (Interviewee 6, 2022)

Conversely, Interviewee 35 from independent media reflects a less deliberate approach: ‘To be completely honest, we didn’t really think much about which term we are using. We took it from press releases and news feeds...’ They acknowledge the inadvertent diminution of the 'real opposition' by echoing the language of Russian agencies (Interviewee 35 2022).

The designation 'terrorist' is also contentious. According to Interviewee 12 from government-controlled media: ‘Terrorists are everyone who are not ourselves or the Assad army. Russia bombs terrorists and only terrorists’ (Interviewee 12 2023). This contrasts with Interviewee 17 from independent media, who asserts: ‘Terrorists are, first of all, ISIS...’ highlighting the complexity and diversity of the groups involved (Interviewee 17 2022).

Finally, the use of the word 'war' is highly significant. Interviewee 24 from government-controlled media states: ‘Strictly speaking, when we speak about the Western involvement, we say ‘war.’ Russia carries out a special operation in Syria, not the war’ (Interviewee 24 2023).

In stark contrast, Interviewee 36 from independent media says: ‘We called the war a war from the first day’ (Interviewee 36 2022)

Word (45,154 articles analysed)	Government-controlled media (37,003 articles)	Independent media (8,151 articles)
‘Syrian opposition’ referring to official UN-led Peace talks participants	2,883 references	2,046 references
‘So-called Syrian opposition’ referring to official UN-led Peace talks participants	5,409 references	0 references
‘Syrian opposition’ referring to Russia-Syria Peace talks participants	9,039 references	1,117 references
‘Terrorist’ referring to ISIS	13,904 references	3,320 references
‘Terrorist’ with no clear reference	19,202 references	4,034 references

Table 4.1: Word usage across analysed articles

The deliberate omission of a single term from media discourse can profoundly impact public perception and policy, as evidenced in the context of the Syrian war. This strategic exclusion effectively negated the legitimate claims of millions to justice on their land. Such a linguistic manoeuvre underscores the ease with which media can manipulate information, and consequently, public understanding of complex geopolitical situations. By merely substituting 'the Syrian opposition' with 'the so-called Syrian opposition,' the Russian media transformed the narrative. This semantic shift implied that what were once territories held by a recognised opposition became havens for terrorists. Consequently, the moral implications of military actions in these areas were altered; bombings that might have previously been seen as attacks on civilians were now framed as legitimate strikes against terrorism. The gravity of civilian

casualties in such contexts was thus diminished. This case exemplifies the critical role of language in media reporting and its capacity to reshape public discourse and international policy by the mere absence of a single word like ‘opposition.’ The phenomenon illustrates a larger issue of how media framing can effectively erase entities from public consciousness and discourse, as simply as Trenin (2017), Abboud (2018), Casagrande and Weinberger (2017), Kofman and Rojansky (2018), Allison (2013), and Charap (2013) describe.

5.3 Rule two. All news only exists for one day only

In contemporary society, we are all consumers of news. Reflect upon this: when did you last find yourself deeply engrossed in a news story, to the extent that you actively sought out its historical context, development trajectory, and prior reporting? For most, unless the topic aligns with specific personal interests or research areas, such engagement is rare. This lack of historical inquiry into news narratives is understandable, given the sheer volume of daily news surpassing our capacity as humans to assimilate new information.

Indeed, a single edition of the ‘New York Times’ presents a greater quantity of news and novel information than an individual several centuries ago would encounter in their entire lifetime (Чепкасова 2019). Our biological evolution as humans has not kept pace with the rapid changes in our informational environment. This discrepancy has led to a situation where we are inundated with more information than we can effectively process. Consequently, substantial portions of news go unnoticed or are not analysed with the depth they warrant. Given our current limitations in processing contemporary news, expecting an average individual to delve into the historical context of news narratives appears unrealistic (Andrejevic

2013; Kolbitsch and Maurer 2006; Balkin 1999; Fuchs 2011; Shao 2009; Horrigan 2016; Lee, Lindsey, and Kim 2017).

This analysis posits that the lifespan of news is typically confined to a single day. Unless an article explicitly references historical events, an average news consumer is unlikely to recall preceding developments. This fleeting nature of news consumption fosters a media landscape conducive to governmental control over narratives. While individuals possess the means to retrospectively analyse news portrayal - a practice scarcely undertaken as evidenced by Bertot, Jaeger, and Hansen (2012), and Rimpiläinen (2020) - the reality often diverges. The following untouched testimony from Interviewee 37, a media professional in a government-controlled context, elucidates this phenomenon:

‘You should really follow the news attentively every day to remember what you were told about Syria a week or two ago. In reality, we didn’t have any problem: we got news from the Ministry of defence – we published it. Our editor might remember that two weeks ago there had been something opposite. So what? Who cares? Nobody. If news articles are not linked on purpose, viewers won’t do it themselves. Nobody ‘gives a crap.’ Also, don’t forget it’s extra work to dig into the archives and report on something that happened before. How does this work benefit an editor or journalist? You get the news, you broadcast it, and that’s it. Don’t think that things like that happened due to some conspiracy or a call from the presidential administration. Frequently, it was just sheer laziness.’
(Interviewee 37, 2022)

This perspective highlights a paradox in the digital age. Despite widespread internet access in Russia, as Perfiliev (2020) notes, and the inherent capability to research past news

events, this technical facility remains underutilised. This underutilisation, as Nocetti (2011) argues, renders the internet ineffective in this context. This observation challenges overestimated perceptions of the internet's impact on everyday life, a view supported by Lievrouw (2004) and Flanagin and Metzger (2001). The reluctance of Russian citizens to employ these digital resources for news verification reflects a broader issue of passive news consumption and the underuse of available technological tools.

The media strategy in Russia, as delineated by Latynina (2019), adheres to a distinct principle: eschew references to historical contexts. This approach manifests conspicuously in the portrayal of Russian military involvement in Syria. A critical analysis, detailed in Chapter 3, reveals the repetitive nature of the Russian government's announcements about military withdrawal from Syria. Despite President Putin's repeated declarations, as Katz (2018) notes, these proclamations were presented as novel developments each time, disregarding any previous statements. This tactic of treating each announcement as an isolated event, without acknowledging its historical repetitions, exemplifies a strategic manipulation of public memory and perception.

The Russian media's treatment of the Syrian opposition exemplifies this ephemeral approach to news reporting. Labels and narratives regarding opposition groups are fluid, altering from one day to the next without consistency or reference to past descriptions. This dynamic portrayal aligns with Bird and Dardenne's (1997) and Krstajić *et al.* (2013) observations on the malleability of news narratives, where the same entity can be labelled as 'opposition' one day and 'terrorists' the next, depending on the prevailing political narrative. This strategy, as Fredin (1997) suggests, relies on the public's limited engagement with historical details, assuming that few will independently verify the consistency of such

narratives. Such an approach raises significant ethical questions about the responsibility of media in preserving historical accuracy and integrity. The Russian media's strategy of omitting historical context and manipulating narrative continuity not only reflects a specific methodological approach to news reporting but also underscores a broader theoretical discussion about the role of media in shaping public memory and perception.

In examining the portrayal of Russia's military campaign in Syria, a notable shift in language becomes evident. The term 'opposition' is strategically omitted when discussing Russia's actions, reinforcing a narrative of unchallenged legitimacy. Conversely, this term conspicuously re-emerges in contexts where the United States, the European Union, or the United Kingdom are accused of supporting terrorism, a perspective supported by Vasilenkov (2013). An interview with an independent media representative (Interviewee 3, 2022) reveals an unsettling practice within Russian journalism:

‘At first, we didn’t have a clearly formulated rule not to refer to previous news, since most reporters didn’t do it anyway. But when someone noticed a couple of times that a news article contradicted what we’d aired just recently, there appeared a non-official rule: do not rework, do not look into the archives, use the information from a current press release in order not to confuse the people or make them nervous. People come home from work tired, they want to turn on the news, find out everything’s okay and go to bed.’ (Interviewee 3, 2022)

This anecdote underscores a significant deviation from traditional journalistic principles. In stark contrast to foundational journalistic training, which emphasises the importance of historical context and continuity in reporting (Josephi 2010; Korkonosenko 2011; Morrison 1997; Fedorov 2012), there is a deliberate avoidance of referencing past news

reports. This practice not only misleads the public but also cultivates a new generation of Russian journalists who are systematically uninformed about the necessity of researching and understanding historical news narratives when reporting on current events. The implications of this shift are profound, signifying a deliberate strategy to shape public perception and memory, thereby influencing the socio-political landscape.

The contemporary landscape of Russian journalism is witnessing the emergence of a new generation of journalists who lack exposure to traditional journalistic practices. This deficiency stems not from a deliberate avoidance but from an educational and professional environment that fails to impart these critical skills. As a result, these journalists are inadvertently aligning with government propaganda, not out of conscious choice, but due to a lack of awareness of alternative approaches. This trend effectively obliterates the historical context within their reporting, posing a significant threat not only to the preservation of the past but also to the prospective future of Russian journalism. The consequence is the creation of a cohort of journalists bereft of essential journalistic techniques, unaware of their existence, and accepting the current media climate as the standard. This situation is underscored by the observations of Antonova and Shafer (2011) and Stigbrand and Nygren (2013), who highlight the erosion of journalistic integrity in this context. Interviewee 20, an individual affiliated with independent media, poignantly captures this dilemma:

‘It’s a huge tragedy. We have an entire generation of journalists who have studied and worked only in the times of Putin. They graduate from journalism faculties, come to work for a governmental channel and think this is journalism, because they never saw anything different.’ (Interviewee 20, 2022).

