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Saving President Assad: Russian Impact on the Eruption of the Syrian Civil War

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Abstract

The Arab Spring, a series of massive revolts against the incumbent regimes in the Middle East, heavily touched Syria. Despite of the strong internal and international pressure, the president Bashar al-Assad refused to resign and violently thwarted peaceful protests, pushing the country to the bloody and devastating civil war. Since the start of the demonstrations in Syria, the incumbent government has been benefiting from the robust political, military, financial and diplomatic support from Russia. This thesis provides a thorough recount of the Russian impact, strategic interests, policy and actions prior and during the transformation phase of the protests into the war. The study reaffirms the conclusion of other scholars that Russian negative impact on the eruption of the Syrian Civil War has been substantial, as the Kremlin significantly enhanced the regime's positions outside and inside Syria, making it capable to withstand the pressure. Additionally, in pursuit of the answers on the main research questions of the thesis, namely, finding out why was the Russia's policy in Syria successful, the dissertation offers an exhaustive and coherent explanation of the Moscow's accomplishment in saving the violent regime from fall. Based on the analysis of the accessible material, the thesis concludes that the main reasons behind Russia's achievement in keeping Bashar al-Assad in charge have been historically strengthened positions in Syria, lack of unity and a viable alternative to Assad in the opposition, strong international allies like Iran and China, ineffective response from the West, avoidance of the same blunders as in Libya, active involvement in the processes from the very beginning of the demonstrations, and an extra motivation to succeed derived from the foreign and internal interests.

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1 Introduction

Almost a decade has passed since the eruption of the Syrian Civil War from the monumental events of the Arab Spring. However, the disastrous for the nation war encompassing various conflicting belligerents and interested international players still has not reached an end. The civil conflict started in March 2011 within the frame of *the Arab Spring*, a series of massive revolts against incumbent governments in several Arab countries. The prolonged demonstrations against the Bashar al-Assad's regime did not result in the demanded resignation of the government, as the leader of the ruling Ba'ath Party refused to leave the post despite extensive protests and international pressure. As a consequence, the nation has been divided in different warring sides, most of them vigorously engaging in a bloody and subversive civil conflict, highly impacting the international politics in the last decade. More importantly, the bloodshed in Syria caused on of the biggest migration crises in the world and created a fertile ground for an emergence of various Islamic terrorist organizations, the most significant among them the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Lesch 2013).

Syria is not the only country in the world, and not even in the region, which is heavily involved in an enduring civil war. However, by the measurement of the impact and repercussions of this conflict on the international politics it has become one of the most crucial events of the last period. Apart from induced by the conflict migration crisis and rise of Islamic terrorism, both of them spreading on an international level, one of the main reasons why did Syria become a pivotal state for the world political order lies in the foreign involvement in the civil war. Due to the conflicting interests regarding Syria, the powerful international actors such as Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States have been actively involved in the intrastate war of the Middle Eastern country (Pieper 2019). According to their individual foreign interests, these crucial political actors sided

with different warring parties of the conflict, by that transforming Syria into a political and military battleground of the big players. Consequently, this colossal international interest and collision of the superpowers in Syria, along with enormous humanitarian crisis and explosion of terrorism, has converted the state into one of the central stages of the international politics.

Comes as no surprise that international interest in Syria has not been limited only with the political actions taken by the internal and external parties of the conflict. Alongside extensive media coverage, the Syrian Civil War has become one of the most discussed and examined subjects of the various academic fields and subfields, most importantly, those of the Political Sciences. A plethora of studies resulting in diverse conclusions have been conducted about the different aspects of the Syrian Civil War, including with the focus on the historical roots and causes of the conflict, the demonstration phase, the armed conflict, the internal and external actors, and various types of consequences be them political, military, humanitarian, social or economic. This war has been under the exhaustive scrutiny since its eruption – yet, the complexity and multiplicity of the internationalized intrastate conflict left many gaps and contested questions despite the existence of an extensive literature around the topic.

Undoubtedly, covering the whole war with all its aspects since the outbreak of the conflict to the present in one thesis is a virtually unreachable goal. Hence, this dissertation focuses on the particular sectors of the civil war by narrowing the topic down in three dimensions. From the political perspective, it assesses the foreign involvement in the war, facilitating the process of internationalization of the internal conflict. In this regard, the theoretical scope of the dissertation will be encircled by foreign involvements, military interventions and different types of external influences on the internal affairs of a conflicting state.

With respect to time, the dissertation will revert back to the beginning of the conflict, more precisely, to the phase when the demonstrations have transformed into a civil war. Certainly, for the sake of a broader picture helping to observe the main focal subject from perspective, the dissertation to will touch the historical

context, the development and the present circumstances of the conflict as well. However, the aim of the research is to assess the foreign influence and involvement in the civil unrest at the vital point when the peaceful demonstrations have gradually become violent, and finally broke into an armed combat.

The internationalization of the Syrian Civil War has developed the conflict into one of the most important areas of confrontation between the big players of the world politics. This thesis, likewise, focuses on this aspect of the war. The interference of these state-actors into the internal affairs of Syria has been crucial in political, economic, humanitarian or military terms. The Syrian conflict can be easily assessed through the lenses of each international player, be it, for example, the United States or Turkey, both of them involving heavily in the war respectively to their foreign interests (Allison 2013). Moreover, if a scholar wants to research the Syrian Civil War it is practically inconceivable to avoid the factor of any external actor. So, if the focus of the thesis is a foreign involvement in the internal conflict, which is the case in our occasion, the scholar cannot ignore any of them. However, thoroughly assessing all the international actors of the Syrian Civil War in one work is beyond realistic objectives. Therefore, within the scope of the international involvement in the Syrian Civil War, this thesis will particularly focus on the Russian (as arguable the most impactful international actor of the conflict) interference and impact on the transformation of the protests into the civil war.

