Policy Brief

Strategic partners against terrorism 2.0?

Russia's initial positions on Syria

1:2

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Introduction

Russia's foreign-policy behaviour has caused great concern in the Euro-Atlantic security region. The annexation of Crimea in 2014, and then the military intervention in Syria in 2015, have led some Western observers to conclude that Moscow is inclined to global expansionism, or is even driven by irrational militarism. While it is certainly important to acknowledge Russia's new assertiveness and prepare for worst-case scenarios, it is also crucial to understand the underlying drivers of the Kremlin's foreign policy on specific issues, such as the crisis in Syria. Russian foreign policy differs from issue to issue and is also susceptible to change. A well-informed view of how Russian foreign policy positions emerge is vital in times of high tension.

In his speech to the UN General Assembly in October 2015, President Vladimir Putin proposed a Russia–West partnership to combat terrorism in Syria. Only two days later, Russia entered the operational theatre, starting its bombing campaign against the Islamic State, on the invitation of the Assad regime.

In this first of two policy briefs, we examine Russia's evolving position on Syria in the period leading up to Putin's UN speech and the Russian military intervention. We argue that the Kremlin's policies in and over Syria, including the invitation to forge cooperation with the West, must be understood in light of enduring Russian representations of itself and of its partners and adversaries. Such identity representations may not have a direct, causal effect on a state's foreign policies, but they will render certain policy developments more likely than others. Identity positions are produced and upheld in official statements by the top political leadership and tend to remain fairly stable in a state's foreign-policy discourses – but they are never totally fixed. Domestic debates as well as external exchanges with other states can contribute to challenging and altering representations of Self and Other, setting out alternative policy paths.

Why is Russia in Syria?

Russia's many reasons for intervening in Syria can be summarized as follows:

- Firstly, Russia wishes to prevent a possible forced 'regime change' in Syria. In the Russian view, the instigation of 'Colour Revolutions' in authoritarian but sovereign regimes, and military interventions to unseat such regimes, are elements in a Western scheme to govern the world. The Kremlin has feared that such tactics could ultimately be employed by the USA also against Russia. Russia's persistent vetoing of UN Security Council resolutions that could pave the way to regime change in Syria in the years before the intervention could therefore be interpreted as attempts to interrupt and resist this practice (Allison 2013). By the autumn of 2015, Russia had both the military capacity and the diplomatic clout to act out its rejection of Western 'interventionism'. It did so through an invited military operation, designed to shore up the Assad regime at a time when it was faltering.

- Secondly, Russia has ambitions of fighting international terrorism and defeating the Islamic State (IS). International terrorism has been projected as a core threat to Russian security ever since the 'anti-terrorist campaign' was launched against Chechnya in 1999. Since then, the radical Islamic insurgency has spread across the Russian North Caucasus, and in recent years several thousand fighters from North Caucasus have joined the ranks of IS in Syria.

- Thirdly, Russia sees its involvement in the crisis in Syria as an opportunity to re-engage with the West and re-instate itself as a key player on the international political scene. The crisis in Ukraine in 2014 was followed by sanctions imposed by the West and the isolation of Russia from the international community. Strategic cooperation in the 'fight against international terrorism' has presented itself as the best opportunity for Russia–Western partnership since Putin came to power in 2012.

The emergence of Russian foreign policy

Since the end of the Cold War, three alternative positions on foreign policy can be identified in the Russian domestic political debate (Tsygankov 2016). Each of these positions is linked to special relationships with significant other parties, like 'the West', 'international terrorism', and 'the Assad regime'. Each position advocates and makes possible different Russian policies on Syria:

- The **Westernizer** position sees Russia as aligned with the West – radically different from the Soviet Union, and part of a universal civilization of modern liberal market democracies. This position was particularly prominent in the Yeltsin era (1991–1999), but has faded in recent years. It had largely disappeared from official Russian foreign policy discourse by the time the crisis in Syria reached international media headlines in 2011. If the **Westernizer** position were to guide Russia's policy on Syria, Russia would most likely seek cooperation with the US-led coalition to fight international terrorism. Moreover, Russia would be guided by humanitarian concerns in addition to military ones, and would to a greater extent pursue its goals through international institutions. The authoritarian Assad regime would probably not be represented as an ally, and would not get Russia's military support on the ground. Instead, the 'moderate' Syrian opposition would be the logical proxy – if not in deeds, then at least in words.