5.4 Rule three. The geography

One of the most renowned television programs globally is the U.S. late-night show ‘Jimmy Kimmel Live.’ A notable feature of this program is a segment involving a geographical quiz (Kimmel 2018). In this segment, a host interacts with passers-by - typically average Americans or tourists - on Hollywood Boulevard, posing elementary geography questions. Commonly, the task involves identifying a country like Australia on a map. Regrettably, a significant proportion of participants fail these basic geographical challenges (Kimmel 2017; Diskin 2018).

This segment's popularity arguably stems from a schadenfreude-driven enjoyment, wherein viewers find amusement in perceiving themselves as more knowledgeable than the participants. While it is ostensibly easier to answer such questions in a relaxed home environment as opposed to under the scrutiny of a camera, this does not necessarily reflect a genuine superiority in geographical knowledge. If replicated in various countries, it is likely that similar results would be obtained, indicating a widespread deficiency in geographical literacy. This deficiency becomes more pronounced when the task shifts from identifying countries to locating specific cities or regions, particularly in nations unfamiliar to the participants. Such findings highlight a critical gap in global geographical understanding, underscoring the need for enhanced educational focus on this subject.

The challenge of comprehending the geographical complexities of a distant, war-torn country is formidable, particularly for those with no direct connection to the region. This country, besieged by conflict, has seen its territories repeatedly seized and repossessed by various factions. It is an unrealistic expectation for the average media consumer to discern the intricacies of the ongoing conflict, including the current locations of hostilities and the

fluctuating control over specific areas. Despite the availability of visual aids and maps, it remains improbable that the majority, even if engaged and willing, could grasp the detailed nuances of such a situation. This holds true even in the absence of deliberate misinformation.

The situation takes on an even more complex dimension when deliberate attempts at misinformation are introduced. If the objective is to obfuscate the reality - to blur the lines of understanding about which factions are involved, their respective locations, and the dynamics of the conflict - the challenge for the average media consumer becomes even more daunting. This is especially the case when the news is not a priority for the individual, occurring in a distant land with no apparent personal relevance. In such scenarios, the inevitable outcome is a pervasive lack of awareness, not only about the specifics of the events but also their geographical context (Mediavektor 2015; Лира 2015). As expressed by Interviewee 38, a representative of government-controlled media:

‘Before Russia engaged in war, nobody had ever cared where Syria was. Afterwards, people had to do some Googling, yet even the journalists got tired of figuring out where this or that town was located, who controlled it and what was going on there. We got news from the newsfeed. We published it exactly as it was written there. If the newscast was too detailed, viewers got a sore eye. The public was not really interested in where exactly this Aleppo-Schmaleppo was located.’ (Interviewee 38 2022)

The principle of geographic ambiguity in Russian media coverage is straightforward: avoid specificity. A typical Russian media consumer might struggle to locate Syria on a map (РИА НОВЫЙ ДЕНЬ 2015). Identifying specific cities within Syria is considerably more

challenging. This difficulty is compounded in the context of the Syrian civil war, where control of various city areas frequently shifted between competing forces (Allison 2013).

This phenomenon was particularly pronounced during the conflict in Aleppo. Contrary to common perception, Aleppo is not a single city but an agglomeration, making the identification of specific conflict zones challenging. Comparatively, stating that a conflict is occurring in Aleppo is as vague as declaring that it is happening somewhere in England – a description too broad to provide meaningful location specificity. This lack of specificity is especially problematic for Russian media consumers, most of whom have no personal experience with Aleppo's geography, leaving them with little understanding of the specific locations of conflict and the parties involved.

The strategic division of Aleppo during the civil war exemplifies this issue. Approximately one third of the city was under the control of the Syrian government and Russian military forces, another third was held by ISIS and affiliated groups, while the remaining part was controlled by the Syrian opposition (Lubin and Saleem 2019; Kousa and Pottgiesser 2019; Graham 2017; Grant and Kaussler 2020). An independent media interviewee reflected on this complexity:

‘Now that you ask me these questions after so many years and I witness what’s going on in Ukraine, I realise with great shame how much we neglected the Syrian reports. Aleppo, Idlib, Palmyra. I myself published dozens of news from Syria on our publication’s website and I wasn’t really interested in which group controls which region. Perhaps, there is also an attempt to protect yourself from the information. Because if you understand which region is bombed exactly, you may realise that the bombing doesn’t exactly target the terrorists. And how

can you live with that information? Now we are following what's going on in Ukraine more closely, and it makes our lives harder.' (Interviewee 23, 2022)

Numerous reports from independent sources have substantiated that Russian governmental forces were predominantly engaged in combat against Syrian opposition factions, rather than targeting terrorist groups. Consequently, regions of Aleppo under opposition control were subjected to particularly relentless bombardment. A significant proportion of casualties in these areas can be attributed to the deliberate targeting by Russian military of non-military entities, including medical facilities, schools, and other civilian structures. The strategy of bombing civilian locations in the opposition-held areas of Aleppo appears to have been designed to coerce the opposition into submission (Tokmajyan 2020; Simons 2016; Oxford Analytica 2016). One interviewee elucidated this approach: 'Say, you want to report that you have been bombing Aleppo, and you want to report that you have been bombing not the civilian population, but the terrorists – this becomes the easiest task in the universe. All you have to do is not specify which areas exactly you are bombing' (Interviewee 23, 2022).

This tactic was evident in the coverage by Russian media, which frequently reported on the bombardment of Aleppo in a manner that obfuscated the specific targets. These reports would generically assert that Russia was targeting terrorists, often accompanied by visual aids like maps that simply marked Aleppo with a dot, without detailing the specific areas being bombarded. Such reporting effectively masked the reality of the situation on the ground (Lane 2017; Cafarella and Casagrande 2016; Böttcher 2016; Gulland 2016; Lucas 2015).

The employment of a specific tactic by Russian media in Palmyra, Idlib, and other Syrian regions, exemplifies a strategy of geographic obfuscation. This approach effectively marginalised the Syrian opposition in public discourse, simplifying the complex geopolitical landscape of the Syrian war. Russian media consumers, generally lacking the motivation or resources to thoroughly investigate Syrian geography, were presented with a reductive narrative: areas under bombardment were uniformly labelled as terrorist strongholds, thus negating the existence of legitimate opposition forces. This narrative distortion served as a tool for erasing the Syrian opposition from the political map, rendering them invisible in the war's discourse.

The Russian public's engagement with this narrative further illustrates the tactic's effectiveness. Questions regarding the multifaceted nature of control in Aleppo's regions, or the identity of those in command, were largely disregarded. The simplification of the narrative to 'Russia bombing terrorists' in various Syrian locations, as echoed in the statements by Lavrov (2018), Baev (2015), and Celso (2018), reveals a broader strategy. This strategy capitalises on the public's limited interest in geopolitical specifics, thereby aiding the government's efforts to obscure potential war crimes. The lack of public scrutiny over the exact locations of these bombings, and the consequent indifference to the true nature of the targets, underscores a troubling disengagement with the ethical implications of warfare.

The general public often lacks the patience to delve deeply into geographic specifics, a reality that is both simple and disheartening. This principle holds true even within the most impartial media organisations in the most enlightened nations. There is little expectation for news consumers to acquire a sufficient understanding of foreign geographies to fully grasp events occurring there.

This lack of geographical understanding persists even when one's own country is actively involved in foreign conflicts. For example, during the United Kingdom's involvement in Iraq, many British citizens expressed strong opposition, with some labelling the operation as erroneous or even a war crime. However, when questioning these concerned citizens, particularly those engaged in discussions about geographic details, their knowledge of the exact locations and actions of British forces in Iraq often appears limited. Considering Iraq's vastness, expecting even the most informed citizens of a country with unbiased media to comprehend these specifics seems unreasonable. This leads to a more troubling question: what level of understanding can be expected from individuals exposed to media heavily influenced by Russian propaganda? (Porter 2018; Thomas 2020; Robinson, Goddard, and Parry 2009; Murray *et al.* 2008). Interviewee 5, from a government-controlled media outlet, elucidates this issue:

‘It’s not like Putin calls you personally and says we should conceal which part of Aleppo we’re bombing. No, your editor just tells you: don’t overload the newscast with information, the people will get weary. And the editor-in-chief had told them the same before. And the editor-in-chief was asked to focus on our guys’ successes in Syria. Also, the editor-in-chief focuses on press releases from the ministry of defence. Therein you learn that we are bombing the terrorists in a specific city, with no details.’ (Interviewee 5, 2023)

The principle guiding the coverage of military actions in opposition or civilian territories is starkly straightforward yet profoundly impactful: steadfastly deny any bombings in these areas and refrain from acknowledging their very existence. This approach necessitates a deliberate vagueness, eschewing specific references to particular locations. Such a strategy

was notably evident in the Russian military's bombardment of Aleppo. This tactic not only obscured the geographical presence of the Syrian opposition but also effectively negated the existence of civilians in the heavily bombarded zones. The underlying premise of this narrative -that only terrorists inhabit these areas - defies logic, especially considering Aleppo's status as a densely populated metropolis. By adhering to this narrative, an unsettling implication emerges: the non-recognition of civilian presence, particularly children, in these areas renders them non-existent in the official discourse. Consequently, their susceptibility to harm from state-sponsored military actions is systematically ignored. This denial facilitates a portrayal of Russia as victorious, a narrative supported by a range of scholarly analyses (Carpenter 2013; Breau and Joyce 2013; Nimmo 2016; Ri *et al.* 2019; Çelikel *et al.* 2015; Guha-Sapir *et al.* 2015; Rogers and Reeve 2015). Within this context, Interviewee 5, from the government-controlled media, illuminates the pervasive ethos: 'You have to root for your country. Especially when there is a war. You have to support it. Propaganda is also a part of war. I remind you that we won in Syria. All the rest is liberal whining' (Interviewee 5, 2023).