The relevance of the Syrian Civil War does not arise any doubts. However, spotlighting particular period, aspect and actor of the conflict asks for a further explanation. The literature on the Russian Involvement in the Syrian Civil War, which will be overviewed in the next chapter together with the literature about the theoretical part of the foreign involvements in internal conflicts, is vast but it focuses more on the already escalated military conflict and its painful consequences for Syria and for the rest of the world, especially neighboring areas and Europe, hit by the migrant crisis from the conflicting country (Trombetta 2014). This thesis will shift the focus more to the causes of the conflict which has eventually emerged from the peaceful demonstrations against the regime. These

demonstrations had their reasons but what was the main factors that transformed the protests into a bloody war? The scholars researching this field mostly agree that Russian role in this radicalization of the riots was crucial as the Kremlin backed Assad's regime and helped him to violently retain his power. However, this highly accepted idea rises different questions which are not sufficiently covered in the relevant academic works. Namely, what exactly was the impact of Russia on the eruption of this war? How did Russia facilitate the transformation of the protests into a civil conflict by helping Assad to stay in power? As Assad still rules the country after nine years since the start of the protests, why and how did Russia succeed in achieving this goal? These are the questions which will be assessed in this dissertation in order to encompass all the aspects of the Russian role in the outbreak of the war.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Since the onset of the demonstrations in Syria, and subsequently, to the gradual escalation of the violence finally outbreaking into the war, the Syrian Civil War has been under vigorous scrutiny of the scholars focusing on the various subfields of Political Sciences. The internal conflict, significantly surpassing boundaries of one country by spreading in scale and consequences across different continents, has been studied from numerous theoretical or empirical angles culminating in copious conclusions on the conflict's causes, developments and ramifications. Thus, given this abundance of the material, the literature review section of the thesis does not aim to fully cover every academic study conducted on the subject. Rather, the review will focus on two main components of the thesis: theoretical framework, in order to place the topic conceptually in the academic discussion and the main works about the topic itself more broadly – the Russian Involvement in the Syrian

Civil War. These two sections of the literature review will provide the essential academic background, necessary for understanding the main arguments and crucial findings of the research.

In the first part the chapter will overview literature around foreign interventions in civil wars as a theoretical framework of the thesis. Essentially, the dissertation revolves around the Russian involvement in the Syrian Civil War, which should be considered as a part of the general academic studies about the foreign involvements in the internal affairs of a country. In order to make the main argument of the thesis comprehensible, it should be put into the conceptual context of the subject. Evaluating the fundamental ideas on foreign intervention in the first part of the chapter will serve to this purpose.

The second part of the literature review will revolve specifically around the Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war. In the light of critical evaluation of the studies conducted about the concept of foreign intervention and course of the Syrian civil war in general, this part will accentuate the Russian role in the war. Accordingly, this part of the literature review will be further utilized to demonstrate the actual void in the scholarship about the thesis subject, illustrate the need of the research, and spotlight exactly where the dissertation situates itself in the abundant studies of the Syrian Civil War.

2.2. Discussing Theoretical Framework: International Intervention

Due to its controversial political, economic, humanitarian, ethical and legal aspects, different types of international interventions in the internal affairs of countries have been one of the most debated subjects among scholars (Holzgrefe 2013; Regan 2014; Orford 2011; Welsh 2004; Bellamy 2009; Chandler 2002; Fierke 2005). From these various forms, Patrick M. Regan (2014) in the *Routledge Handbook of Civil Wars* identifies three central types of interventions in civil wars: external diplomatic interventions, military interventions, and economic

interventions. According to the author, the essential aim of the diplomatic interventions is to achieve a peace agreement facilitated by mediation and international forums. In order to make negotiations between all the warring parties successful, concessions are needed, only in this case can mediation deliver tangible results. However, various other components of the diplomatic intervention remain issues of scholar arguments. For example, if we put it in the context of the wars in the Middle East (Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria), 'most studies of diplomatic interventions would point toward inferences about when - or under what conditions associated with the conflict - it would be most advantageous to attempt a diplomatic solution. When, that is, might the conflict be ripe for diplomacy?' (Regan 2014, p. 314). Further elaborating on the different aspects of the diplomatic intervention, including its effectiveness in particular contexts, Regan (2014, p. 316) relies on Walter's (1997, 2002) studies coming to a conclusion that external parties aiming to end civil wars should overcome two crucial challenges. Firstly, one of the warring parties, which dominates militarily and 'feels that it can win', will have a tendency to maintain the combat for a greater final gain. And secondly, if the supreme goal of the negotiations is to terminate the war, the external mediators of the conflict should be willing to accept possibly undesirable for them outcomes of the diplomatic bargaining between the fighting sides.

Other two types of interventions emphasized by Regan (2014, p. 316) are military and economic interventions. Conforming to the scholar, military and economic balance of the warring parties can be altered by the assistance of the external powers acting within the contours of their interests. Potential interveners believe that their military or economic assistance to a particular party of the war will impact the course of a conflict. With that idea in mind, 'the US intervened with military assistance to one side in at least 37 civil wars between 1945 and 1994; the Soviet Union intervened in at least 20 wars, and Britain 13 civil wars.' Looking at these stats, which clearly have increased after 1994, one might fairly conclude that external powers frequently favor involving themselves in external civil wars. However, there is a rather vivid agreement between scholars that these types of

interventions are not effective in bringing peace (Balch-Lindsay and Enterline 2000; Regan 1996, 2002; Elbadawi and Sambanis 2000).

Thus, military and economic interventions though generally unsuccessful in ending civil wars, mostly serve the policy goals of the interveners, especially if there are third-party interventions on the side of both government and rebels (Balch-Lindsay et al., 2008). However, by 'manipulating the structural conditions such that one side loses power while the opponent gains' the international interveners can alter the conditions to the extent where 'the group that loses power will expect to get less at the negotiating table'. On the example of the United States, providing assistance to the Syrian rebels and stating that the United States is looking for a negotiated resolution of the conflict, it is detectable that the United States tries to create the conditions where Assad would expect to lose on the battlefield and 'so is best to take a negotiated route to getting out of town' (Regan 2014, p. 317). In this sense, by scrutinizing further the arguments provided by the scholars, we can conclude that external interveners, operating in the framework of their foreign interests, can utilize different types of interventions at the same time in order to enhance the winning chances of the favored party of the conflict. By acting this way, these external powers seek for a peaceful resolution of the war *only* if the clear winner of the agreement between the warring sides will be the party they bolstered militarily or financially. Otherwise, the external powers intervening civil wars might prefer the continuation of the war until the victory of their favorable party instead of compromising their interests for the sake of peace. This becomes apparent on the example of the Russian intervention in the Syrian Civil War as well, further demonstrated in details in the next chapters.

One of the most debated sections of the international intervention and easily one of the most contentious issues among academics working on international politics is *humanitarian intervention*, which should be considered as a part of military intervention (Chomsky 1999; Klose 2015; Wheeler 2000; Holzgrefe 2003; Kissinger 2002; Frye 2000). This term has been defined variously by the scholars of political sciences, although, differences in the definitions are rather minor details

than conceptual incompatibilities. Holzgrefe (2003, p. 18) offers fairly concise, though comprehensive definition of the term, which will be used frequently in this and the following chapters: 'the threat or use of force across state borders by a state (or group of states) aimed at preventing or ending widespread and grave violations of the fundamental human rights of individuals other than its own citizens, without the permission of the state within whose territory force is applied.' Further elaborating and basing on this particular definition, Robert O. Keohane (2003, p. 1) adds a description of unauthorized humanitarian intervention with an example: 'unauthorized humanitarian intervention refers to humanitarian intervention that has not been authorized by the United Nations Security Council under Chapter VII of the Charter. NATO's military actions in Kosovo are a prominent example of unauthorized humanitarian intervention.'

