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**ИНФОРМАЦИОННОЕ ИЗМЕРЕНИЕ СИРИЙСКОГО КОНФЛИКТА В КОНТЕКСТЕ АМЕРИКАНО-РОССИЙСКОГО ПРОТИВОСТОЯНИЯ НА БЛИЖНЕМ ВОСТОКЕ**

**THE INFORMATION WARFARE ASPECT OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT IN THE CONTEXT OF THE U.S.-RUSSIA POWER STRUGGLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

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**Аннотация**

Данная диссертация посвящена информационному освещению сирийского конфликта в СМИ России и США. Целью этого исследования является выявление медиа стратегий, используемых российскими и американскими СМИ при освещении основных аспектов сирийского конфликта. Был проведен контент анализ англоязычных статей по четырем основным аспектам войны, а также произведен сравнительный анализ полученных результатов, официальных позиций и стратегических интересов двух держав. Для каждой из сторон были выявлены основные используемые элементы информационной войны и медиа стратегии.

**Ключевые слова:** cирийский конфликт, информационная война, стратегические интересы России и США, конкуренция в регионе

**Abstract**

This dissertation examines mass media coverage of the United States and Russia in the context of the Syrian conflict. The aim of this research is to reveal media strategies employed by U.S. and Russian media outlets to construct images of the major aspects of the Syrian conflict. News articles were subjected to content analysis according to four major aspects of the war. Comparative analysis of deconstructed images along with official stances and geopolitical aspirations of two great powers was conducted. Finally, media strategies and tools of information warfare were identified for both countries.

**Key words:** the Syrian conflict, information warfare, strategic interests of Russia and the United States, regional competition

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**INTRODUCTION**

**Relevance of the topic.** Presently, a new kind of reality is gaining more and more traction – the one which is constructed by information. It has become part and parcel of our life and a key feature of the social environment. People constantly try to find new ways of utilizing information and, over time, it has also acquired a new function – being a weapon. The concept of *information war*, or *media war*, has become an integral element of social and political fabric of today. It also related to *propaganda*, which is both the concept and the practice used by many countries as a part of their political games, because it is an effective way to influence people’s minds and attitudes.

When anti-government protests broke out in Syria in March 2011 in a small southern city of Daraa, probably, few people assumed that the country would plunge into chaos and minor demonstrations would eventually escalate into a bloody civil war within weeks with foreign actors’ interference and the resulting internationalization of the conflict. A trigger for this uprising is considered to come from the Arab Spring phenomenon – a wave of revolutions across the Middle East. As the conflict unfolded, radical groups and terrorists like the Islamic State (ISIS) or Jabhat al-Nusra got involved which led to other countries launching military operations in Syria. The United States formed the anti-ISIS coalition and initiated airstrikes against terrorists in 2014. Since 2017 the U.S. military also targeted some governmental positions in response to alleged chemical attacks by Bashar al-Assad’s forces. Unlike the U.S., Russia was officially invited by the Syrian president who asked for military aid to counter terrorism in the country. The United States and Russia found themselves on a new battleground where their interests are completely opposite: the United States is inclined to oust the current Syrian government and its leader and, hence, the United States has provided support to various opposition groups; Russia, on the contrary, acknowledges Bashar al-Assad as a legitimate leader and supports the government forces. Since both external actors try to achieve dominance in the region, they have initiated large-scale information campaigns in the media.

**Research question** of this paper is as follows: What are the discourses on the Syrian conflict that the U.S. and Russian media have been striving to construct in the context of the two superpowers’ regional competition and what media strategies have been employed to this end?

**Object of the study:** information war efforts undertaken by Russia and the U.S. through their respective media concerning the Syrian conflict.

**Subject of the study:** strategic communication objectives, media narratives, media strategies, specific forms and tools of information warfare employed by major Russian and U.S. media outlets aiming at projecting their conflicting interpretations on the causes and dynamics of the Syrian conflict.

**The aim of the research** is to reveal media strategies employed by U.S. and Russian media outlets to construct images of the major aspects of the Syrian conflict.

**Research objectives.** To achieve the aim, the following objectives have been set:

1. To collect and to sort news articles devoted to the Syrian conflict from three major Russian and three major American media outlets and to subject this pool of sources to content analysis.
2. To deconstruct images of the Syrian conflict portrayed by major Russian and American media focusing on the causes of war, the fate of the Bashar al-Assad presidency, the attitude towards political and military opposition, and the prospects for political settlement.
3. To conduct comparative analysis of both sides’ separate images of these specific aspects of the conflict.
4. To correlate these media interpretations of the Syrian war with the official positions of Russia and the U.S. on the conflict.
5. To identify media strategies and tools of information warfare employed by the US and Russia.

**The chronological framework** of the study covers the period from 2011 to May of 2018. These temporal limits are determined by the date of beginning of the conflict in March of 2011 and as the conflict is still ongoing articles from 2018 are also included.

**Methodology.** To carry out this research the following methods were applied to fulfill research objectives in chapters two, three, four and five. In order to identify the differences between Russian and American media coverage of the Syrian conflict, as well as employed media strategies, information tools and official governmental positions, ***comparative analysis*** was applied. Elements of ***discourse analysis*** were implemented to trace linguistic peculiarities and divergence in media coverage. In addition, it was used to identify how the information reality of an armed conflict is constructed by both countries' media and how it is perceived. The articles published in English by both Russian and American media were subjected to ***content analysis*** assisted by Nvivo software. Counting linguistic units, identifying positive and negative connotations and themes, allowed to identify and highlight the differences in Russian and American media coverage of the conflict.

Primary sources. Due to the nature of the object of study, media articles were used as the main pool of primary sources in this research. For this study, three American and three Russian media outlets in English were chosen according to the criteria of traffic and audience engagement statistics: CNN, the New York Times, Fox News, RT, TASS and Sputnik. According to SimilarWeb (a market intelligence tool)[[1]](#footnote-1), RT's English website has about 187.54 mln of total visits monthly, TASS' English website – 1.94 mln and Sputnik' – 75.69 mln. As for American media, total visits of CNN's website are about 535.87 mln, the New York Times' – 348.92 mln, Fox News' – 312.67 mln.

This research is focused on the issue of competing for influence on international public opinion and efforts to gain dominance in projecting political actors’ own worldviews to the outside world. Both countries have been fighting in this “battle for hearts and minds” and it is especially noticeable in the Syrian conflict. That stipulates the choice of English articles only, which constitute units of analysis.

The units of analysis are of paramount importance in a content analysis. It is what being counted and categorized by the researcher. The unit of analysis for the dissertation are the news items from three Russian and three American media that focus specifically at least on one of the four aspects. For an article to be considered relevant to the portrayal of the Syrian crisis and, therefore, to qualify for inclusion in this research, it had to satisfy one of two criteria. Either the main angle of the story deals with a topic that explicitly and primarily referred to the Syrian conflict (or one of the aspects in focus), or the main angle of the story in the same way relates to other countries-players in the discourse. Concerning identification of what an article is about and its focus, this was conducted through headlines and deciding, after reading the entire news item, what the central message is, since often other issues are mentioned in one article or one article can be dedicated to the several aspects at a time.

Sampling. Based on the sampling algorithms described by C. Newbold in “The Media Book”, *quota sampling* was used for the purpose of this research (as one of the four basic approaches to selecting sources in media studies).[[2]](#footnote-2) . It is a non-probability method which implies collecting representative data from a group and ensures that the sample represents definite characteristics chosen by the scholar.

In this research quota sampling was applied in the following way:

**1. Dividing the population size into specific groups:** 4 characteristics (aspects) were singled out for this research: causes of the war, attitude to Bashar al-Assad’s presidency, attitude to the Syrian opposition and international initiatives for the conflict settlement.

**2. Calculating a sample size** **for each group**: quota of 6 articles per year for one characteristic was established in each media, which gives 126 in total for both Russian and American media, but due to the uneven distribution of population size over years and media outlets, the correction was made. Thus, in case when respective shares of the population size exceeded 30% of average number, the quota was raised. Hence, the final sample size for different aspects depended on the base sample volume (126 articles) corrected for uneven distribution.

**3. Applying restrictive selection criteria for thematical relevance of each group:** articles were chosen from the automated query results using the search engines for each of media outlet on the basis of containing key words directly corresponding to one of the four characteristics in focus.

Being a non-probability method, quota sampling does not provide 100% correct assessment of editorial policy. This reservation is important as this research does not claim to grasp and represent the absolute variety of nuances and deviations in respective outlets’ editorial policies.

Among other types of primary sources, transcripts of speeches and official statements of presidents, ministers and government members were selected for contrasting the official stances of the U.S. and Russia. Statements and remarks by state leaders allow to identify government-approved stances on specific issues in focus. Thus, official resources referred to in the study are: the English version of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s website[[3]](#footnote-3), the English version of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation[[4]](#footnote-4) website, archive of the White House under former American President Barack Obama[[5]](#footnote-5), archive of the U.S. Department of State[[6]](#footnote-6), official website of the White House[[7]](#footnote-7) and website of the U.S. Department of State.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Theoretical approach.** The *constructivist paradigm* was adopted as a conceptual-theoretical framework for this research. In this perspective, information domain and mass media in particular are perceived as a constructed reality. In social constructivist theory, scholars focus on the social construction of reality. Human relations, including international relations, revolve over ideas, concepts, thoughts and discourses and do not essentially include material conditions or forces. Hence, the theoretical approach of this study is based on findings and categories of media strategies and information coverage of international armed conflicts, which were elaborated by such scholars as Brian Nichipaulk[[9]](#footnote-9), Christopher Paul[[10]](#footnote-10), Scot Macdonald,[[11]](#footnote-11) Philip Seib[[12]](#footnote-12) and Johanna Neuman.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**Literature review.** In academic field, the theme of information warfare or propaganda is one of the most prominent. Thus, before starting the research itself, it is worth considering works of the authors which are connected to the topic of the dissertation. That will help us to estimate the relevance of the research.

In general, by analyzing previous literature, it became obvious that there is a number of books and articles which are devoted to the history of the “infowar” phenomenon and also try to explain the very gist of it. For example, Leo Bogart[[14]](#footnote-14) presents the reassessment of the Cold War premises of American Propaganda which brings the original 1954 study up to date and places it into historical context. His work is a careful examination of the principles and beliefs that have guided American propaganda operations including the problems that currently face American information policy. It summarizes an empirical study based on extensive interviews of the agency's executives and operatives that is updated by the new interviews reflected in this edition, and that helps USIA guide and plan its own research and improve its operations.

David W. Guth[[15]](#footnote-15) in his study explores public debates over the use of U.S. “soft power”—international government-to-people communication, generally classified by proponents as informational “public diplomacy” and critics as persuasive “propaganda” efforts. The focus is on challenges emerging during both the Cold War and the War on Terror. The author examines the 1953 debate over the role of U.S. propaganda, and shows how many of the same issues reemerged following 9/11 terror attacks.

Dennis M. Murphy[[16]](#footnote-16) focuses on historic cases of American propaganda and also on the National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication in the U.S. It perceived as a positive step in competing against propaganda. Additionally, it remained to be seen whether process can be instituted in a way to go beyond political cycles or nation's leadership is able to change the tendency of using information as power.

Some historic overview to the use of propaganda in Soviet Russia is given by Boris V. Bruk[[17]](#footnote-17). Speaking of these days, the author enumerates several entities which are, according to his view, serve propagandist purpose: from media like RT, global PR-agencies up to meetings like the Valdai Club and organizations like Rossotrudnichestvo. The author comes to conclusion that in many present situations propaganda is counterproductive in diplomatic issues.

A. Kudors and A. Pabriks[[18]](#footnote-18) analyze both American and Russian involvement and strategies in Syria along with cooperation and competition issues. Problems of European Union as refugee crisis and consequent diplomatic crisis are touched upon (concepts of nation security and human security are juxtaposed in this context). Some neighbouring countries like Turkey or Iran are in focus too, but the most attention is drawn to Russian strategies in Syria and Russian propaganda. Additionally, some attention is devoted to strategic communications of ISIS. In conclusion, authors give their estimation of the situation and players proving Russia “capable” in diplomatic and military cooperation and the US as a remaining “steadfast actor”.

The role of traditional and new media in American policy-making is observed by Lyse Doucet[[19]](#footnote-19). The author focuses on the cases of two major chemical attacks in Syria and contrast B. Obama's and D. Trump's decision-making processes. The United States is put as a key actor in this conflict, but the author underlines similar observations for other Western allies. Moreover, major impact of media is highlighted but they are not perceived as a major power in these events.

**Contribution to the field.** In this research, conceptual-theoretical findings of international conflicts media coverage are applied to the Syrian conflict. These results not only define and describe the images constructed by the two countries’ mass media with regards to the Syrian conflict, but also contrast it with strategic interests and geopolitical aspirations of the United States and Russia in the region.

**The structure of the work** reflects research objectives. Hence, the first chapter explores major concepts used in conceptual studies of information warfare, some well-known historic examples of propaganda during prominent conflicts and an overview of popular tools and practices of information warfare. The second, third, fourth and fifth chapters follow the unified research design: they provide the results of content analysis of Russian and American media and assess their correlation to the official positions. The second one is devoted to the causes of the war. The third chapter is dedicated to Bashar al-Assad’s presidency, its role in the conflict and its image in the media. The third one focuses on the Syrian opposition and different approaches to its categorization within the continuum of “radical” vs. “moderate”. The fifth chapter outlines major international efforts for peaceful conflict settlement. The last chapter provides an overall conclusion to the dissertation.

**Approbation.** Some conceptual and methodological approaches adopted in this research were presented at the meetings and seminars at RT during the author's internship there in February 2018, feedback received from RT analysts allowed to refine the research design of this study.

# **Chapter 1. Media Strategies and Coverage of International Military Conflicts**

## 1.1. Defining the basic concepts (information warfare, propaganda, public diplomacy, strategic communication)

Presently, mass media are considered to be one of the most vital institutions which performs various functions: inform, report about events, enlighten, educate, disseminate culture, entertain and advertise. At the same time, they affect not only consciousness, values, ideals, outlook of the audience, but also conduct the collective actions of people - behaviour. Media space appears to be a place for public dialogue and supposed to create a platform for an exchange of ideas and opinions.

Thus, mass media play a pivotal role in forming and operating of public conscience. With its help, perception and interpretation of reality and current affairs are carried out through it and with its help. Mass media no longer reflect reality, but rather constructs it, according to its rules and preferences.