- The **statist** position rejects the idea that Russia is or should strive to become part of the West. This position arguably dominated official foreign policy discourse from the late 1990s and until 2012. In this line of reasoning, the values of power, stability and sovereignty are explicitly ranked over those of freedom and democracy at home. In external politics, this view promotes the image of Russia as a power-holder striving to preserve its own geopolitical interests and areas of influence in the world. The statist position has a built-in pragmatic bent: emphasising Russia's multinational character, it sees the UN as a key institution for upholding the balance of power between states. It does not exclude interaction with the West, but recognizes the value of tactical cooperation. Accordingly, this position was tilted towards strategic Russia–Western cooperation against international terrorism after the events of 9/11. If this position were to guide Russia's policy on Syria, cooperation with and support for sovereign states in the Islamic world and their incumbent regimes – including the Assad regime – would become a logical priority, combined with hostility towards non-state actors of any stripe and tactical cooperation with the West.

- The **civilizationist** position projects a more one-sidedly negative view of the West. The fight against Western expansionism or 'imperialism' becomes a core rationale for challenging the Western system of values, through Russian expansionism. The emphasis on Russia's cultural mission calls for a policy aimed at spreading Russian values abroad. This civilizationist position was not particularly evident before 2012. However, since the large-scale demonstrations in Moscow in connection with the Duma elections in the autumn of 2011, it has increasingly come to dominate the official foreign policy discourse, peaking with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. If the

2

civilizationist position were to direct Kremlin policy on Syria, we would probably see a pattern of Russian actions isolated from and in confrontation with the Western powers. In negotiations and voting, Russia would attempt to outline an alternative order and seek to reduce US power, independent of pragmatic interests on specific issues. In its relations with the Assad regime, Moscow would be supportive, while simultaneously pursuing policies aimed at spreading Russian cultural influence in Syria. Any non-state Islamic or other opposition would be seen as the enemy and therefore subjected to harsh policies.

Russia's policy on Syria 2011–2015

Many popular accounts have read Russia's engagement in Syria as a manifestation and continuation of the prominence of the civilizationist position in Russian foreign policy. But such assertions cannot be accepted at face value. How did these three foreign policy positions inform and influence Russia's policy on Syria in the years immediately prior to the military intervention?

Russia and the West

In line with the prominence of the statist position in the Kremlin's foreign policy discourse, Russia increasingly signalled scepticism of Western engagement in the Middle East after the Arab Spring. The view that unseating Assad would lead to chaos in Syria, with references to the 'failed political transitions' in Egypt and Libya, accompanied talks with the USA on Syria in 2012. It also conditioned Russia's persistent reluctance to support UN initiatives that could pave the way for regime change in Syria. Russia's resistance to the Geneva peace process in June 2012 and January 2014, where the USA demanded Assad's removal, is the logical policy manifestation of this position. Similarly, Russia's response to developments in the evolving civil war in Syria seemed based on the assumption that the West would use the human rights abuses or atrocities ascribed to Assad as a pretext for ignoring the Geneva peace conference initiative and enforcing regime change.

Also in line with a statist position, Kremlin officials signalled that Russia wanted to sit at the negotiating table on an equal footing with the USA within the existing order, and was not seeking to negate any Western viewpoint or initiative on Syria. In 2012, Russia presented a three-point plan which included a proposal for the Assad regime to cede power following negotiations between Assad and the opposition. Moreover, Russia eventually accepted the emerging UN-led Geneva peace process as the only game in town, even if these talks were not bearing fruit. Despite allegations that the opposition carried much of the blame for the carnage in the 25 May 2012 Houla killings, only two days later Russia supported the UN Security Council statement condemning the Assad regime's 'outrageous use of force'. It also supported UNSC Resolution 2118 in 2013 which imposed on Syria responsibilities and a timeline for the destruction of its chemical weapons and facilities. In this case, Russia took the initiative, was given a crucial role in negotiations with the USA, managing to offset US and French threats of military intervention in Syria by proposing and facilitating international control over Syria's chemical weapons arsenal.