As a contradictory phenomenon to state sovereignty, robustly invading the scholar debates especially after the NATO military operation in Kosovo, humanitarian intervention has been raising political, moral, ethical, and legal questions about the essence and different aspects of the concept. These doubts about humanitarian intervention have been acknowledged by the United Nations recognizing international community's failure to prevent 'atrocities committed in the 1990s in the Balkans and Rwanda'. However, on the other hand, the United Nations also acknowledged the international criticism of the NATO military intervention in Kosovo, forcing the United Nations to engage 'in a serious debate on how to react to gross and systematic violations of human rights'. The main dilemma, which should have been solved, was vividly uttered by Kofi Annan, the seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations, who emphasized the two most contentious points of the issue: 'if humanitarian intervention is, indeed, an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, how should we respond to a Rwanda, to a Srebrenica, to gross and systematic violation of human rights that offend every precept of our common humanity?' (United Nations 2005). Indeed, allowing to any country or military organization to military intervene in a sovereign country would generate the issues such as violation of sovereignty or excessive use of force. However, if the international community excluded any option of humanitarian

intervention, what would their answer be on genocide or different types of atrocities in particular countries?

In the pursuit of solving this dilemma, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) adopted the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), a principle which has been finally agreed by the members of the United Nations in 2005 after omitting some of the aspects from the initial document proposed by the ICISS (United Nations 2005). According to this document (ICISS 2001), the basic principles of the Responsibility to Protect are:

A. State sovereignty implies responsibility, and the primary responsibility for the protection of its people lies with the state itself.

B. Where a population is suffering serious harm, as a result of internal war, insurgency, repression or state failure, and the state in question is unwilling or unable to halt or avert it, the principle of non-intervention yields to the international responsibility to protect.

Despite adoption of the document, which technically allows intervening into a foreign country's internal affairs under special circumstances, even by employing forces if authorized by the United Nations Security Council (United Nations 2005), R2P scholarly studies and debates about this topic did not cease to exist for several reasons. First of all, as a crucial legal document adopted by the United Nations, the R2P evoked new debatable issues and a wave of appreciation or criticism among scholars, and most importantly, the R2P did not deal with the existing political and ethical questions of the humanitarian interventions occurred before the adoption of the document. This subject remained to be handled through the scholarly, civic and political disputes (Pattison 2010; Bellamy 2009; Hehir 2012; Chataway 2014; Stahn 2007).

While it is eminently problematic to determine which particular case of internal violence calls for an urgent international involvement in order to legally halt severe human rights violations by justifiably stepping over the Westphalian sovereignty concept, more burdensome issue still lies in properly selecting *who* should intervene. With regard to this pivotal question, James Pattison (2010) has

developed a theoretical framework named the 'Moderate Instrumentalist Approach', which, according to the author, proposes legally, politically and morally admissible scheme to determine the power eligible for rightful intervention. The Moderate Instrumentalist Approach is a consequentialist approach which asserts that the most crucial point in determining the legitimate intervener is *effectiveness*. This means that 'when deciding who should intervene, the Moderate Instrumentalist Approach focuses on the intervener that will be the most effective' (Pattison 2010, p. 70). The non-instrumentalist approaches concentrate on moral factors in choosing the legitimate intervener by arguing that intervener's effectiveness is not a moral concern (Graham 1987, p. 143; Beitz 1980, p. 391). Through his theoretical framework, Pattison challenges this idea and claims that not judging a potential intervener by its possibility of success is 'nonsensical'. The scholar argues that effectiveness is not the *only* determinant of an intervener's permissibility (as the Extreme Instrumentalist Approach would assert). However, the Moderate Instrumentalist Approach 'holds that achieving good consequences is *necessary* - and sometimes *sufficient* - for an intervener's legitimacy'.

Another important angle the notion of foreign intervention has been discussed, and frequently criticized from is the motive of the intervener country to involve itself in a different country's internal affairs. Ideally, there should be only one purpose to intervene - to stop the violence against civilians who are deliberately attacked by the government, or defend them from the internal conflict, as the state cannot anymore provide protection from the serious harm. However, as it has been regularly denounced by scholars, the intervener states decide to intervene, and then act accordingly, with the prioritization of their foreign interests, and not the initial idea of intervention - protecting the oppressed population (Bellamy 2009; Chomsky 1999; Wheeler 2000; Kennedy 2004). Noam Chomsky (1999), for instance, while discussing 'the new military humanism' of the United States, the United Kingdom and NATO in the Kosovo War, argues that the bombing employed as a measure against the ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo committed by Yugoslavia was not in fact intended to avert this massacre. The leaders were declaring the bombing as a necessary action to end the

humanitarian catastrophe, although, 'with full awareness of the likely consequences, Clinton and Blair decided in favor of a war that led to a radical escalation of ethnic cleansing along with other deleterious effects' (Chomsky 1999, p. 16). Chomsky asserts that anti-communism rhetoric was successfully utilized by the United States to take fierce steps in achieving political and economic hegemony during the Cold War. However, the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the communist Soviet Union left the Western Bloc with a need to propose a new discourse to justify its actions towards political dominance. This is exactly where the humanitarian ideals as a legitimization tool of the hegemonic policy came into play. As Chomsky (1999, p. 11) claims, 'with the Soviet deterrent in decline, the cold war victors are more free to exercise their will under the cloak of good intentions but in pursuit of interests that have a very familiar ring outside the realm of enlightenment'.

If we look at the phenomenon of intervention (in this case the NATO Intervention in Kosovo as arguably one the most featured and academically discussed interventions in history, which once again spotlighted this issue in the scholarly debates) in the perspective of various theoretical schools, Chomsky's position clearly echoes neo-Marxist standpoint on the issue. Sean Richmond (2016) further explores different theoretical angles on the phenomenon of intervention by focusing chiefly on the NATO intervention in Kosovo. As examples of support to Chomsky's argument, Richmond overviews perspectives of Diane Johnstone and Tariq Ali who, according to the Richmond's summary, criticized the United States' neo-imperialist agenda by stating that the Kosovo operation was an American way to secure two important elements: globalization as a hegemony of the United States model and 'elimination of any viable alternative model of economic development' (Johnstone and Ali, cited in Richmond 2016, p. 247).

Furthermore, Richmond (2016, p. 238), while explaining the divisive nature of the humanitarian intervention, remaining a controversial subject of discussion among scholars and policymakers, offers insights of other theoretical schools on the debate. Relying on the works of the liberal scholars such as Adam Roberts

(2016, cited in Richmond 2016), Ivo Daalder and Michael O'Hanlon (2000, cited in Richmond 2016), Richmond concludes that liberals accentuate ideational and material factors of the NATO intervention in Kosovo. Indeed, Adam Roberts (2016, cited in Richmond 2016, p. 238) highlights three important aspects: 'a sense of shame from inaction in Bosnia beforehand; humanitarian concern; and a desire to maintain NATO's credibility'. In analysis of Roberts' and other liberal authors' works, Richmond asserts that the most important reasons of the intervention in liberal perspective, unlike those of neo-Marxist allegations of hegemonic purposes, in fact were human rights issues: 'accordingly, one of the main policy objectives of NATO's action was to protect the human rights of this minority population. Thus, from a liberal perspective, the Kosovo crisis and subsequent NATO intervention are seen primarily as human rights issues.'

