

Report

# Russian disinformation in Syria

Kraków 2024

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## About the project



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# Introduction

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The primary objectives of Russia's information strategy in Syria have been to provide long-term support for President Bashar al-Assad, weaken Western influence in the region, and solidify Russia's position as a key actor in the Middle East. Russian media outlets such as RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic actively published content portraying Assad as a stabilizer in the region and Russia as a defender of Syria's sovereignty against Western influence. At the same time, they positioned Russia as a neutral mediator striving for peace and balance in the region. By highlighting its efforts against the backdrop of the West's failed interventions, Moscow gained the trust of local communities and neighbouring states, which began to view Russia as a more reliable partner. These efforts align with Russia's doctrine of information warfare, which aims to shape alternative media narratives to manipulate public opinion at the local, regional, and global levels.

For decades, Syria has exemplified one of the region's most tightly controlled media systems. Major outlets, such as state-run newspapers Al-Thawra and Tishreen, were entirely subordinate to the government and primarily used to promote the ideology of the Ba'ath Party. Despite limited political openness in the 2000s, which allowed for the emergence of the first private radio and television stations and partially independent press, these media remained under strict government control. Their owners were closely tied to the regime or the Ba'ath Party. Before the 2011 protests, Syria ranked among the world's ten least free countries for press freedom.

This report documents Russian propaganda narratives that supported pro-Russian political factions, undermined the credibility of the Syrian opposition, and bolstered Assad's position as a guarantor of stability. The analysis also explores their impact on the political, social, and international situation in Syria's dynamically evolving political landscape.

 The report was created before the fall of President Bashar al-Assad's regime. It considers the political changes in Syria in 2024 but also documents the narratives developed prior to the capture of Aleppo, Hama, and Damascus by rebel forces and Assad's subsequent relocation to Moscow<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Arab News, Russia transported Assad in 'most secured way', <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2582606/amp>, [14.11.2024]



# Chapter 1.

## Political and Media Situation in Syria

### 1.1. Political Background

Since 2011, Syria has been mired in a profound political and social crisis triggered by mass protests against the authoritarian regime of President Bashar al-Assad. These protests, part of the broader regional movement known as the Arab Spring, initially had a peaceful character, seeking reforms and the expansion of civil liberties. However, the regime's response to the demonstrations was brutal—Assad employed military force against civilians, escalating tensions and transforming the protests into a bloody civil war<sup>2</sup>. As violence intensified, many social groups became radicalized, leading to the emergence of numerous political and military factions competing for power and territory. Over time, other nations became involved in the conflict, further complicating its dynamics.

Before November 27, 2024, when the rebels launched their final offensive, the most significant faction remained the government forces loyal to Assad, the Syrian Arab Army. These forces controlled key areas of the country, including Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Tartus, Latakia, and the Mediterranean coastline. From the outset, Assad received substantial support from Iran, which, according to estimates by the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, allocated \$6 billion annually to back Assad's regime<sup>3</sup>. Hezbollah also fought on the regime's side, and in 2015, Russia became directly involved, mainly through airstrikes. Russia's military presence in the region was particularly prominent. Russian forces sought to present themselves as agents of stability, a strategy that had some success. They constructed schools, provided humanitarian aid, cleared mines, and ensured relative security in areas plagued by years of conflict and radicalization. This approach helped solidify Russia's image as a stabilizing force amid the ongoing chaos.

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<sup>2</sup> C. Phillips, *The battle for Syria: International rivalry in the new Middle East*. Yale University Press 2016.

<sup>3</sup> G. Hamann, *Wojna w Syrii. Kto z kim walczy?*, "DW" 29.01.2016, <https://www.dw.com/pl/wojna-w-syrii-kto-z-kim-walczy/a-19010560>



**Graphic 1:** Photo taken by the author during a stay in Syria in 2023, en route to Aleppo.

Opposition rebel groups, while initially striving for democratic reforms, became significantly fragmented and transformed into numerous local factions. However, two factions emerged as Assad's primary opponents. One was Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)<sup>4</sup>, originating from the former Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda. Currently led by Mohammad al-Jolani, HTS established a provisional government following Assad's fall. The other was the Syrian National Army, supported by Turkey, which controls territories in the north of the

<sup>4</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/programs/former-programs/warfare-irregular-threats-and-terrorism-program-archives/terrorism-backgrounders/hayat-tahrir>, [15.10.2024]

country. Northeastern Syria remains under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), predominantly Kurdish. This coalition, backed by the United States, played a crucial role in driving out the so-called Islamic State. Beyond the various factions that still control different areas of Syria, ethnic and religious divisions must also be considered. These include Sunnis, Alawites, Christians, Kurds, Druze, Ismailis, Armenians, Turkmen, and Assyrians. Against such a fragmented political landscape, Syria has been—and remains—an ideal ground for disinformation campaigns.

