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RUSSIAN CIVILIAN OUTREACH AND INFORMATION OPERATIONS IN SYRIA

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INTRODUCTION

The large-scale Russian military intervention in Syria entered its seventh year in 2021. Major military operations seem to be halted for now and the Syrian government, together with its allies, has been able to reconquer significant portions of the country's territory. Nevertheless, the Syrian territory continues to be fragmented and the Syrian government faces a wide range of challenges, from the collapsing economy to simmering local opposition in certain regions.

Russian involvement in the conflict, and in the country more broadly, is far from over and it is still requested by the Syrian regime. Even though Russia might be involved in various power-struggles inside the Syrian governmental apparatus and economic structures and there are several important differences between Russian and Syrian visions of the future political development, the dependence of the Syrian government on Russian support means that its presence in the country is, thus far, secured. This relatively favourable yet intricate context also defines the means and nature of Russian outreach and information operations in Syria.

While the methods that Russia uses in its information and influence operations in the West are well-known, these practices in authoritarian states in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Global South have received far less attention. Syria represents an important case for this research. Not only that Russia is highly active in the country, but the Syrian information environment is also significantly different from the Western context. The Syrian public sphere had been under tight governmental control for decades and the presence of non-Syrian media had been limited. Although this has partially changed after the outbreak of the revolution in 2011 in some parts of Syria, the Syrian media environment has since been divided according to the dominant power in a given territory—i.e., the government in south and central Syria, Kurdish forces in the north-eastern parts of the country,

Turkish-affiliated armed factions in the north and Islamist groups in the north-western regions.[1]

Syria, with its combination of different types of conflict and post-conflict environments, government that tightly controls its public sphere, and a regime that requires Russian assistance, thus requires a nuanced contextual analysis. At the same time, it provides an interesting case for probing the similarities and differences in Russian methods of information operations in different spaces.

This research report aims to understand how Russia communicates with the Syrian public and how it seeks to maintain and justify its presence by shaping its image in the country. Bearing in mind the peculiar nature of the Syrian public sphere with its government-controlled media, as well as the particularities of Syrian politics and society, we map the Russian methods of reaching out to the Syrian population in two different ways. First, we present an overview of the main practices of Russian outreach to the Syrian public, focusing specifically on methods of how Russian armed forces communicate with civilians and political elites, as well as networks that Russia has established in the country. Second, we zoom in on the media sphere, outline the main narratives used by the Russian state media that concern the situation in Syria and analyse how they play out in the context of specific crises that Russia has faced in the country.

The general scope of the paper is divided into three more specific research aims that guide the analysis. First, we seek to understand which methods of public outreach Russia uses in Syria. Second, we aim to identify the main narratives on Syria present in selected Russian state media published in Arabic. Third, and to conclude the study, we analyse to what extent the Russian narratives are aligned with Russian goals in the country.

Methodology

The first part of the study is based on secondary literature, aiming to identify the methods of Russian intervention in Syria, its main goals, and the key forms of outreach to Syrian civilians. The main intention in this section is to highlight the less formal and localised means of communication and formation of partnerships that help Russia shape its image, extend its influence, and secure the presence of its troops in the country.

The second part of the study that deals with the empirical research was based on analysing the content pushed by Russian outlets aimed at influencing the target audience. This analysis was based on qualitative research, specifically on content analysis of relevant content published by the Arabic-language editions of the two main Russian state-sponsored outlets, RT and Sputnik. Using the GDELT Project, an open-source online media analytical tool, and manual search using relevant keywords in Arabic, we obtained a collection of articles

published by these sources on Syria-related topics.[2] The selected archive contains texts published from the start of the intervention in 2015 until mid-2021, with a particular emphasis on the texts concerning the two mini-case studies.

The next step concerned the content analysis of individual articles within the collection, aimed at identifying key narratives appearing repeatedly and consistently in Russia-sponsored content. Narrative, a term, frequently used in the disinformation-research field, points to the assumption that state-sponsored disinformation and propaganda are not disseminated ad hoc, but rather that state actors use these tools in order to promote their strategic goals.[3] As such, the content which they, directly or indirectly, promote is meant to convey, through repetition of the same stories, certain key messages.[4] Narrative mapping is therefore based on identifying what messages are commonly and repeatedly conveyed in the analysed content and describing the context, which gives meaning to each individual piece of information, and which is purposefully constructed by the state actor.[5]

Structure of the report

The first part of the text introduces the goals of Russian engagement in Syria and outlines the main means used for achieving them. It then proceeds to the analysis of the main Russian soft power tools in the country, focusing on key methods of outreach and primary communities towards which the outreach is realised. The second part moves to the issue of information operations in Syria and beyond. It first introduces the main methods of Russian information operations and the Syrian media ecosystem and its specificities. In the next step, it maps the main Russian outlets active in the country and proceeds with narrative analysis. This section identifies positive and negative narratives voiced by the Russian media about the Syrian conflict and the roles of different actors within it. Subsequently, it introduces the notion of reactive narratives and shows the use of these narratives in the context of the chemical attack in Khan Shaykoun. Finally, it points out the similarities in the narrative construction of Russia in Syrian media with previously analysed narratives and summarises how Russian communication patterns reflect the main Russian goals in the country.

RUSSIAN INTERVENTION IN SYRIA

Although Russia entered the Syrian war militarily in September 2015, it has been an ally of the Syrian regime since the Soviet era and both countries significantly enhanced their mutual relationship in the second half of the 2000s[6]. Ensuring the survival of Bashar al-Assad in the time of crisis most likely triggered the decision to intervene militarily. However, Russian engagement in Syria has sought to achieve several broader goals.[7] Being one of Assad's key backers meant securing the Russian position in the country vis-à-vis its perceived competitors—most importantly, the United States and other Western and Middle Eastern states that sided with Syrian opposition and rebel forces and called for Assad's removal. The Syrian conflict in this respect mirrored the competition between regional and international powers and it started to be waged not only on Syrian battlefields, but also in the information sphere and international diplomatic arena.