Human rights in the core of the motives of intervention are shared by constructivists as well. According to this theoretical school, the expansion of human rights agenda in the Western countries facilitates the understanding of the humanitarian interventions as the one in Kosovo (Wheeler 2000; Reus-Smit 2004). Constructivists realize that 'the Kosovo action involved humanitarian and security imperatives' but they also argue that the main factors behind this military operation were humanitarian concerns on the human rights violations during the conflict. This view is challenged by neo-Realist explanation of the issue: 'in contrast to liberal and constructivist accounts, neo-realists argued that the NATO's involvement in the Balkans is best understood as delusional moral crusading and dangerous American expansionism, primarily due to the disappearance of a balancing superpower post-Cold War' (Richmond 2016, p. 238). Whilst offering a realist view on the NATO policy, Kenneth Waltz (2000) argues that the Balkan conflicts were not just a European but first of all a NATO concern. In this sense, credibility of the military organization is at stake, preservation of which is a vital goal for the United States: 'in the absence of European initiative, Americans believe they must lead the way because the credibility of NATO is at stake'.

Thus, the aim of this section was to overview the existing debates around the concept of foreign intervention as a principal thematic framework of the thesis. As the topic revolves around the Russian intervention in the Syrian Civil War, this scholarly debate discussed in the first section of the literature review will contribute in building conceptual background essential for the further elaboration on the subject. Although, the main focal points of the section, apart from theoretical, legal and ethical dimensions, encompassed mostly criticism of intervention, it should be noted that events such as *Rwanda Genocide* raised questions to the policy of non-intervention similarly (Kuperman 2001; McQueen 2005; Piiparinen 2007; Seybolt 2007). Inactiveness of the international community facilitated materialization of the great tragedy, and immense military powers like NATO have been criticized not only for politically motivated and unjustified for other reasons interventions but as well for not acting when necessary for the prevention of humanitarian catastrophes. Hence, foreign intervention, as a political notion, is a complex issue which has been discussed in academic or political circles throughout decades. Interestingly, this dilemma has once again become one of the central examined topics in the light of the Syrian Civil War, and by focusing on this particular internationalized conflict, the thesis will further enrich the discussion on the highly contested subject of the political realm.

2.3. The Russian Involvement in the Syrian Civil War

Russian involvement in the Syrian Civil War can be divided into three major phases. The first phase of the involvement would be the transformation phase of the demonstrations into the war. Second, the period from the outbreak of the civil war in 2011 to 2015, when upon formal request of the Assad's government, Russia militarily intervened in the conflict. The third stage starts from this military intervention, when the support of the Kremlin to the Syrian regime became officially militaristic. The dissertation mostly focuses on the first phase of the involvement, as it tries to explain Russian role in the outburst of the civil war by successfully

keeping Assad in power amid internal and foreign pressure. However, from today's perspective, in order to comprehend the conflict better, it would be more precise to look at the starting processes of the conflict within the full picture of the war.

There is a strong agreement within the scholars focusing on the Russian involvement in the Syrian Civil War that the assistance from the Kremlin to the Assad's government has been one of the most crucial reasons facilitating transformation of the demonstrations into the war, lengthy continuation of the crisis, and inability of the rebels to oust Assad from his post (Souleimanov 2016; Allison 2013; Saleh 2017; Mason 2011; Sullivan 2018; Weiss and Ng 2019; Notte 2016) . As Roy Allison (2013, p. 795) points out, at the regional level Iran has been the most faithful ally of Alawite Assad but at the international level Assad does not have any bigger and more powerful proponent than Russia, 'which has most prominently provided a diplomatic shield for the Syrian state and bolstered it with arms supplies'. The scholar overviews possible reasons behind Russia's motivation to endorse Assad's regime, starting from the historical close partnership between the Soviet Union and Syria, which continued with Bashar al-Assad's presidency and backing of the Kremlin on international stage, ending with geopolitical and economic interests in Syria, such as Russian naval contacts in the country or arms trade. Furthermore, as the author outlines, Russia needs to retain its positions in Syria and successfully implement designed policy there because of the inner political rationales. More precisely, Russia has a historically established suspense 'of moves towards regime change in foreign states that are perceived to bear the imprint of western states'. According to the official Russian stance, which also quite well embodies Russian regime's political worries, 'neither the western powers nor their Saudi and Qatari regional partners should seek to expedite any more 'revolutions' in states whose regimes they dislike. Above all, this expresses nervousness about future external pressures which foreign states may exert for political change in Russia on the basis of claims that Putin and his entourage lack political legitimacy' (Allison 2013, p. 819).

Internal rationales behind foreign policy of Russia have been brought forward by Hanna Notte (2016), Roland Dannreuther (2014) and Sam Charap (2015) as well, claiming that the Kremlin's main goal in Syria does not concern the Middle Eastern country as much as Russia itself. In fact, the main aim behind the involvement of the Russian regime in Syria is calculated through the internal political lenses, meaning that the Kremlin seeks to recast the established inadmissible for Russia tradition of the Western influence on the authoritarian or undesirable for the West regime changes in the non-western countries. According to this logic, the Russian government, which unutterably recognizes its authoritarianism, saves Assad's authoritarian regime in order to protect itself from the same political development. As Notte (2016, p. 65) sums up about this idea, 'since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, considerations of domestic political order play an important role in Moscow's calculations, rather than any concern with Assad's personal fate.' In a broader sense, as noted by Dannreuther (2014, p. 93), the Kremlin by saving the Assad's regime, and protecting itself obliquely, opposes the Western imposed liberal democracy, 'as an instrument militarily to enforce their preferred 'democratic' partners through intervention on putatively humanitarian grounds'. Instead, 'Russia presents a model, which is conservative in its support of the overriding need of the state to defend its sovereign rights of state and to respond to the societal demands for reform. For this Russian perspective, such change can only come from within and cannot be imposed from outside'. By narrowing down this array of assumptions, it can be concluded that part of the scholarship around the Russian involvement in the Syrian Civil War view this interference as a mostly self-protecting aspiration, being a part of widely broader Russian ideological battle with the Western imposed liberal-democratic hegemony, spread of which in the strategic for Russia regions, such as the post-Soviet space, the Caucasus, the Central Asia, and the Middle East in this case, is highly unacceptable for Moscow.