5.5 Rule four. Every little helps

As previously highlighted, a significant segment of the population either claims or endeavours to eschew official news broadcasts. This trend is particularly pronounced regarding Russian television channels, which are widely perceived as heavily laden with propaganda (Kiriya and Degtereva 2010) and subjected to stringent government control, thus rendering them highly biased. While the proportion of individuals who actively shun television news, as opposed to merely professing to do so, may be relatively small, their existence is nonetheless notable. From the perspective of those overseeing the Russian government's propaganda apparatus, a key objective is to engage with this segment of the populace that deliberately

avoids news broadcasts. Despite efforts to evade news consumption, television remains the primary source of cost-free entertainment for a vast majority of Russian citizens (Paul and Matthews 2016; Mickiewicz 2005), making it a significant channel for disseminating information.

Additionally, it is imperative to consider Russia's harsh climatic conditions. Television offers not only a no-cost form of entertainment but also one that is accessible within the comfort of a warm living room. In contrast, countries with milder climates provide the option of outdoor activities. However, in many regions of Russia, for most of the year, such outdoor leisure is virtually unfeasible. Consequently, individuals are often confined to their homes, not solely due to economic constraints or indolence, but due to the prohibitive outdoor conditions. There exists a cultural norm of keeping the television perpetually on, irrespective of active viewership. Television executives have coined a term for this phenomenon, referred to as 'watching TV with your ass' (Oates 2006; Toepfl 2014; Novikova 2010).

The term commonly used to describe housewives engaged in media consumption, implies that the television functions as a background noise while they perform household chores. This phenomenon signifies that viewers are not actively watching the television; instead, their attention is intermittently engaged as their physical orientation is often away from the screen. Media managers colloquially describe daytime programs as being 'watched by your ass,' indicating that these programs are more often heard than visually attended to.

This practice is not exclusive to housewives. It is prevalent for individuals to keep the television on from the moment they wake until they retire to bed. Consequently, even if individuals are not actively watching news programs, they are likely to be aurally exposed to

them. In cases where news avoidance is intentional, viewers frequently switch to entertainment channels during news segments (Pietiläinen 2008). Schimpfoss and Yablokov (2014: p. 296) emphasise the strategic significance of this phenomenon in the context of Russian media: ‘Television is the primary, and most effective, tool employed by the political regime to influence its people, and the federal television networks are critical elements of the political system in Putin’s Russia’ (Schimpfoss and Yablokov 2014: p. 296).

The implications of such media consumption patterns are profound. Individuals may not actively watch news broadcasts, yet the omnipresence of television ensures exposure to various content forms. Recognising this, if one were responsible for disseminating information to the Russian populace, the strategy would involve utilising diverse mediums for information dissemination, not restricting it to news broadcasts alone. This approach is supported by the research of Pietiläinen and Strovsky (2010), Pietiläinen (2005), and Mickiewicz (2005), who highlight the multifaceted strategies employed in Russian media environments.

The representation of the Syrian war in Russian media was distinctively pervasive, a stark deviation from prior coverage of global conflicts. This intensified media strategy, exclusively observed during the Syrian war, was unprecedented in its directness and frequency. Russian military successes in Syria were consistently highlighted, marking a significant shift in media tactics. The omnipresence of this narrative was far more aggressive than in any previous global conflict or political event, as evidenced by scholarly analysis (Strovsky and Schleifer 2020; Chatterje-Doody and Crilley 2019; Brown 2015; Simons 2016).

Moving beyond news programs, which are expected to feature such content, the Syrian war was mentioned in non-news segments in a manner that suggests a deliberate strategy to

permeate public consciousness. An illustrative example is the inclusion of references to the conflict and Russian achievements within weather forecasts. Viewers, typically less vigilant during these segments and focused on regional weather information, encountered unexpected mentions of the war. This tactic could particularly influence those attempting to avoid state propaganda, as their guard would likely be lowered during what is perceived as apolitical content. Such a strategy indicates a methodical approach by the state to embed war narratives into various facets of media programming, a tactic not previously observed in the dissemination of government narratives.

The integration of references to the Syrian war into Russian television broadcasts exemplifies a strategic media approach. Traditionally, weather reports on Russian TV were confined to domestic weather conditions. However, during this period, these segments began to incorporate mentions of the Syrian war. For instance, weather presenters would interject comments such as, ‘Oh, and by the way, there are no clouds in Syria at the moment, providing our forces with optimal conditions to bombard terrorist positions. As evident, clear skies prevail over Aleppo and Palmyra,’ thereby subtly directing the public's attention towards areas of interest in Russian military propaganda (Полит.ру 2015; Spektr 2015; Настоящее Время 2015; Россия24 2017; Vesti 2015). This tactic aligns with the testimony of Interviewee 5 from government-controlled media, who stated: ‘The instruction was to push a little further as the people’s enthusiasm started to ebb away. Good news about Syria needed to be in place across the schedule, not just in the politics section’ (Interviewee 5, 2023)

The pervasiveness of this propaganda becomes evident when considering the ubiquity of television in daily life. Even for those actively avoiding official Russian media, escaping these narratives proves challenging. The incorporation of Syrian war content extends beyond

conventional news and political programming, permeating various aspects of media consumption. This strategy underscores a systematic effort to maintain a narrative of Russian success in Syria, as noted by various scholars (Van Herpen 2015; Gerber and Zavisca 2016; Romanets 2017), and highlights the inescapable nature of state-influenced propaganda within Russian media.

An illustrative instance of media manipulation was highlighted when Channel 1 was found to have incorporated screenshots from the video game 'Arma 3' in a broadcast about Syria (РБК 2018). These game images, purported to be authentic footage, formed part of a report on Lieutenant Alexander Prokhorenko, who perished in Palmyra in 2016. The broadcast delineated his presence in enemy territory on the outskirts of Palmyra, orchestrating Russian airstrikes against terrorist factions. The visuals from 'Arma 3,' depicting dilapidated structures and the obliteration of military assets, were presented as evidence of Russia's offensive against terrorist enclaves. Intriguingly, 'Arma 3,' a conventional war-themed video game released in 2013, is set in the 2030s, featuring a fictional conflict between NATO forces and Iran.

This choice of 'Arma 3' as a visual aid in the report is analytically significant. The game's imagery closely mirrors the anticipated appearance of Syrian terrain in public perception. Following the exposure of this fabrication, Channel 1 acknowledged the error, attributing it to an inadvertent selection by a junior editor rather than a deliberate attempt at deception. They clarified that the footage's inclusion was a non-malicious error, not an intentional act of subterfuge. This raises critical questions about editorial processes and decision-making, particularly the improbability of selecting a war video game's imagery for a factual news story amidst various available sources. While it might be considered an isolated incident were this the first occurrence, the Ministry of Defence had previously faced

accusations of a similar nature. Specifically, they were alleged to have used a screenshot from the mobile shooter game 'Gunships' as purported evidence of U.S. forces colluding with ISIS, by failing to target ISIS military installations. Previously, when the Ministry was confronted with this deceptive practice, they issued a statement attributing the error to a civilian contractor. It was revealed that the contractor, who was responsible for editing footage for the Ministry of Defence, inadvertently included the game content, which was available on the same device used for editing. Despite this exposure, the Ministry persisted in its claim of possessing evidence indicating an alliance between American forces and ISIS.



(Александр Сухов [@alex_sukhov] 2018)

5.6 Rule five. Do not mention casualties

Russian media coverage seldom mentioned Russian military casualties, focusing instead on incidents already reported by international sources. Official narratives consistently maintained that Russian actions resulted exclusively in terrorist casualties, emphatically denying any harm to non-combatants. In stark contrast, the United States and European Union

forces were frequently depicted by Russian sources as deliberately targeting Syrian civilians. This portrayal is supported by academic analyses and news reports (Stent 2016; Vesti 2016).

Shifting focus from Russian military to civilian casualties in Syria invites a critical examination of the broader impacts of aerial bombardments. Theoretical frameworks in conflict studies suggest that aerial campaigns, regardless of the perpetrator, inherently risk civilian harm. This hypothesis seems to be systematically overlooked or dismissed in Russian media narratives, as dictated by official media guidelines (Pukhov 2015; Sukhankin 2018). A representative of the government-controlled media articulated this selective blindness succinctly: 'Russia's official position was simple: we don't bomb civilians. And we didn't in Syria. We bombed ISIS. How would the children get there? No way. Period' (Interviewee 39, 2023).

The discussion omits any mention of Russian-inflicted casualties. This absence raises questions about the breadth of information accessible to the Russian populace. Given that foreign NGOs and independent reporters are often discredited for allegedly relying on data from governments adversarial to Russian interests, the domestic narrative remains unchallenged. This systemic denial of civilian harm, uncontradicted within the Russian media landscape, leaves no verifiable basis to refute these omissions (РИА Новости 2020; Газдиев 2017; Бут 2016; ntv.ru 2018; Александров and Левитин 2015; 1tv.ru 2016; Россия24 2016). Interviewee 36, an independent media source, reveals a similar reluctance to acknowledge civilian losses, stating: 'Even when we wrote about civilian losses, it was hard to admit it. We wanted to blame the terrorists, not ourselves' (Interviewee 36 2022).