The civil war in Syria, ongoing since 2011, has resulted in one of the most severe humanitarian crises of modern times. According to United Nations estimates, 16 million people in war-torn Syria require humanitarian aid. Seventy per cent of the population lives on the brink of poverty, lacking access to essential services such as healthcare and education. Over 14 years of war, approximately 600,000 people have died, around 7 million have been internally displaced, and an additional 6 million Syrians have fled to neighbouring countries. Following Assad's fall, reports of returns began to surface. However, according to data from countries like Turkey, only about 50,000 people chose to return to Syria from Turkey in December 2024.



**Graphic 2:** Sputnik Arabic portrayed Russia as providing humanitarian aid to Syria, even breaking through the international blockade to deliver assistance: الجيش الروسي يقدم مساعدات إنسانية في محافظة دير الزور شرقي سوريا, "Sputnik Arab" 6.02.2024,, <https://sarabic.ae/20240206/-/الجيش-الروسي-يقدم-مساعدات-إنسانية-في-محافظة-دير-الزور-شرقي-سوريا-1085809716.html>

## 1.2. Media Context in Syria

### Media Before the Revolution (Pre-2011)

The Syrian media landscape before 2011 was characterized by:

#### **Strict state control**

Authorities limited access to independent information. Even after the introduction of private media, their narratives could not criticize the core pillars of Assad's regime.

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#### **Access to pan-Arab media**

Syrians had access to channels like Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, as well as Lebanese and Jordanian media.

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#### **Limited Internet access**

The internet was censored, and its availability was restricted to a smaller, though growing, segment of the population. Consequently, national television, pan-Arab outlets, and printed press remained the primary sources of information.

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### Changes After 2011

#### **Lifting of social media censorship**

In February 2011, the government lifted the ban on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, leading to their widespread use by participants in the protest movement.

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#### **Fragmentation of the public sphere**

With the escalation of the conflict, Syrian media split along the lines of the fighting. Various groups—ranging from the opposition, Kurdish forces, Islamic factions, and jihadists to pro-government entities—began creating their own media outlets.

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## Involvement of external actors

The conflict also became an arena for informational warfare involving media from the Gulf States, Iran, Western countries, Turkey, and Russia.

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## Media Landscape by December 2024

The Syrian media landscape reflected the country's political and territorial divisions. Major information sources varied by region:

### Government-controlled areas

- Pro-government media dominated, including the Syrian channel Sama, the pro-government Iranian channel Al-Mayadeen, Russia's Sputnik Arabic, and Hezbollah-linked Al-Manar.
  - Private news channels gained limited freedom to criticize, but this was confined to issues not affecting Assad's regime's core pillars.
  - Russia's RT Arabic was among the most-watched channels, surpassing many competitors.
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### Opposition-controlled areas

- Channels like Al-Jazeera (Qatar), Al-Arabiya (Saudi Arabia), and TRT Arabi (Turkey) were popular. Residents also accessed other sources, including Western outlets like BBC Arabic.
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### Kurdish-controlled areas

- Ronahi TV - one of the main Kurdish media outlets, broadcasting in Kurdish and Arabic.
  - Hawar News Agency (ANHA) - a news agency serving as a key source of information from the Rojava region, publishing in Kurdish, Arabic, Turkish, English, and Persian.
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Syrian state media, such as the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)<sup>5</sup> and television stations Syria TV<sup>6</sup> and Al-Ikhbariya<sup>7</sup> served propagandistic functions, reinforcing the narrative of Bashar al-Assad's government. Their role was to shape public opinion that strengthened the regime's position and presented it as the sole force capable of restoring stability in the country. SANA frequently published materials portraying the actions of anti-government armed groups as a threat to stability and national security while simultaneously ignoring accusations of human rights violations by pro-government forces reported by independent and opposition media.