Apart from gaining advantage in a great power competition, Russian engagement in Syria was also meant to secure past military, diplomatic, and economic investments and prevent losing them as it happened e.g. in Iraq and Libya.[8] It also enabled Russia to become one of the key players in the war-torn country. This role did not serve Russia only within Syria, but also helped it to enhance its political influence and status in international diplomacy as well, as any Syria-related discussion had to involve Russian representatives.[9] Furthermore, the intervention in Syria was perceived by Russian leadership as serving their own security concerns as it enabled Russia to counter extremist actors based in Syria whose recruitment networks extended also to Russia and Central Asian republics.[10] Finally, the involvement in high-profile military action has been an opportunity to test and showcase new equipment in front of potential customers in addition to serving as training grounds for Russia's own forces in unfamiliar conditions.[11]

As this overview suggests, most of the reasons for Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict have been closely tied to instrumental Russian interests in the region or on the international scene rather than to Syria itself. Many of the initial goals were achieved within the first few years of

Russian involvement; however, the pragmatic and opportunistic approach, which treats Syria rather as a means than a goal in itself, has persisted even after the conclusion of major military operations.[12] Following this strategy, Russia prioritises ad hoc stabilisation of the country and elimination of potential threats that might present additional costs and threaten past achievements. On the other hand, Russia is not particularly concerned about the dire humanitarian situation or open-ended nature of the conflict as long as they do not threaten key Russian interests or the position of the Syrian regime.[13] At the same time, Russia actively tries to normalise Syria's position in the international community, shift the costs of more comprehensive reconstruction on other states, and reap the potential economic benefits of its involvement in profitable sectors of the economy.[14]

Such a pragmatic approach has also defined the specific form of involvement that Russia employed in the conflict. At first, it was primarily the Russian air force that aided the Syrian regime to contain the rebel offensive in the North-western parts of the country. Since then, a smaller number of special forces have also joined the aerial campaign and supported the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) in combat operations. Russian military police units have been deployed to captured regions and areas of potential conflicts to secure their pacification and to demobilise opposition fighters.[15] Russia has also stepped up cooperation in training, advising, and supplying the loyalist armed forces throughout the conflict. In many cases, Russia even embedded its own personnel into the leadership ranks of Syrian forces.[16] Apart from military aid, there have been multiple other forms of support. Russian diplomats have shielded Syria from the criticism in the UN and other international organisations, actively tried to broker de-escalation deals between foreign powers involved in the conflict, and lobbied for restoring other states' relations with the Syrian government. Finally, although falling short of the amount of aid provided by other actors (such as the UN), Russian assistance has also included limited financial support and provisions of materials and services (such as oil products) that Syrians would not be otherwise able to afford.[17] All these activities have been also featured in Russian information operations and Syrian regime propaganda vis-à-vis the Syrian public in various forms.

The tools of Russian outreach and soft power

Russian engagement in the Syrian conflict has relied on coercive military force and partnership with the Syrian political elites rather than on winning the 'hearts and minds' of the wider public.[18] Nevertheless, Russia has employed multiple forms of outreach to the Syrian public living in the territories controlled by the government, especially to those Syrians in regions that are either contested (such as the northeast and south) or in the areas with a significant presence of Russian forces.[19] These activities help to enhance the legitimacy of Russian forces in

> Russia actively tries to normalise Syria's position in the international community, shift the costs of more comprehensive reconstruction on other states, and reap the potential economic benefits of its involvement in profitable sectors of the economy.

the country, as well as achieve particular political goals, whether by supporting a favourable and Russian-friendly environment or by building a network of Russian allies in the country. As such, they indicate the diversity of channels used for outreach and strategic communication with the Syrian public.

In addition to personal connections with influential political figures on the national level and in the armed forces, Russians have also created a range of contacts on the subnational level (e.g. with local strongmen, tribal notables, business elites, or municipal officials) around the country.[20] Although Russia has never been able to create a fully reliable "lobby group" on the national level[21], it has established diverse networks of trusted brokers and intermediaries that help to connect Russians with local governance structures, especially in sensitive and restive regions of the country.[22]

However, Russia also has other tools of soft power at its disposal. For older generations of ruling Baath Party officials and military elites, the connections with Russia were already forged during Soviet times through education or training at Russian institutions. For instance, there are reportedly about 35 000 former Syrian students at Russian universities who participate in some way in alumni associations.[23] Although these numbers are quite small, many of the alumni are still well-positioned within the structures of the Syrian state and business community and at least some of them could represent a point of contact that the Russian intelligence community or military might use.

The deployment of Russian military police, often composed of Muslim officers of Chechen or Ingush origin, has been widely used to facilitate direct contact with Syrian civilians or local militant factions. Playing an interface between the Russian military, Syrian government, and local communities, the military police units have been entrusted with a range of different tasks. These entail guard duties, but also basic peacekeeping activities, such as protection of civilians and maintaining ceasefires, mediation between conflicting parties in volatile southern regions or between Kurdish and pro-regime militants in northeast Syria.[24] In some cases, the Russian military police units succeeded and they were also able to secure

acceptance from Syrian communities who perceived them as a more orderly and better trained alternative to Syrian government forces and pro-Assad militias.[25] In other cases, their efforts have been hampered by insufficient numbers of deployed forces, absent linguistic skills or translators, close cooperation with Syrian secret services and, thus, general rejection by communities opposed to the Syrian government, or in general, lack of their ability to deliver on promises of better governance and services.[26]

The provision of humanitarian aid represents one of the less militarised practices of outreach to the Syrian public and shapes a positive image of Russia and Russian forces in the country.[27] The diversity of Russian entities providing some form of aid, their opaque nature, and lack of coordination with the UN system make it difficult to comprehensively map their activities. However, it is assumed that most of them are directly linked to the Russian government or influential figures and organisations close to it (e.g. Yevgeniy Primakov, Chechen leadership or the Russian Orthodox Church).[28] Provided only to the areas controlled by the Syrian government and, in some cases, coordinated directly with the Russian military, Russian aid encompassed deliveries of food and other material aid, emergency health care and investments into reconstruction of health facilities, or demining efforts.[29]

A variety of actors linked to the wider Russian humanitarian system, as well as the openness of the Syrian government towards Russian entities, have made the delivery of aid more flexible and able to react to the basic needs of Syrian communities. For example, while military-linked entities were able to operate close to the frontlines and in areas newly-captured by the Syrian government, humanitarian organisations connected to the Russian Orthodox Church worked in cooperation with Syrian Christian churches in areas with a stronger presence of Christian communities. Similarly, humanitarian organisations linked to Russian Muslim networks were used to deliver aid during Ramadan or through Syrian Islamic charitable networks.[30]