A well-known metaphor about mass media as the forth branch of power is relevant as never before. Evidently, it is not official in the legal aspect like the legislative, executive and judicial branches, but its capability to influence public opinion and, on some occasions, even to control the course of events is indisputable. A famous German historian and philosopher of history, Oswald Spengler, in the beginning of the 20th century wrote in his book “*The Decline of the West*”: “A small number of superior heads, whose names are very likely not the best-known, settle everything, while below them are the great mass of second-rate politicians - rhetors, tribunes, deputies, journalists - selected through a provincially-conceived franchise to keep alive the illusion of popular self-determination.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

It is likely that if Spengler could have foreseen the rapid development of online media, his suppositions would have been even bolder. Scientific and technical progress appears to be a key factor in the development of information society and mass media, which, in turn, allows it to erase boundaries in the information field; now, it can be easily intersected by global networks which provides instant dissemination of information. Thus, the distance between the very event and its media representation is eliminated. The event is broadcasted to the viewer in the same moment when it is happening, and the viewer becomes a direct participant as a result. But as it was already mentioned mass media rarely reflect reality as it is. One of the reasons for that is pursuit of dominance on the world scale as well as in military conflicts.

As a result, the notion of **“information warfare”** was introduced; it refers to the use of information and its capabilities as a tool of warfare, being evidently more applicable in the military domain. There is no universal definition of this concept, but the one which is widely accepted was introduced by Brian Nichipaulk and presents information warfare as “*the process of protecting one’s own sources of battlefield information and, at the same time, seeking to deny, degrade, corrupt, or destroy the enemy’s sources of battlefield information*”.[[21]](#footnote-21) In this context, several other concepts, which are sometimes considered as interchangeable with information warfare, are to be defined, such as propaganda, information operations, public diplomacy and strategic communication.

The latter is, possibly, one of the most ambiguous terms in the scholarly field. Nevertheless, the definition offered by Paul Christopher seems to be inclusive enough: “***Strategic communication*** *is* *coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signaling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives.*”[[22]](#footnote-22) Alternative view was offered by Kirk Hallahan, who described strategic communication as “purposeful communication activities which are used by organizational (or national) leaders and members to accomplish a certain mission”.[[23]](#footnote-23)

“**Public diplomacy**” is another concept of shared misunderstanding, particularly the relationship between strategic communication and public diplomacy. Some scholars tend to consider these notions interchangeable, while others define public diplomacy as being subordinate to strategic communication or vice versa. Undoubtedly, there is a certain overlap, but more traditionally public diplomacy is thought to be focused on “government engagement, outreach, and broadcast”. Strategic communication encompasses not only these but also some features of “information operations as well as the communicative value of policies and more importantly actions.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Another definition which is often referred to was given by Congressional Research Service in 2009 report. They imply that public diplomacy outlines governmental attempts “*to conduct foreign policy and promote national interests through direct outreach and communication with the population of a foreign country*”[[25]](#footnote-25)

When discussing **information operations**, it is important to specify that this term is more applicable to military domain, a popular subject in American academia. Joint Chiefs of Staff of the US defines it as: “*the integrated employment of the core capabilities of electronic warfare, computer network operations, psychological operations, military deception, and operations security, in concert with specified supporting and related capabilities to influence, disrupt, corrupt or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting our own*.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Following this logic, information operations are definitely subordinate to strategic communication. Other definitions also focus on the use of tools to control the flow of one’s own information and that of an opponent for the purpose of revealing the opponent’s strategy.

**Propaganda** is distinctly different from the other terms mentioned. Generally, propaganda has a very strong and distinctive negative connotation regardless of suggested definitions. In modern discourse it implies deception and manipulation. In addition, there are certain features that identify propaganda as: “*the veracity of the content, the presence or absence of intention to influence, candor about that intention to influence, whether manipulation is involved*.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Another definition is represented in Jowett and O’Donnell’s book “*Propaganda and Persuasion”* where propaganda is perceived as a “*deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist*.”[[28]](#footnote-28) One of the most prominent works devoted to propaganda is a book by Nicholas Jackson O’Shaughnessy “*Politics and Propaganda”*. He suggests that it is a combination of symbolism, rhetoric and myth, where symbols can be “read” differently or be reused, rhetoric has to “resonate” with feelings and myth, being a key part of propaganda, acquires “power of narrative”.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Hence, the main difference between these concepts can be presented as follows. Public diplomacy is done by diplomats and officials while strategic communications are performed by military officers. There is still a wide overlap between them, but strategic communication is a broader term which also encompasses information operations. Propaganda differs from other types of political communication because of its one-way direction of communication. While public diplomacy, for example, aims at mutual interaction and relationship-building, propaganda focuses on manipulation and deception. Democracies, for the most part, rarely turn to direct propaganda. They tend to substitute the term with notions like “public diplomacy”, “information operations” or “strategic communication” to justify their information activities meant to influence perceptions of audiences.

## 1.2. The evolution of media coverage of military conflicts

Conflicts in society have been in different shapes and forms for thousands of years: from interpersonal and family up to social-class and transnational ones. Disagreement and violence often get a radical turn and result in an armed conflict. This method was to settle territorial, national, inter-ethnic, sectarian, and international disputes through the use of military struggle.

Recently mass media, and especially online media, have become a powerful and widely-used weapon in armed conflicts. Informational aspects of modern conflicts are planned as thoroughly as military aspects. Thus, a war is fought not only on a real battlefield but on a virtual one as well. The struggle for the legitimacy in the court of public opinion and army morale are as important as the war itself. Georgii Pocheptsov, in his book “*Information warfare”*, highlights the similar idea: “Nowadays in developed countries not a single action is possible without corresponding information support. Wars should look justified, enemies – the cruelest, our soldiers – real heroes.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

The significance of the mass media and its role during military conflicts is increasing, particularly due to the rapid development of means of communication technologies. These changes have challenged the traditional patterns of information flows and transformed the global mediascape. It implies not only the variety of perspectives available, but also cultural, social and political interpretations which media outlets now instantly provide.

It is believed that in the context of military conflicts modern technologies have also influenced media strategies. Propaganda has become part and parcel of media coverage during wartime. This fact is the reason why governments and officials of various countries tend to establish control over disseminated information. Rapid development of communication technologies has undermined such efforts, since there is no monopoly over information, and a plethora of wider perspectives is available.

Within this framework, the question of coverage and perception of conflicts becomes of paramount importance both for policy makers and media organizations. In this respect, the media industry turns into a crucial battlefield where winning both domestic and international public support is at stake. As a result, it can affect the audience with negative influence, contribute to escalation of the conflict, or participate in its peaceful settlement and restoration of relationships after it.

One of the most significant tasks at the preparatory stage of information warfare is the use of mass media for misleading a potential enemy, bringing discredit upon military and political leaders, as well as restricting outreach activities of the enemy all the way to partial or total media blackout.

As a result, the struggle for interpretation of reality occurs. According to theory of war types by an American sociologist Alvin Toffler, wars of the agrarian period were waged because of territorial disputes, wars of the industrial period – for facilities and means of production, while wars of the informational period – for means of information and knowledge processing. Among other spheres of warfare, like land, sea, air and space, now the information sphere (infosphere) is also included.[[31]](#footnote-31)

What can be observed now is predominantly media wars. The main events are unfolding on newspapers’ pages, TV screens, radio programs and on the Internet. The prevalence of military forces, numbers of war prisoners or captured cities are not valid any more, what only matters is the way it is told. Mass media narratives are being compiled of carefully selected clips, close-ups, camera angles, descriptions and witnesses’ interviews. Without any doubt, there are certain people responsible for choosing “the right angles”. Thus, that is how a new reality is being constructed for the public.

A turning point in this info-military sphere that gave a proper understanding of the impact of mass media on military, economic and foreign policies of a country occurred after the failure of the American military operation in Vietnam. More than once, the United States claimed that the reasons of their defeat were mainly connected with some crucial oversights in information warfare rather than with the lack of financial and personnel capabilities or the USSR support to Vietnamese forces. Indeed, pictures of coffins sent back from the front caused the rise of civic protest movement. Apart from protests, there was a division inside the government which enabled mass media to criticize current foreign policies and the political establishment. Negative image of American military in and outside the United States as well as negative attitude to the war in Vietnam among public are considered as the most significant reasons for the failure of this campaign.

During that time the increasing dominance of images in mass media was not so obvious to adherents of psychological and covert operations who were slow to realize the potential of images, and especially of those that were altered. The latter consisted of “manipulating images; staging events to be photographed or filmed; changing captions for images to appear to be something other than they really were; focusing on certain things and not others and creating photomontages. These forms of image manipulation create an altered reality for the viewer and provide a powerful weapon to those who would practice propaganda or deception”.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Ensuing analysis of Vietnam campaign led to certain conclusions regarding the role of information factor in the course of military actions, which can also be relevant in the situations when the groundwork is laid for participation in military conflicts. The main objective is the creation of positive national and international image and public opinion with respect to foreign policy of the country.

The American government has successfully drawn a conclusion from that case and, consequently, governmental control over the mass media industry has considerably increased. Since then, all American crisis and wartime policies are elaborated in terms of the information factor as a dominating factor. It was noticeable during various conflicts at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries, namely during American actions on Haiti in 1994, “peacekeeping” operation of NATO in Bosnia and Herzegovina and especially during military operations of the United States and the coalition in Iraq.

The beginning of the Gulf War gave a boost to enhancing the influence of American media, in particular, CNN. That war proved to be the finest hour for CNN as it was broadcasting live all the military actions from day one. Viewers got to know what was happening on the battlefield from news reports by CNN, other channels relayed their broadcasts with the logo, and the “live” streaming became a trademark of full-time broadcasting.

Thus, the “CNN effect” as a term appeared; it implies a sharp increase of media influence and vast media outreach in times of crisis in a country or in the world. This phenomenon can also be explained by the participation effect created with the use of live streaming, where any viewer can find himself in the thick of events.

Scholars could not come up with a unified definition of the CNN effect, as some of them were focused only on policymaking and its impact on humanitarian interventions, while others presented it as a new approach of dealing with international relations.

Thus, for example, Samuel Feist defined this phenomenon as “a theory that compelling television images, such as images of a humanitarian crisis, cause U.S. policymakers to intervene in a situation when such an intervention might otherwise not be in the U.S. national interest.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Philip Seib presented the CNN effect as “presumed to illustrate the dynamic tension that exists between real-time television news and policymaking, with the news having the upper hand in terms of influence.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Johanna Neuman widened the definition by adding to intervention the impact of coverage on the initial decisions as well as on subsequent intervention phases including long-term deployment and exit strategies.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Many scholars doubt the effectiveness of the CNN effect on policy making processes. Several studies on the US intervention in Somalia that were carried out had no correlation. Thus, Jonathan Mermin considered this case as “evidence of the power of governments to move television” and not the opposite way.[[36]](#footnote-36) Steven Livingston and Todd Eachus conducted a thorough content analysis and interviews with decision-makers in Washington and Africa, and came to the conclusion that the U.S. decision “was the result of diplomatic and bureaucratic operations, *with news coverage coming in response to those decisions*” (emphasis added).[[37]](#footnote-37) Furthermore, Piers Robinson suggested a model of policy-media interaction which implies that “media influence is likely to occur when policy is uncertain and media coverage is critically framed and empathizes with suffering people. While in case policy is certain, media influence is unlikely to occur.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

Nevertheless, in many studies, correlation between coverage and policy causes confusion. In this situation it is crucial to differentiate between examples when a government decides to intervene and consequently encourages media coverage and those when a government is unwilling, and therefore, opposes media pressure. In this context, “control” and “pressure” are two different notions, and it is not likely that mass media is able to force policymakers, rather to put some pressure.

What really makes an impact is rapid development of global television and online media. Now, authorities, diplomats, experts and military or intelligence officers are challenged by real-time coverage. Namely, they have to find a way to compete with it and at the same time to avoid compromising their professional standards. Thus, if they jump at a conclusion without verifying information or relying on incomplete facts because of time pressure, their analysis and decisions can suffer a lot. Alternatively, if they carry out a thorough research and verification and come out with in-depth reports and analysis, these can already be irrelevant. Time for official response, evaluation of events and news production shrunk, which affects reflection of reality, since journalists have to use questionable sources and unreliable information.

Nevertheless, over time CNN has lost its credibility and is no longer associated with “independent” broadcasting. It happened so, mostly, because of the development and popularization of social networks (social media), which enable people to get alternative “truths” revealed by direct participants, ordinary people. Channels’ livestreams have been replaced by livestreams in Facebook and other social networks. Newspapers and television have also been replaced by digital media. Consequently, the phenomenon of the “CNN effect” became irrelevant too.

Recently, the time between the outbreak of military actions, no matter how far they might be, and information reaching international public has reduced immensely. More importantly is that parties to a conflict can become a “media outlet” themselves by posting materials from the ground. Even in cases when mainstream media does not consider events to be “newsworthy”, digital and social media can fill the gap.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Therefore, a new concept, “citizen journalism”, appeared. It implies the engagement of a person in the act of news production (gathering of information and reporting) about issues that may resonate the national agenda. Some scholars defined it as “democratization of the multimedia technologies by the people and for the people”.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Undeniably, citizen journalism has a significant influence on traditional media. Moreover, this concept can be widened to those who have journalistic degree or training. More and more professional journalists start blogs or channels to comment on news stories and sometimes touch upon topics usually avoided by mainstream media. In addition, citizen journalism has become such a wide-spread phenomenon that some media outlets accept materials and stories from readers. Evidently, now it turned into a tool to reinvent and reshape traditional media practices.

Thus, the Internet has become a crucial factor in constructing our reality, which has already been proven by the wide application of instruments during the information campaign in the 2008 South Osetian-Georgian conflict and the “Arab Spring” in 2010-11 mainly by means of Twitter and Facebook.

The first attempts to use social media as a tool of political mobilization occurred in 2008 in Egypt and in 2009 in Iran, but its real impact became noticeable in 2011 during the protests in Egypt and Tunisia. Social media provided rapid information exchange and, consequently, enabled to coordinate the masses. Moreover, its ability to break governmental monopoly over information flows and present alternative perspectives led to neutralizing the effect of traditional media. The use of the very same social networks by the opposition could be observed during the ongoing Syrian conflict. Nevertheless, in influencing international public attitudes, traditional media still play a pivotal role, which will be addressed in the next chapters.

## 1.3. Elements and media tools of information warfare

With advances in news technologies more intricate and subtle, media practices and tools were developed. As mentioned above, that role of mass media is integral in conflicts as it tends to shift focus in a favourable manner or alter reality completely. Thus, it is worth mentioning some strategies and tools that are widely-used by media outlets.

First of all, particular patterns and components of information warfare in conflicts should be mentioned:

1. Psychological operations – the use of information in order to influence the personnel of the enemy and targeted audience; such information like the use of the Internet to convince people to subscribe to a specific cause or doctrine.
2. Electronic warfare – prevents the enemy from obtaining accurate information; widely used by terrorist organizations, political hackers, and rival countries through the use of the Internet.
3. Misinformation or fake news – provides the enemy with deceptive facts about the military capabilities or strategies.
4. Physical destruction – can be a part of information warfare if it is aimed at affecting elements of information systems.
5. Security measures – are aimed at preventing the enemy from finding out the capabilities and intentions, as well as preventing any breaches in the information systems.
6. Direct information attacks – misrepresentation of information (corruption of information) without visible alteration of the context, its original structure and location.