**Graphic 3:** A frame from a SamaTV recording titled "Terrorists Use Civilians in Aleppo as a Political Card": <https://fb.watch/x2zNoHhHXb/>

<sup>5</sup> The channel ceased broadcasting after Assad's downfall, with the last Facebook post dated 10.12.2024.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ortas.online/>

<sup>7</sup> The channel suspended broadcasts following the fall of Assad's regime.

An example of independent media supporting the opposition included stations such as Orient News<sup>8</sup> and Al-Jisr TV<sup>9</sup>, which broadcast abroad, including Turkey. Their content was highly critical of the Assad regime, highlighting the brutality of government repression and military operations conducted with the involvement of Russia and Iran. Both now-defunct outlets relied on foreign financial support. In 2016, Al-Jisr TV photographer Abdul Salam Kanaan was killed while documenting Syrian military airstrikes on the village of Zafraneh, underscoring the station's commitment to covering the conflict from the opposition's perspective<sup>10</sup>. Content from Al-Jisr TV is no longer available online, as the station's website has been shut down.

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<sup>8</sup> Orient News, <https://orient-news.net/en> ceased operations in November 2023. Its archival content remains available on the website.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Jisr TV was a Syrian television station that also ceased broadcasting. It has no active website, and its content is no longer available online.

<sup>10</sup> Committee to Protect Journalist, Abdul Salam Kanaan, <https://cpj.org/data/people/abdul-salam-kanaan/>, [02.10.2024]

## Chapter 2.

# Tools and Techniques of Disinformation Used by Russia

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Russia, as a key ally of Bashar al-Assad's regime in the Syrian conflict, actively employed disinformation to defend its political interests and justify its military presence in the region. This strategy encompassed a wide range of activities, including undermining the credibility of evidence related to war crimes, demonizing the West, manipulating terminology, and promoting conspiracy theories. Russia portrayed its military intervention as compliant with international law, asserting that it was invited by the legitimate Syrian government while simultaneously condemning the U.S. military presence as illegal and lacking a UN mandate. These narratives, such as the supposed fight against terrorism or the prevention of a "power vacuum", aimed to legitimize the operation of Russia's airbase in Hmeimim and its naval activities in the port of Tartus. These efforts were presented as necessary for regional stabilization, protecting civilians, and countering transnational terrorism. In reality, they primarily served to protect Assad's regime and secure Russia's strategic interests in the Middle East.

### Undermining the Credibility of Evidence

#### Quote:

"Nebenzya also stated that the situation involving chemical weapons in the Syrian city of Douma resembles what happened in Khan Sheikhoun in 2017, when the United States had already prepared an attack on Syria". (9 April 2018).

#### Context:

This statement followed airstrikes by the U.S.-led coalition in response to the use of chemical weapons in Douma. Russia sought to discredit the strikes by claiming that the allegations against Syria were baseless, emphasizing that the OPCW had not yet completed its investigation. However, independent evidence confirmed that Assad's forces had used chlorine, exposing the falsehood of Russia's accusations.

#### Source:

„Sputnik Arabic”, المندوب الروسي: لا شك في الطابع المسرحي لحادثة دوما كما حادثة خان شيخون  
<https://sarabic.ae/20180409/1031453780-المنذوب-الروسي-الطابع-المسرحي-دوما.html>



**Quote:**

"The spokeswoman for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova, stated during a press conference that Western journalists subjected Syrians, who were witnesses to the 'fabricated chemical attack' in Douma, Syria, to mocking harassment". (29 April 2018)

**Context:**

The permanent missions of Russia and Syria to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) organized a press conference on the use of chemical weapons in Douma. According to Russia, the event aimed to expose the allegedly false nature of a video made by the "White Helmets," which served as a basis for a missile strike conducted by the U.S., the UK, and France on Syria on 14 April 2018. Zakharova accused BBC and ITV journalists of undermining the testimonies of witnesses and questioning children about "what sums of money they had received to challenge the information about the attack".

**Source:**

زخاروفا: الصحفيون الغربيون يضطهدون السوريين الذين يتكلمون الحقيقة حول "الهجوم الكيميائي" المفبرك, „Sputnik Arabic” 29.04.2018,  
<https://sarabic.ae/20180429/1032007838-دوما-الهجوم-الكيميائي.html>

## Discrediting Western Actions

**Quote:**

"The 'SANA' agency quoted the words of an anonymous source in the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: 'We are not surprised by such reckless escalation from a state like the United States, which has supported and continues to support terrorism in Syria. The U.S. acted as an air force for Daesh; it should surprise no one that it supports terrorists and promotes their fabrications and lies as a pretext for attacking Syria'".