Contrastingly, numerous independent reports highlight severe atrocities committed against Syrian civilians by the Russian military. A strategic pattern emerges, particularly in opposition-controlled areas, where deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure, such as hospitals and schools, is apparent. This tactic seemingly aims to maximise civilian casualties and break the will of the people. Post-attack, the strategy involves not only a refusal to acknowledge these casualties but also ensuring no official record contradicts denials of such bombings (Naylor 2015; Human Rights Watch 2015).

The explicit association of Russia with reports of child casualties in Syria is conspicuously absent from media narratives. This observation is perplexing, considering the high likelihood of civilian harm in any city subjected to bombing. Despite this, the narrative strategy effectively dissociates Russia from these tragedies. A significant factor contributing to this phenomenon is the reluctance of even the most vehement critics of Putin within Russia to acknowledge their indirect role—through taxation—in the harm inflicted upon children (Архипов 2017; Захаренко 2016; Шароградский 2017; Цимэс 2019; Радио Свобода 2019b; Козлов 2016; ТелеФОМ 2015). Interviewee 20, from an independent media outlet, articulates this sentiment:

‘It’s very easy. Your readers are not ready to read or watch this. If they are not ready to believe you, you can’t do anything about it. They will believe what they are ready to believe: that it’s not us, it is staged, it didn’t happen, it’s the Americans. Every event counts a hundred different versions. Pick the one you like and believe in it.’ (Interviewee 20 2022)

Surprisingly, even individuals who seek information from diverse sources and oppose Putin's regime often inadvertently support him when discussions turn to civilian casualties

caused by Russian military actions. These staunch opponents are unwilling to confront the reality that their nation, using their tax contributions, is causing harm to innocents and non-combatants.

The correlation between the intensification of conflict on the battlefield - a term that tragically encompassed areas where children fell victim to Russian bombardments - and the surge in media coverage of this war is stark. Independent sources and foreign governments reported increasing casualties, which paradoxically fuelled aggressive denial in the Russian public sphere. This phenomenon saw a unification of the populace around their government and leader, vehemently rejecting the stark reality of their nation's involvement in the deaths of children, as evidenced by Клопс (2017), Землякопова (2018), and Vesti (2019):

‘We had reports on civilian casualties in Syria. Go see what’s going on in the comments under these articles. Our own ‘Putin, die!’ readers hated us for it and said it was impossible that Russia would bomb children. Apparently, not everyone, but it was a massive thing.’ (Interviewee 17, 2022)

This observation underscores an implicit rule: the Russian populace was largely unprepared to acknowledge their nation's potential complicity in the killing of children in Syria. Despite the precarious nature of the propagated narratives, any admission by Russia of civilian casualties, accompanied by an apology or acknowledgment of error, would compel Russian citizens and media consumers to confront a disturbing possibility. The steadfast denial of these incontrovertible facts by the government facilitated a similar denial among the public, a phenomenon further explored in the works of Williams and Souza (2016), Красная Линия (2017), РИА Новости (2017), and slamnews.ru (2018).

The government's perception of its invulnerability in this matter stemmed from the citizens' reluctance to acknowledge governmental misconduct. Subsequently, a second wave of propaganda emerged, emphasising allegations against US and EU forces regarding civilian attacks in Syria. These assaults were portrayed as either inadvertent, stemming from an over-reliance on sophisticated technology, or as deliberate acts intended to malign Russia. The narrative suggested that Western forces, specifically from the EU, the UK, and the US, intentionally targeted Syrian civilians to falsely implicate Russia and tarnish its global standing. The underlying assertion was that to attribute responsibility for a crime, the crime must first be committed; thus, by orchestrating these attacks, the West aimed to construct a narrative of Russian culpability.

However, evidence supporting the effectiveness of this strategy remains scant. No significant surveys have been conducted within Russia to gauge public opinion on the alleged involvement of Western armies in civilian casualties in Syria. Nevertheless, the initial part of this narrative appeared to resonate effectively with Russian citizens. Even in the absence of belief in Western culpability, there was a widespread reluctance to accept any Russian involvement in civilian harm. A recurring theme in this discourse, often echoed in reports on regional conflicts (Hall 2016; Shaheen 2018; Perper 2018), is the denial of civilian presence, attributing the areas solely to terrorist occupancy. Such assertions raise critical ethical questions regarding the dissemination and framing of conflict narratives, underscoring the necessity for rigorous scrutiny and methodological rigour in analysing such claims.

Upon careful consideration, it becomes evident that the complete evacuation of civilians from an entire city, especially one partly occupied by terrorists, is an unrealistic expectation. This assumption challenges the analytical depth typically exhibited by media

consumers. In the context of this discussion, most individuals consuming media reports display a reluctance to acknowledge the improbability of such scenarios. In this specific instance, there appears to be a tacit acceptance of misinformation among the audience. A deeper, rational analysis would likely lead to the acknowledgment of being misled. However, only a minority of Russian media consumers seem willing to confront the harsh reality that military operations conducted in their name have resulted in tragic outcomes, such as the deaths of Syrian children. This is exemplified in the words of Interviewee 38, a representative of government-controlled media: ‘If I were asked if children could die if a city was bombed, I’d say yes. But we tried not to think about it back then. We hoped all children had been evacuated and the city was just occupied by the terrorists’ (Interviewee 38, 2022).

5.7 Rule six. Do not ignore Western reports

At first glance, the strategy of the Russian media to ignore foreign reports on the Syrian war might seem overly simplistic and unwarranted. The majority of Russian media consumers, lacking alternative means or the inclination to seek news beyond state-controlled sources, remain uninformed about international perspectives. The absence of Western viewpoints on Syria theoretically poses no threat to their existing beliefs, as it does not challenge the narratives presented by the Russian media propaganda apparatus.

However, this perspective is reductive and overlooks the complexities of media manipulation in contemporary Russian governance. Individuals adept in media propaganda within the Russian government adopt a seemingly riskier yet more effective approach. As articulated by Interviewee 6 from a government-controlled media outlet in 2022: ‘Why ignore what the Western press is writing? On the contrary, we need to explain how they lie about

Russia and how they are all against Russia. Look what terrible things we are accused of by the West – our enemy’ (Interviewee 6, 2022).

This statement encapsulates a fundamental tactic: Russian media does not simply neglect Western reports on the Syrian war; it actively engages with them. This strategy involves reporting, commenting on, and systematically discrediting each piece of information emanating from the West. Such an approach has yielded numerous benefits for the Russian propaganda machine, enhancing its effectiveness without incurring any discernible drawbacks, as evidenced by multiple sources including Interfax (2015, 2018), Strovsky and Schleifer (2020), Eisentraut (2018), McLaughlin (2016), Englund (2019), and Luhn (2016).

The primary advantage of presenting diverse viewpoints, particularly in government-controlled media, is the enhancement of perceived trustworthiness. By deliberately showcasing perspectives that diverge from the official narrative, especially on contentious issues, media outlets appear more bipartisan and credible. This strategy effectively counters potential allegations from the Russian public about biased reporting, as it includes alternative, notably Western, perspectives on events (Петров 2016).

Once such stories are reported, the media gains the latitude to manipulate these narratives. A key objective is to undermine these alternate views, thereby reinforcing Russia's positive role in conflicts, such as in Syria, while portraying Western nations as solely intent on discrediting and destabilising Russia (RT 2016). This approach is succinctly summarised by Interviewee 5, affiliated with government-controlled media:

‘If the story is big and they write about it in the West, and you don’t, it looks like you're scared and you’re hiding. Russia shouldn’t be afraid of provocation.

So, the policy is to refute and accuse the West of the attack, if you want to tell the story. I.e. you use it to your benefit.' (Interviewee 5, 2023)

This strategy underscores the significance of every news item, no matter how minor it may seem. Each piece of news, irrespective of its apparent disadvantage, can be transformed into a substantial asset in the ongoing information warfare against the perceived hostility of the West. This is particularly effective when linked to the prevailing sentiment among viewers, who are generally unwilling to acknowledge any responsibility for the Syrian war (Прозорова 2020).

The photograph of a young boy rescued from beneath a collapsed building in Aleppo, a poignant image emblematic of the conflict's human toll, exemplifies the tactics under discussion. Captured after a bombardment attributed to Russian forces (Barnard 2016), this image, portraying the boy encrusted in dust and blood, seated in an ambulance, garnered widespread attention. Its viral nature not only ensured prominent placement in numerous Western publications but also underscored its inescapability in Russia. Paradoxically, the photograph transcended its initial purpose, evolving into a tool of propaganda. This transformation reflects a broader refusal among Russian citizens and media consumers to acknowledge any culpability in the events depicted, illustrating the complex interplay between media representation and public perception in conflict zones. This case highlights the intricate dynamics of media influence in shaping narratives, particularly in the context of international conflicts where propaganda plays a pivotal role.



(Савченко 2016)

The initiation of a counter-narrative by Russian media, suggesting that a controversial photograph was either fabricated or staged, significantly influenced public opinion in Russia. This alternative narrative, positing that the image was deliberately manipulated to denigrate Russia's military operations in Syria, found resonance among the populace, arguably because it presented a less distressing version of events. Numerous Russian media outlets promulgated the theory that the child depicted was artificially covered in dust and photographed as part of a contrived effort to discredit the Russian military. These outlets categorically denied the possibility of the child being rescued from a building demolished by Russian military forces, adamantly maintaining the stance that such forces do not target civilian structures, particularly those housing children (Sputnik Эстония 2018; RT 2018; Sputnik Эстония 2018; NewsFront 2018; Богатова and Ким 2018; Никитина 2018; Семин 2018; Шишкин 2017; Владимирова 2017; Князев 2017; ТАСС 2017; Садыкова 2017; Чесноков 2017; РИА Новости 2017; RT 2017; Гладких 2019).