Based on information above, the most significant impact of mass media is during the ongoing conflict, that is why it is necessary to pinpoint which tools and strategies exactly are used during this period for affecting people’s hearts and minds. According to Batasheva Anna, some linguistic and stylistic devices come in handy for interpretation of media coverage:

1. Common linguistic devices:

- *precedent* (references to previous events, successful or ineffective military operations, for example, can form certain perceptions of a current conflict);

- *metaphors* (journalists tend to use metaphors to make the narrative more descriptive, for example, to praise actions of one side and condemn actions of another party);

- *labels* (a widely-used technique intended to differentiate sides, often used for underlining friend-enemy opposition).

2. Stylistic devices:

- *context* (a crucial part of coverage as a particular context can create wrong impressions and influence perception);

- *connotation* (positive and negative connotations indicate the overall sentiment of the text).

- *evaluation* (widely-used in media articles for assessing actions of countries, organizations, officials etc.).

- *presupposition* (presuppositions and unproven allegations can come across in many articles);

- *sentiment* (closely connected with connotations).

3. Additional elements:

- *details* (on the basis of the fact what exactly details are provided or absent, it is possible to identify how a certain image was constructed by media);

- *composition* (composition of the text is very important, especially the layout of details)

- *references to experts* (argumentation choice defines the editorial policy of media outlets)

All these techniques and elements are closely interconnected: context influences connotation, evaluation is reflected both in context and word choice (metaphor, label, precedent), whereas presupposition and sentiment is reflected in the whole text. These linguostylistic devices are mainly used in articles of high public significance: military or political confrontations, conflicts, political turmoil. [[41]](#footnote-41)

Apart from aforementioned linguostylistic devices, there are certain features which indicate a planned information campaign and can be considered as a part of information warfare:

* Intensity: not a passing reference, but a repetitive coverage;
* Sudden appearance on the agenda as well as abrupt disappearance;
* Consistency: a lot of channels start broadcasting and discussing this topic;
* Famous journalists, scholars and channels focus mainly on this topic;
* Negative representation goes beyond the mark;
* Introduction of authorities as “talking heads”;
* Detailed and vivid visualization: dramatic, emotional images and footage from different parts of the world.

In addition, the practice to hand the microphone to authorities, government representatives, army generals or experts is often used. It serves as a tool aiming to reassure audience that everything is under control. The reason why it happens is that, during armed conflicts, mass media leaves its position of a watchdog and puts all the effort in supporting national interests or, in other words, interests of the government.[[42]](#footnote-42) At such times, objectivity, plurality of voices and other journalistic values are usually abandoned. The reasons for this phenomenon can be different: governmental pressure, pursuing of ratings or profit. Moreover, entertainment component has become a part of news industry and, consequently, the focus has shifted to drama, live action, creativity. Now a media outlet has to provide viewers with unique stories, scoops and exclusive footage on a regular basis to be able to compete with others and keep its audience attached.

Another distinctive aspect of modern conflict coverage is the representation of the opposite side for evaluation. This tool can also be identified as “talking heads” technique aimed at creating a certain image of the adversaries. It is possible for the audience to identify militants and political leaders of the enemy; citizens from both sides are also represented as well as journalists in the field. And if in case of media all accents and assessments are already made, social networks and digital sources can provide authentic information and real picture of events.

What appears to be even more crucial is distinctive attitudinal effects of mass media and, namely, the particular characteristics and features of the public that affect how they process messages of media. Thus, American scholars of Stanford university, Iyengar and Simon, have identified three main classes of media effects which are used in controlling mass perception[[43]](#footnote-43):

1. *Agenda setting* – the ability of mass media to put emphasis on particular issues (based on amount of coverage, for example) and its relationships with the public concern about the issue.
2. *Priming* – the correlation between news coverage strategies and the criteria, according to which, the audience makes political evaluations about leaders and governments. Priming tends to be stronger for performance evaluation and have lesser effects for personality assessments. Sometimes it is considered as an addition to agenda setting, because by making some issues more prominent in people’s mind, the news industry is able to shape or reshape their assumptions about politics.
3. *Framing* – the connection between how an issue is characterized in news reports and its influence on how it is understood by the public.

Therefore, agendas, perceptions, correlations and relationships between events could be controlled. Nevertheless, one concept should be highlighted here – the one of “*frame*”, which deserves special attention because it can be applied in the analysis of conflicts. A frame is defined as a mental construction which enables to think and interpret reality, in which there are some slots to be filled in. For example, if there is an aggressor, there should be a victim. Two sides of the conflict put it in different ways: in the Russian-Georgian conflict of 2008 Georgia is an aggressor for Russia, while Russia is an aggressor for Georgia. The way in which the news is brought and, consequently, the frame in which the news is presented, is a choice made by journalists. Some scholars define frames as “collections of perceptions and thoughts that people use to define a situation, organize information, and determine what is important and what is not”[[44]](#footnote-44)

Detalization of the key frame is essential: the more details are provided, the more trustworthy the frame appears. Thus, it involves the necessary engagement of experts, victims, witnesses, authorities and visualization. Extension of the frame can also take place by adding accusations and justifications. As a result, the enemy obtains new features represented for the global audience. In this case, the frame refers to the way media arranges and presents events and issues on agenda and the way people perceive and interpret this information.

Consequently, the process of frames creation is called *framing*. Robert Entman denotes it as a way to make some aspects of reality more significant in the text. He also suggests four sides in this process: the reporter, the text, the audience, and the society. Thus, journalists while telling stories use frames to highlight particular aspects and to facilitate audience interest.[[45]](#footnote-45) In the context of conflict coverage, framing can be very helpful as it provides a given explanation as to why a conflict takes place, what parties are there and why they behave in one way or another. Basically, priorities, solutions, plans and assessment of actions are determined by frames. In their book, Michael Elliott, Sanda Kaufman, Robert Gardner and Guy Burgess state that framing can also be applied for “rationalizing self-interest, convincing a broader audience, building coalitions, or lending preferentiality to specific outcomes.” [[46]](#footnote-46) Among frames that are used in conflict media coverage they single out:

- *Identity* frame helps to demonstrate how parties to a conflict identify themselves (self-definition, affiliation to religious or any other group).

- *Charaterization* frame is connected to stereotyping and can be positive or negative; it is used for describing adversaries, undermine their legitimacy or discredit their motivations.

- *Power* frame helps to evaluate legitimate forms of power, which are more likely to advance its position.

- *Conflict management* frame identifies what solutions for a conflict resolution are suggested by different parties.

- *Information* frame indicates reliable and unreliable sources of information.

- *Risk* frame describes assumptions about future events and risks that can appear.

- *Loss versus gain* frame is also connected with suppositions about future and possible courses of actions, what losses and gains they can bring.

If any noticeable shifts in frames or their influence on conflict dynamics appear, this process is called *reframing*. It offers a new perspective not only when some prominent changes in the context of conflict occur, but also when its interpretation and representation change even though the conflict dynamics may remain intact.

In conclusion, mass media, undoubtedly, has undergone drastic changes in recent decades. Changes in nature and coverage of conflicts have transformed the way wars are covered, represented and publicly perceived. The appearance of global broadcasting, satellite channels and the social media revolution turned to be game-changers, and now viewers confront a plethora of competing images, frames and narratives from various sources. In many cases they become victims of information warfare led by opposing actors without being able to identify the truth. Basically, all the recent and present cases of information campaigns accompanying military conflicts are characterized by aforementioned components of information warfare, which will be addressed in the next chapters.

# **Chapter 2. Causes of the war**

## 2.1. Causes of the war in Russian media

2011 became a landmark year which denotes the beginning of the Syrian conflict. Some media reported that mass protests were prompted by the arrest of several youngsters who painted anti-government graffiti. Even though in the first days of unrest in the middle of March, mostly all the media wrote about “peaceful demonstrators” in the city of Daraa. Several days later, events took a violent and chaotic turn and then led to a civil war.

The numbers of articles dedicated to the Syrian conflict presented in Table 1 indicate that RT has provided saturation coverage (56,700 articles in total), while TASS has devoted only 13,244 articles to this topic – the lowest number out of three media outlets of focus.

**Table 1.** Distribution of Russian media articles devoted to the reasons of the war arranged by year.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Number of articles devoted to the reasons of the war | | | | | | | | | Overall number of articles about Syria | % of articles devoted to the causes |
|  | **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** |
| **RT** | 391 | 497 | 373 | 266 | 247 | 299 | 268 | 103 | **56,700** | 4.7% |
| **TASS** | 17 | 42 | 48 | 52 | 30 | 139 | 88 | 60 | **13,244** | 6% |
| **Sputnik** | 227 | 354 | 170 | 189 | 197 | 548 | 277 | 77 | **40,393** | 5% |

According to Table 1, the share of articles devoted to the events of March 2011 and reasons for the war is quite similar to each other in all three media outlets (4.5-6%), even though the overall quantity of articles devoted to Syria varies significantly.

**Figure 1.** Distribution of Russian media articles devoted to the reasons of the war arranged by year.

Figure 1 shows that the first peak of coverage in RT and Sputnik was in 2012 when the conflict unfolded to its full extent. The second peak was in 2016 – the year after Russia stepped into the game, and its full-fledged military operation in Syria came into full force. Evidently, such an important foreign policy decision could not be neglected and many mass media turned back to the very beginning and gave their readers some background and explanation as to why the conflict started and who the main participants were in order to justify this intervention.

Based on quota sampling, 127[[47]](#footnote-47)\* articles focusing on the causes of the Syrian war from three media outlets were chosen out of 4,959 articles in total and content analysis was carried out.

Content analysis allowed the identification of the main themes, main actors and the way the beginning of the war and preconditions for it were reflected in Russian mass media:

Reasons:

- anti-government (demonstrations, protests)

- anti-Assad (protesters)

- freedoms (democratic, media)

- reforms (administrative, democratic, economic)

- foreign (fighters, sponsors, aid, conspiracy, intrusion, meddling, powers, support)

Actors:

- activists (human rights, pro-democracy)

- protesters/demonstrators (peaceful, fake, unsanctioned)

- fighters (freedom, opposition, rebel, foreign)

- forces (government, political, regime change, Syrian opposition)

- groups (FSA-affiliated, jihadist, major opposition, Salafi-Jihadi)

- Islamists

- terrorists (gangs, organizations)

- jihadists (foreign)

- organizations (human rights organizations, independent organization, Syrian rights organizations, terrorist organizations)

Events:

- protests (mass street, protest marches)

- armed (attacks, conflict, opposition)

- coup (military, in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen)

- revolution (Arab, Arab Spring)

- violence (mercenary, spiraling)

- military (heavy military hardware, coup, interference, intervention, operation)

Judging from these results, the major reason for the protests allegedly was dissatisfaction with current leader and government. That is why, protests and demonstrators are usually called “anti-government” and “anti-Assad”. Among other demands “freedoms” take a noticeable position which is connected with “reforms” of any kind (administrative, democratic, economic, social).

The protests turned from being peaceful to ferocious quite quickly and reports about “armed attacks” and “armed opposition” became more frequent. Thus, the wave of armed uprisings in the Middle East countries which came to be known as Arab Spring or Arab revolutions was considered as one of the causes as well. Moreover, other countries in the region like Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen were alluded in this context.

While the conflict was spiraling into a civil war, more and more information about “foreign” meddling and conspiracy concerning foreign-backed terrorists and “fake demonstrators”, whose main aim was a regime change, began to appear. It led to a shift of focus in media coverage by the end of 2012 and at the beginning of 2013, when, among other reasons, non-Syrian players and foreign-sponsored groups started being mentioned.

Word frequency analysis enables to identify thirty most frequently-used words:

**Table 2.** Word frequency analysis results from articles focusing on causes of the war.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Word** | **Count** | **Variations** |
| Syria | 559 | Syria |
| Syrian | 521 | Syrian, Syrians |
| Assad | 305 | Assad, Assad |
| government | 281 | governance, governing, government, governments, governments’ |
| opposition | 190 | opposite, opposition |
| president | 180 | preside, presidency, president |
| protests | 173 | protest, protester, protesters, protesting, protests |
| forces | 151 | force, forced, forceful, forcefully, forces |
| 2011 | 146 | 2011 |
| Arabic | 146 | Arab, Arab, Arabic, Arabs |
| regime | 134 | regime, regime, regime’, regimes |
| Bashar | 108 | Bashar |
| arms | 106 | armed, arming, arms |
| foreign | 95 | foreign, foreigners |
| change | 88 | change, change, changed, changes, changing |
| peaceful | 79 | peace, peaceful, peacefully |
| Western | 78 | Western |
| region | 77 | region, regional, regionally, regions |
| Arab Spring | 67 | Spring, Spring’, Springs |
| crisis | 64 | crisis |
| terrorist | 63 | terrorist, terrorists |
| demonstrators | 58 | demonstrate, demonstrated, demonstrating, demonstration, demonstrations, demonstrators |
| backing | 53 | back, backed, backing, backs |
| democracy | 41 | democracies, democracy |
| Islamist | 41 | Islamist, Islamists |
| rights | 41 | right, rightful, rights |
| Daraa | 38 | Daraa |
| Sunni | 37 | Sunni, Sunnis |
| terrorism | 37 | terror, terrorism |
| freedom | 32 | freedom, freedoms |

This type of analysis demonstrates that Bashar al-Assad’s presidency and regime became the ground for people’s unrest. Thus, government, name and position of Assad are mentioned 874 times and regime is mentioned 134 times in 127 articles under analysis.

The phenomenon of “Arab Spring” was referred to 67 times, which allows to suggest that the beginning of the war and resemblance with other Arab countries suffered from Arab Spring were discussed among other reasons for the war.

The allusion to “foreign” presence is also confirmed, as it comes across 95 times. In this context, the mentioning of “backing” is crucial, because in the majority of articles, these two notions are connected. Other countries’ involvement is often labelled as “US-backed” or “Western-backed” foreign fighters or opposition. After 2013, lesser information about “peaceful protesters” came up and more blame was put on “external” influence while describing causes of the war. In addition, “Western” is also one of the most frequently-used words which is repeated 78 times.

Symbolizing a turn in media coverage with terrorism being named as a trigger of conflict escalation, words “terrorism”, “terrorists” and “Islamists” are used 141 times to outline that opposition reportedly engaged in mass atrocities to no lesser extent than the government.

Democracy, rights and freedom, which were considered as the main demands of the opposition, are mentioned 41, 41 and 32 times respectively, and these figures signal that after the first year of the conflict these notions were not used very often for a description of the causes.