**Context:**

Statements presented by "SANA" align with the pro-government narrative of Syria, which denies responsibility for the alleged chemical attack, accuses the West of supporting terrorism, and portrays military intervention as a violation of the country's sovereignty. This is also part of a broader information war between Syria and its allies and Western countries.

**Source:**

الخارجية السورية-لا نستغرب-التصعيد-الأرعن-الولايات--937699/middle\_east/RT Arabic” 11.04.2018,  
[https://arabic.rt.com/middle\\_east/937699-الولايات-الأرعن-التصعيد-لا-نستغرب-الخارجية-السورية-المتحدة-الإرهاب-في-سوريا/](https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/937699-الولايات-الأرعن-التصعيد-لا-نستغرب-الخارجية-السورية-المتحدة-الإرهاب-في-سوريا/)

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**Quote:**

"Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, confirmed today that 'what happened in Syria was planned in an American-Israeli command center'".

**Context:**

During his speech, the Iranian leader accused the United States and Israel of supporting rebels in Syria and orchestrating efforts to overthrow Assad's government. Russian media frequently cite statements from politicians, journalists, and experts that align with the Russian narrative. Additionally, social media posts included graphics (see Graphic X below) illustrating a proposed new territorial division in Syria, suggesting not only jihadist control over some areas but also the occupation of territories by the U.S., Israel, and Turkey.

**Source:**

خامنئي يكشف مفاجأة... دولة مجاورة لسوريا وراء ما حدث في الأيام الماضية 11.12.2024,  
<https://sarabic.ae/20241211/خامنئي-يكشف-مفاجأة-دولة-مجاورة-لسوريا-وراء-ما-حدث-في-الأيام-الماضية-1095682874.html>

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Graphic 4: Graphic posted on platform X by the account @313Reckless (23.6k followers).

## The Dichotomy of Legal vs. Illegal Intervention

### Quote:

"Political scientist Ghassan Yusuf, in an interview for the program 'Around the World,' stated that the presence of American troops in Syria is occupation in the full sense of the word, as there was no agreement between the United States and the Syrian government regarding the entry of their troops onto Syrian territory. Yusuf also pointed out that U.S. forces are currently training Kurdish separatist militias and are involved in the looting of oil from the region and its sale. He added that this year, the Americans also stole Syrian wheat and sent it to the U.S., justifying it by claiming that Syrian wheat is among the best in the world".

**Context:**

Russia used the argument of being "invited by the legitimate government" to emphasize the legality of its presence in Syria. At the same time, it ignored the fact that Assad was responsible for mass atrocities and that his "invitation" did not represent the will of the Syrian people. Through this narrative, Russia sought to portray its actions as compliant with international law, in contrast to the U.S.

**Source:**

„Sputnik Arabic”, 25.09.2021, <https://sarabic.ae/20210925/-خبير-الوجود-العسكري-الأمريكي-احتلال-ومن-حق-السوريين-المطالبة-بإخراجه-بكافة-الوسائل-1050249046.html>

**Narrative of Western "Double Standards"****Quote:**

"Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that 'the West demonstrates double standards and refuses to provide aid to Syria, even in humanitarian matters. In the face of the pandemic, the West continues its economically suffocating policy towards the Syrian Arab Republic'".

**Context:**

Russia criticized sanctions as a political tool used by the West, claiming they obstructed peaceful solutions. In reality, the sanctions were a response to the confirmed use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime, but Russia ignored this evidence to shield its ally.

**Source:**

„Sputnik Arabic” 4.12.2020, <https://sarabic.ae/20201204/1047406021-موسكو-تكشف-سبب-العقوبات-الأمريكية-على-دمشق.html>

**Quote:**

"Russian media, citing the New Eastern Outlook portal, reported that the United States had been planning to overthrow the Syrian government for over 30 years, and the conflict that erupted in Syria in 2011 was the culmination of American efforts. [...] The report outlined various pretexts justifying a potential military attack by Turkey on Syria. It noted that Syria currently poses an obstacle to U.S. interests in both Lebanon and the Persian

Gulf region—among other things, by shutting down the Iraqi pipeline, which threatens international involvement in the Iran-Iraq War. The report stated that the United States should consider dramatically increasing pressure on Assad's regime by creating simultaneous military threats to Syria from three neighboring hostile states: Iraq, Israel, and Turkey".