On the other hand, even though humanitarian assistance features prominently in Russian depictions of its role in Syria, its delivery and effect are more complicated. The estimated amount of provided aid is, in comparison, significantly lower than the aid provided by other major donors and it has further declined over the past couple of years. Russian contributions to the UN humanitarian assistance programmes in Syria have also been rather minor. Moreover, Russian humanitarian organisations have been accused of politicisation of aid and interfering with international programmes.[31] Such a peculiar combination of a highly publicised campaign, followed by non-transparent, limited, and politicised execution, has also included Russian deliveries of its Sputnik Light Covid-19 vaccine to Syria. While Russia has announced that it will deliver about 250 000 doses of its vaccine to the country (roughly a quarter of what Syria is supposed to receive under the COVAX scheme), it has been unclear how

many have been administered and how the Syrian government paid for them.[32]

Russia tries to reach out to the Syrian population and build further connections with the public additionally by using its relations with specific sub-groups of the Syrian population. As already mentioned, Russia made use of its own Muslim minority as its Islamic organisations or north-Caucasian republics, especially Chechnya, established contacts with Syrian Muslim authorities.[33] These resulted in several mutual visits as well as financial support and aid being channelled to loyal Muslim organisations.[34] Christians and other religious minorities represent, in this respect, one of the traditional Russian partners since the 19th century.[35] As such, the narrative of the protection of Syrian Christian minorities from the Islamist threat, also actively promoted by the Russian Orthodox Church, is meant to influence as much the audience in Russia and Europe as the public in Syria.[36] Among the specific practices of outreach, Russia makes use of already mentioned humanitarian aid carried out by entities associated with the Russian Orthodox Church, but also establishing relations with the Christian leadership in the country, local Christian strongmen, or militias, through funding the reconstruction of churches and smaller reconstruction projects.[37] However, the emigration of Christian communities during the war years led to constant shrinking of the community and, thus, also its declining relevance.[38]

In sum, Russia was able to establish multiple official and informal methods of outreach to the Syrian population. While the partnership with the authoritarian Syrian government grants Russian forces freedom of movement, protection, and propaganda support, the connections established on the local level support de-escalation of potential conflicts, gathering intelligence, and they additionally translate to political influence on the ground. Russia also seeks to shape its perception in the country and enhance its soft power through the provision of humanitarian assistance, as well as using religious connections with both Christian and Muslim religious authorities in Syria. Information operations focused on the Syrian public operate in parallel with these activities, working towards the same goals.

Activity	Target Group
Elite networking	Political, military and business elites, elites who formerly studied in Russia, local strongmen, tribal leaders, religious figures.
Military police deployment	Civilians living close to Russian bases, population in restive regions, leaders of armed factions in the case of conflict.
Humanitarian aid	Civilians in areas impacted by recent conflicts and areas important for Russian military presence.
Religious connections	Religious elites—both Muslim and Christian, Christian communities and their elites.

Table 1. Russian Public Outreach Activities

RUSSIAN INFORMATION OPERATIONS IN SYRIA

Russian information operations

Although present in Russian strategic and military thinking for decades[39], the interest in Russian information operations and their use for political purposes has risen following the Russian annexation of Crimea and the start of war in eastern Ukraine in 2014.[40] Information operations began to be seen as a tool that Russia uses alongside other methods to promote its political and security interests within its aggressive stance on the international scene.[41] In general, Russian information operations have sought to enhance Russian influence in target countries through the shaping of the information environment. These operations have taken diverse forms, from increased contacts with pro-Russian parts of the population, to direct influence over certain media or increased presence in the online information sphere.[42] Russia has developed a dedicated infrastructure for information operations that encompasses government and (government-controlled) media channels, in some cases operating abroad in local languages (RT, Sputnik etc.), but also media and websites that are sponsored by Russia covertly and its infamous troll factories used for manipulating social media.[43]

Not shy about using disinformation, these media channels have employed multiple methods to shape the debate in respective countries and promote Russian interests. In some cases, Russia has straightforwardly presented its own take on particular issues, promoting its own actions as just and correct and boosting its own image as a powerful state.[44] In other cases, it sought rather to delegitimise its opponents, foster mistrust of their opponent's leadership and promote social discord. To do so, Russian and pro-Russian channels have often resorted to amplifying existing forms of discontent with mainstream politics and mainstream media, as well as spreading numerous interpretations of a given event. The latter strategy is based on quick dissemination of multiple different, often contradictory, disinformation narratives regarding the event in question, aiming to flood and overwhelm the information space, create

multiple different versions of the truth, and confuse the audience regarding the dominant interpretation of the event.[45]

These information strategies have been well-documented in many different countries (especially in the West), however their exact impact on the audience and their ability to manipulate public opinion is still a matter of debate and difficult to measure.[46] Compared to Europe and Ukraine, the systematic research on Russian information operations in the Middle East has been, so far, rather scarce beyond the communication efforts surrounding some crucial moments of the Syrian conflict.[47]

There are significant differences between the European information environment and the tightly government-controlled public spheres of many Middle Eastern authoritarian countries which pose certain barriers for easy entrance of pro-Russian voices.[48] This has led some analysts to argue that Russia has been, beyond Syria, less active in the region and it has relied on personal networks and direct engagement with authoritarian leaders rather than on outreach to a wider public.[49] However, the Arabic versions of Sputnik and RT are accessible throughout the region via satellite. Especially RT is recognised as a valid source of information, even if, according to some of the rare polls conducted on this matter, viewership of Russian channels varies widely between different countries. Whereas specifically RT appears to be more accepted in Iraq, Egypt, or Syria, in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan or UAE, its reach seems to be limited by both a generally anti-Russian stance and governmental control of the public sphere.[50]

Nevertheless, RT Arabic is still a newcomer to the Middle Eastern media scene. It produces more online content than any other big region-wide media outlets, such as CNN Arabic, BBC Arabic, Al Jazeera, or Al-Arabiya.[51] Some thus argue that its recognition in the region is based mostly on these shorter videos and news circulating online.[52] However, the Middle East represents the only region where its viewership has been growing.[53] There have also been signs pointing to sustained messaging on social media, focused on youth in the region, that is playing to widespread anti-imperialist and anti-Western sentiments and that is, in some cases, indirectly supporting Russian political positions.[54] Furthermore, Russian trolls have been reportedly increasingly engaged in organised information operations focused on areas of Russian interest not only in Syria, but also in Libya and elsewhere.[55]