It is also worth noting that religious aspect – which in case of Syria means the sectarian divide between the Sunni, a majority sect, and the Alawite, a minority Shia sect holding political power under the Baath regime – sometimes was named as one of the reasons. Specifically, “Sunni” – the most popular branch of Islam – is mentioned (37 times). According to this narrative, Sunnis are opposed to Shiites, who are referred to more seldom (14 times).

Sentiment sentences coding demonstrates the overwhelming majority of negative connotation over positive ones. Namely, 472 sentences out of all were decoded very negatively and 531 as moderately negative, while only 66 sentences appeared to be very positive and 237 sentences – moderately positive.

## 2.2. Causes of the war in American media

Reasons of the Syrian conflict, evidently, were not neglected by American media outlets either, but the share of articles devoted to this topic varies drastically. Table 3 demonstrates that the New York Times has devoted 20,790 articles to this topic – twice the amount of CNN figures (43,300 articles in total). Fox News has an average index of its total number (22,473), but it has the lowest figures of articles dedicated to the causes of the war, which indicates that the editorial policy of Fox News differs significantly from two other media outlets in focus.

**Table 3.** Distribution of American media articles devoted to the reasons of the war arranged by year

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Number of articles devoted to the reasons of the war | | | | | | | | | Overall number of articles about Syria | % of articles devoted to the causes |
|  | **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** |
| **CNN** | 1,219 | 935 | 1,102 | 1,179 | 1,965 | 2,045 | 2,310 | 3,253 | **43,300** | 32% |
| **NYT** | 762 | 425 | 297 | 217 | 204 | 185 | 146 | 186 | **20,790** | 11.6% |
| **Fox News** | 68 | 346 | 391 | 159 | 168 | 104 | 190 | 152 | **22,473** | 7% |

According to Table 3, the share of articles devoted to the beginning and reasons of the war differs significantly in these three media outlets. CNN paid the most attention to this topic – 32% out of all, while Fox News discussed it only in 7% of articles and the New York Times – in 11.6%.

**Figure 2**. Distribution of American media articles devoted to the reasons of the war arranged by year

Figure 2 shows that coverage of CNN exceeds coverage of two other media excessively. It has peaked for the first time in 2015, which is, probably, due to the launching of the Russian military operation in Syria. Moreover, it is still noticeably increasing over the recent years. Contrary to CNN, the NYT’s coverage is dwindling: after its peak in 2011 in the beginning of the conflict, it has reduced fourfold in 2018. The number of articles from Fox News has been growing gradually over seven years of conflict, the highest rates were recorded in 2012 and 2013.

Based on quota sampling 129[[48]](#footnote-48)\* articles dedicated to the causes of the Syrian war from three media outlets were chosen out of 17,180 articles in total and content analysis was carried out.

Content analysis allowed the identification of the main themes, main actors and the way the beginning of the war and preconditions for it were reflected in American mass media:

Reasons:

* government (1,982 government massacre, Baathist, government, corrupt governments, government corruption, government permission, government warnings, transitional government)
* anti-government (anti-government videos, anti-government message, anti-government protests, chanting anti-government slogans, painting anti-government graffiti)
* regime (Syrian regime forces, brutal regime)
* human rights (basic rights, human rights issues, human rights reforms)

Actors:

* groups (armed groups, monitoring group, religious group, human rights groups, jihadi groups, militant groups, terror group, terrorist groups)
* activists (opposition activists, activist group, human rights activists, political activist)
* demonstrators (beating demonstrators, infiltrating demonstrators, peaceful demonstrators, pro-democracy demonstrations, shooting demonstrators)
* authorities (Syrian authorities, security authorities)
* rebel (little rebel activity, rebel factions, rebel fighters, rebel groups, Syrian rebels retreat)
* opposition (opposition activists, opposition bodies, opposition group, opposition stronghold)

Description of events:

* protest (peaceful protest, anti-government protests, big protest, street protests)
* armed (armed groups)
* forces (Syrian regime forces, Syrian government forces, Syrian security forces, army forces, police forces, security force violations, unwarranted force)

The analysis of the main themes indicates that the government became the main reason for people coming out on the streets. Historical reference to “1982” when the government of Bashar al-Assad’s father suppressed an uprising was used to liken it with the events of 2011 when Assad was accused of crushing “*peaceful demonstrators*”. Besides, the government and the ruling Baath party are considered as being “*corrupted*” and the regime is called “*brutal*”. One more theme which is a direct indication to one of the causes of the war is “*human rights issue*”. People were demanding human rights reforms and the regime change to more democratic one (“*pro-democracy demonstrations*”).

As for the description of the events, the mentioning of “*painting anti-government graffiti*” indicates that theory about youngsters who were arrested for doing this was also corroborated in American mass media. Thus, these arrests struck a chord among Syrian people and triggered the notorious uprising. Even though protests are depicted as “*peaceful*”, special emphasis is placed on the aggressive governmental actions (*beating demonstrators, shooting demonstrators, regime/government/security forces, army forces, police forces, security force violations*).

Table 4 represents word frequency analysis with top thirty frequent words in American media:

**Table 4.** Word frequency analysis results from articles focusing on causes of the war.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Word** | **Count** | **Variations** |
| Syria | 471 | Syria |
| Syrian | 440 | Syrian, Syrians |
| Bashar Assad | 408 | Assad, Assad's |
| government | 329 | govern, governance, governed, government, governments |
| protests | 221 | protest, protester, protesters, protesters', protesting, protests |
| forces | 206 | force, forced, forceful, forces, forces' |
| killings | 160 | kill, killed, killing, killings, kills |
| president | 139 | presidency, president |
| demonstrator | 136 | demonstrate, demonstrated, demonstrating, demonstration, demonstrations, demonstrator, demonstrators |
| regime | 126 | regime, regimes |
| Daraa | 125 | Daraa |
| rights | 120 | right, rightfully, rights |
| activists | 119 | activist, activists |
| 2011 | 111 | 2011 |
| Arab Spring | 111 | arab, arabic, arabs |
| opposition | 104 | opposite, opposition |
| civil | 70 | civil |
| fighting | 70 | fight, fighting |
| uprising | 69 | uprising, uprisings |
| arrests | 67 | arrest, arrested, arrests |
| violence | 66 | violence |
| arms | 65 | armed, arming, arms |
| peaceful | 64 | peace, peaceful, peacefully |
| freedom | 50 | freedom, freedoms |
| back | 44 | back, backed, backing, backs |
| unrest | 38 | unrest |
| crackdown | 36 | crackdown, crackdowns |
| revolution | 36 | revolution, revolutions |
| democracy | 33 | democracies, democracy |
| foreign | 33 | foreign, foreigner, foreigners |

As well as in Russian media, *Syrian president Bashar al-Assad* and his government takes the first places according to frequency – 916 times with “*regime*” mentioned 136 times, which gives ground to consider dissatisfaction with Assad and his policies as one of the reasons for the protests.

*Daraa* – the hotbed of the revolt – was mentioned 125 times, *2011* – the year of the beginning of the war and “*Arab Spring*” – 111 times in 120 articles under analysis, which indicates that almost all the articles contain information not only about when and where the conflict started, but also a reference to Arab Spring revolutions that hit the Middle East among other causes of the war.

Among demands of the protesters, which were mostly repeated at the outset of the conflict, “*rights*” take the first place (120 times), while *“freedom”* and *“democracy”* are repeated much less (50 and 33 times respectively). Thus, it implies that the emphasis has shifted from the initial allegations.

Conspiracy about “*foreign*” intervention and external players is not popular in American media as it came across only 33 times. Nevertheless, allusion to someone *“backing”* opposition is presented in some articles (44 times) as one of the reasons of the war.

What is also important to note is that *“violence”* (repeated 66 times), *“arrests”* (67 times) and *“uprising”* (69 times) have very similar numbers, which suggests that in American media, the blame for intensifying of the conflict is put on governmental forces. *“Crackdown”* mentioned 36 times adds to this assumption as well.

Sentiment sentences coding reveals that most of the sentences possess negative connotation: 475 – very negative and 680 - moderately negative, while there are only 65 sentences with very positive connotation and 232 moderately positive.

## 2.3. Causes of war. Comparison

The results of content analysis give reasons to suggest that the image of the beginning of the war presented by the Russian mass media can be deconstructed as follows:

* Anti-government protests broke out, Syrian citizens peacefully called for reforms;
* Arab Spring hit Syria, which implies a revolution to overthrow Bashar al-Assad (after the unrest turned into armed clashes);
* Foreign meddling added to turning the conflict into a bloody civil war.

The results of the coverage analysis devoted to the causes of the war in Russian mass media mainly coincides with the official position of the Russian government. President Vladimir Putin, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov and other Russian officials in their speeches stated that:

* Structure of the Syrian state, the government, the very nature of power and social patterns should be put to the change but without innocent people suffer[[49]](#footnote-49);
* Some efforts to “stage” the protests were made externally[[50]](#footnote-50);
* The United States and its allies bear responsibility for what has happened in the region and Syria in particular[[51]](#footnote-51).

As for the American media, the main messages devoted to the causes of war can be presented as follows:

* Peaceful demonstrators dissatisfied with a corrupted government and lack of human rights and freedoms came out on the streets, but were shot and arrested by the regime forces[[52]](#footnote-52);
* Syria became one more victim of the Arab Spring wave[[53]](#footnote-53);
* Peaceful protests were brutally suppressed by Bashar al-Assad’s forces what led to escalation into an insurgency[[54]](#footnote-54).

According to these results, it is feasible to track certain similarities. Thus, Russian and American media agree upon the peaceful nature of protests at the outset of the conflict and demands of demonstrators (democratic reforms, more freedom in all spheres, changes in the system of state).

Nevertheless, differences are more evident: Russian media focuses lots of attention to the foreign meddling and “Western-backed” opposition and called it one of the main reasons for the conflict escalation. It is only slightly highlighted in American media, which are, in their turn, more focused on Assad’s violent actions and label him and his forces as triggers to the intensified confrontation.

Unlike being named as one of the other major triggers, terrorists, Islamists and jihadists do not get lots of coverage in this context in American media. Sectarian division in Syria between the Sunni and the Shiite also does not seem to be of big interest there, whereas Russian media occasionally refers to these groups while enumerating the reasons of the war.

## 2.4. Elements of information warfare

Conducted analysis elicits some prominent features of information campaign:

- Intensity (Especially CNN's coverage stands out in this context as 32% of articles are devoted to the causes of the war and the beginning of the conflict – the highest number out of all six media sources);

- Consistency (All media refer to the topic in focus to a greater or lesser extent which is evident on Figures 1 and 2);

- Negative representation (Russian media focus mainly on foreign intrusion and terrorist groups among opposition forces, while American media tend to blame Assad and his regime in the conflict evolving);

- “Talking heads” (Extremely popular technique for both sides; a wide range of authorities' quotations, interviews and conference speeches are used in addition to a plethora of experts, analysts and politicians invited to give their comments).

- Detailed and vivid visualization (Almost all the articles contain pictures or videos from the ground which serve a particular purpose – to convince who is guilty or to show how the events unfolded)

It goes without saying that all mass media were trying to create a certain frame. Among those which were used to determine the roots of the conflict were:

* *Identity* frame (the way protesters identified themselves as freedom fighters or radical warriors or religious group affiliation – Sunni or Shiite);
* *Power* frame (the way to evaluate legitimate forms of power, and also the power which is more likely to advance its position – as it was mentioned above, American media presented Assad as losing power and not be able to cope with the revolution).

The shift that occurred in Russian media after 2013 can be viewed as *reframing*. Since that time, Russian media introduced a new perspective – foreign meddling and, as a consequence, appearance of jihadists became one of the main reasons for conflict escalation. Some linguistic and stylistic tools can also be tracked down:

* Precedent: Arab Spring and countries it hit before were named many times in all the media to convince that the Syrian events are the consequences of it.
* Labels: such phrases as “brutal” regime in American media or “Western-backed” opposition in Russian are the examples of labelling.
* Connotation and sentiment: some of the results were provided by sentiment sentences coding analysis, where negative connotations are prevailing.
* Evaluation: in some media a direct assessment can come across, for instance, such allegations as “opposition fights for freedom” or “Assad kills innocent citizens”).

# **Chapter 3. Attitude to Bashar al-Assad**

## 3.1. Attitude to Bashar al-Assad in Russian media

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad turned out to be, probably, the most controversial figure during the Syrian conflict. He took the office in June 2000 when his father, Hafez Assad, who ruled the country with an iron fist for nearly three decades, died. In the beginning he was perceived as a fresh, young leader who might initiate substantial change and elaborate a more moderate and democratic regime in Syria. As the uprising proved, not all the promises and initiatives were delivered and implemented. The fact that Bashar and his family belong to Syria's Alawite minority in a predominantly Sunni country added to controversy around him as some consider the current government secular.

**Table 5.** Distribution of articles devoted to Bashar al-Assad in Russian media arranged by year.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Number of articles devoted to Bashar al-Assad | | | | | | | | | Overall number of articles about Syria | % of articles devoted to Assad |
|  | **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** |
| **RT** | 749 | 1,147 | 638 | 2,363 | 1,740 | 3,890 | 2,160 | 2,330 | **56,700** | 31% |
| **TASS** | 48 | 180 | 240 | 132 | 438 | 528 | 576 | 216 | **13,244** | 36.5% |
| **Sputnik** | 609 | 866 | 753 | 854 | 2,682 | 4,666 | 3,382 | 1,675 | **40,393** | 38% |

According to Table 5, the highest share of articles which refers to Syrian President is from Sputnik even though overall number of articles is higher from RT, which, in its turn, dedicated 31% of articles to Assad. TASS has similar share of articles about the President to Sputnik’s – 36.5%

**Figure 3.** Distribution of articles devoted to Bashar al-Assad in Russian media arranged by year.

Figure 3 demonstrates that the first peak of coverage in RT and Sputnik was in 2012, when the conflict unfolded to its full extent. The coverage in TASS also became more intensive that year (it increased almost fourfold in comparison with 2011). The second peak in RT was in 2014, while in Sputnik the number of articles remained nearly the same up to 2015, when it reached its final peak along with RT. It can be easily explained by Russian engagement in Syrian affairs. Since 2015, President Assad and President Putin had a number of discussions and, as a result, a Russian military operation was launched. After that, in 2018 it reduced by almost twice as much compared to its highest amount in 2016.

Based on quota sampling 131[[55]](#footnote-55)\* articles about Bashar al-Assad were singled out in three Russian media sources (out of total number – 32,832).