The third significant outcome of consistently scrutinising Western reports transcends domestic politics, directly engaging with the international media landscape that Russia contends with. This approach is not about internal political dynamics but centres on the external media conflict Russia engages in. By offering an alternate narrative for each piece of news, Russia inevitably attracts a segment of the Western audience that may harbour more trust in these narratives than in their own governments' reports. In democratic societies, the populace is often divided, with approximately half supporting the government and the other half in opposition, among whom a substantial number may harbour deep-seated distrust towards their own government. Consequently, when news is disseminated by government or official sources, it frequently encounters scepticism among the public. At this juncture, the introduction of an alternative narrative, perspective, or concept becomes crucial – essentially, the provision of 'alternative facts' becomes a strategic necessity (Lukasiewicz 2019; Barrera *et al.* 2020; Himma-Kadakas 2017; Cooke 2018; Moreno-Castro, Corell-Doménech, and Camaño-Puig 2019; Brat 2015; Tan and Weaver 2010; Huisman, Murphet, and Dunn 2006; Scolari 2009; Ryan 2003). Knight and Tsoukas (2019) aptly describe this phenomenon: 'When a critical sense turns into conspiratorial thinking, alternative facts are swallowed hook, line, and sinker, as long as they come from alternative sources according to one's taste and world view' (Knight and Tsoukas 2019)

Imagine a scenario where an individual's mistrust in their government is so profound that they perceive any official report as fallacious. Here, Russia steps in, offering an alternative viewpoint on every news story reported in the West, not just limited to the Syrian war but encompassing a broad range of significant events occurring in Western nations.

The strategic formulation of an alternative narrative within Russian media propaganda yields exclusively positive effects, with no discernible negative repercussions attributable to the adherence to the policy of never disregarding Western reports. This approach is particularly effective in the context of the propaganda surrounding the Syrian war. A substantial segment of not only the Western populace but also Russia's own citizens are reluctant to acknowledge their nation's role in civilian casualties in Syria. A representative from a government-controlled media outlet, Interviewee 6 (2022), elucidates this strategy:

‘We live in a new world. Everyone has Internet. Everyone travelled abroad themselves or know someone who did. You must understand that your viewer is not behind the iron curtain. They still get some rumours from the West. You can’t and you shouldn’t try to hide these rumours. You should discredit them. Preferably mock them.’ (Interviewee 6, 2022)

Contrary to the efficacy of outright ignoring Western reports, engagement and refutation of these reports prove more beneficial. By not isolating the public from alternate narratives and not endeavouring to shield them from Western perspectives, the approach does not merely augment the public's capacity for critical analysis of diverse news sources but also fortifies the government's stance. The populace tends to gravitate more towards the government's comforting narrative than the conflicting Western perspective.

This inclination is supported by empirical evidence: A 2015 survey conducted by the Levada Centre reveals a profound scepticism towards Western media among Russian citizens. Only 5% of respondents unequivocally trusted the Western media's portrayal of Russia’s involvement in international affairs, as depicted in Figure 5.1.

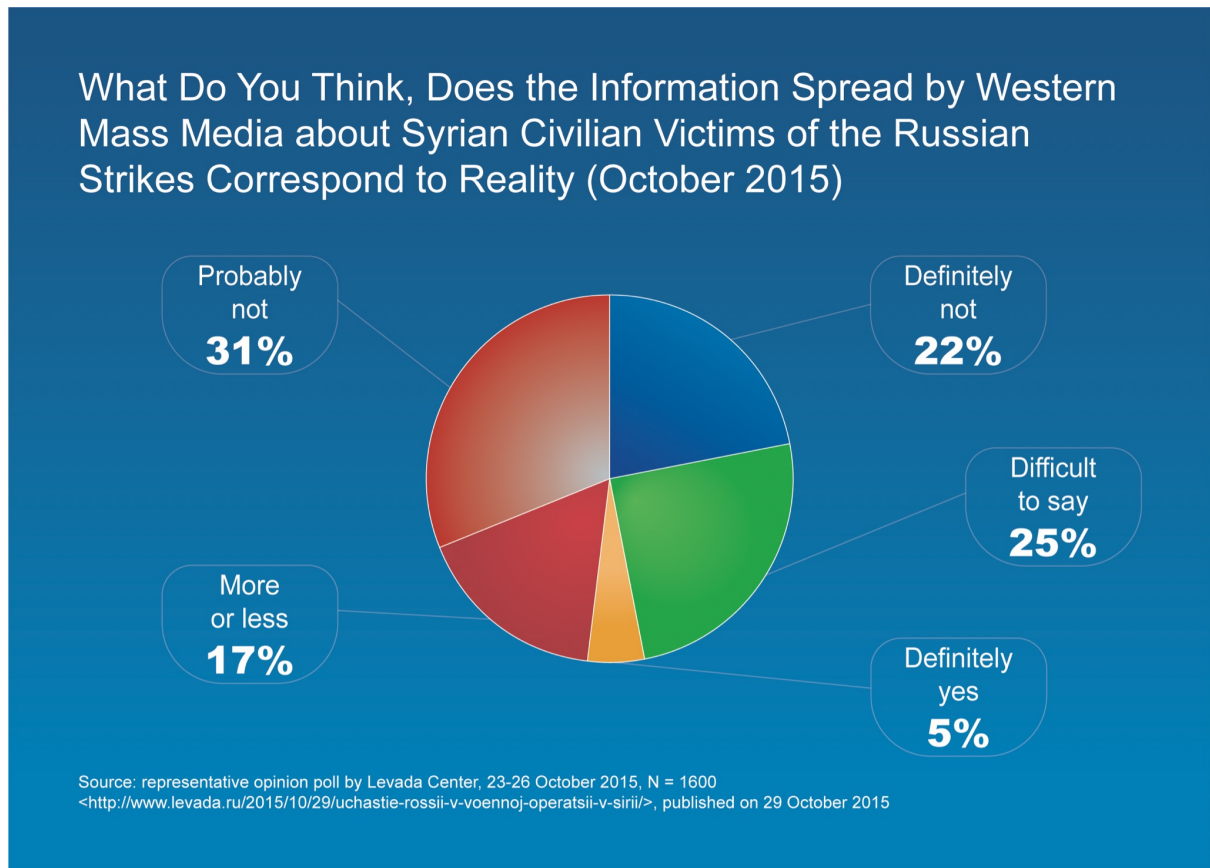


Figure 5.1: Are Western media lying about Russia’s involvement in Syria? Casula, Philipp (2015)

This observation challenges the conventional narrative, often emphasised in journalism education, that exposure to diverse viewpoints inherently enhances public information and decision-making capabilities. This theory posits that, when presented with varying perspectives, the public will be better equipped to make informed and judicious choices. However, this ideal does not always align with reality. In scenarios where one side is evidently falsifying information while the other presents incontrovertible facts, there is a tendency for the public to overwhelmingly gravitate towards the falsehoods, finding solace in them despite their inaccuracy. This phenomenon suggests a dissonance between the theoretical framework of journalism and its practical implications, as evidenced by Downing (2000), Speed and Mannion (2017), and Murguía (2019).

5.8 Rule seven. The tone

This regulation pertains exclusively to television news, reports, and radio broadcasts. From a research perspective, its verification poses significant challenges, as it necessitates attentive monitoring of these broadcasts. Particularly challenging is the detection of nuanced variations in the reporter's tone, a task almost insurmountable for individuals not proficient in Russian. Despite these difficulties, this rule is stringently adhered to by prominent propagandists in Russian media. A pertinent analogy can be drawn with the news reporting on North Korean television channels (Kim 2013). Even for those lacking proficiency in Korean, the tone's variance is discernible, indicating its strategic use in news delivery. Notably, North Korean news anchors employ a distinctly cheerful, commanding tone, especially when referencing their leader (Kang 2007; Jung 2013; Choi 2016; Mehrabian 1981; 김인수 2017; Yoon 2015; RogueStatesMedia 2014; The Telegraph 2011; CNA 2018), effectively utilising tone as a tool in their propagandist repertoire.

The employment of varied tonal nuances on Russian television is subtly aligned with the Russian psyche, yet it functions effectively as an instrumental tool. This subtlety is evident in the changing tones of news reporters, contingent upon the subject matter. Demina (2017) highlights a significant shift in tone when reporters discuss countries such as the United States or the United Kingdom, particularly in the context of the Syrian war. In these instances, the news anchor adopts a condescending and dismissive demeanour. This approach is pronounced when reporting on British or American perspectives on specific events, where the anchor's tone is laden with disdain, often punctuated by a meaningful look or a pause, signalling disbelief.