Syrian media ecosystem

Syria represents one of the examples of the highly-controlled public spheres in the region. Syrian media, such as state-run ***Al-Thawra*** ("Revolution") or ***Tishreen*** ("October" named after the war with Israel in October 1973), have for decades been dominated by the government's line and as such, they have been primarily used to bolster the regime's legitimacy. The limited political opening in the 2000s brought the establishment of the first private radio and TV channels, as well as partially independent press, such as the

daily ***Al-Watan*** ("Nation"). However, these were mostly operated by businessmen closely linked to the government or political parties allied to the ruling Baath party.[56] The media remained under strict control of the government and pre-uprising Syria ranked in the bottom 10 countries worldwide for freedom of the press. Syrians could also access some pan-Arab channels (such as Al-Jazeera and, later, Al-Arabiya) and Lebanese or Jordanian media. As the internet was closely controlled and limited to a smaller, but growing, part of the population[57], the national and pan-Arab television channels and printed media remained the primary source of news according to available polls.[58]

The Syrian media scene changed abruptly with the start of the uprising in 2011.[59] While the Syrian government lifted its ban on social media in February 2011, the country experienced a boom of new publications connected to various parts of the protest movement, as well as increased propaganda from the side of the Syrian government. Throughout the ensuing civil war, the Syrian public sphere fragmented along the lines of the conflict as each side—different opposition groups, Kurdish forces, Islamist and Jihadist groups and, finally, loyalist forces—engaged in their own media production.[60] So did many of their backers and the Syrian civil war became an information battleground with the participation of not only regime and opposition media, but also those from Gulf states, Iran, Western states, or Russia.[61] As a consequence, each group in the country consumes slightly different information channels and favourite media seem to follow the dominant political authority over a given territory—a trend that is further strengthened by the growing role of online news and social networks.[62]

The previous dominance of pro-regime media in the government-held territories largely continued, even though private news channels became slightly more open to criticism that does not touch the core foundations of Assad's government.[63] Social media, and especially Facebook, seems to be of growing importance as a source of information;[64] however, audience research also reveals the continuing relevance of national and international TV stations, their websites, and their social media profiles. The dominant channels in this respect are pro-government Syrian ***Sama***, pro-regime and Iranian-leaning ***Al-Mayadeen***, Hezbollah-aligned ***Al-Manar***, and a set of pro-opposition channels, including Lebanese ***Al-Jadeed***, Qatari ***Al-Jazeera*** and Saudi ***Al-Arabiya***. In the opposition held territories, the latter two are preferred, according to polls, but the others feature, as well. [65] Finally, from non-MENA media, ***RT Arabic*** in both opposition and government-held territories and ***BBC Arabic*** in opposition territories feature among the most important TV channels and online news sources, while RT especially is outperforming most of its competitors.[66] On the other hand, this picture appears to be more mixed in a recent (January 2021) survey, where the respondents expressed lesser preference and higher distrust for openly partisan and state-affiliated media, among which they also counted RT.[67]

RUSSIAN PRESENCE IN THE SYRIAN INFORMATION SPACE—KEY OUTLETS, INDIVIDUALS AND PLATFORMS

The following chapter gives an overview of Russian Arabic-language sources that are actively participating in information operations in the Syrian information space. Since these sources communicate in Modern Standard Arabic, they do not exclusively target the Syrian audience, but rather the general Arabic-speaking public in the entire region. However, as this report analyses their Syrian-related content, it is possible to presume that it is primarily aimed at the Syrian audience. The Russian sources detailed below can be separated into two distinct categories.

First, online outlets, either websites or social media channels that are directly affiliated with the Russian government or Russian state institutions. Second, media outlets that are directly tied to and sponsored by the Russian state and that are known to actively participate in Russian foreign influence operations.

Government-Affiliated Social Media Channels and Websites

The level of activity of Russian state institutions directly communicating to the Syrian audience is, perhaps surprisingly, relatively low and limited to several social media accounts with moderate followings.[68] The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs operates an Arabic-language Twitter account (@Russia_AR) which is, however, aimed generally at Arab-speaking countries, featuring mostly content related to diplomatic relations between Russia and its Middle Eastern partners.[69]

It also operates active Twitter and Facebook accounts of the Russian Embassy in Syria.[70] Those accounts do communicate on topics relevant to the Syrian audience, but they post in English and Russian, as well as in Arabic. Meaning, that they do not only focus on the Syrian population, but they aim to reach an international audience, as well.

Finally, the Russian Ministry of Defence operated a website between 2016 and 2019, posting Arabic-language content about the activities of the Russian armed forces in Syria and their role in safeguarding the Syrian people.[71] However, the website is no longer operational. The main platform of the Russian military aimed for communication with the Syrian public is now the "Russian

Reconciliation Center for Syria". The Center is operated by Russian Armed Forces, it is headquartered at the Khmeimim Air Base, and it administers the PR activities of the Russian military in Syria, as well as general coordination of other forms of outreach of the Russian military towards Syrian civilians. The Center operates a Facebook account, which is used primarily to create a positive image of the Russian military presence in Syria by showcasing selected activities of the Russian armed forces, and to declare the official positions of the Ministry of Defence on specific issues.[72]

State-Sponsored Media Outlets

The two main Russian state-sponsored media outlets targeting foreign audiences, RT and Sputnik, have their respective Arabic-language editions: RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic. Out of the two, RT Arabic is significantly more visible, both in terms of the size of their audience and the level of their activity on social media. While being available via satellite, both outlets base their strategy primarily on reaching their audience via the Internet and social media and they put out a constant stream of articles and video content.

RT Arabic		Sputnik Arabic	
Facebook Account	17.4M Followers	Facebook Account	2.2M Followers
Twitter Account	5.2M Followers	Twitter Account	270K Followers
YouTube Account	6.03M Subscribers	YouTube Account	71K Subscribers
VKontakte Account	88K Followers	VKontakte Account	
Instagram Account	1.6M Followers	Instagram Account	90K Followers
Telegram Account	45K Followers	Telegram Account	15K Followers

Table 2: Size of the audience on social media of RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic

Especially RT Arabic, being bigger, better funded, and more established than Sputnik News, managed to gain a significant hold in the Middle East and in Syria, in particular.[73] It operates both a television channel and an online news website and it is highly active on different social media platforms, which it is able to leverage to attract a wide audience and to appeal to younger consumers. RT is active on the main social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube), as well as the more niche ones (Telegram, VKontakte). Additionally, its reporters and hosts also have an active presence on social media, and they use their following to promote RT's content. Some of RT's key on-screen personalities have been crucial in promoting Syria-related content in the past, including Salam Mosafir[74], Maya Manna[75], and Anna Knishenko[76].