This track-record of events indicates that, in the period in question, the statist position continued to inform Russian policy on Syria, even as civilizationist representations grew

stronger in the official foreign policy discourse more generally from 2012 onwards.

These developments also serve to illustrate how the domestic debate plays into Russian foreign policy by supporting or discouraging the policy of the Kremlin leadership. Judging by Russian expert comments at the time, the leadership's policy on the chemical weapons event was celebrated. This was seen as an opportunity not only to reshape the model of future conflict resolution and leave behind the practice of humanitarian intervention, but also to bring back Russia as an equal and unique partner to the USA in world affairs. Furthermore, it indicates that Russia's foreign policy emerges in relation to that of other states: When Russia was given a chance to play a role together with Western states, cooperative relations became possible and 'the West' appeared less as an adversary.

The civilizationist position was reinforced by the events that unfolded in Ukraine in 2014. The idea that 'Colour Revolutions' and NATO's Eastern expansion were Western tools for achieving global hegemony was the core frame within which the Kremlin interpreted the Maidan uprising and the unseating of the Yanukovich regime in February 2014. With the USA and the EU jointly imposing sanctions on Russian individuals and businesses, the 'West' was increasingly presented as one combined adversary of Russia.

Nonetheless, Russia's policy on Syria, when this became a top priority in 2015, was not geared toward one-sided civilizationist confrontation with the West. Rather, the oft-repeated argument that Moscow's Syria policy wished to re-engage Western powers, but on Russian terms, and thereby put an end to Russia's isolation post-Ukraine, seems correct. For example, Russia temporarily lowered the guard against endorsing non-state actors and oppositional forces in Syria (viewed as US proxies) in the Moscow 1 and 2 meetings from early 2015. On the other hand, these talks, between members of the Syrian opposition and representatives of the Assad regime, were held in Moscow and under the 'Moscow principles'. These principles conceded that the crisis should be settled in accordance with the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, but stressed 'maintaining Syria's sovereignty and unity', 'fighting terrorism', 'settling the crisis peacefully and politically', and 'rejecting any foreign interference' (Russia Direct 2015). As such they can be seen as a Kremlin-led negotiating track with an agenda informed by Russian views; they were launched alongside the Geneva process where, in the Russian view, the Western powers were in charge.

Kremlin policy on Syria in this period remained mostly in line with the statist position, where Russia is striving, rather pragmatically, to preserve geopolitical interests and secure some areas of influence in the world, but within the prevailing world order. However, after the Ukraine crisis there came a greater insistence on counteracting the West and Western initiatives, and on pursuing an independent 'Russian' and pro-active policy on the global arena. Arguably, this development came with the rise to prominence of the civilizationist position in the Russian domestic debate at this time, as well as the West's 'rejection' of Russia through policies of sanctions and deterrence following the annexation of Crimea.

Russia and international terrorism

In addition to the sceptical view of Western powers and regime-change policies, the fostering 'international terrorism' and 'extremism' were projected as the main threat to Russia in the Syrian theatre in this period. Indeed, the Syria case seems to have provided a means of reinvigorating these threat perceptions in Russian foreign policy discourse. The longstanding idea that Russia and the West could unite in the fight against terrorism was also reinvigorated. This would seem to indicate that, faced with the threat of terrorism, enmity with the West could be downgraded in the hierarchy of Russian threat perceptions and pave the way for a more cooperative approach. But here, the official Russian discourse on terror is Janus-faced. Historically, when Russia–West cooperation on terrorism does not work out, Russia sees the West as the 'real' enemy, standing behind the terrorists and using them in the fight to acquire global hegemony (Wilhelmsen 2011).