Content analysis identified the main themes in these articles, which gives an overview of the situation with respect to Syrian President, government, foreign influence and many other issues:

Description of Assad:

* Syrian leader, president
* legitimate leader, legitimate president
* legitimate authority, government
* legitimate Syrian leadership

Description of the government:

* elected government
* sitting government
* real government

Issues discussed:

* national sovereignty
* different nationalities
* national state interests
* national security
* stable government
* national conference (reconciliation, dialogue)
* power transfer

Attitude of Syrian citizens:

* mass support
* public support
* carrying support
* staunch supporters
* popular support
* considerable support

Description of the events and participants:

* Syrian conflict (unrest, war, disaster, armed conflict)
* chemical arms
* armed extremists
* foreign support of the terrorist groups
* groups (rebel, opposition, terrorist, human rights, various lobby groups, monitoring, international)
* government troops (army, authorities, parliament, elite)

External players

* leading world powers
* European (powers, countries)
* Western powers, governments
* powers (international, foreign, outside)
* intervention (military, foreign)
* energetic intervention from outside

These results reflect a position of Russian media concerning Bashar al-Assad by repetitively calling him a “legitimate” leader or president and his government as a “legitimate” authority. The issue of legitimacy has been on the agenda since the beginning of the conflict and was widely discussed by the international political community.

Among other problems Assad is supposed to deal with, those connected with “national sovereignty”, “state interest” and “security” are regularly discussed in the articles, as well as a need for “stable government”.

Mass support of Syrians for their President is continually highlighted in Russian media, especially after he won the election with 88.7% of votes that cannot be a better proof of “public support”. Thus, it implies a faith of people into their leader as the only single figure able to stabilize the country.

Concerning Assad, the other controversial issue was the usage of chemical weapons that he was accused of. It got quite an extensive coverage, because Russia, among other countries, suggested dismantling the Syrian chemical arsenal and was directly involved in the process of Syrian chemical demilitarization.

Themes about external players are stipulated by the fact that American and European leaders and officials were extremely vocal about Assad’s fate. Russian media cited their speeches with calls to “power transfer” and regime change and along with prospects of “military intervention”.

Word frequency analysis identifies the thirty most frequently-used words:

**Table 6.** Word frequency analysis results from articles focusing on Bashar al-Assad.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Word** | **Count** | **Variations** |
| Bashar Assad | 903 | Assad, Assad’ |
| Syria | 745 | Syria, Syria' |
| Russia | 463 | Russia, Russian, Russians |
| president | 386 | presidency, president, presidents |
| government | 293 | govern, governance, governed, government, governments |
| support | 155 | support, supported, supporter, supporters, supporting |
| regime | 131 | regime, 'regime, regime’, regimes |
| international | 129 | international, internationally |
| foreign | 118 | foreign |
| terrorists | 115 | terrorist, terroristic, terrorists, terrorists' |
| elections | 108 | elect, elected, election, elections |
| forces | 107 | force, forced, forces, forces' |
| Moscow | 93 | Moscow |
| Damascus | 91 | Damascus, Damascus', |
| leader | 88 | leader, leaders |
| United States | 88 | States, States', U.S. |
| Western | 85 | Western |
| West | 83 | West |
| chemical | 82 | chemical |
| power | 82 | power, powerful, powers |
| terrorism | 76 | terror, terrorism |
| security | 75 | secure, secures, securing, security |
| legitimate | 73 | legitimate, legitimately, legitimizing |
| change | 67 | change, changed, changes, changing |
| Lavrov | 62 | Lavrov |
| Obama | 59 | Obama |
| Washington | 55 | Washington |
| Putin | 54 | Putin |
| Libya | 51 | Libya, Libya' |
| intervention | 41 | intervention, interventions |

Judging by these results, the top-three frequent words are Bashar Assad (903 times), Syria (745 times) and Russia (463 times), which confirms that Russian media are mainly focused on Russian involvement in Syrian affairs.

*President, government* and *regime* are repeated 386, 293 and 131 times, respectively, as the fate of the Syrian leader and his government are constantly discussed by Russian, Western and European leaders. As it was already stated, the issue of Assad's *legitimacy* has been among one of the most predominant in their speeches and, as a result, in media reports.

Among frequently-used words, “*support*” (155 times) deserves a special position, as it reflects not only mass support of Syrian for Assad but also support for opposition, especially, *terrorists* (115 times) by outside players. In addition, “*foreign*”, which can also be applied to both foreign meddling or foreign backing of terrorists, is used 118 times.

The Unites States is also one of the most prominent actors in this conflict. Since September 2014, it has been leading a coalition and launching airstrikes allegedly against ISIS. The U.S. administration expressed its negative attitude to Assad since the very early days of conflict and, consequently, it has been reported in Russian media as well. Moreover, the fact that has been widely discussed and brought into focus is that U.S. and members of the coalition were never invited in Syria and, thus, their actions contravene international law, while Russian military operation was conducted at the request of Bashar al-Assad. This justifies mentioning of *United States* (88 times), *West* and *Western* (85 and 83 times) along with former President *Obama* who was mentioned 59 times and the seat of the government - *Washington* (55 times). At the same time, Russian President is mentioned 54 times and Minister of Foreign Affairs 62 times.

Sentiment sentences coding reveals that most of the sentences possess negative connotation: 458 – very negative and 511 - moderately negative, while there are only 98 sentences with very positive connotation and 255 moderately positive.

## 3.2. Attitude to Bashar al-Assad in American media

Since the beginning of the conflict, the U.S. has become a direct participant of the Syrian conflict. Firstly, the American President, officials and politicians put this topic on their agenda almost in every meeting or conference. Negative attitude to Syrian President has been palpable as they have stated opinion outright and, inevitably, American mass media has been conveying almost the same message. The number of articles devoted to Bashar al-Assad in each three media outlets is demonstrated in Table 7:

**Table 7.** Distribution of articles devoted to Bashar al-Assad in American media arranged by year.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Number of articles devoted to Bashar al-Assad | | | | | | | | | Overall number of articles about Syria | % of articles devoted to Assad |
|  | **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** |
| **CNN** | 434 | 673 | 938 | 961 | 1,312 | 1,451 | 3,014 | 3,659 | **43,300** | 28.7% |
| **NYT** | 740 | 1,155 | 1,168 | 740 | 710 | 1,104 | 546 | 762 | **20,790** | 33% |
| **Fox News** | 51 | 42 | 114 | 232 | 290 | 554 | 1,742 | 952 | **22,473** | 18% |

According to Table 6, the share of articles about Assad is quite similar in CNN and the New York Times, which share is even bigger (33% against 28.7%). Fox News devoted only 18% of articles to this topic.

**Figure 4.** Distribution of articles devoted to Bashar al-Assad in American media arranged by year.

Figure 4 illustrates that coverage of CNN was gradually increasing up to 2016, then soared and peaked in 2018. Similar to CNN, the number of Fox News' articles was steadily rising and peaked in 2017. The New York Times, on the contrary, has the highest index in 2012 and 2013, and there was also a rise in 2016 but after that news about Assad reduced by almost half.

Based on quota sampling, 130[[56]](#footnote-56)\* articles devoted to the causes of the Syrian war from three media outlets were chosen out of 23,344 articles in total and content analysis was carried out.

Content analysis identified the main themes in the articles concerning Assad, his government, events and issues discussed along with him:

Description of Assad:

* Syrian president
* Syrian leader
* current president
* former president
* brutal dictator
* Syrian dictator

Description of government:

* government blockade
* government forces
* 1982 government assault
* authoritarian government
* government policies
* government security forces

Issues discussed:

* chemical (attack, weapons arsenal)
* reforms (future reforms, human rights, organizational, political, promising)
* air campaign
* air strikes

Description of the events and participants:

* groups (islamic extremist groups, human rights, terror, military)
* activists (Syrian opposition activists, anti-Assad, anti-government, human rights)

External players:

* Western governments
* Western leaders
* anti-Assad coalition forces

As it was already stated, the American position towards the Syrian President has been clear and unambiguous. These results prove that in American media he is mentioned either as the “Syrian president, current president or Syrian leader” or “brutal dictator” with his government being called “authoritarian”.

Some references to his father Hafez Assad also come across: “1982 government assault”, which is an allusion to an uprising which was fiercely suppressed by the “former president”.

Among some important issues that have been on the agenda, the use of chemical weapons is noteworthy because the U.S. administration was extremely vocal about “chemical attacks”, which were allegedly organized by Assad. While discussing Assad, some articles contains debates and calls for “reforms” in Syria.

One more topic that has drawn lots of attention was “air strikes”. Since the U.S. launched its anti-ISIS campaign, not authorized with Syrian government, hundreds of air strikes were conducted against suspected terrorists.

Word frequency analysis identifies the thirty most frequently-used words:

**Table 8.** Word frequency analysis results in articles dedicated to Bashar al-Assad.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Word** | **Count** | **Variations** |
| Syria | 1,922 | Syria, Syrian |
| Bashar Assad | 1,631 | Assad, Assad's |
| Russia | 574 | Russia, Russian, Russians |
| government | 506 | govern, governance, governed, governing, government, governments |
| United States | 425 | Unites States, U.S. |
| president | 418 | preside, presided, presidency, president, presidents, presides, presiding |
| regime | 350 | regime, regimes |
| forces | 345 | force, forced, forceful, forcefully, forces, forces', forces’, forcing |
| opposition | 243 | opposite, opposition |
| support | 216 | support, supported, supporter, supporters, supporting, supports |
| attack | 215 | attack, attacked, attackers, attacking, attacks |
| ISIS | 188 | ISIS, ISIS' |
| Damascus | 183 | Damascus, Damascus' |
| chemical | 179 | chemical, chemicals |
| international | 174 | internalized, international, internationally |
| security | 173 | secure, secured, securely, securing, security |
| Trump | 169 | Trump |
| Iran | 168 | Iran |
| American | 158 | American, Americans |
| leader | 146 | leader, leaders, leaders’ |
| Obama | 140 | Obama |
| backs | 139 | back, backed, backing, backs |
| foreign | 136 | foreign, foreigners |
| ally | 124 | allied, allies, allies', ally, ally’ |
| Putin | 122 | Putin |
| Kerry | 108 | Kerry |
| Moscow | 82 | Moscow |
| Western | 75 | Western, Westerners |
| crime | 68 | crime, crimes |
| transitional | 65 | transition, transitional, transitions |
| dictator | 54 | dictator, dictatorship |

Interestingly, the top-three frequent words in American media are *Syria* (1,922 times), *Bashar* *Assad* (1,631 times) and *Russia* (574 times). In comparison, *United States* is mentioned 425 times and *American* – 158 times. These results demonstrate that American media are mostly focused on Russian involvement in Syria. Moreover, speaking about countries, *Iran* is mentioned 168 times. It draws certain attention, because Iran, along with Russia, support Assad’s rule and, thus, takes the opposition position from the U.S. and *allies* (124 times).

Since the articles are focused on Assad, such words as *president, government* and *regime* are among the most popular ones and repeated 418, 506 and 350 times, respectively. As for some evaluative statements that can be tracked in the articles, some media refer to the U.N. human rights chief, who accused Assad of war crimes and crimes against humanity, relating to crime being repeated 68 times. In addition, American politicians have also called him a “dictator” (54 times), which attracts media attention.

To justify the intervention, the U.S. refers to the threat of terrorism in many articles, especially mentioning ISIS (188 times) and calling their campaign “anti-ISIS”.

It is worth noticing that the current President of the United States, Donald Trump, got slightly more coverage (169 times) than the former president, Barack Obama (140 times), probably, because Trump has made bolder statements about Syria, such as calling Assad “an animal” which kills Syrian people. John *Kerry* who had the position of Secretary of State under Obama’s presidency has appeared 108 times in American media.

Sentiment sentences coding demonstrates that most of the sentences possess negative connotation: 952 – very negative and 1,111 - moderately negative, while there are 200 sentences with very positive connotations and 553 moderately positive.

## 3.3. Attitude to Bashar al-Assad. Comparison

The results of content analysis deconstruct the image of the Syrian President depicted by the Russian mass media, which mostly corresponds with Russian official position and can be presented as follows:

- Bashar al-Assad is a legitimate president, his government is legitimate too and Russia supports and respects it[[57]](#footnote-57);

- There is no evidence that Assad used chemical weapons;

- Meddling external players in Syria use provocations to undermine the position of Assad[[58]](#footnote-58).

Moreover, Russia’s President stated that Assad did not use chemical weapons, and that it was a provocation.[[59]](#footnote-59) Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov also noted that Western countries are responsible for the situation in the Middle East and Syria, calling the policy “incompetent” and fully oriented to preserving dominance in the region.[[60]](#footnote-60)

As for the American media, main messages devoted to Assad can be presented as follows:

- Assad is a dictator, his government lost legitimacy and should be replaced;

- Assad kills his own people by using chemical weapons;

- The U.S. should interfere because chemical weapons were used.

These ideas can be easily traced to statements of official American authorities. During Obama’s presidency, the main message was “Assad must go” and the U.S. intended to facilitate this process.[[61]](#footnote-61) In addition, Secretary of State John Kerry stated that regime forces used chemical weapons.[[62]](#footnote-62) Nevertheless, Obama asked Congress to consider “targeted military strike” to respond to the “regime’s atrocities”.[[63]](#footnote-63) When Donald Trump took office, the American stance towards Syria has become even more negative and after calling the Syrian leader an “animal”. He launched airstrikes in April 2018 in response to alleged chemical attacks, but never asked Congress for permission.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Thus, the differences in the position of two countries and, consequently, in media from both sides are evident. Russia stands for Assad's legitimacy while the U.S. considers him as a murderer, who must be ousted as soon as possible. While Russia states that no chemical weapons were used by governmental forces, the U.S. takes the opposite side and accused Assad.

## 3.4. Tools of information warfare

Conducted analysis elicits some prominent features of information campaign:

- Intensity (Especially coverage of the NYT with 33% and CNN's with 28.7% stands out in this context);

- Consistency (All media refer to the topic in focus to a greater or lesser extent which is evident in Figures 3 and 4);

- Negative representation (Russian media mostly blames foreign players while American media criticize Assad and his government);

- “Talking heads” (Extremely popular technique in this part as well; many officials' quotations, interviews and conference speeches are present in the articles, along with experts, analysts and politicians invited to give their comments).

Certain frames are used to create an image of the Syrian President and among the most noticeable are:

- *Identity* frame (Russia and the U.S. construct completely different identity images: a legitimate ruler that can stabilize the country is opposed to a brutal dictator killing his own people);

- *Characterization* frame (Negative characterization frame used by American media intended to undermine Assad's legitimacy, while the Russian position is to support the Syrian government);

- *Conflict management* frame (the U.S. is convinced that outside intervention can help defeat terrorists and lead to a change of power, Russia pushes for another solution – no external players should decide the fate of Syria);

- *Power* frame (assessment of legitimate forms of power, and also the power which is more likely to advance its position that corresponds with all mentioned above: American media present Assad as losing power and Russian as standing firmly on the ground and ready to protect his people).

Some linguistic and stylistic tools can also be tracked down:

- Labels: such phrases as “brutal dictator” in American media.

- Precedent: Russian media often refer to the Libyan case, where a leader was ousted and the country plunged into a chaos to prevent the same scenario in Syria.