### Context:

Russia compared the coalition's actions in Syria to previous interventions, such as those in Iraq and Libya, suggesting that the West's goal is to overthrow governments in the region. In this way, Russia sought to undermine the legitimacy of international actions against Assad. The report referenced in the article published on "Sputnik Arabic" dates back to the Cold War era (1983).

### Source:

وكالة روسية: الولايات المتحدة تحاول تدمير سوريا منذ 30 عاما „Sputnik Arabic”, 12.04.2017, <https://sarabic.ae/20170412/1023424633-أمريكا-سوريا-تقرير.html>

## Promoting Conspiracy Theories

### Quote:

"A former member of the terrorist organization Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly the al-Nusra Front, banned in Russia and many other countries), known as 'Abu Muhammad al-Idlibi,' reported that Ukrainian instructors trained terrorists in Syria in the use of suicide drones against the Russian army in Idlib and throughout the country. [...] The attack on Aleppo carried out by terrorists from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham took place with the involvement of Ukraine and the United States, using drones and advanced technologies".

### Context:

After rebels took control of Aleppo in November 2024, numerous posts referencing the situation in Syria appeared on social media, including claims about the involvement of Ukraine and the United States in training the rebels. These reports were widely disseminated in Russian, Arabic- and Turkish-language media<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> More on this topic can be found in the report: K.W. Olszowska, K. Wasilewski, Rosyjska dezinformacja w Turcji, <https://disinfoinmenat.com/raport/rosyjska-dezinformacja-w-turcji/>

**Source:**

Sputnik,, عنصر سابق بـ"هيئة تحرير الشام" يكشف لـ"سبوتنيك" تدريب أوكرانيا للإرهابيين في سوريا  
 5.12.2024, <https://sarabic.ae/20241205/-عنصر-سابق-في-هيئة-تحرير-الشام-يكشف-ل-سبوتنيك-تدريب-أوكرانيا-للإرهابيين-في-سوريا-1095494554.html>



**Graphic 5:** Graphic showing a post on platform X by the account @mog\_Russ (528.2k followers) claiming that yellow and blue armbands indicate the training of rebels by Ukraine.

As evidence of the funding of both Ukraine and the rebels (consistently referred to as terrorists by the Russians) from HTS, a comparison was presented of the uniforms worn by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Julani (Ahmad Hussein al-Shar'a).





The tools and techniques employed by Russia should be linked to information operations that have been a part of the country's strategy and military doctrine for decades<sup>12</sup>. They have become one of the tools used to promote Russia's political and security interests within its offensive international policy. Russian or pro-Russian information channels use various methods to advance their interests and undermine the credibility of their opponents. In some cases, Russia portrays its actions as just and lawful, constructing the image of a powerful state. In others, it delegitimizes opponents<sup>13</sup>. strengthens distrust in their leadership, and fuels social divisions. Particularly effective has been the strategy of flooding the informational space with multiple—often contradictory—narratives, making it difficult for audiences to discern the dominant version of events and creating disinformation chaos. Russian information operations in the region also focus on the youth, exploiting anti-imperialist and anti-Western social sentiments, indirectly bolstering Moscow's political position.

<sup>12</sup> They gained particular significance after the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas in 2014.

<sup>13</sup> More on this topic can be found in the report: K.W. Olszowska, M. El Ghamari, Analiza: Rosyjska dezinformacja w regionie MENAT, <https://disinfoinmenat.com/analizy/rosyjska-dezinformacja-w-regionie-menat/>

These activities are not limited to Syria but extend to other areas of Russian interest, such as Libya<sup>14</sup>, where increasing evidence points to organized disinformation campaigns conducted by Russian trolls. Although the impact and effectiveness of these activities on public opinion remain challenging to measure definitively—partly due to Russia's use of popular narratives in the Arab world and its efforts to amplify them—the Middle East stands out as the only region where the viewership of Russian news channels is systematically increasing.