By a similar token, in the Russian discourse, all armed non-state actors have often been subsumed under the label 'terrorist' (Wilhelmsen 2016). This rhetorical stance is detectable in Russian comments on the evolving civil war in Syria. In the period examined here, non-state actors were often collectively referred to as 'terrorists and religious extremists'. Moreover, Russia indicated that terrible deeds such as the use of poison gas which killed hundreds of people in Damascus in August 2013 more likely were undertaken by the Syrian rebels than Assad. Thus, and despite including non-state actors in the Moscow 1 and 2 meetings, Russia's inclination to link all non-state actors to terrorism was clear. Members of the opposition groups who came to Moscow for the first two rounds of talks were considered to be 'Assad-tolerated opposition' and were allowed to attend in a personal capacity only (Russia Direct 2015). This identification of non-state actors as a threat ties in with the Kremlin narrative on Western regime-change policy and the argument that any weakening of the state by supporting oppositional groups would imply strengthening the terrorist threat.

In sum, the statist and the civilizationist positions in Russian foreign-policy discourse trigger different responses to terrorism in Syria. Whereas the statist position put its bets on strategic cooperation with the West and sets terror as the number one enemy, the civilizationist position places the West at the top of the hierarchy of threats.

Russia and the Assad regime

While terrorism was projected as a foe in Syria in the period studied here, we can note a careful delineation of 'Islam' from 'terrorism' in the official discourse and attempts to invoke Russia's multi-ethnic and multi-religious identity and potential friendship with Middle Eastern states. This delineation simultaneously sets Russia apart from the 'intolerant' Western practices of spreading liberal values through 'Colour Revolutions'. Russia stepped up its diplomatic activity in relation to key Middle East players in Syria already during Putin's two first terms as president, especially in the years before the Arab Spring. Relations with Iran were prioritized, but Russia also engaged Turkey and Egypt and even courted Israel, as well as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. These efforts received a blow with the Arab Spring, but were taken up again from Russia's side in 2013. In 2014 they reached levels unprecedented since the fall of the Soviet Union (Kozhanov 2016).

3

Within this broad Russian offensive to engage states in the Middle East, improving relations with the Assad regime in Syria became an obvious priority. Syria under the rule of the Assad family had been a key Soviet ally in the Middle East during the Cold War. While Russian–Syrian ties were weaker in the 1990s, Putin decided already in 2005 to cede three fourths of Syria's debt to Russia. The increasing export of weapons from Russia to Syria beginning in the early 2000s was practical evidence of the friendship (Åtland 2016).

Russia's new engagement with states in the Middle East was of course connected to and spurred by the new enmity with the West that had been unleashed by the crisis in Ukraine – but it is not necessarily synonymous with a civilizationist position. It is more in line with the statist position of great-power competition within the existing order. In Putin's speech to the Federal Assembly in December 2014, he declared – after having depicted the United States as a threat to Russia and the world – that Russia would 'protect the diversity of the world'. He continued: 'We will actively promote business and humanitarian relations, as well as scientific, educational and cultural relations. We will do this even if some governments attempt to create a new iron curtain around Russia...our goal is to have as many equal partners as possible, both in the West and in the East...we will continue our cooperation with Africa and the Middle East' (Putin 2014).

In this narrative it is hard to find grounds for rapprochement with the West on Russia and the Middle East – because it hinges largely on the Russia–West dichotomy. However, we should not conflate Russia's commitment to the Syrian state with commitment to the Assad regime. As noted, Russia signalled that it was open to Assad's departure already in 2012. It was the principle of non-intervention in sovereign states and the idea that military intervention is a Western tool for world dominance that informed Russia's loyalty and support for the Assad regime in Syria in the years leading up to the military intervention in September 2015.

Conclusions

While the Ukraine crises brought civilizationist policy to prominence in Russia, the Syria crises initially brought back pragmatic statism as the core prism through which Russian foreign policy is shaped. On balance, it seems reasonable to conclude that, prior to the military intervention in 2015, Russia's policy on Syria was aligned more closely to the statist position. The civilizationist position became more influential in how Russia related to the West in general after the crisis in Ukraine, and resulted in a new insistence on an alternative Russian track in Syria – in cooperation with the Assad regime as well as other states in the region, and exclusive of the West. However, concerning each of the core actors in the Syria case, Russia operated with and acted on a set of alternative identifications. The West *might* be a partner, the Syrian opposition might be engaged, and the Assad regime *might* have to step down.

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4

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