- Connotation and sentiment: some of the results were provided by sentiment sentences coding analysis, where negative connotations are prevailing, especially in American media.

- Evaluation: American articles contain a direct evaluation of the Syrian President as a “brutal dictator”, who “must go” or “Assad kills innocent citizens”.

# **Chapter 4. Attitude to the opposition**

## 4.1. Attitude to the opposition in Russian media

After the beginning of the uprising in 2011, it took little time to understand that the anti-Assad opposition is extremely fractious and deeply divided. Types and the number of opposition groups fighting the regime have been changing constantly, along with alliances between them. Thus, the notion of “Syrian opposition” turned into an umbrella term. Among the most noticeable groups were: Syrian National Council (SNC), formed in 2011 and recognized as a partner for peace dialogue, which later merged into National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition forces, formed in 2012 and acknowledged as a “legitimate representative of the Syrian people”; the Free Syrian Army (FSA) – a conglomeration of several groups and brigades, which is seen as “moderate rebels” by the U.S. and has received military and financial assistance from the country.

Evidently, a number of terrorist organization emerged during the time of conflict. The Islamic State, or ISIS, whose initial aim was establishing a caliphate state on the territories of Iraq and Syria, is the most prominent among them. Next, Al-Nusra Front (later renamed as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham) is considered as a Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda and began their opposition against the Syrian government in 2012.

**Table 9.** Distribution of articles devoted to the opposition in Russian media arranged by year.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Number of articles devoted to the opposition | | | | | | | | | Overall number of articles about Syria | % of articles devoted to the opposition |
|  | **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** |
| **RT** | 356 | 640 | 686 | 1,030 | 1,534 | 1,673 | 1,910 | 757 | **56,700** | 35% |
| **TASS** | 60 | 228 | 336 | 276 | 252 | 516 | 396 | 152 | **13,244** | 36% |
| **Sputnik** | 266 | 711 | 618 | 1,222 | 3,260 | 5182 | 3,599 | 691 | **40,393** | 38.5% |

According to Table 9, almost all outlets have the same shares. The highest share of articles which describes Syrian opposition is from Sputnik (38.5%); RT dedicated 35% of its articles to the opposition. TASS has the lowest number in total amount, but its share is similar to Sputnik’s – 36%.

**Figure 5.** Distribution of articles devoted to the opposition in Russian media arranged by year.

Figure 5 demonstrates that in 2012 the noticeable rise in coverage in all three media outlets was recorded when the conflict unfolded to its full extent. The coverage in TASS remained, more or less, stable and got more intensive only in 2016 (it increased by almost nine times in comparison with 2011). The second peak in RT was in 2016 and 2017, while in Sputnik, the number of articles was gradually increasing up to 2016 when it reached its final peak. It can be connected with the ongoing Russian military operation in Syria at that time. In 2018, an evident decline in coverage can be noted in all Russian media.

Based on quota sampling 129[[65]](#footnote-65)\* articles about Syrian opposition were chosen in three Russian media sources (out of a total number of 26,321).

Content analysis identified the main themes in these articles, which gives a glimpse of opposition forces being divided and other issues discussed in this context:

Description of participants:

* groups (armed, opposition, rebel, human rights groups)
* opposition (Syrian, US-backed, democratic, external, fractious, moderate opposition)
* rebel forces (Al-Nusra, Al-Qaeda-linked, foreign, moderate rebels)
* fighters (Jabhat Al-Nusra, foreign fighters)
* Islamists (radical, foreign, Syrian Islamists)
* terrorist (groups, foreign terrorists)
* Al-Nusra (terrorists, fighters, extremist group)

Description of the events:

* war (extended war, foreign war rhetoric)
* weapons (US-supplied, supply corridor)
* chemical weapons (sarin gas)

These results illustrate a position of Russian media concerning the Syrian opposition. It is apparent that it is non-homogeneous: from “armed groups” and “fractious opposition” up to “terrorist groups” and “radical Islamists”. Moreover, “foreign” appears to describe fighters and terrorists. The terrorist organization “Jabhat Al-Nusra” is among main themes too unlike ISIS, for instance.

Chemical attacks, with help of sarin gas, are also decoded as it still remains a controversial issue of which group actually used them. Supplying of arms and routes (“supply corridor”) clearly caught the attention of Russian media as well.

Word frequency analysis identifies the thirty most frequently-used words:

**Table 10.** Word frequency analysis results from articles focusing on the Syrian opposition

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Word** | **Count** | **Variations** |
| Syria | 1,422 | Syria, Syrian, Syrians |
| groups | 433 | group, grouping, groupings, groups, |
| Russia | 339 | Russian, Russians |
| opposition | 307 | opposition, opposition’, oppositional, oppositions |
| governments | 276 | governance, governate, governing, government, governments |
| terrorist | 261 | terrorist, terrorists |
| United States | 258 | United States, U.S. |
| force | 252 | force, forced, forcefully, forces, forcing |
| Bashar Assad | 233 | Assad |
| rebels | 201 | rebel, rebels |
| Al-Nusra | 186 | Nusra |
| arms | 173 | armed, arming, arms |
| Islam | 172 | Islam, Islamic, Islamism, Islamization |
| foreign | 149 | foreign, foreigners |
| militants | 145 | militant, militants |
| support | 139 | support, supported, supporter, supporters, supporting |
| military | 138 | militaries, military |
| Al-Qaeda | 112 | Al-Qaeda |
| ISIS | 107 | ISIS, the Islamic State, ISIL |
| Lavrov | 101 | Lavrov |
| backing | 92 | back, backed, backing, backs |
| Western | 78 | Western, Westerners |
| Washington | 78 | Washington |
| terror | 76 | terror, terrorism |
| moderate | 64 | moderate, moderates |
| Sham | 60 | Ahrar ash-Sham, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham |
| jihadists | 54 | jihadist, jihadists |
| extremists | 54 | extremist, extremists |
| Daesh | 53 | Daesh |
| radical | 43 | radical, radicalism, radicalization, radicalized, radically, radicals |

Judging by these results, the top-three frequent words are *Syria* and Syrian (1,422 times), *Russia* (339 times), and *groups* (433 times). Articles dedicated to this topic are mainly focused on focused on Russian involvement in Syrian affairs and also on various groups operating in Syria under the unified and ambiguous name of “Syrian *opposition*” (307 times). *United States* are mentioned 258 times and it is connected with a fact that the U.S. has its own opinion about opposition forces and, namely, that there is “*moderate opposition*” (64 times). In Russian articles, this phrase is used in the context of the American position.

Russian media mention direct participants of this conflict differently: *terrorists* take the first place among them (261 times), then more neutral words follow - *rebels* (201 times) and *militants* (145 times), jihadists and extremists share the same amount (54 times). Terrorist organizations are also widely discussed in Russian media: *Al-Nusra* (186 times), *Al-Qaeda* (112 times), *Ahrar ash-Sham* and *Jabhat Fatah al-Sham* (60 times), *ISIS* and its Arabic name *Daesh* (160 times).

As well as in previous parts, “*foreign*” interference is noted, along with *“backing”* and *“support”.* This is stipulated by a number of discussions about who backs and supports particular groups of opposition.

Sentiment sentences coding reveals that most of the sentences possess negative connotation: 571 – very negative and 677 - moderately negative, while there are only 77 sentences with very positive connotation and 246 moderately positive.

## 4.2. Attitude to the opposition in American media

As it was stated earlier, the U.S. has been an important player in the Syrian conflict and all the controversy concerning opposition connected, mainly, with the United States. Being an ardent opponent of Assad’s regime, the U.S. made a decision to support Syrian opposition until Trump decided to suspend the CIA program to arm and train rebels in 2017. The problem that has aroused was that it has been extremely complicated to identify the real “freedom fighters” from terrorists who aimed to undermine Syrian sovereignty. This problematic issue has inevitably drawn lots of media attention.

The number of articles devoted to the opposition in three American media outlets is demonstrated in Table 7:

**Table 11.** Distribution of articles devoted to the opposition in American media arranged by year.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Number of articles devoted to the opposition | | | | | | | | | Overall number of articles about Syria | % of articles devoted to Assad |
|  | **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** |
| **CNN** | 359 | 509 | 688 | 753 | 1,152 | 1,414 | 2,257 | 2,663 | **43,300** | 22.6% |
| **NYT** | 487 | 931 | 942 | 772 | 696 | 1,183 | 1,371 | 2,009 | **20,790** | 40.2% |
| **Fox News** | 61 | 73 | 121 | 424 | 518 | 1,068 | 2,230 | 1,570 | **22,473** | 27% |

According to Table 11, the highest share of articles about Syrian opposition is in the New York Times – 40.2%, almost half of the total coverage. CNN has devoted 22.6% of articles to this topic and Fox News – 27%.

**Figure 6.** Distribution of articles devoted to the opposition in American media arranged by year.

Figure 6 illustrates that coverage of all three media was gradually increasing up to 2015, then soared and CNN and the New York Times peaked in 2018. After 2017, coverage by Fox News suddenly started dwindling, and in 2018, reduced by almost twice as much compared to its highest amount in 2017. This peak is, probably, connected with election of the new President of America – Donald Trump in November 2016, as he got up to speed in 2017.

Based on quota sampling, 131[[66]](#footnote-66)\* articles devoted to the causes of the Syrian war from three media outlets were chosen out of 24,151 articles in total and content analysis was carried out.

Content analysis identified the main themes in these articles, which gives an overview of the situation with respect to Syrian opposition:

Description of participants:

* groups (armed, human rights, moderate rebel, activist, insurgent groups)
* opposition (groups, activists, fighters)
* rebel (moderate rebel, Islamic rebels, rebel surge)
* activist (rights activist, civil society activists)
* terrorist groups / jihadist group
* coalition (coalition aircraft, opposition coalition)

Issues discussed:

* Syrian rebel training program
* human rights (groups, monitors, violations)
* legitimate right
* fierce security crackdown
* security (disorder, force violations)
* chemical weapons
* supplying weapons
* oil (fields, pipeline, network, prices)

Description of regime

* Assad regime
* toppling al-Assad
* tyrannical regime

These results demonstrate a position of American media concerning the Syrian opposition. It is certainly quite different from the Russian attitude. Even though there are similar indications that opposition is non-homogeneous (“armed groups”, “moderate rebel”, “jihadist groups”), there are no titles of terrorist organizations. Among other participants, US-led coalition stands out as American airstrikes received a lot of coverage.

As the U.S. intended to “topple Assad” and his “tyrannical regime”, the American administration decided to launch the “rebel training program” for Syrian opposition groups and supply arms to them.

Chemical attacks have been one of the widely-discussed issues in American media along with “security crackdown” and “disorder”. In addition, unlike in Russian media, some attention has been devoted to Syria’s oil resources (“oil fields”, “oil pipeline”).

Word frequency analysis identifies the thirty most frequently-used words:

**Table 12.** Word frequency analysis results from articles focusing on the Syrian opposition.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Word** | **Count** | **Variations** |
| Syria | 1,710 | Syria, Syrian, Syrians |
| Assad | 561 | Assad, Assad's |
| group | 550 | group, groups |
| governments | 468 | govern, governance, governed, governing, government, governments, governs |
| forces | 459 | force, forced, forcefully, forces, forces’, forcing |
| opposition | 446 | opposite, opposition |
| United States | 379 | United States, U.S. |
| rebels | 342 | rebel, rebelled, rebels, rebels', rebels’ |
| ISIS | 340 | ISIS |
| Islam | 334 | Islam, Islamic |
| units | 237 | unit, unite, united, unites, uniting, units |
| regime | 235 | regime, regimes |
| activists | 205 | activist, activists, activists’ |
| Russia | 203 | Russia |
| protests | 193 | protest, protester, protesters, protesting, protests |
| fighters | 193 | fighter, fighters |
| support | 190 | support, supported, supporter, supporters, supporting |
| American | 175 | American, Americans |
| Kurdish | 169 | Kurdish |
| Iraq | 158 | Iraq |
| back | 148 | back, backed, backing, backs |
| coalition | 144 | coalition |
| Damascus | 144 | Damascus |
| Russian | 141 | Russian, Russians |
| international | 125 | international, internationally |
| Obama | 117 | Obama |
| foreign | 111 | foreign, foreigners |
| terrorist | 84 | terrorist, terrorists |
| Qaeda | 79 | Qaeda |
| moderate | 61 | moderate, moderates |

Articles dedicated to this topic are mainly focused on various *groups* (550 times) operating in the country, thus, “*opposition*” is mentioned 446 times, *“rebels”* - 342 times, *“activists”* – 205 times, and *“fighters”* – 193 times. *Kurdish* forces as one more participant side which fights ISIS are also highlighted 169 times.

*United States* is mentioned 379 times (*American* - 175) as, inevitably, all policy decisions of American administration are covered in media. Therefore, a term suggested by the U.S. government, “*moderate opposition*” is repeated 61 times.

Among terrorist organizations, only *ISIS* (340)and *Al-Qaeda* (79) as its affiliate have been in focus. Since the U.S. launched their first airstrikes, all this campaign was conducted under the slogan of fighting terrorism implying ISIS, even though lawfully this operation was not approved by the Syrian government.

As well as in Russian media, references to “*foreign*” interference and fighters (111 times) are accompanied by discussion about *“backing”* (148 times) and *“support”* (190 times) of particular groups of the opposition.

Sentiment sentences coding demonstrates that most of the sentences possess negative connotation: 716 – very negative and 1,077 - moderately negative, but there are more sentences with very positive connotation (152) and moderately positive (418) than in Russian media.

## 4.3. Attitude to the Syrian opposition. Comparison

The results of content analysis deconstruct the image of the Syrian opposition depicted by the Russian mass media, which coincides in many issues with the Russian official position. The main difference is that some media articles dwell on chemical allegations while Russian officials do not always make bold statements, unlike American colleagues. Russian media usually divide their attention between anti-terrorist activities and activities of alleged network of external players who are conspiring together for regional domination. All in all, Russian position can be presented as follows:

* States that encourage Bashar al-Assad’s opponents bear responsibility for increased terrorist threat;[[67]](#footnote-67)
* The West failed to distinguish "moderates" from extremists;[[68]](#footnote-68)
* Providing cover to the “moderate opposition”, the U.S. fights terrorism “only in words”;[[69]](#footnote-69)
* The West is trying to combat terrorism, but at the same time to use some of these groups to overthrow the current regime.[[70]](#footnote-70)

As for the American media, main messages devoted to Assad can be presented as follows:

* There are moderate rebels in Syria that can be separated from terrorists;[[71]](#footnote-71)
* The U.S. is fighting ISIS, while Russia is fighting other opponents of Assad’s regime;[[72]](#footnote-72)
* The Syrian government ordered to deploy chemical weapons against civilians[[73]](#footnote-73) and the U.S. and its allies can use their “righteous power” against these atrocities by launching airstrikes.[[74]](#footnote-74)

Thus, the differences in the positions of the two countries and, consequently, in the media from both sides are easily tracked. Both the U.S. and Russia exchange with quite unambiguous allegations and, sometimes, accusations which are bound to be reflected in mass media of both countries. The main issues of disagreement are moderate rebels and their nature and chemical weapons and their owners.