The tonal variation is distinctly noticeable when comparing the portrayal of British, American, and EU viewpoints. Particularly, a ‘I told you so’ tone prevails in references to Europe, suggesting an imminent collapse due to misguided policies. This narrative posits that Europe, having ignored Russia's prudent advice, now faces dire consequences from the Syrian migrant crisis, potentially leading to the downfall of Europe, America, and Britain (1tv.ru 2019; 1tv.ru 2020; Россия24 2015; Россия24 2016; Клейменов 2018; TV Rain 2018; ICTV 2020; euronews 2018). Interviewee 6, from government-controlled media, elucidates this phenomenon:

‘The right tone in the anchor’s speech is a special art. In fact, only a few people in the country have full command of it – the capability of showing despite for the West and love for Putin. In the USSR there was a good school of anchors, they read the news really well, with a feeling, but I think our anchors surpassed them in this art.’ (Interviewee 6, 2022)

This overtone insinuates the West’s general ineptitude and inability to grasp fundamental facts. The deliberate use of long pauses serves a strategic purpose: it gives viewers time to internalise and express disbelief at the perceived folly of the Europeans, often leading to exclamations like ‘Can you believe these European idiots?’

The portrayal of the Russian military in Russian media, as evidenced by various sources (Россия24 2015; 1tv.ru 2017; Соловьев 2020), is characterised by an overly optimistic and triumphant narrative. This representation suggests an infallible and effortlessly victorious military, particularly in the context of the Syrian war. The media narrative implies that the challenges faced in Syria are negligible compared to potential future conflicts where Russia is depicted as being prepared to confront global powers, including the United States. The

portrayal of these conflicts as 'small potatoes' compared to the might of the Russian military, is indicative of a strategic narrative aimed at bolstering national morale and military prowess.

In a similar vein, the depiction of Vladimir Putin in the media adopts a distinctly paternalistic and reassuring tone (Abrams 2016). Whenever Putin's stance on an issue is mentioned, the narrative shifts to one that is fatherly and comforting, positioning him as a guardian figure who is deeply concerned with the welfare of the Russian populace. This narrative strategy is designed to evoke a sense of security and trust in Putin's leadership, suggesting he uniquely embodies and prioritises Russia's national interests. The consistent use of this tone in media outlets (1tv.ru 2020; Соловьев 2020; Соловьев 2018) seeks to reassure the public of a stable and protected future under Putin's guidance.

The representation of President Putin's rhetoric in government-controlled media is a nuanced phenomenon. Reports adhering to a neutral stance maintain a tone that is reassuring, calm, and serious. However, this tonal alignment shifts in accordance with Putin's delivery. For instance, when Putin makes a sarcastic remark, the news anchor adopts a sarcastic tone, exemplified in a report from 1tv.ru (2020). Similarly, an angry comment by Putin results in a corresponding shift in the anchor's demeanour (1tv.ru 2020). As noted by Interviewee 5, a media professional in this government-controlled sector: 'The main tip is Putin's tone of voice when he speaks. If Putin is being angry, you should be angry. If Putin is being ironic, you should be ironic' (Interviewee 5, 2023).

This mimicry extends beyond mere tone. Anchors in these contexts endeavour to replicate not only the verbal content of Putin's statements but also the emotional undertones. Whether the sentiment is sarcasm, dismissiveness, seriousness, or anger, the anchor reflects it

in their presentation. This approach is particularly evident when Putin employs humour; the anchor not only praises the humour but also attempts to emulate it, reinforcing the message's impact.

The underlying strategy of these propagandists transcends the simple conveyance of information. Their objective is to engage the audience emotionally, targeting both the intellect and the emotional core of the viewers. This approach, as outlined by scholars such as Goyman (2014), Novikova (2014), Paul and Matthews (2016), and Lelich (2014), underscores the importance of emotional resonance in effective propaganda, a tactic that aims to win over not just minds but also hearts.

5.9 Chapter summary

The primary objective of Chapter 5 is to delineate the most prevalent and effective strategies employed by Russian media in reporting the Syrian war. Despite their technical nature, these strategies proved indispensable and highly effective in shaping the perspectives of the Russian populace. It can be confidently posited that the Russian media's influence significantly solidified the public's views on various aspects of the Syrian war, including Russia's involvement, its historical significance, and the broader narrative of the conflict. To an uninitiated observer, the coverage of the Syrian war by Russian media might appear haphazard; however, it was governed by stringent, identifiable rules:

The first rule pertained to language use. A strategic avoidance of certain terms, such as 'opposition,' was employed to obfuscate the presence of any anti-Assad entities other than terrorists. An interviewee elucidated: 'Avoid using certain words, for example, 'opposition,' to

make sure no one thinks that there is any kind of opposition to Assad except the terrorists' (Interviewee 6, 2022).

The second rule focused on the temporal aspect of news reporting. It posited that news is ephemeral, existing solely for a day. This approach deliberately eschews historical context, thereby avoiding contradictions and ensuring each narrative remains unchallenged and self-contained. The news exists for one day and you do not refer to the past actions.

The third rule involved geographical ambiguity. By not specifying exact locations, the media absolved itself from the responsibility of factual accuracy, rendering their reports unverifiable. This tactic is exemplified by the coverage of Aleppo, a vast region fraught with conflict throughout the war, yet Russian media consistently refrained from mentioning precise locations in their reports.

In addressing the complexity of the conflict in Aleppo, which is under the control of various factions, it is crucial to scrutinise the language used in describing military actions. For instance, statements indicating that Russian forces have been targeting terrorists in Aleppo can be misleading, as this city also harbours civilians and opposition-controlled areas. Borri (2016) elucidates this point, stating that such a narrative absolves the aggressor of responsibility by creating an assumption that only terrorists are targeted, thereby obscuring the possibility of civilian casualties. Vinogradova (2019) highlights a significant aspect of Russian domestic propaganda concerning the Syrian war. She outlines the fourth rule as the necessity to reach even those Russian citizens who deliberately avoid news. The coverage of the Syrian war transcends traditional news outlets, permeating entertainment and even weather programs on Russian TV, thus ensuring inescapable exposure to narratives of Russian military triumphs.

The fifth rule, as Wainer (2020) notes, involves a deliberate omission of casualty figures. The Russian side's losses, civilian or military, remain undisclosed, perpetuating the narrative of a flawless campaign against terrorism, where only terrorists suffer harm, and no civilian casualties occur.

Lastly, the sixth rule, perhaps the most challenging, involves the Russian media's approach to Western reports of the conflict. Contrary to ignoring Western accusations of war crimes or other negative portrayals, Russian media actively engages with these reports. This engagement is strategic, aimed at countering or reframing narratives that cast Russia in a negative light regarding its involvement in Syria.

The primary rationale for not disregarding news, particularly when it is current and highly relevant, lies in the necessity to construct an alternative narrative. This narrative serves as a refuge for those sceptical of their government. Within the context of Russian media, this approach reinforces the perception of Russia being besieged by antagonistic Western forces intent on undermining its credibility (Полонский 2017). Consequently, the Russian media apparatus does not attempt to conceal reports of the nation's alleged war crimes in Syria. Instead, it systematically provides counter-narratives to each accusation. The existence of these counter-narratives is crucial, regardless of their validity, as they offer an alternative perspective sought by certain segments of the population. This strategy becomes particularly vital when accusations of war crimes are levelled against Russia. A notable segment of the Russian populace, including those who neither endorse Putin nor trust state media, are reluctant to conceive of Russia as a perpetrator of war crimes.

The seventh rule pertains to the tone of media coverage, especially prevalent in television, radio, and online platforms in Russia. The delivery of news is governed by stringent guidelines regarding tone. For instance, discussions involving the Russian military are mandated to exude a tone of optimism, whereas references to Putin must convey reassurance. Putin's statements are invariably presented with an air of paternal protection, portraying him as a fatherly figure characterised by strength, composure, and a commitment to safeguarding the populace from threats (Hutchings and Rulyova 2009).

In the perspective of Putin and the Presidential Administration, one might argue that the Russian media's portrayal of the Syrian war was executed with precision. This coverage emerged strategically, bolstering the President's approval ratings. It served as a smokescreen, obscuring the Russian military's challenges and losses in Syria. Additionally, it masked transactions enriching Putin's inner oligarchic circle, notably through engagements with Assad and Syrian oil. This media narrative was adeptly manipulated: present when advantageous, and abruptly ceasing when its utility waned and potential detriment arose. The cessation of coverage coincided with a waning public interest in the conflict, reinforcing a critical notion within Putin's strategy: the tangible realities of war are subordinate to the power of media representation. This shift in coverage does not imply the end of the actual conflict in Syria, but it underscores the pivotal role of media in shaping public perception and political agendas.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

6.1 Main Findings and Arguments

This thesis primarily aims to demonstrate that the Russian media's coverage of the Syrian war, despite appearing ruthless, immoral, unprofessional, and chaotic, was not a spontaneous development. It adhered to a meticulously crafted set of guidelines, strategically designed to present the extensive death and destruction in Syria in a manner most palatable to the Russian audience. This approach, it can be reasonably argued, proved effective in shaping public perception.

The consequent question arises: What is the outcome of adhering to these media guidelines? It is evident that such efforts were not futile. When one's source of information on the Syrian crisis is exclusively the Russian state-controlled media, as was the case for a majority of Russian citizens, a distinct and somewhat homogenised perspective emerges. This constructed narrative closely mirrors the views of Russian citizens regarding the conflict. This assertion is substantiated by a range of governmental and semi-independent surveys conducted on the topic, which collectively offer a window into the public sentiment shaped by these media practices.

The efficacy of the Russian media apparatus in aligning with governmental perspectives on the Syrian war is evident. Despite the availability of independent media and reports from Western and non-governmental organisations in the region, the Russian government's narrative regarding the Syrian war has gained substantial traction among the public. This predominance is due to the sheer volume of pro-government news on Syria, overshadowing the content from independent, Western, and non-governmental sources. The Russian populace generally finds

the government's stance on Syria more reassuring, which partly explains their alignment with the government's viewpoint on this issue (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley 2019).