Since the Russian intervention in the country, Syria seems to be among the top priority countries for RT Arabic. It has a team of local reporters covering events specifically in Syria (Mais Muhammad[77], Hassan Nassr[78], and Osama Al Hamad[79]) and its domestic, as well as Russian, reporters were given significant freedom of action during the war.[80] RT Arabic has an exceptionally strong position in the country and it is currently ranked as the 7th most visited website countrywide[81], moving up from 11th place in 2018.[82] A poll conducted in 2016 also suggests that it is among the top 6 most-watched news stations and top four most-read online news website in Syria in the government-controlled areas and among the top 10 most-watched news stations in areas under the control of the opposition.

Sputnik Arabic does follow the same strategy of relying heavily on the online space and social media, and it maintains an active presence on the same platforms as RT Arabic. However, being established later than RT and presumably receiving a smaller budget than its counterpart, its reach (270 000 followers on Twitter and close to 2 million likes on Facebook) is significantly smaller than that of RT Arabic (5.2 million followers on Twitter and over 16 million likes on Facebook). However, it is worth mentioning that Sputnik-affiliated journalists were provided with a platform on Sham FM—one of the most popular pro-regime radio stations in Syria.[83]

ANALYSIS OF KEY RUSSIAN SYRIA-RELATED NARRATIVES

Since the beginning of official Russian military intervention in Syria, both categories of Russian outlets have promoted various, often distinctly different narratives. These narratives differ in the ways they are employed, the situations they are used in and the objectives they are supposed to complete. As the previous research of Russian narratives on Syria revealed, the depictions of other actors in the Syrian war (such as Turkey or Kurds) are flexible and open to reinterpretation as the situation on the ground and, thus, also Russian strategic goals, change.[84] Broadly speaking, it is possible to differentiate between three types of such narratives deployed by Russia in Syria—strategic narratives with positive messaging, strategic narratives with negative messaging, and reactive narratives.

Strategic narratives with positive messaging:	Strategic narratives with negative messaging:	Reactive narratives:
"Russia is the only Syrian ally"	*"The West is plotting against Syria"*	*Deployed individually in response to specific events as a part of Russia's crisis communication toolbox e.g. "Fog of Falsehood"*
"Russian military presence is protecting Syria from terrorism"	*"Defamation of local opposition to the Syrian regime"*	
"Assad is the legitimate leader of Syria with full support from Russia and the Syrian people"		
"Russia is the dominant power in Syria"		

Table 3: Three types of narratives deployed by Russia in Syria

The first two types—positive and negative strategic narratives—are part of what can be referred to as Russia's "strategic communication" in Syria. In other words, these narratives could be understood as particular storylines that are deployed in a public sphere to aid the policies, operations, and overarching strategic goals of the Russian state in the country.[85] Although their objectives differ, the two types are established narratives that have been echoed by the Russian outlets continuously for extended periods of time (usually for several years). These narratives are usually used in countless different variations and individual stories; however, the key underlying message that they communicate remains unchanged.

The ***strategic narratives with positive messaging*** represent a state-sponsored version of classic PR—communication used to build up and promote a positive image of Russia and Russian military presence and activities in Syria. The ***strategic narratives with negative messaging*** represent, on the other hand, what is sometimes called "Dark PR" in the corporate world.[86] These narratives represent communication used to damage and discredit the reputations of individuals and entities, in this case, state (United States) or non-state (White Helmets) actors that pose a threat to Russian interests in the region.

The third type—***reactive narratives***—are narratives that are deployed in response to specific events that could generate significant public outcry and cause serious damage to Russia's reputation. If the previous types of narrative can be considered parts of Russia's strategic communication efforts, the third type is part of Russia's crisis communication toolbox. In the Syrian context, the Russian outlets have most commonly deployed this tool at times when the Russian or the Syrian military have been accused of violence against civilians and other activities that violate international law. This approach mimics the already mentioned information operations tactic that was used by Russia on multiple occasions in previous crises, known as the "Fog of Falsehood"—basically, overflooding the information sphere with multiple competing interpretations of a given event.[87]

The following section will present the key strategic narratives regularly echoed by the Russian outlets and demonstrate the use of reactive narratives on the case study of the Khan Shaykhun attack.

Strategic narratives: Positive

Most of the narratives consistently promoted by Russian outlets contain positive messaging—their aim is to present Russia and various aspects of its military presence in Syria in a positive and favourable light to the target audiences.

Russia is the only Syrian ally

The first narrative presents Syria as a country facing constant threats from all directions—from non-state armed militias and rebel movements, from the United States, Western

> Stories in which Russian military or diplomacy seems to have the upper hand over those of the United States are given significant attention and reports of various ways in which the Russian military is technologically superior to the U.S. military are also commonplace.

European states and NATO, and from regional powers, like Turkey and Saudi Arabia. While all the other actors are attempting to exploit the country for their own benefit, the only country that has the best interests of the Syrian people at heart is Russia. This selfless approach is demonstrated through stories of how the Russian state is sending humanitarian aid,[88] its military is helping the local population,[89] and its diplomats are protecting Syria on the international stage by providing diplomatic support.[90]

Russian military presence is protecting Syria from terrorism

This is most likely the most commonly featured narrative across all Russian outlets, often communicated by both state media and government institutions and representatives. The main message of the narrative is that Russian military intervention into Syria saved the country from being conquered by the Islamic State (IS), domestic armed movements (equated with Islamist terrorists) and that the only thing that protects regular Syrian people from both domestic and foreign terrorists, militants, and other enemies, is the continuous presence of the Russian military.[91] The overall narrative is complemented by commonly featured stories of various counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism activities of the Russian military.[92]

Assad is the legitimate leader of Syria with full support from Russia and the Syrian people