This topic is further expanded by Souleimanov & Dzustati (2018) who claim that Russian involvement in the Syrian Civil War has become a strategic trap for Moscow. Initially, Russia had interests of keeping Assad in power and enhancing

Russian geopolitical positions in the Middle East by their strong and impactful presence in Syria but the war turned out to be extremely complicated and multifaceted, which cornered Russia in the pernicious situation where the state does not gain much from its continuous involvement in the conflict but a withdrawal from the prolonged civil war would 'lead to the failure of its initial goal and an even more dramatic loss of reputation, both domestically and internationally'. Russia indeed might have had more tangible political goals while interfering in the Syrian conflict in the beginning but these goals have changed in accordance with the development of the internationalized intra-state war, and, according to Souleimanov & Dzustati, finally, the Russian presence in Syria transformed into the quest for unreachable results. In other words, Russia remains in Syria for the sake of being there, as the bridges for reversion are burnt.

Speaking of Russian initial aims in Syria, scholars such as Nye Jr (2016), Macfarquhar (2016), and Bodner (2015) argued that one of the fundamental intentions of Russian involvement in Syria was to trade with the United States over Syria. Namely, Russia would leave its positions in the Middle Eastern country in exchange of *carte blanche* in Ukraine, where Russia annexed Crimea, and subsequently, got sanctioned by the Western states. However, in the earlier works, Souleimanov (2016, pp. 110-111) argues that this geopolitical operation 'did not materialize', as after 2015 there were no signs of 'military or intelligence cooperation having taken place between Russia and key Western actors over Syria, and the Western economic sanctions against Russia have been prolonged'. Failure in this endeavor explains, in the author's opinion, why Putin has publicly switched Russia's tasks in Syria several times. The goals, such as fighting against the Islamic State, providing support to Assad, creating wide international coalition against Islamic terrorism, stabilizing the 'legitimate authority' of Assad, and others have been repetitively mentioned.

While focusing on the Russian reaction to the Arab Spring, as an antecedent event of the civil conflicts in the Middle East, including in Syria, Robert O. Freedman (2013) outlines Putin's four goals for the Middle East that

substantially determined Russia's further policy in the light of the transformation of the riots into the civil wars. According to the author, firstly, Russia has sought to restore Russia's positions in the Middle East as a great power balancing the United States' global dominance. Second, in economic terms, Putin wanted to sell armaments and nuclear reactors to Middle Eastern states 'while at the same time trying to get them to invest in the Russian economy'. Third, because of expensive exploiting of Russian oil and natural gas, the Kremlin has sought to become partners with the Middle Eastern states producing oil and gas. And lastly, Russia wanted to reduce support from the Middle East to the Islamist insurgents in Russia's North Caucasus. Did Russia achieve any of these goals or not by intervening in the Syrian Civil War? This is another issue but what is apparent from the Freedman's article is that Putin's administration had clear intentions in mind when interfering in the Syria's internal affairs. However, apart from the designed foreign policy towards the Middle East which has been partially applied to the Syrian case as well, Russia's involvement in this particular conflict includes specific rationales and consequences which cannot be easily generalized within the framework of 'Russia and Middle East'. As Freedman (2013, p. 213) notes about Russia's obstinacy in supporting Assad, several reasons can be detected behind this decision. There are economic rationales such as multibillion-dollar military contracts with Syria. There are purely military ones such as Russian naval facility in Tartus which has a strategic value for Moscow or geopolitical motives like demonstrating to the Russian public and the whole world that Russia can resist the United States' hegemonic aspirations. Moreover, as mentioned by other scholars discussed above, Freedman similarly concludes that domestic issues played an important role in Russia's decision to involve itself in the Syrian uprisings in support of the regime: 'in part, it stems from Russian domestic politics, where in the face of public protests during the Russian presidential campaign, Putin played the Russian nationalist card, blaming the United States not only for instigating the Arab Spring-like demonstrations in Russia but also for backing the Syrian opposition against the Assad regime.'

A Russian scholar Dmitri Trenin (2013) in his analytical article explains Russian involvement in the Syrian Civil War with consideration of four main factors. The author lists them in accordance with the level of their importance. First, Russia is concerned with the world political order, and considers military interventions sanctioned by the United Nations legitimate only provided the aim of the interference is protection of the civilians and not the change of the regimes. Second, according to Trenin, Russia and its public did not meet the Arab Spring with the same optimism and enthusiasm as it was perceived by the west. On the contrary, there was a great fear among Russian establishment that anti-authoritarian riots would end with the Islamists seizing the power, which would have had far more detrimental consequences. Third, Trenin claims that Russian economic interests in Syria are not great but they still exist and should not be neglected. And finally, Trenin emphasizes Russian religious purposes as a minor but still persistent factor. Namely, Russia seems to be concerned with the raising level of Islamic fundamentalism which oppresses Christian minorities in Syria, and therefore provides a political shelter for those who suffered from the increased levels of religious sectarianism.

The literature around the Russian involvement in the Syrian Civil War clearly demonstrates that the Russian role in keeping Assad in power has been fundamental for the survival of the regime. As Souleimanov (2016, p. 114) underlines, it is obvious that ‘the Russian intervention in Syria saved the embattled regime of Bashar al-Assad’. This is a generally accepted assumption among scholars, which is strengthened by vivid factual evidences and subsequent analytical conclusions. However, what is missing in the literature on the topic is a focus not only on the Russian involvement and support of Assad in the war itself but an exhaustive, coherent and convincing explanation of the reasons behind Russia’s success in saving Assad on the onset of the uprisings, subsequently converting into a war. The existing literature offers various explanations of the rationales behind Russian support of Assad in Syria, as well as its consequences, international influence, and future possible development but why and how did Russia manage to retain Assad in power in spite of violent domestic uprisings and

tremendous foreign pressure still asks for a deeper examination. This is the particular part of the literature which will be enriched by the thesis. In this sense, this work will serve to the literature around the Russian involvement in the Syrian Civil War, which, in its turn, will be part of the rich scholarship around the Syrian Civil War in general. Moreover, in a theoretical sense, the thesis will deal with the multifaceted issue of foreign interventions in political studies, which remains and most probably, will remain as one of the most debated and contested topics in the field.

3 Methodology

The main topic of the dissertation *the Russian Impact on the Eruption of the Syrian Civil War* as a part of the broader discipline – Political Sciences, can be assessed in an array of methodological approaches. Since the start of the Arab Spring demonstrations to the eruption of the wars in the Middle Eastern countries, including Syria, these conflicts have been examined through various methodological spectra, be it quantitative or qualitative. Each of these methodologies utilized for a better exploration and demonstration of the Syrian Civil War, with clear understanding of its roots, nature, and consequences, served to the preliminary designed research goals or problematic questions asking for reasoned answers. This dissertation narrows down the wide topic of the Syrian Civil War in two directions. Firstly, it focuses on the eruption of the civil war, and secondly, on the foreign involvement in it, specifically, the Russian involvement as a crucial factor for the regime's survival and subsequent transformation of the demonstrations into the armed conflict. As stated in the introduction of the thesis, the main questions the dissertation attempts to answer are: What exactly was the impact of Russia on the eruption of this war? How did Russia facilitate the transformation of the protests into a civil conflict? Why did Russia succeed in saving the Syrian regime? Finding answers on these problems, which had not been assessed sufficiently even in the abundant literature around the Syrian Civil

War, needs specific set of approaches designed for successful methodological examination of the topic with consideration of its nature.