## 4.4. Tools of information warfare

Conducted analysis elicits some prominent features of information campaign:

- Intensity (Especially coverage of the NYT with 40.2% and Sputnik with 38.5% stands out in this context);

- Consistency (All media refer to the topic in focus to a greater or lesser extent, which is evident in Figures 5 and 6);

- Negative representation (Russian media put emphasis on the American support of the opposition and condemns their continuous efforts to change the regime, while American media put blame on the regime for the atrocities against civilians);

- “Talking heads” (Extremely popular technique in this part as well; many officials' quotations, interviews and conference speeches are present in the articles, along with experts, analysts and politicians invited to give their comments);

- Detailed and vivid visualization (each side uses dramatic footage to prove its point and demonstrate the “true” aggressors).

Certain frames are used to create an image of the Syrian opposition with the most evident being:

- *Identity* frame (Russia and the U.S. construct completely different identity images in this context as well: who the real opposition is, who the moderate opposition is, who the terrorists are – completely opposite frames are created for these indecisive issues);

- *Characterization* frame (Negative characterization frame used by both Russian and American media while describing each other’s military actions);

- *Conflict management* frame (the U.S. is convinced that outside intervention can help defeat terrorists and outside support for the opposition can help overthrow Assad, Russia stands for the regime support and blames the U.S. for not being able to distinguish opposition groups).

Some linguistic and stylistic tools can also be tracked down:

- Labels: The most popular is “moderate opposition” in American media, which is often referred to in Russian media as well. The biggest challenge is to label correctly where is the opposition and where are the terrorists.

- Connotation and sentiment: The results provided by sentiment sentences coding analysis revealed that in Russian media coverage negative connotations are prevailing over the numbers in American media.

- Evaluation: Articles from both sides contain a direct evaluation of the action of the Syrian government (in the context of chemical attacks), assessment of military successes and strategies of the other side and, apparently, considerations about the nature of the opposition.

# **Chapter 5. International initiatives for the crisis settlement**

## 5.1. International initiatives for the crisis settlement in Russian media

Since the conflict unfolded to its full swing, a number of conferences and negotiations took place in order to unify conflicting parties. Some attempts have been undertaken by the Security Council of United Nations and its member states. Confrontation of two great powers has continued during the reconciliation process as well. Hence, some drafts of resolutions were prompted by the United States and blocked by Russia later on, and some drafts suggested by Russia were rejected by the U.S. Nevertheless, by common efforts, a number Geneva talks were organized. Even though several rounds of it have achieved no significant results, it led to signing of the Vienna agreement about formal negotiations between the opposition and the Syrian government in 2015. It has become a basis for the unanimously adopted UN Resolution 2254. Two years later, Russia initiated Astana talks with the help of Iran and Turkey, and then a conference in Sochi. The American media were quite dubious about them and consider it not inclusive for all the opposition parties.

**Table 13**. Distribution of articles devoted to peace initiatives in Russian media arranged by year.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Number of articles devoted to peace initiatives | | | | | | | | | Overall number of articles about Syria | % of articles devoted to peace initiatives |
|  | **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** |
| **RT** | 168 | 354 | 445 | 1,025 | 927 | 1,491 | 1,474 | 1,075 | **56,700** | 32.5% |
| **TASS** | 49 | 228 | 456 | 460 | 220 | 540 | 264 | 168 | **13,244** | 23% |
| **Sputnik** | 126 | 463 | 523 | 587 | 1,729 | 3,948 | 2,999 | 777 | **40,393** | 28% |

Table 13 demonstrates that the highest share of the articles devoted to international attempts comes from RT, which also has the biggest overall number. TASS dedicated 23% of its articles to this topic, while Sputnik shows a share of 27.6% of the articles about peace talks.

**Figure 7.** Distribution of articles devoted to peace initiatives in Russian media arranged by year.

Figure 7 illustrates that coverage from Sputnik exceeds coverage from RT and TASS excessively. In all three media outlets, the coverage more than doubled in 2012 when it became clear that the conflict was far from over. It was also a year when the first peace talks – the Geneva conference was held. The first peak was in 2014 when the second round of Geneva talks was organized and Assad won the presidential election. The third and the fourth Geneva conferences in 2016 failed to reach any agreement, and it led to Russia’s initiative to organize Astana talks, which were held in January 2017. That explains the second peak in all media in 2016. From 2016, Sputnik’s coverage has been rapidly dwindling: after its peak in 2016, it has reduced fivefold in 2018. RT and TASS also have decreased the intensity of their coverage in the recent years.

Based on quota sampling, 129[[75]](#footnote-75)\* articles dedicated to international initiatives for the crisis settlement from three media outlets were chosen out of 20,496 articles in total, and content analysis was carried out.

Content analysis allowed the identification of the main themes, key actors and the range of suggested means of conflict reconciliation in Russian media:

Description of the conflict:

* bloody sectarian war
* global proxy war
* constant war
* informational war
* armed conflict
* crisis situation

International initiatives:

* reconciliation process
* international conference
* peace conference
* intra-Syrian talks
* proximity talks
* indirect negotiations
* special envoy
* solutions (military, political peaceful)
* peace (lasting, plan, settlement)
* reconciliation (instant, political; center, process)
* transitional government

Actors:

* Syrian government forces
* American government
* military intervention
* Western powers
* major world powers
* oppositional groups
* extremist groups
* terrorist groups

Other issues:

* sanctions (envisaged, tough)
* international peacekeeping intervention
* interference (criminal, external, foreign)
* puppet democracy

The themes analysis indicates that in the articles dedicated to reconciliation efforts, quite an unconventional angle to the description of the conflict appears: if “bloody sectarian war” and “armed conflict” came across before, “global proxy war” and “informational war” occur for the first time.

The actors remain the same for the most part: “Syrian government forces, “al-Assad regime”, “Western powers”, “oppositional groups”, “extremist groups”, and “terrorist groups”.

The option of military interference is also touched upon in the articles under analysis: “external”, “foreign” intervention.

Following the events of 2011, Russia and China have used their veto power to block the UN resolution draft aimed at imposing sanctions on Syria, because of ongoing violence of government forces against the opposition. Russia considered this step as a violation of Syrian sovereignty. Since an agreement was not reached, the U.S., Canada and the EU imposed unilateral sanctions against Assad and his government, urging him to step down. That stipulates “sanctions” among pivotal issues on the agenda.

Referring to the evident anti-Assad actions of the U.S., some Russian media convey the message about American intention to establish a “puppet democracy” in Syria.

Apparently, the central theme is the negotiation process and attempts of peaceful settlement. A number of “peace conferences” were organized and a wide range of “solutions” and “plans” were suggested, but the fundamental problem remains – it is impossible to bring all parties of the conflict to the negotiation table as the opposition is still extremely disintegrated. Staffan de Mistura was put in charge as the UN special “peace envoy” for the crisis resolution. When face-to-face negotiations proved inefficient, “proximity”talks were introduced – all the communication was indirect and went through Staffan de Mistura.

Word frequency analysis identifies the thirty most frequently-used words:

**Table 14.** Word frequency analysis results from articles about peace talks.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Word** | **Count** | **Variations** |
| Syria | 2,043 | Syria, Syrian, Syrians |
| Russia | 752 | Russia, Russian |
| opposition | 462 | opposite, opposition, oppositional |
| talks | 425 | talk, talking, talks |
| government | 375 | governance, governate, governing, government, governments |
| Geneva | 360 | Geneva |
| United Nations | 352 | United Nations, UN |
| Bashar al-Assad | 328 | Assad, Assad' |
| United States | 314 | United State, U.S., American |
| peace | 275 | peace, peaceful, peacefully |
| groups | 251 | group, grouping, groupings, groups, groups' |
| foreign | 245 | foreign |
| resolution | 222 | resolute, resolutely, resolution, resolutions |
| process | 191 | process, processes |
| Lavrov | 187 | Lavrov |
| meeting | 184 | meet, meeting, meetings |
| negotiator | 184 | negotiable, negotiate, negotiated, negotiating, negotiations, negotiator, negotiators |
| conference | 156 | conference, conferences |
| crisis | 137 | crisis |
| delegations | 133 | delegated, delegates, delegating, delegation, delegations |
| represents | 131 | represent, representative, representatives, represented, representing, represents |
| Astana | 130 | Astana |
| terrorist | 130 | terrorist, terrorist’, terrorists, terrorists' |
| ceasefire | 120 | ceasefire, ceasefires |
| envoy | 115 | envoy, envoys |
| agreement | 108 | agreement, agreements |
| sanctions | 86 | sanction, sanctioning, sanctions |
| settlement | 82 | settlement, settlements |
| transitional | 82 | transition, transitional, transitioned, transitions |
| de-escalation zone | 56 | de-escalation zone, zones |

News dedicated to the reconciliation process inevitably emphasize *Russian* participation in this process – 752 times. The sides of the conflicts are referred to as *opposition* – 462 times, *groups* – 251 times, *government* – 375 times, and *Bashar al-Assad* – 328 times. Being an active player, the United States was mentioned more than twice than that of Russia (314 times).

*United Nations* (repeated 314 times) plays a key role in the peace process. It initiated the first *Geneva* talks (360 times) in 2012, where the need for a *transitional* government (82 times) was suggested, and initiated all subsequent Geneva rounds of negotiations. The UN Security Council proposed several resolution drafts on this topic. One of such drafts, proposed by Western and Arab countries, was strongly condemned and vetoed by Russia, as it did not outline violence from both sides and did not exclude outside intervention. The UN Security Council Resolution 2254 became a landmark in the process of peace resolution. This *resolution* caught lots of media attention (repeated 222 times); it called for a *ceasefire* in Syria (120 times).

As an alternative to the Geneva conferences which showed no prominent results, Russia, Turkey and Iran organized the *Astana* talks (130 times), which led to the adoption of a document about monitoring a ceasefire agreement, and later to the establishment of “*de-escalation zones*” (56 times).

Sentiment sentences coding reveals that most of the sentences possess negative connotations: 523 – very negative and 629 - moderately negative, while there are only 92 sentences with very positive connotations and 312 moderately positive.

## 5.2. International initiatives for the crisis settlement in American media

As it was stated before, the U.S. have taken an active part in the process of the Syrian conflict settlement. American officials have been extremely vocal about the contribution of the U.S. in the UN initiatives. As one of the options for the reconciliation, the U.S. suggested to impose sanctions on Syria and its government, which was strongly condemned by Russia. In addition, Russian attempts at a peace settlement have been openly criticized by the United States.

**Table 15.** Distribution of articles devoted to peace initiatives in American media arranged by year.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Number of articles devoted to peace initiatives | | | | | | | | | Overall number of articles about Syria | % of articles devoted to peace initiatives |
|  | **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** |
| **CNN** | 329 | 577 | 1,369 | 1,404 | 1,534 | 1,326 | 1,693 | 694 | **43,300** | 23% |
| **NYT** | 487 | 931 | 942 | 772 | 696 | 1,183 | 1,371 | 2,009 | **20,790** | 41% |
| **Fox News** | 63 | 400 | 649 | 765 | 981 | 1,966 | 4,410 | 792 | **22,473** | 45% |

**Figure 8.** Distribution of articles devoted to peace initiatives in American media arranged by year.

Figure 8 shows that coverage of all three media outlets significantly increased in 2012, when the first attempts to reconcile the Syrian crisis were made. After that, the coverage from CNN and Fox News was gradually growing, peaking in 2017, and then starting to decrease. It can be connected with a number of Geneva and Astana talks that were held in 2017. The New York Times intensified its coverage after 2015, and still rising.

Based on quota sampling, 130[[76]](#footnote-76)\* articles devoted to the causes of the Syrian War from three media outlets were chosen out of 26,343 articles in total and content analysis was carried out.

Content analysis identified the main themes in these articles, which gives an overview of the

main themes, key actors and some other issues discussed in the context of conflict reconciliation in American media:

International initiatives:

* negotiation process
* peace conference, talks
* transition

Actors:

* Syrian government forces
* Syrian opposition moderates
* Syrian president (leader, al-Assad)
* Syrian opposition figures
* opposition activists
* opposition group
* fractured opposition
* fragmented opposition
* American-led forces
* Russian forces

Description of events:

* Syrian crisis
* Syrian conflict

Other issues:

* Syrian rebel training program
* Syrian refugees
* Islamic State militants
* information attacks

The results of themes analysis differ from those of Russian media: the main focus is not on the conflict settlement initiatives, but on the parties of the conflict and negotiating sides. “Peace conference”, “peace talks” and “negotiation process” in America media are often connected with “transition” process as the U.S. government insists on Assad stepping down. Non-homogeneous character of opposition (“fragmented”, “fractured”) is underlined, and such groups are enumerated:

“Syrian opposition moderates”, “opposition activists” who are opposed to “government forces” and “Syrian president”. The refugees’ problem is touched upon as well. Similar to Russian media, which refers to information war, “information attacks” are discussed in American outlets.

Word frequency analysis identifies the thirty most frequently-used words:

**Table 15.** Word frequency analysis results from articles about peace talks.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Word** | **Count** | **Variations** |
| Syria | 1721 | Syria, Syrian |
| Russia | 657 | Russia, Russian |
| Assad | 601 | Assad |
| United States | 479 | United States, US, U.S., American |
| governments | 402 | govern, governance, government, governments |
| opposition | 341 | opposite, opposition, oppositions |
| forces | 314 | force, forced, forcefully, forces |
| groups | 310 | group, groups |
| units | 307 | unit, units |
| rebels | 239 | rebel, rebels, rebels' |
| regime | 239 | regime, regimes |
| talks | 211 | talk, talked, talking, talks |
| Turkey | 190 | Turkey |
| international | 182 | international, internationally |
| support | 176 | support, supported, supporter, supporting, supportive |
| ISIS | 157 | ISIS |
| United Nations | 150 | United Nations, UN |
| back | 152 | back, backed, backing |
| resolution | 141 | resolution, resolutions |
| foreign | 140 | foreign, foreigners |
| peace | 129 | peace, peaceful, peacefully |
| terrorist | 117 | terrorist, terrorists |
| Arab League | 116 | Arab League |
| ally | 105 | allied, allies, allies', ally |
| Putin | 105 | Putin |
| Trump | 103 | Trump |
| negotiation | 96 | negotiate, negotiation, negotiator |
| Obama | 81 | Obama |
| Geneva | 75 | Geneva |
| intervention | 58 | intevene, intervention |

Intrestingly, the top-three frequent words in American articles dedicated to the peace initiatives are *Syria* (1721 times), *Bashar al-Assad* (601 times) and *Russia* (657 times), which implies that Russian attempts to reconcile the crisis get more attention than *American* (479 times). This analysis also demonstrates that leaders of the countries, *Vladimir Putin* and *Donald Trump*, are mentioned almost the same amount of times (105 and 103 respectively), but *Barack Obama* - only 81 times, despite most of the conflict occuring during his presidency.