Unlike all the other narratives pushed forward by Russian outlets that are promoting the positive image of Russia, this narrative is centred around harnessing support for a key Russian partner in the country—President Bashar al-Assad and his regime. The main ambition of this narrative's messaging is to legitimise Assad's authority, justify Russia's continuous support of his regime, and deflect criticism from the undemocratic nature of his rule and reported war crimes perpetrated by the regime.[93]

The key argument used as part of this narrative is that the stability of the country

is tied to the survival of the current regime and that its end would have catastrophic consequences for the Syrian people, inevitably leading to Syria being overrun by terrorists and criminals.[94] At the same time, calls of NATO and EU member states for Assad's resignation are presented as ignorant of the situation on the ground and unrealistic,[95] and their leaders as inconsiderate of the stability of the country and safety of its people.[96]

Russia is the dominant power in Syria

The final positive narrative is focused on emphasising Russia as the dominant power in Syria. Russian outlets commonly feature news about Russia negotiating with Syrian neighbours about security and geopolitical issues[97] and that other powers active in the region, including the United States, need to seek Russia's approval before they can take any action in Syrian territory.[98] The role of the Syrian government or the president is usually completely omitted and the underlying message about who is the real power broker that decides the future of the country is crystal clear.[99]

What stands out as a common feature is a narrative emphasising Russian dominance over the United States in the country. Stories in which Russian military or diplomacy seems to have the upper hand over those of the United States are given significant attention[100] and reports of various ways in which the Russian military is technologically superior to the U.S. military are also commonplace.[101] As such, this narrative also corresponds to the notion of Russia being a superpower—emphasis on Russian superiority on the international level, and features commonly in Russian strategic narratives worldwide.[102]

Strategic narratives: Negative

While the majority of those narratives that are strategically pushed by Russian outlets towards Syrian audiences are positive, there are also two distinctly negative and defamatory types of narratives that appear repeatedly and consistently echo the same ideas and claims.

The West is plotting against Syria

Apart from targeting local Syrian groups opposed to the regime, Russian outlets also regularly conduct smear campaigns targeted against the United States and other NATO member states active in the region, and their policies towards Syria. The individual narratives that most frequently feature in different variations across the Russian outlets are most commonly insinuating that:

a) There is cooperation and/or partnership between the United States and various terrorist organisations active in Syria;[103]
b) The United States and its allies are attempting to discredit Bashar Al-Assad and his regime and have conducted several "false flags operations" in order to do so;[104]

> The Russian smear campaign against the White Helmets can be seen as emblematic of a campaign led against the anti-regime opposition in general.

c) The actions of the United States and their allies in Syria constitute a violation of international law and an act of aggression against a sovereign state.[105]

All three individual 'mini-narratives' operate within a wider context of Russian propaganda in Syria and their messaging particularly stands out in contrast with previously described positive narratives. The alleged acts of aggression perpetrated by NATO are contrasted with Russian military presence in the country that is presented as a selfless act of a loyal ally. Conspiracy theories that claim that the United States is sponsoring chemical attacks on civilians then, in turn, help to deflect similar allegations against Assad's regime.

The combination of both positive (defensive) and negative (offensive) narratives that complement and support each other creates a complex and convincing story of the Russian presence in Syria, one which is highly favourable to the Russian interests in the country. While the key elements and messages remain unchanged, the story is able to incorporate any new developments on the ground and adapt accordingly.

Defamation of local opposition to the Syrian regime

The second narrative is aimed at local groups or individuals that criticise or oppose either Russian presence in the country or, more often, Assad's regime and its actions. Generally, any opposition group beyond the co-opted official opposition allowed by the regime tends to be labelled as a criminal organisation and any individuals associated with the opposition are portrayed as terrorists.[106] There is, however, one organisation in particular that the Russian outlets have been specifically and directly targeting in recent years—the Syrian Civil Defence, better known as the White Helmets. The Russian smear campaign against the White Helmets, described in detail in the mini-case study below, can be seen as emblematic of a campaign led against the anti-regime opposition in general.

Mini-Case Study: The Subversive Campaign Targeting White Helmets

The White Helmets are a volunteer organisation that provides medical services, evacuation and search and rescue services in opposition-controlled areas in Syria. From the beginning, the organisation was very active on social media, publishing footage from their operations, often including photos and videos capturing the civilian victims of regime airstrikes and bombings up-close. Because of its association with opposition forces and especially because it managed to bring worldwide attention to the civilian casualties of the Assad regime's military operations, it quickly became a thorn in the side of the Syrian regime. Therefore, the White Helmets eventually became a target of an intense information operation campaign sponsored by Russia and the Syrian regime and conducted through a variety of means, including Russian and Syrian outlets and social media platforms.

Russia-sponsored outlets managed to spread a range of disinformation targeting the White Helmets, both in Syria and outside of it, by fuelling and amplifying various conspiracy theories about the organisation. The most common subversive narratives surrounding the organisation was its alleged association with Al-Qaeda, Al-Nusra Front, ISIL, and other terrorist organisations,[107] claims that their rescue operations are staged,[108] claims that White Helmets themselves orchestrate chemical attacks in opposition-controlled areas so that they can then be blamed on the armed forces of the regime[109] and that they are a proxy group created by NATO to secretly promote the interests of the United States in the country.[110]

While RT Arabic was at the helm of the anti-White Helmets campaign, Syrian state media and pro-regime outlets[111] usually echoed and amplified the claims and narratives first created by Russian sources. The conspiracy theories and disinformation narratives regarding the White Helmets were also reiterated by foreign sources and online communities, including prominent U.S. alt-right websites.[112] The campaign also extensively used social media platforms to sway public opinions against the White Helmets. Using both official Russian government-affiliated accounts, as well as what appeared to be thousands of bot accounts,[113] the anti-White Helmets discourse ended up dominating Twitter, with content that challenged the organisation being much more prevalent on the platform than content supportive of it.[114]

Mini-case study: Distorting the information environment in the aftermath of the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack

On the 4th of April 2017, the Syrian town of Khan Shaykhun in the Idlib Governorate was struck by an airstrike using lethal chemicals.[116] According to the joint investigation conducted by the United Nations and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the Syrian government was responsible for the attack which likely used a nerve agent known as sarin.[117] The attack was followed by airstrikes of hospitals and clinics in the area that were treating the survivors.