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<sup>14</sup> More about Libya: M. El Ghamari, Dezinformacja rosyjska w Libii, <https://disinfoinmenat.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Rosyjska-dezinformacja-w-Libii-1.pdf>



## Chapter 3.

# Strategy for Countering Disinformation in Syria

In the face of ongoing Russian disinformation campaigns in Syria, developing an interdisciplinary counterstrategy that accounts for the region's specific characteristics and the broader international political context is crucial. Pro-Russian media, as outlined in this analysis, dominate the Syrian informational space, allowing Russia to manipulate narratives and discredit the opposition. At present—following the overthrow of Assad in December 2024—it is unclear how much capacity Russia will retain to continue its disinformation activities. However, experience suggests that Russia will do everything possible to persist in its information warfare and influence Syria in ways that favour its interests. Thus, it seems prudent for Western states to take action now and offer the new Syrian authorities—likely still mindful of Russia's informational efforts to keep Assad in power—cooperation in combating Russian disinformation.

A successful strategy must include legal, educational, media, and international collaboration measures. Creating integrated legal frameworks would enable holding specific actors spreading disinformation accountable. At the same time, cooperation with international organizations such as INTERPOL or Europol could assist in monitoring disinformation activities and protecting Syrian institutions from cyberattacks. Supporting independent media is critical to providing society access to reliable information and countering pro-Russian narratives. Public education programs on recognizing disinformation could enhance citizens' resilience to manipulation. Additionally, an international information exchange platform could facilitate the detection of false narratives while developing counter-narratives, strengthening the positive image of the Syrian authorities and their stabilization efforts. Special attention should be given to involving the Syrian diaspora in the counter-disinformation strategy. The diaspora could be key in building positive narratives and counter-narratives against Russian campaigns. Diaspora leaders and activists could act as "ambassadors" of disinformation resistance, promoting accurate information among Syrian communities abroad. A recommended action would also include supporting the creation of local information platforms on social media, such as Facebook or Telegram, and organizing training sessions on identifying false information. This would empower the diaspora to assist Syrian society in combating informational manipulation. Additionally, the diaspora, particularly in countries with a strong presence of pro-Russian media, could monitor Russian narratives and support international efforts to counter disinformation.

A multi-level and targeted strategy to counter Russian disinformation in Syria must be comprehensive and interdisciplinary, tailored to local realities, historical experiences, and international expertise. Full implementation of such a strategy could effectively mitigate the destructive impact of Russian propaganda campaigns, support Syria's internal stability, and enhance its image on the international stage.

## Chapter 4.

# Conclusions and Recommendations

Since Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, his priority has been to promote Russia's status as a great power through competition with the West in a zero-sum game, favouring a vision of a multipolar world. In this context, Russia's military intervention in Syria in September 2015 should be considered, as it pursued multiple objectives but was fundamentally part of efforts to erode the U.S.-led international order. Putin accurately predicted that the West would not oppose military intervention in Syria, interpreting the Western approach to Russia as a sign of weakness. In the Middle East, Western states consistently demonstrated a lack of interest in engagement beyond the fight against the so-called Islamic State. For years leading up to the intervention, Putin supported Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad through various means. Moscow's deep and multifaceted ties with Syria, combined with its strategic posture toward the West, prompted the Kremlin to back Assad to the very end.

The intervention in Syria provides significant lessons about Russian warfare and the connections between political objectives and military tactics. Moscow leveraged both spheres to achieve its goals, with its diplomatic and informational campaigns complementing military operations. These efforts illustrated continuity rather than change in the Kremlin's approach to war, counterterrorism, and threat perception, adapting to new realities as needed. Unable and unwilling to lead the reconciliation process in Syria, Russia was prepared to tolerate a low level of conflict at the expense of international stability.

Russian disinformation activities in Syria represent a critical component of its influence strategy, which bolstered Russia's position in the region and legitimized Bashar al-Assad's actions. The conclusions drawn from the analysis of disinformation in Syria highlight the need to implement coordinated counter-strategies based on legal regulations, public education, and international cooperation.

## Conclusions

### Systematic Support for the Assad Regime

Russia effectively bolstered the image of Bashar al-Assad as a stabilizer and "defender of Syria," doing so at the expense of the opposition, which was portrayed as a radical and anti-national force. Pro-Russian narratives focused on discrediting political opponents and their allies, strengthening Assad's position on the international stage (e.g., Syria's return to the Arab League) and diminishing support for the internal and external opposition.