First of all, the nature of the questions the thesis attempts to answer asks for a deep analysis and observation of the factual and historic evidences, as it cannot be calculated through statistical data. Obviously, impact of a country on a civil war can be partially demonstrated by the examples shown in numbers - for instance, number of military ammunition and weapons aided to a particular party of the war, which would have had impact on the war, but this cannot be considered as a quantitative research in its essence, as these examples demonstrated in numbers serve to the backing of the arguments drawn from the analytical judgement. This impact is chiefly constructed with statistically immeasurable factors such as political support, and thus, the level and nature of influence on the war, and especially its political side, can be assessed solely with qualitative research (Lamont 2015).

Therefore, due to the nature of the topic and the research questions, in addition to limitations of the study, such as the inability to conduct any type of field research (for safety reasons), this thesis focuses on primary sources as official documents, diplomatic notes, memoirs, speeches, correspondence, interviews, research data, and on secondary sources as books, articles, journals, analytical videos, biographies, documentary films, lectures etc. The literature and primary sources around the Syrian Civil War is sufficient for a coherent and comprehensive analysis dealing with the proposed research questions. Though different types of statistics and numeric data are utilized to facilitate discussion around the subject and back introduced conclusions, the main method of investigating the answer on the proposed question is a qualitative research. This can be considered as the most convenient way to evaluate through qualitative analysis and logical chain of reasoning what was the impact of the Russian support of the Assad's regime on the eruption of the Syrian Civil War.

The thesis is structured in the way to gradually approach the main discussion points. After reviewing the existing literature around the topic in order

to demonstrate clearly where does the thesis situate itself, and which specific unresolved problems of the Syrian Civil War it will assess, the dissertation reviews the historic context of the Russia-Syria relations in order to build the background for a proper understanding of the Russian actions in Syria. By examining the historic alliance between Russian and Syria, this part of the thesis also serves to back one of the main arguments of the thesis that the Kremlin's success in saving Bashar al-Assad in charge has been assisted with the Moscow's historically solid positions in Syria, giving Russia necessary possibilities to maneuver easily.

Furthermore, the thesis continues with the discussion of the political narrative prior to the demonstrations in order to make the essential causes driving people to revolt lucid. This overview of the political situation in Syria before the start of the conflict, and the next chapter examining the transformation phase of the peaceful demonstrations into the civil war serve to the clear understanding of the Russian impact on the processes. As the main subject of the thesis revolves around the international intervention in the intra-state conflict, the next chapter of the dissertation displays the stance and the role of each important international actor on the Syrian crisis. This chapter particularly aims to place the Russian position and action about the Syrian demonstrations in international context. Only after creating this necessary ground for further analysis, the thesis commences with the Russian involvement in the internal political processes in Syria and draws conclusions built upon the whole picture of the conflict in its genesis. Therefore, by analysis and empirical observation of the political narrative of this concrete period, the dissertation will draw conclusions on the main research questions, including explanation of the Russian success in keeping Assad in charge as one of the main catalysts of the civil war.

The utilized material for the dissertation is mainly English. However, in order to avoid the complete one-sided, euro-centric perspective on the issue and diversify the sources, the study to some extent relies on the Russian and Syrian authors as well. The tangible outcome of the thesis are empirical conclusions via thorough analysis of the information acquired through primary and secondary

sources, such as online and physical libraries of the University of Glasgow, Dublin City University, and the Charles University; free-access online libraries in internet; English, Russian, and Arabic media; video-platforms (Youtube, Vimeo etc); and all other relevant materials, source and reliability of which are vivid and acceptable.

4 The Historical Context of the Russia-Syria Relations

The official Russia-Syria relations, counting more than 75 years, started with the recognition of the Syrian independence by the Soviet Union on 22 July 1944. However, the process of rapprochement between two states did not commence before arrival of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party into power. Despite gaining formal independence from France, political life of the newborn Syrian state had been under heavy Western influence. For this reason, when last French troops finally left the country in 1946, the nation turned out to be unprepared for sovereign political existence. Amid internal destabilization and a war with Israel in 1948-1949, the Western states refused to sell weapons to Syria. This factor enhanced the historically solidified feeling of skepticism and resentment towards the West in the Syrian nation and political establishment. After three coup d'etats and two military dictatorships during the short period of 1949-1953, the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party assumed power in 1954. Along with the frustration by the West's refusal in military support, Syria signed a trade agreement with the Soviet Union in 1955, and an important arms deal with Czechoslovakia in 1956. Besides internal political rationales, this decision had also been taken under certain ideological influence of *the pan-Arabism*¹, championed by Egypt and its president, Gamal Abdel Nasser - one of the most crucial political leaders and forerunners of the movement. These substantial deals signified establishment of strong relations between Syria and the Eastern Bloc, ideally concurring with the Soviet Union's interests at onset of the

¹ A nationalist ideology asserting that all Arabs should be united in a single state (Rubin 1991).

Cold War, as the leader of the coalition was looking for allies in the region (Lund 2019).

From the major catalysts, the Suez Crisis in 1956 can be considered as one of the antecedent events facilitating formation of close relations between Syria and the Soviet Union. This short but breaking event in the history of the Middle East strengthened the Soviet positions in the region, including Syria, which started more actively cooperating with the Eastern Bloc in military, political and economic terms. At the same time, in 1955, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey and the United Kingdom established a military alliance by signing the Baghdad Pact, perceived as a hostile bargain by Syria. As a result, Syria approached the Soviet Union more firmly, although 'the consequence of Baghdad pact was not only the approach of Syria to USSR but also the separation of the Middle Eastern countries as the satellites of the eastern and western blocs at the same time' (Aghayev & Katman 2014). The period from 1956 to 1957 marked rapid development of the Soviet-Syrian cooperation. Apart from the considerable military and economic assistance (from 1955 to 1958, Syria had received about \$294 million as a military and financial aid from Moscow), the Kremlin aided Syria in a massive construction of hydroelectric plants and irrigation projects. The Soviet leaders promised to defend Syria during the Syrian president, Shukri al-Quatli's visit to Moscow in 1956. Additionally, the noteworthy economic agreement between the Kremlin and Damascus signed soon afterwards in 1957, already became an alarming sign for the United States and the West (Kreutz 2007). The UK foreign office warned its Western partners that Syria could now 'be regarded as a Soviet satellite'. Indeed, when already a NATO member, Turkey, sent troops to the Syrian borders, the Soviet Union issued a warning that the Kremlin would take 'all necessary measures' if Syria came under attack. Thus, due to support of the Eastern Bloc and reluctance of the main international actors to embark on the Third World War, Syria escaped serious military conflict, whilst continuing the rapprochement process with the Soviet Union steadfastly (Lund 2019, p. 4).