The incident caused a strong international reaction and condemnation of the attack by numerous states and international organisations. From the Russian perspective, the attribution of the attack to the Syrian government portrayed its key partner in Syria, President Bashar Al Assad, as a war criminal, and it exposed active Russian participation in a deliberate disregard of international agreements. This threat prompted Russia to launch an intensive information campaign aiming to distort the facts, using its state-sponsored media, as well as various governmental channels and representatives.

While Russian outlets, such as RT and Sputnik, played an indispensable role in creating the "information fog", the initial steps were taken by Russia's top political leadership—Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, President Putin, Russian Delegation to the UN, and others.[118] Russian state media then followed, amplifying the claims made by Russian representatives and expanding on them, while sticking to the same argumentation—questioning the evidence and proposing multiple different alternative explanations.

The most common narratives that aim to discredit the original story based on the United Nations' interpretation of the events include:

- Attempts to discredit the evidence by questioning its reliability and origin. Russian outlets and Russian representatives have claimed that the evidence of the attacks lacks credibility since it was provided by the opposition forces and/or White Helmets and that the evidence itself is incomplete or artificially altered;[119]
- Attempts to disprove some of the basic facts about the way in which the incident took place (for example, whether an aerial attack took place) in order to cast doubt over the veracity of the entire story. Almost immediately after the attack, RT attempted to prove that the exposure to the nerve agent could not have been a result of an airstrike.[120]

- Attempts to discredit the OPCW in order to dispute the findings of its investigation and its attribution of the attack to the Syrian regime. Russian outlets have regularly labelled the OPCW as heavily politicised and manipulated by the United States, using OPCW as a geopolitical tool in its efforts to frame the Syrian armed forces as culprits of the attack.[121]
- Claims that, while the Syrian government was calling for an open international investigation into the incident, the United States refused it, worried about the findings of such an investigation.[122]

Apart from narratives that aim to distort the original story, numerous alternative explanations of the event were promoted by Russian outlets. Those explanations often contradicted each other, pointing to various different potential perpetrators of the attack, suggesting different scenarios of how the attack might have occurred, and questioning whether the attack happened at all. The following are some of the explanations of the attack presented by Russian state-sponsored media:

- The chemical attack was carried out by the White Helmets to frame the Syrian government;[123]
- The attack never actually happened, and it was staged by the White Helmets to frame the Syrian government;[124]
- The attack was carried out by ISIL or another terrorist organisation;[125]
- The incident was a result of an accident in a factory operated by the opposition forces;[126]
- Saudi Arabia and Israel were behind the attack;[127]
- The attack was carried out by Turkey and Al-Nusra.[128]

As demonstrated above, by deploying multiple different potential explanations of a given incident, Russia is not attempting to convince the audience of one particular version of the truth. Instead, by muddling the facts and insinuating the involvement of other state or non-state actors, it supports the attempts of Assad's regime to deflect the blame and it gives its excuses a minimal level of plausibility. Moreover, by pointing to a range of opponents of Assad's regime, Russian media attempted to associate them with the attack and turn them into a scapegoat that can be blamed for the attack instead of the Syrian regime itself.

However, it is difficult to say whether Russian attempts to muddle the truth were successful or not. Measuring the effects of state-backed information operations is notoriously difficult and there are no reliable polls monitoring attitudes and opinions of the Syrian population. The lack of data makes it impossible to quantify what influence Russian efforts actually did have on the public opinion regarding the attack and analysis of their impact is therefore outside of scope of this study.

> Russian propaganda in Syria seems to be building an information environment favourable to its interests by disseminating disinformation and consistently promoting certain narratives as part of a long-term strategy.

Reactive narratives

The previous section explains ways in which Russian propaganda in Syria seems to be building an information environment favourable to its interests by disseminating disinformation and consistently promoting certain narratives as part of a long-term strategy. While those strategic narratives represent a cornerstone of Russian information operations in the country, they are complemented by a different type of approach to the information space at certain times.

This approach can be characterised as the deployment of reactive narratives—numerous different disinformation claims and conspiracy theories that quickly emerge all at once and are extensively promoted, albeit only for a limited period of time. Reactive narratives tend to be deployed in reaction to reputation threats dangerous enough that they can significantly harm Russian interests. In this respect, they represent a crucial tool in Russia's crisis communication arsenal. One of the most common methods of such reaction is the mentioned strategy of creating the "Fog of Falsehood" and flooding the information space with a high number of different, often contradictory information and explanations regarding the event in question.[115] Used, for instance, in the aftermath of the Skripal case in 2018, the case study below showcases a similar use of reactive narratives in the Syrian context, following a chemical attack in Khan Shaykhun.

Russia's Image in Syrian Media

The way that the Russian presence in Syria is presented in pro-Assad media outlets, both state-owned (Syrian Arab News Agency—SANA) and privately owned (Al Watan, owned by Rami Makhlouf, the cousin of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad), is fairly similar to its portrayal in Russian Arabic-language outlets. While they might differ in details, both Syrian and Russian media share the same general narratives regarding the Russian military presence in Syria and the relationship between the two countries.

Russia is presented as a key ally of Syria, with the two countries sharing a strategic alliance bound by the common interest of fighting the U.S.-backed terrorists on the Syrian territory.[129] There is a significant and repeated emphasis on the legitimate nature of the Russian military presence in the country, deployed in Syria to support the counter-terrorism efforts of the Syrian regime.[130] This is contrasted with the United States depicted as an occupying force, repeatedly accused of backing the same terrorist groups that Russia is fighting against and working to destabilise and divide Syria.[131]

Apart from being aligned on the general portrayal of the relations between the two countries, the Syrian pro-regime media also frequently mirror certain specific narratives that can be found in the Russian outlets. These include Russia's diplomatic support for Syria on the global stage as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, a narrative promoted by Russian outlets and echoed by Syrian media as well.[132] In addition, there are frequent mentions of various Russian humanitarian aid and expertise-sharing initiatives.[133]

The extent to which the Syrian and Russian media are aligned on these topics suggests that both the Russian government and the Syrian regime share similar goals in how they portray the Russian presence in Syria. They both seek to present the Russian military intervention in Syria as a legitimate act, secure the support of the local population for the intervention and for an ongoing Russian presence into the future, and create a clear distinction between the Russian presence and the U.S. and NATO activities in Syria. In this way, the Russian and Syrian media amplify each other's messages and mutually increase their effectiveness.