This situation underscores a broader crisis in journalism, particularly regarding its role, survival, relevance, and fundamental responsibility to inform the public and hold authorities accountable. In the context of Syrian war coverage, Russian media has failed its citizens: journalists in Russia have neglected their critical duties to provide comprehensive information to their readers and to hold the Russian government accountable for its actions in Syria.

Undoubtedly, Russia significantly lags in press freedom, ranking 149th globally in terms of freedom of information, expression, and press, as reported by Reporters Without Borders (RSF 2020). This situation is further exacerbated by the high incidence of casualties among journalists in Russia, a troubling statistic that places the country as one of the leaders in Europe in this regard. Journalists in Russia face routine persecution and violence, with the perpetrators often evading consequences (Ljubas 2019; CPJ 2021). This oppressive environment severely impedes the efficacy of journalism, compelling journalists to prioritise not only their professional integrity but also their personal safety and that of their families.

The state of journalism in Russia, constrained by these conditions, has a formidable journey ahead to reclaim its freedom, professional values, and standards. However, the prospect of achieving this freedom appears bleak. A comparative analysis of the coverage of a significant event like the Syrian war by the constrained Russian media and the ostensibly freer Western media reveals a perplexing dynamic. Despite the expansive freedom enjoyed by Western journalists, their impact on public opinion or subsequent events appears minimal. This assertion is substantiated by the continued presidency of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, despite

widespread coverage and the tragic loss of hundreds of thousands of lives over nine years. This scenario suggests a paradox in media influence: Whether in a society with access to diverse viewpoints and information sources, as in the West, or in a restricted environment like Russia, the ultimate outcome and public impact appear similarly unaffected.

The tendency for individuals to prefer information sources that align with their pre-existing beliefs is well-documented (Mutz and Martin 2001; Entman 1989), rather than sources offering a more objective viewpoint. This selective exposure does not merely influence the manner in which facts are received; it also shapes the very facts individuals choose to accept, often aligning with their preconceived notions. Such a predilection poses a significant challenge to journalists and the media at large, prompting a crucial inquiry into the role of journalism within a society inclined towards echo chambers of agreement.

This challenge was starkly exemplified following Russia's second invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The ensuing two months saw a drastic suppression of independent media in Russia, culminating in the closure of numerous outlets. As reported by Денисенко and Флоринская (2022), this period witnessed an exodus of over 900,000 individuals from the country, a contingent predominantly composed of independent journalists, editors, and media managers. The scale of this media crisis is further underscored by the cessation of approximately 2,000 media entities (Никифоров, Старикова, and Хейфец 2022). Notably, a fraction of these media professionals has relocated abroad, continuing their journalistic endeavours despite these adversities.

The predominant sources of unrestricted Russian news are platforms such as YouTube and Telegram. Given the frequent blocking of websites by the state, individuals within Russia

are advised to utilise VPNs to access information. It is increasingly evident that the existence of independent media in Russia is improbable as long as Putin's regime persists. A significant majority of the Russian populace, influenced by state-controlled media, reportedly supports the government's actions in Ukraine, with a survey indicating a 76 percent approval rate for the 'special operation' in Ukraine (РИА Новости 2022). The strategies employed to propagate this conflict mirror those developed and refined during the Syrian war, demonstrating their efficacy in shaping public opinion.

The Russian media landscape is characterised by a singular focus on pleasing one entity – Vladimir Putin. This dynamic is poignantly described by a media expert: ‘The whole Russian media machine works for one reader and one reader only, and there's one media consumer and one media consumer only. And that media consumer is Vladimir Putin’ (Interviewee 31 2023).

The motivations behind journalists' compliance, whether ideological, financial, or pragmatic, are secondary to the fundamental reality of their singular audience. As the expert further notes: ‘It does not matter why the journalists lie... It does not change the basic fact that they have one consumer, they only need one click. They only need one like, and that like can come only from one person and that person is Vladimir Putin’ (Interviewee 31 2023).

This insight, supported by academic research (Bodrunova, Litvinenko, and Nigmatullina 2020; Pasti 2005; Jakubowicz, Sükösd, and Research (Organisation), 2008; Evans, Henry, and Sundstrom 2016), underlines the unique dynamics at play within the Russian media ecosystem, where journalistic integrity and diversity are compromised by political exigencies.

Vladimir Putin stands singularly as the pivotal figure in the financial sustenance and operational continuity of media organisations in Russia. He embodies the sole, quintessential patron whose approval and financial backing are critical. This monopolistic patronage inevitably shapes the media landscape, leading to a homogenised news environment predominantly tailored for this exclusive audience. Such a scenario is particularly ironic given Putin's well-documented disinterest in consuming media directly. Instead, he engages with media through secondary reports, assessing their content and behaviour rather than experiencing them first-hand.

For media entities, this dynamic translates into a constant pursuit of approval from Putin. The operational model hinges on annual financial support, necessitating a ritualistic submission of performance reports to the presidential administration. These reports, critical for justifying past expenditures, become instrumental in securing future funding (Сергиенко 2020). Consequently, media organisations find themselves in a perennial cycle of seeking renewal of what effectively becomes a yearly 'subscription' by Putin. Their primary objective morphs into ensuring this subscription continues in subsequent years, thus sustaining their existence and operations.

Russia perceives itself as a European nation, steadfastly upholding what it views as European values - values which, according to Russian sources, have been forsaken by Europe itself (Инвест-Форсайт 2018). This self-conception positions Russia as a solitary guardian of these ideals. Historically, the Soviet Union propagated a narrative of superiority over Western nations. It asserted that the Soviet way of life was vastly more advanced than that of Europeans, Britons, and Americans.

Key to the Soviet narrative was the claim of a society free from hunger, racism, segregation, and unemployment, complemented by universal access to healthcare, education, and housing. In stark contrast, the United States was portrayed as a nation plagued with homelessness, hunger, inadequate education, and lack of medical care. This portrayal painted Soviet life as not only happier for the average citizen but also significantly superior. This narrative was effective largely due to travel restrictions that prevented most citizens from visiting foreign countries, thus limiting their ability to challenge the state's portrayal. However, following the Soviet Union's collapse, increased travel opportunities enabled more Russians to personally witness the higher living standards in Western countries, contradicting the earlier Soviet claims. This shift is illustrated in Bronfenbrenner's 1961 study, highlighting the changing perceptions post-Soviet era.

The strategy previously employed, which asserted the superiority of life in Russia over the West, was eventually considered unsustainable in the contemporary global context. Consequently, a strategic shift was adopted. This new approach, markedly more effective in the realm of propaganda, acknowledges the difficulties present in Russian life—acknowledging economic challenges, social issues, and governance problems. However, it simultaneously draws parallels with the West, emphasising that Western nations also grapple with issues such as corruption, crime, and bribery. The narrative suggests a universal hardship, negating the dichotomy of a 'good life' in the West versus a 'bad life' in Russia. Additionally, this narrative positions Russia as a contrast to European nations, particularly highlighting the absence of issues like the influx of radical Muslim migrants and the prevalence of homosexuality, as discussed in the works of Persson (2015), Edenborg (2018), Jakubowicz, Sükösd, and Research (Organisation) (2008), and Edenborg (2017).

It is critical to understand that the Russian media's extensive coverage and framework were not exclusively devised for the Syrian war. While the Syrian war served as a catalyst, the underlying objective was to shape perceptions about Russia, and more specifically, about Vladimir Putin. The Syrian war, in this context, was utilised as an exemplar, a case study to demonstrate Russia's geopolitical strength and influence. This approach to media coverage reflects a broader strategy in Russian propaganda, where specific events are used as vehicles to convey larger narratives about Russia's global stature and leadership.

The media portrayal, as highlighted by Smirnov (2018), suggests that Russia is perceived as a paramount global power, possessing unparalleled military capabilities. This narrative positions Russia not merely as a nation with formidable nuclear prowess but also as a benevolent force, self-appointed as the world's peacekeeper. Within this context, Vladimir Putin emerges as a pivotal figure. He is depicted as a confident and popular leader who prioritises Russia's national interests over personal gains.

In contrast to the perceived instability and frequent leadership changes in other nations, compounded by challenges such as immigration and social changes, Putin's leadership is portrayed as a bastion of stability. The narrative underscores Putin's unique role in safeguarding Russia's interests, positioning him as a solitary protector against Western hostilities. This perspective is not limited to the context of Syria, which is seen as one of the many platforms where Putin has demonstrated his commitment to Russia's defence and representation on the global stage.

The prevailing perception in general news media is that Russian news bifurcates into positive and negative categories. Positive news typically originates from or is associated with

President Vladimir Putin, while negative news is ascribed to other sources. A customary practice among Russian TV channels and radio stations is to lead with positive news. This approach stems from the belief that most audiences primarily focus on the first 10 minutes of a news broadcast. Consequently, if there is favourable news concerning the Syrian war, it is prioritised in the news sequence. Such news is often presented as either being reported to Putin or announced by him directly. In the absence of favourable developments in Syria linked to Putin, the Syrian topic might be demoted in the news line-up or, in exceptional cases, omitted entirely (Allison 2013; Borri 2016).

Like media outlets globally, Russian news adapts to its audience's preferences. However, in Russia, the primary consumer of media content is perceived to be Vladimir Putin, with the general Russian populace considered secondary. There exists a consensus between Putin and the Russian public regarding Russia's status as a preeminent nation and a leading military power (Putin 2020). In catering to this shared sentiment, Russian media channels consistently deliver content that resonates with both Putin and the Russian public's preferences.