Even though seizure of the power by the Ba'ath Party advanced Soviet-Syrian relations significantly, the enduring historic alliance between the two countries should be attributed to Hafez al-Assad (father and predecessor of Bashar al-Assad), who assumed power in 1971. As Yevgeny Primakov (2009, p. 6), former Russian political authority and a prominent Middle East researcher, noted in his semi-biographic book, Hafez al-Assad, along with Gamal Abdel Nasser, got 'further than advocating a purely nationalist worldview' and 'introduced aspects of social reform'. This did not mean that Hafez al-Assad had been supporting the 'radical left', on the contrary, in the early years of his political career, he accused them of 'facilitating Russian interference in Syria's internal affairs'. Initially, this position of Hafez al-Assad worried the Soviet leaders but once in charge Assad immediately cleared up all the doubts of the Eastern Bloc about his loyalty: 'Assad moved quickly to reassure the Soviet Union that Syria would in fact remain an ally of the Eastern Bloc'.

In 1971, Syria permitted the Soviet Union to use its ports in Latakia and Tartus. In exchange, Syria received more weapons. Thus, Soviet-Syrian relations advanced to a higher level. The process of the rapprochement intensified in the later years. Assad was publicly praising and supporting the Soviet Union, but with pursuit and consideration of the pragmatic policy by putting Syria's interests first (Lund 2019, pp. 6-7).

The close ties between the two countries started deteriorating with Mikhail Gorbachev and his *perestroika* policy. The Soviet Union gradually became unwilling to arm and financially support Syria. It became clear for the Syrian leadership that the Soviet Union would not play its patron role anymore. The Gorbachev's geostrategic vision included reconstructing relations with the United States and its ally Israel - the development of processes, which could not be considered as pleasant news by the Syrian government and the rest of the Arab world. Finally, at the end of 1991, the dissolution of the Soviet Union opened a new, more complicated chapter for Russia-Syria relations (Vassiliev 2018).

In 1990s, Russia-Syria relations went through serious turbulence due to the Russia's inability and lack of political will to continue financing Syria as the Soviet Union did. Russia gradually lost influence over the Middle East, including Syria, which, in turn, started reorienting its policy towards the West. Nonetheless, the cooperation established in decades did not disappear altogether and continued existing in the form of cultural and economic exchanges through inertia. In 2000, after death of Hafez al-Assad and resignation of Boris Yeltsin, Russia-Syria relations, reaching rock bottom since 1954, had been handed over to Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin, the new leaders of the states (Vassiliev 2018).

Putin's era has become a paramount moment in Russian policy changes towards the Middle East. As Gaub and Popescu (2013, pp. 1-2) note about the beginning of this new period, the partnership between Russia and Syria, importance of which had been diminished after the end of the Cold War, 'was re-launched after both President Putin and President Bashar al-Assad took office in 2000 and, more importantly, when Russia began to re-assert itself on the global stage towards the middle of the last decade.' Putin closed military bases in Vietnam and Cuba in the first years of his presidency, and with this, Tartus has become the only Russian military base outside the post-Soviet space. This base has transformed into a symbol of the Russia-Syria partnership, and an indication to Russian strategic interests in the region. While the United States, previously dominating the Middle East, started receiving detrimental results from its military operation in Iraq, Russia actively began enhancing positions in the region. Syria was openly opposing the American hegemony, while in response receiving sanctions from the United States (Lund 2019, p. 13). This difficult relationship between Syria and the United States had been creating a fertile ground for the rapprochement of Moscow and Damascus. This process, as Vassiliev points out (2018, p. 386), was aided by secularity of Syria and historic ties between two countries: 'just the Syrian association of alumni of Russian universities numbered about 35,000 members. Further tens of thousands studied at the Soviet/Russian military schools or academies. The army was equipped almost exclusively with Russian weapons.'

The years 2001-2005 should be considered as a decisive period on the road to the closer Russia-Syria relations. The two states collided in the geopolitical interests, and, most importantly, in the anti-Western sentiments. Syria was feeling political pressure from the West, while Russian leaders became more and more unwilling in succumbing to the United States dominance and NATO's eastward expansion. 'Colour Revolutions' in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), and Ukraine (2004), ending with the overthrow of the Russia friendly autocratic leaders, have been perceived by Putin as a western aggression against the Russian interests. For this reason, Russia would not leave its positions in another region so easily. In January 2005, Assad made its first visit in Russia, labeled as a 'historic milestone' of the partnership by the political experts (Lund 2019, p. 15).

From this point, Syria has been approaching Russian political orbit more intensively. Assad made another visit to Moscow in 2006, while significantly rebuilding the two states' military partnership. In 2008, Assad visited Russia third time and supported Russian military intervention in Georgia publicly, by declaring it as 'a reaction to provocation by Georgia'. In the same announcement about the conflict, Assad underlined Syrian friendship with Russia and the fact that Syria would oppose 'any attempt to tarnish Russia's reputation or misrepresent its position, which in this situation is both logical and explicable'. After this meeting with Medvedev, Russia started new dredging works in Tartus to rebuild the base under the policy of the military modernization induced by the Russo-Georgian war. In 2010, Medvedev made the first ever visit in Damascus by a Russian or Soviet leader in the history of the countries (Weitz 2008). Thus, it can be concluded that the Arab Spring demonstrations started in the peak of the Russia-Syria relations.

5 Syria Before the Wave of Protests

The Arab Spring, commonly accepted term for the wave of demonstrations in the MENA (the Middle East and North Africa) region, popularized by an article by Marc

Lynch (2011), started in January 2011, in Tunisia, against the longstanding dictator, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, and spread with a domino effect over other countries of the region, such as Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen (Whitehead 2015, p. 17). Undoubtedly, the ongoing riots in other Arab countries became a source of inspiration and a strong impetus for the Syrian people to go out and demonstrate against the Assad regime. However, the public of the country would not have protested simply on the example of the other countries if not for the accumulated social and political struggles over decades of the Assads' rule. Therefore, in order to correctly comprehend the phenomenon of the riots in Syria, we should examine the social and political background that stood behind the protest of the Syrian people, coming to fruition in the form of demonstrations along with a tremendous wave of uprisings shaking the region.