Strategic narratives and Russian goals in Syria

The strategic narratives employed by Russian media are intended to support Russian strategic goals and its position in the country through communicating to the local population and influencing its attitudes. Their primary aim is to bolster the image of Russia as the indispensable ally of the Syrian nation.

In this respect, Russia highlights its military and diplomatic prowess and its contribution to the stability and protection of Syria both

domestically and internationally. The support to Syria is also stressed by highlighting the provision of humanitarian aid and involvement in reconstruction. The narratives additionally seek to bolster the legitimacy of the Syrian government, while lambasting its opponents and accusing them either of unlawful meddling or association with terrorist movements. Although the position of some regional actors might be more ambiguous (which reflects the complicated geopolitics of the region and uneasy partnerships that define Russian engagement in Syria), the identified narratives clearly paint Russia as a better option for Syrians and as a key ally supporting Syria in a number of crucial areas.

Thus, these narratives help to legitimise Russian presence in the country and shape its image as an indispensable ally, while glossing over its more instrumental goals. Although the communication campaign represents only one part of Russian outreach activities, it nevertheless helps to highlight the value of Russian civilian, military and diplomatic support for the country and its positive effects on Syria. At the same time, showcasing Russian military and diplomatic dominance helps to enhance its political capital on the domestic and international level, as well as its role as weapons seller and manufacturer. The Russian narratives also play well with and mutually enhance messaging pursued by the Syrian pro-regime channels that interpret the war as a foreign and Western-led conspiracy against Syria and frame the armed opposition as Jihadist terrorists.[134]

Apart from strategic narratives, Russian media also play an instrumental part in both voicing and amplifying reactive narratives targeted at the Syrian audience. These narratives are a key crisis communication tool of the Russian state and are deployed in response to specific events that could generate significant public outcry and cause serious damage to Russia's reputation.

In the Syrian context, these narratives are mostly deployed as a tool to deflect criticism and blame from either the Syrian regime or the Russian military at times when they face accusations of violating international law, with the Khan Shaykhun being the most prominent example. In these cases, the Russian media follow the same strategy that they have repeatedly deployed in various European states, known as the "Fog of falsehood", described in detail above. This shows that, when necessary, the Russian state-operated media use the same tactics to achieve the same goals—to distract, confuse, and overload the information space in order to deflect the blame from Russia and its allies—even in contexts that are radically different from Europe, such as the Syrian one.

CONCLUSION

This study mapped diverse forms of Russian communication, soft power, and outreach towards the Syrian public. It asked how Russia operates in the context as specific as the Syrian case, how different Russian information operations are in such a context, and what narratives Russia employs. There are several take-aways that can help us to better understand not only Russian outreach strategies in Syria, but also the Russian approach to using those tools in general.

First, while Russia operates in Syria in a generally permissive environment defined by partnership with the Syrian regime, it nevertheless invests in diverse forms of outreach. The importance of less formal and elite connections across Syrian society (military and business elites, tribal elites, Christian minorities, religious authorities), in some cases forged through the provision of humanitarian support or other types of funding, should not be underestimated, especially in the context of the closely controlled public sphere. Similarly, the localised practices of outreach, such as those practiced by Russian military police, play a crucial role in diffusing local conflicts and maintaining the Russian position as the 'problem-solver' and 'negotiator' that might be accepted better than the Syrian regime among many communities.

Second, the position of Russian media, in particular RT Arabic, seems to be particularly strong, especially compared to its marginal positions in many Western countries. According to the available data, both its website and its TV programmes are read and watched by quite a significant number of Syrians, at least those in the territories under governmental control. It is incorrect to assume that this automatically translates to uncritical acceptance of its content, as other polls suggest, and we might speculate the reasons for this relatively large readership and viewership. Nevertheless, these numbers show that Russia might be in position to promote its soft power alongside its hard power in some places. Such soft power is then only aided by support provided by Syrian governmental media that share some of the pro-Russian narratives.

Third, the narrative strategies employed by Russia in Syria represent the mix of those known from other places, such as the use of reactive narratives to cover-up reputational crises, and those tailored for the Syrian context. Among the latter, it is especially the relatively higher number of positive narratives, highlighting not only Russian dominance, but also speaking favourably about the Syrian regime as its important domestic ally. This represents an unsurprising, but significant difference from how Russian media narrate the situation in other countries, especially in the West, with its dominance of negative and disruptive messaging.

Recommendations

1.) When developing responses to Russian information operations, NATO member states tend to primarily think in the context of defence and resilience of their own societies. The findings of this case study documenting Russian information influence in Syria, however, imply that wide-spread information operations in the digital space are likely to form an inherent part of any significant foreign military engagement of the Russian state, whether in Europe or elsewhere. Apart from increasing their own resiliency, NATO and its member states should therefore invest in developing ways to monitor and counter Russian information operations in non-NATO states, particularly in the MENA region and in Africa. Among others, this might also mean support for local news production, grounded in the work of citizen journalists and civic initiatives. While this form of support might be better suited for member states than for the Alliance itself, it should nevertheless be explored.

2.) At the same time, Russian practices of communication with Syrian society are not limited to media. Russia employs a wide range of informal practices and local forms of communication that enables its reach to the Syrian elites and specific parts of the Syrian population (such as religious minorities). As the Syrian conflict has been a significant training ground for Russian armed forces, these practices might be repeated elsewhere. NATO should develop capacities to monitor these practices and networks and learn lessons from them, both for the Syrian case and for their potential application elsewhere.

3.) Nevertheless, Russia is maintaining a strong network of state-funded media, which continues to play a key role in amplifying Russian information operations and disseminating Russian narratives, including those that aim to damage the credibility and reputation of NATO member states. This network has a global reach and, as was documented in this analysis, has significant influence in certain geopolitically im-

portant regions, such as the Middle East and North Africa. NATO should, therefore, consider developing strategic communication capabilities capable of reaching and influencing audiences in non-Western languages, so that it could counter Russian narratives around key issues and events in those regions and disrupt its information dominance.

4.) As this analysis demonstrates, even outside of NATO Russia still applies similar disruptive information tactics that were previously experienced by NATO member states, such as the "Fog of Falsehood". NATO and its member states would benefit from actively countering those tactics whenever they are deployed, such as in the case of the Khan Shaykhun attack, by actively debunking Russia's false claims, uniting their messaging and amplifying its reach, and "naming and shaming" Russia's efforts to obfuscate the information environment.

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