The articles devoted to the peace talks also describe participants: various *groups* (310 times), operating in the country, thus, “*opposition*” is mentioned 341 times, and *“rebels”* - 239 times. *Terrorist* threat (117 times) along with *ISIS* 157 (times) is dicussed in these articles as well.

*United Nations* (150 times)and its *resolutions* (141 times) apparently also attract lots of attention in American media, so much that some of the resolutions were drafted by the United States. Among other key players in the reconciliation process, American media singled out a regional organization of Arab States - *Arab League* (116 times), which have also called for ousting Assad, and *Turkey* (190 times), which has also supported the Syrian opposition, but later on took part in organizing the Astana talks.

Evidently, the process of *negotiations* (96 times) and peace *talks* (211 times) is the central topic, even though *Geneva* conference (75 times), for example, is mentioned five times less than in Russian mass media.

Sentiment sentences coding demonstrates that negative connotations prevail in the articles devoted to this topic: 710 – very negative and 853 - moderately negative, but there are more sentences with very positive connotations (130) and moderately positive (358) than in Russian media.

## 5.3. International initiatives for the crisis settlement. Comparison

The results of content analysis deconstruct the image of the peace initiatives offered by great powers and the United Nations. Mass media in Russia and the U.S., in most cases, reflect the results of particular conferences and observe participants and suggested measures. Throughout all the conflict, competition and struggle for domination between two great powers have been visible, and the aspect of reconciliation is no exception. US-suggested drafts of resolutions were rejected by Russia, and the West-organized Geneva conference was perceived as a failure in Russia and, hence, the Astana talks were organized. It is worth noting that Russian media dedicated more attention to the Geneva meeting and, obviously, to the Astana one, while American outlets discussed Geneva seldomly and paid almost no attention to the Astana talks. Nevertheless, Russian media tend to highlight the failure of the Geneva talks more directly than Russian officials.

Overall, the picture of international initiatives reflected in Russia can be presented as follows:

* Implementation of sanctions against the Syrian government violates the country’s sovereignty and run counter to previous agreements;[[77]](#footnote-77)
* The key priority is the unity and territorial integrity of Syria;[[78]](#footnote-78)
* Principles of international law, including non-intervention in the internal affairs, the non-use of force threat and the settlement of the disagreements by political dialogue should be followed;[[79]](#footnote-79)
* The West opts for a “politicized approach” by trying to prove superiority in the region, instead of resolving the conflict;[[80]](#footnote-80)
* The main reason that hinders negotiation process – all players should stop provoking and inciting rebels to continue armed confrontation.[[81]](#footnote-81)

As for American coverage, it reflects the official stance for the most part, but some evaluations, especially of Russian actions and preferences in choosing sides, which can be not so evident in official speeches, are highlighted in news articles:

* Sanctions can be an option to influence the Syrian government (prevent them from attacks on protesters);[[82]](#footnote-82)
* Assad's presidency is still a “stumbling rock” in the peace process. Syrian officials’ persistence to support Assad is considered as “disruption” of the peace efforts;[[83]](#footnote-83)
* The American government pursues a “two-pronged” goal: to establish peace in the country and defeat the terrorist organizations;[[84]](#footnote-84)
* Russia’s attempts for reconciliation, de-escalation zones in particular, have not been successful.

## 5.4. Tools of information warfare

Conducted analysis elicits some prominent features of information campaign:

- Intensity (All Russian media devoted approximately 30% of their articles to this topic, while coverage of Fox News with 45% and the NYT with 41% stands out even more);

- Consistency (Russian and American media refer to the topic in focus to a greater or lesser extent, which is evident in Figures 7 and 8);

- Negative representation (Russian media emphasizes negative external influence on Syria, blames American geopolitical aspirations in hindering the reconciliation settlement of the opposition and condemns their continuous efforts to change the regime, while American media put blame on the regime for the atrocities against civilians and Russian backing of this regime);

- “Talking heads” (Extremely popular technique in this aspect as well; all media outlets give references to participants of the conferences and peace talks).

In portraying the Syrian reconciliation process, certain frames are used:

- *Identity* frame (both countries still construct different identity images for the “right” side to support);

- *Characterization* frame (In some cases, negative characterization frame applied by both Russian and American media while describing each other’s peace efforts and suggestions);

- *Conflict management* frame (the most important frame in this context; the U.S. persists that external influence can help the situation, for example, implementation of sanctions, along with regime change while Russia stands for the right of the Syrian people to choose their government and non-intervention in internal affairs, in addition to a call for refraining from regime change incentives);

* *Power* frame (difference in perceptions of who the legitimate representative of the Syrian people is can be also observed in both countries’ coverage)
* *Risk* frame (during peace conferences the prospects of Syria’s future have inevitably been on agenda, especially the evaluation of possible risks);
* *Loss versus gain* frame (along with risks, potential losses and gains in different suggested plans and resolution actions have been discussed; this frame serves to create a certain perspective of which an action plan can be more successful, for example).

Some linguistic and stylistic tools can also be tracked down:

* Precedent: Since there have been several rounds of peace talks organized by different actors, references to previous negotiations and their results often occur in the articles.

- Labels: One of the crucial challenges - to distinguish “moderate” opposition from terrorists remains in this context. Consequently, the same labelling, along with countries being called “backers” of either side, has still been used in the articles.

- Connotation and sentiment: The results provided by sentiment sentences coding analysis revealed that American media imply negative connotations more often than Russian media.

- Evaluation: Articles from both sides contain a direct evaluation of the other side’s actions, assessment of policies and strategies.

# **CONCLUSIONS**

It is evident that the Syrian conflict is characterized by saturation coverage, both in the U.S. and in Russia. Moreover, it has turned out to be an effective tool for influencing peoples’ minds and attitudes. Based on this research, it is possible to identify the most prominent media practices employed by media outlets of both countries and compare them with the official positions.

Thus, **causes of the war** in the U.S. and Russian media are described almost in the same manner: a peaceful nature, initially of demonstrations and demands of the protesters (economic, political, social reforms). Both countries also refer to the Arab Spring phenomenon among reasons for the war. Nevertheless, from the beginning of the conflict, Russia has paid special attention to foreign interference (especially the U.S. and its allies) and radical groups that emerged from nowhere, when the U.S. has strongly criticized the Syrian government and its leader, Bashar al-Assad, in particular, for the escalation. This aspect fully reflects the official stances of two great powers.

Being, apparently, the most controversial issue, the fate of **the Bashar al-Assad’s presidency** has drawn a lot of media attention as a result of constant discussions in the political sphere. Russia insists on Assad’s legitimacy and denies all allegations about chemical attacks initiated by governmental forces. The United States has taken completely the opposite position: they call Assad a dictator and accuse him of using chemical attacks against the Syrian people, which, according to their opinion, gives a right for the U.S. to interfere. When Donald Trump took office, the American stance towards the Syrian president has become even more negative.

Concerning this aspect, some Russian and American media are more careful in their statements than officials. For example, touching upon chemical weapons, some articles indicate that there is no evidence regarding the side which has actually deployed them, even though several investigations were carried out.

Since the beginning of the conflict, the types and the number of **opposition groups** fighting the regime have been changing constantly, along with the alliances between them. Soon, the notion of “Syrian opposition” turned into an ambiguous umbrella term. The Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army are the most prominent actors. Among the most notorious terrorist groups, suddenly appearing during the uprising, are the Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL or Daesh) and the Al-Nusra Front (Jabhat Fatah al-Sham). The nature of Syrian opposition has divided the international public into two groups: those, who support the U.S. in assuming that there is moderate opposition in Syria, and those, who agree with Russia that even if moderates exist, it is impossible to separate them from terrorists. Russia blames the U.S. for covering terrorists and pursuing their geopolitical aspirations in the region instead of combating a common threat. The United States, in turn, accuses Russia of targeting Assad’s moderate opponents and not terrorists.

Consequently, such evident confrontation, which in most cases has been expressed verbally by authorities, has been reported by the media as well. In this aspect, media of both countries convey the same message: each side tries to prove its point to vast audiences. Mutual accusations are also present in the news articles.

**International attempts** to put an end to this conflict cannot be called successful, yet. A number of negotiation rounds have been organized: the Geneva talks, Vienna meeting, Astana conference and Sochi talks. The United Nations plays a key role in the reconciliation process. It initiated the first *Geneva* talks in 2012. The UN Security Council proposed several resolution drafts on this topic. One of such drafts, initiated by Western and Arab countries, was vetoed by Russia and China. It was aimed at imposing sanctions on Syria and did not take into consideration violence from both sides, implying that foreign intervention is possible. Nevertheless, the UN Security Council managed to adopt Resolution 2254 in 2015, which called for a ceasefire in Syria. American officials have been extremely vocal about the contribution of the United States in the UN initiatives. The Russian side has also suggested several options for the conflict settlement, but many of them were openly criticized by the United States. In 2017, Russia initiated the Astana conference with help of Iran and Turkey, and then peace talks in Sochi. The American side did not consider these efforts successful, as they were not inclusive for all the opposition parties. Confrontation of two powers has been extremely noticeable during the efforts of elaboration and implementation of a unified peace plan.

The aforementioned conferences have caught lots of media attention in both countries, reflecting the results of peace talks, participants and suggested plans. Media coverage of this aspect almost fully coincides with official stances of the two great powers. Based on this research, the main focus of American media is not on the conflict settlement initiatives, but on the parties of the conflict and negotiating sides. Assad’s fate has been discussed during all the conferences and American media have labelled him as a main “stumbling rock” in the peace process. Russian attempts, for example, de-escalation zones, have not been appreciated in the United States. Russian media coverage often contains evaluations of the Geneva talks and indicates their failure. Officially, Russia stands for a non-intervention principle along with political dialogue, instead of the use of force. In addition, Russia accuses the Western powers in encouraging opposition to continue fighting, in order to overthrow Assad, which is touched upon in many articles. Moreover, a message of Russian officials about the U.S. pursuing dominance in the Middle East can be easily tracked in Russia media.

This research reveals **media strategies** and **tools of information warfare** employed by the U.S. and Russian media outlets.

First of all, several features of an information campaign have been elicited in all aspects under analysis:

- Intensity: all media outlets have a substantial share of articles for each aspect of the conflict. The causes of the war are the least covered aspect out of four, because it was mainly discussed during the outset of the war.

- Consistency: all media refer to the topics in focus to a greater or lesser extent, but there is no doubt that in all six media coverages of the conflict is consistent.

- Negative representation: disagreements over aspects and mutual accusations result in negative representations of the other side’s policies or actions.

- “Talking heads”: comments from experts or officials, along with quotations of speeches, comprise the majority of the articles dedicated to all the aspects.

- Detailed and vivid visualization: articles about the causes of the war, the fate of Bashar al-Assad’s presidency, and the attitude towards political and military opposition usually contain vivid pictures or videos from the ground, which serve a particular purpose – to convince the audience who is guilty or to show how the events unfolded. Articles about the prospects for a political settlement are usually accompanied by pictures of the officials.

An analysis of the articles also allows the identification of which **frames** are used by media outlets and coverage of which aspects they are applied to:

* *Identity* frame is applied to all the aspects in focus: in the context of the roots of the war, this frame indicates the way protesters identified themselves as freedom fighters, radical opposition, or have a religious group affiliation – Sunni or Shiite; concerning Assad, Russian and American media use this frame to create his identity in keeping with their official position (whether he is a legitimate leader or a brutal dictator); to differentiate who the moderate opposition is and who the terrorists are, both sides apply this frame; covering peace initiatives, identity images for the “right” side to support are constructed;
* *Characterization* frame is used for all the aspects, except for the causes of the war: in all the other articles, negative characterization frame is applied to undermine Bashar al-Assad's legitimacy, to criticize American support for the opposition or to condemn each other’s peace efforts and suggestions;
* *Conflict management* frame is applied to all the aspects, except for the causes of the war, but it is used in the same context: whether outside intervention can help defeat the terrorists and cause a regime change is a solution to stop violence, or no external players should decide the fate of the Syrian people, and no provocations should be undertaken to oust the government;
* *Power* frame helps to evaluate legitimate forms of power, which is more likely to advance its position and also to identify legitimate representatives of the Syrian people in all aspects.

Two frames which are crucial for the negotiations process are *risk* frame and *loss-versus-gain* frame, because possible risks, losses and gains are on the agenda during all of the reconciliation talks.

The most widely-used **linguistic and stylistic tools** that help construct an image in either of the sides are:

* Precedent: references to the Arab Spring wave, affected countries, in particular, the Libyan case, and previous rounds of peace talks organized by different actors and their results often occur in the articles.
* Labels – one of the most popular techniques: coverage of each aspect contains labels, for example, “brutal” regime or “brutal dictator”, “Western-backed” opposition, “moderate opposition” or “backers” of the regime.
* Connotation and sentiment: content analysis demonstrates that all aspects are characterized by negative connotations and sentiments.
* Evaluation: all media provide assessments of all parties involved in the conflict, their actions, military successes and strategies of the other side, policies and suggested peace initiatives.
* Presupposition: in the articles with experts’ overview of the situation (for any of the aspects), presuppositions can come across.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the Syrian conflict has become a new battlefield of two great power in the diplomatic, military and information domains. It is evident that both countries have their interests in the Middle East, and even share the main one – maintaining security in the region, but, that is not enough for successful cooperation. Russia has its economic interests as, for example, making new economic ties through the oil or nuclear sectors and arms trade. U.S. interests are focused on the energy aspect, as well, along with developing long-term relations with reliable allies in the region. What is more important is a desire of the U.S. to promote democracy; attempts of which can be observed in the Libyan case. Russian policy-makers insist on a multi-polar world system with Russia among the great powers. Consequently, Russia has seen an opportunity to improve its position in the region during the Syrian war. Military operations have demonstrated its capabilities of quick military forces deployment and coordinated activities of air and naval forces. Moreover, this operation compelled other countries to start dialogue with Russia to prevent military miscalculations. Current Russian policy is aimed at balancing the U.S. presence. Moreover, Russia offers an alternative to the American perspective: regime changes should not be governed by Western powers, but by the willingness of the people. Hence, Russian priorities in the region are to restore and strengthen its positions, while challenging U.S. dominance. Nevertheless, the Syrian war is not yet over, and the threat of terrorism is still existent, while two countries are fighting for dominance, instead of productive cooperation aimed at peace and security in the world.

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# **APPENDIX**

1. **Russian media (RT, TASS, Sputnik)**
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