President Vladimir Putin's strategic approach to dissent and media coverage is predicated on an understanding of a psychological phenomenon, wherein public attention and outrage tend to wane over time. He posits, 'They will yell for a while, and they will come down.' (Putin 2018) This perspective has been consistently applied in his handling of domestic protests in Russia. Historically, these protests have followed a trajectory aligning with Putin's predictions: initial public fervour dissipates into fatigue, leading to their eventual cessation.

This approach is not confined to domestic affairs but extends to international media coverage, as exemplified in the context of Syria. Putin's astute manipulation of this

psychological tendency ensures that prolonged exposure to distressing news, such as that from the Syrian war, gradually diminishes public interest. Despite criticism directed at Putin, it's crucial to note that the decline in news coverage from Syria was not a direct result of his actions. Instead, it reflected a broader trend in public engagement with news media. Analysis of consumer interactions with news concerning Syria, including metrics like viewing, clicking, liking, sharing, and commenting, reveals a marked decline in attention span and interest. This waning interest, as scholars such as McGlynn (2020) and Doucet (2018) assert, can be attributed to a general sense of fatigue among the populace, rather than to any specific policy or intervention by Putin.

The cessation of war coverage does not, regrettably, equate to the cessation of war itself. In fact, diminished media attention potentially leads to an escalation in war crimes due to decreased scrutiny (Belin 2000; Fedor 2015; Strovsky and Schleifer 2020). This raises a pertinent question regarding the criteria for media classification of conflicts as a World War. The conflict involving Russia, Syria, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Israel, the US, the EU, and the UK, despite resulting in extensive loss of life, was not labelled as such by global media. This omission is striking, considering the media's frequent use of the term 'World War' in contexts of lesser significance. The media's tendency to sensationalise the prospect of a Third World War contrasts sharply with its treatment of the Syrian war, which was relatively understated (Freedman 2001). This inconsistency suggests a global apprehension about acknowledging the advent of a Third World War, possibly leading to a collective oversight of its manifestation in the Syrian war.

The coverage of the Syrian war by Russian media diverged significantly from the reality of Russia's military involvement in the region. The American attack in Deir al-Zor, which

resulted in 300 Russian casualties, remains largely unknown within Russia. This event, obscured in domestic media narratives, only came to light for some Russian citizens through Western media sources. Marten (2019) notes that the majority remained unaware until recently. This selective reporting reflects Russia's tendency to amplify its victories while downplaying defeats, particularly its reluctance to admit the loss of 300 lives to a U.S. offensive.

The media ecosystem fostered by Putin has yielded an unintended consequence: the isolation of Putin as the primary consumer of this tailored information. In this system, Putin predominantly relies on reports designed to hold the bearer accountable, thereby limiting his exposure to diverse information sources. This structure has inadvertently made him susceptible to misinformation, as he lacks mechanisms to independently verify the reports he receives. The only occasion for cross-checking occurs when contradictory reports are presented simultaneously. Stone (2019) highlights instances where Putin, basing decisions on these inaccuracies, has disseminated false information about the Syrian war. Consequently, Putin's decision-making process is often built on misrepresentations perceived as truth.

6.2 Questions for Future Research

This research represents one of the initial scholarly endeavours to analyse and describe Russian media coverage of the ongoing Syrian war. Given the conflict's unresolved status, this study paves the way for future analyses, including the exploration of the Russian media's portrayal of the 2022 Ukrainian war, a conflict emerging as a direct extension of the Syrian coverage.

The study aims to contribute to multiple fields. Primarily, it offers insights into the broader research of Russian media, focusing on their approach to international events, particularly those involving armed conflicts, with or without Russia's direct participation. This research delves into the mechanics of modern propaganda, building upon an extensive body of existing literature that explores propaganda techniques in both the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia.

This investigation is particularly timely, examining the evolution of Russian media strategies in the age of the Internet and social media, where news dissemination is rapid and far-reaching. It underscores the continuity of the Russian media and propaganda apparatus, tracing its roots back to the Soviet era. Significantly, the study highlights that Russia's current leadership, formed in the Soviet milieu, plays a crucial role in shaping media narratives. The Syrian war, as one of the first international crises in this modern media age, provides a pertinent case study for understanding these dynamics.

This research is poised to offer valuable insights for future scholars aiming to delineate the evolution of Soviet propaganda into its contemporary Russian counterpart. By examining the transformation and tactics employed, this thesis provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of propaganda in modern Russian media. This study is instrumental for researchers exploring the intricacies of Russian policy formulation and its media representation. It delves into the impact of these policies on the international arena, offering a nuanced analysis of their interpretation and potential misinterpretation by global observers.

Additionally, this thesis contributes to the discourse on the operation of Western media, regarded as free in comparison to its Russian counterpart. It serves as a cautionary exposition

on the susceptibility of public opinion to manipulation, utilising universally applicable techniques. The comparative analysis of media influence in societies with varying degrees of freedom underscores the universality of these manipulative strategies.

Of particular interest is the light this research sheds on the persona and decision-making processes of Vladimir Putin. Given Putin's reticence and the limited public insight into his decision-making, this thesis is valuable. It offers an analysis of his interaction with the media, particularly through the lens of the Syrian war, thereby providing clues to his strategic thinking and desired public perception. This study represents a pioneering effort to analyse the portrayal of the Syrian war in global media and to explore the consequences of such media representations. It anticipates future investigations which will scrutinise the effectiveness of media outlets across various countries in disseminating factual information to their audiences. This research holds significant potential for those seeking to reformulate the concept of journalism in the contemporary era, offering universally applicable insights. It elucidates not only the role of media in a less free society such as Russia but also highlights its function in more liberal contexts like the UK. Arguably, the most profound impact of the Syrian war, and a stark testament to the limited influence of global media efforts, is the continued presidency of Bashar al-Assad as of February 2024. This outcome, perceived as a loss by pro-democratic forces, underscores a critical reality for media practitioners worldwide and the Syrian populace subjected to Assad's rule. It compels a reflection on the media's role and responsibilities in conflict-ridden regions.

The protracted conflict in Syria, culminating in the unchanged presidency of Bashar al-Assad, epitomises a stark conclusion to over a decade of international media scrutiny and extensive humanitarian interventions. Despite the relentless endeavours of non-governmental

organisations to instigate peace in Syria, Assad's unaltered leadership position underscores a profound disappointment in the efficacy of global journalistic efforts to illuminate and influence the course of this conflict. As scholarly attention pivots to other areas, it becomes imperative to acknowledge the unchanged political landscape in Syria, notably Assad's presidency, as a salient illustration of the ineffectiveness of worldwide media in deciphering or decisively impacting the Syrian war. This situation underscores a critical intersection between journalism and politics in contemporary society, challenging the conventional demarcation between these domains. This research highlights a crucial message for the journalistic community: As of February 2024, the unchanged presidencies of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and Vladimir Putin in Russia reflect a complex interplay of political endurance and media representation in global conflicts.

While it might be tempting to regard this research as predominantly addressing a localised Russian issue, such a view oversimplifies the broader implications. The methodologies and strategies outlined herein, though seemingly implausible for implementation within the unrestricted realm of Western journalism, warrant a closer examination. Despite the apparent superiority of Western media in covering the Syrian war - especially in terms of professionalism, objectivity, and depth - the ultimate narrative outcome aligns remarkably with the Russian perspective: Bashar al-Assad remains Syria's president. This convergence in narrative extends beyond Russian media, permeating global media landscapes. A notable shift occurs in public interest; prolonged exposure to the suffering of others often leads to a gradual decline in audience engagement. This phenomenon is not confined to the Syrian context but is likely to replicate in other prolonged crises, as suggested by the diminishing global media attention to Ukraine. Perhaps the greatest propaganda tool that exists in the world is time.

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Interviewee	Media affiliation (Government-	Date of interview
Interviewee 1	Independent	2019; 2021
Interviewee 2	Independent	2020; 2022
Interviewee 3	Independent	2022
Interviewee 4	Independent	2022
Interviewee 5	Government-controlled	2021
Interviewee 6	Government-controlled	2022
Interviewee 7	Independent	2022
Interviewee 8	Independent	2022
Interviewee 9	Independent	2021
Interviewee 10	Independent	2022
Interviewee 11	Independent	2019
Interviewee 12	Government-controlled	2021
Interviewee 13	Independent	2021
Interviewee 14	Government-controlled	2022
Interviewee 15	Government-controlled	2022
Interviewee 16	Government-controlled	2022
Interviewee 17	Independent	2022
Interviewee 18	Independent	2022
Interviewee 19	Government-controlled	2022
Interviewee 20	Independent	2022
Interviewee 21	Government-controlled	2022
Interviewee 22	Independent	2022
Interviewee 23	Independent	2022

Interviewee 24	Government-controlled	2021
Interviewee 25	Government-controlled	2022
Interviewee 26	Independent	2022
Interviewee 27	Independent	2022
Interviewee 28	Government-controlled	2022
Interviewee 29	Independent	2022
Interviewee 30	Independent	2022
Interviewee 31	Government-controlled	2022
Interviewee 32	Government-controlled	2022
Interviewee 33	Government-controlled	2022
Interviewee 34	Independent	2022
Interviewee 35	Independent	2022
Interviewee 36	Independent	2022
Interviewee 37	Government-controlled	2022
Interviewee 38	Government-controlled	2022
Interviewee 39	Government-controlled	2021

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