## Anti-Western and Anti-Turkish Narratives

Russian media, such as RT Arabic and Sputnik Arabic, systematically published content portraying the U.S. and Turkey as destabilizing forces driven by imperialist interests. Through these narratives, Russia garnered social support in Syria and legitimized its presence in the region as a counterbalance to alleged threats posed by the West and neighbouring states.

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## Use of Social Media Platforms and Digital Techniques

Operations on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and VKontakte enabled Russia to spread false narratives, manipulate context, and create fake social movements. Through anonymization and the use of fake accounts, pro-Russian narratives gained reach, allowing Russia to influence public opinion and depict the opposition as a threat to stability.

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## Rekomendacje

### Engage the Syrian Diaspora in Counter-Disinformation Strategies

The Syrian diaspora could play a pivotal role in building counter-narratives and promoting reliable information about the situation in Syria. Collaborating with influential social leaders and humanitarian activists from the diaspora could help establish support groups and information exchange channels that promote stability and democracy while limiting the impact of pro-Russian narratives. Creating local information platforms like websites, Facebook groups, Twitter channels, Telegram, and YouTube accounts would enable the diaspora to reach a broader audience and effectively counter disinformation. Workshops and training sessions on recognizing false information, organized with organizations like Poland's Stowarzyszenie Demagog, could raise awareness among diaspora members, empowering them to verify information independently and reduce the spread of false narratives. Moreover, involving the diaspora in monitoring pro-Russian narratives and collaborating with international organizations specializing in counter-disinformation could enable more effective responses to disinformation campaigns. Media campaigns highlighting the diaspora as an independent and credible source of information could undermine Russian propaganda and build credible alternative narratives. Additionally, establishing coordination and support centres for the diaspora in key host countries could enhance their capacity to cooperate with international partners and improve the efficiency of coordinated counter-disinformation efforts.

## **Create Integrated Legal Frameworks**

Syria requires integrated legal provisions to combat disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks effectively. These regulations should enable the prosecution of entities conducting hostile informational activities and establishing dedicated cybersecurity units. Cooperation with international organizations like INTERPOL and Europol and countries experienced in countering disinformation would foster tighter collaboration and improve the capacity for rapid response.

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## **Support Independent Media and Develop Local Narratives**

Russia's disinformation strategy relies on controlling media messaging and presenting pro-Russian narratives as the sole source of information. Supporting independent media in Syria, in collaboration with international partners, could effectively counter pro-Russian information channels. Independent media equipped with resources and proper training would be able to provide reliable information about events and the political situation in the country, thus reducing the impact of Russian propaganda.

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## **Promote Social Education and Strengthen Disinformation Detection Skills**

Introducing educational programs to identify false information and assess source credibility is crucial for countering Russian disinformation in Syria. These programs, conducted as workshops for youth and adults, should be supported by international organizations like UNESCO and implemented in cooperation with local NGOs. Raising social awareness about the risks of media manipulation could significantly reduce the impact of false narratives and improve citizens' critical thinking skills.

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## **Enhance International Cooperation and Create Information Exchange Platforms**

Syria should develop collaborations with countries and organizations experienced in countering disinformation. Establishing an information exchange platform between Syrian agencies and international partners, such as the European Union or NATO, could facilitate faster detection and neutralization of disinformation while understanding the methods used by pro-Russian organizations, including the Internet Research Agency. Such cooperation would enable the development of effective countermeasures and strengthen Syria's ability to combat Russian disinformation campaigns.

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## **Develop and Strengthen Counter-Narratives**

Systematically creating counter-narratives that highlight the achievements of Syrian authorities in cooperation with international organizations and their efforts to stabilize the country could counteract the negative image promoted by pro-Russian media. Regularly

publishing content documenting progress in infrastructure reconstruction, political stabilization, and international cooperation could mitigate the impact of pro-Russian narratives. This recommendation is particularly relevant now, as the new Syrian authorities are likely to face Russian disinformation aimed at delegitimizing them.

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### **Establish Monitoring and Counter-Disinformation Task Forces**

Creating task forces dedicated to countering disinformation would enable rapid responses to false content published on social media. These teams could monitor the activities of pro-Russian media and collaborate with international platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram to report and quickly remove false information. This initiative would allow Syria to combat the spread of disinformation more effectively, contributing to greater political stability.

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