On 22 February 1971, when Hafez al-Assad successfully claimed presidential privileges, the Assad family's abiding rule commenced. Having discarded democratic values, Hafez al-Assad, the first *Alawite*² president of Syria, started building an authoritarian state based on curtailment of civil rights, imprisonment of the opposition leaders, cult of personality, corruption, sectarianism, and suppression of any protesting voices. Hafez al-Assad was re-elected in referendums every seven years, and did not leave his post until his death on 10 June 2000. In 1982, Hafez al-Assad authored violent quelling of uprisings led by the Muslim Brotherhood in the town of Hama, which has been established as the massacre of Hama in the history of Syria. This brutal use of forces against the civilians in Hama included besieging of the town, helicopter gunships, bulldozers, and artillery bombardments, resulting in the deaths up to 20.000 people, while more than 70.000 have been arrested, and around 200.000 Syrians had to flee the country (Fisk 2010; Fares 2015). Hafez al-Assad, while marginalizing Sunni urban classes, maintained his power through the various methods of the authoritarian rule, evaluated by Raymond Hinnebusch (2001, p. 89) as a 'populist authoritarianism' with high reliance on army and military elites,

² The Alawites are a sect of Shia Islam, representing 17.2 percent of the Syrian population (Izady 2018).

augmenting the Islamist movement as a reaction to the 'mixture of statism, rural and sectarian favouritism, corruption and new inequalities'.

In 2000, Bashar al-Assad, Hafez al-Assad's younger son, took office after the minimum age of presidency had been lowered from 40 to 34 specially for him. He delivered an inaugural speech, perceived by the Syrian people as a glimmer of hope for positive social, economic and political transformations. Many in Syria and outside of the country started believing that Bashar al-Assad could indeed become a reformer, 'a breath of fresh air who would lead the country in a new direction' (Lesch 2013, p. 79). In his inaugural speech, Bashar al-Assad criticized many aspects of the previous governance, even parts of his father's policy, and, indeed, the first years of Bashar's rule was labelled 'the Damascus Spring', as exhausted from the stringent authoritarianism country witnessed certain levels of liberalization. This short period of more open and transparent policy of liberalization was distinguished by important, democratic by nature political moves such as 'general amnesties to political prisoners of all persuasions, licensing of private newspapers, a shake-up of the state-controlled media apparatus, provision of political forums and salons in which open criticism and dissent were tolerated' (Lesch 2013, p. 80). Furthermore, Bashar al-Assad repealed the cult of personality established by his father who pursued the ideological path of the prominent leaders of the pan-Arabism movement, especially Gamal Abdel Nasser (Lesch 2013; Fares 2015).

The Damascus Spring, which should have become a foundation of a more democratic and freer Syria, did not last long, as the regime appeared to be loosening its grip on power by emergence of critical civil society organizations and prodemocracy groups. Thus, the Assad government and Assad himself, who was warned by the loyal to Hafez al-Assad military-security apparatus, so called 'old guard', that societal liberalization would be detrimental for the regime, reacted quickly, and the most of political and social reforms have been abandoned. In the following years, Syria witnessed reforms mostly in economic and administrative

fields but real democratic and political changes away from the single party system were buried away along with the brief sparkle of liberalization (Lesch 2013, p. 80).

The 2008 global economic crisis hit the Middle East as well, making basic items more expensive than it used to be. According to the experts, several of the reasons behind the public's readiness to protest in the streets were scarceness of perspectives for the youth, high prices, absence of adequate jobs and living necessities. The scholars also underline the role of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter which produced a source of expeditiously spreading information uncontrollable by the regime (Gelvin 2014; Lesch 2013; Cooke 2018). The WikiLeaks, shaking political lives in many countries by revealing 'the profligate lifestyles of the ruling elite, bared for all to see the widespread socioeconomic problems, corruption, and restricted political space', augmented public's discontent with the regime in Syria as well (Lesch 2013, p. 81).

Al-Haj Saleh (2017), a Syrian writer and political dissident, evaluates the 'modernization and development' policies undertaken by Bashar al-Assad in his decade in charge before the revolution as 'superficial makeovers', which 'were devoid of any humane, ethical, or political essence', and only played a role of façade to cover up the absence of political rights and public freedoms. Syria was modernized only outwardly with the emergence of modern malls and fancy hotels, but the economic liberalization policy of the regime almost entirely neglected the rural areas of the country, and even in the big cities the 'neoliberal authoritarian development model' favored only the wealthy elites at the expense of the marginalized low classes. The system created by Bashar al-Assad, rigidly characterized by Saleh as an inhumane social, political, and ideological apparatus 'based on racial discrimination with respect to the population, as well as holding a monopoly on power, wealth, and patriotism', worsened the unemployment problems in Syria, as the labor market was demanding the modern requirements (for instance, knowledge of foreign languages and technologies) that could not be met by the undereducated Syrians. The ruling elites of the country diminished the

social role of the state, and became the sole beneficiaries of all the goods provided by 'liberal economy'.

Furthermore, the social struggles affected the youth, usually becoming a torpedo of the riots, extremely painfully. Lesch (2013, p. 81) draws the picture of social difficulties in Syria with the relevant statistics:

The number of people in the Syrian population of 22 million people below the age of twenty-five is about 60 percent. The unemployment rate, estimated at around 20–25 percent countrywide, is even much higher among those under age 25 at approximately 53 percent of females and 67 percent of males. The Corruption Perceptions Index for 2010, which rates the world's countries on corruption, transparency, accountability, and ease of doing business, listed Syria at 127 out of 178 countries, and in the Middle East and North Africa region, it came in 14 out of 19 countries, with states such as Iran, Libya, Yemen, and Iraq behind it.

Thus, before the revolution, the negative social, political and economic background did not seem to favor the regime, which was holding the power and keeping stability in the country by means of ruthless police state measures. The Syrian intelligence and security services, so called *mukhabarat*, assured that all the individuals raising their voices against the government would not be left unnoticed. According to the common saying in Syria, anyone could 'disappear behind the sun' for doing anything that might upset the *mukhabarat* (Dagher 2019, p. 18) These security agencies were operating above any law and controlled every branch of the government or civil society, including the military, ministers, press or ordinary citizens. That is the reason why Assad felt more or less secured in the beginning of the wave of demonstrations in the region. However, the examples of successful revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt have been perceived by then nihilistic Syrian people as a sign that they also could bring the real political changes to their country, so the fear of the regime's brutality faded away with the help of the deeply protracted feeling of injustice and urge to dramatic reformations.

6 How Demonstrations Transformed into the War?

The uprisings in Syria started as a part of the series of demonstrations in the MENA region, triggered in Tunisia by the self-immolation of a young vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi, as a reaction to the confiscation of his goods. Bouazizi was selling fruit and vegetables in Sidi Bouzid due to the inability to find a job in the highly corrupted country, struggling with the great levels of unemployment and authoritarianism. After two weeks of mass demonstrations and death of around 300 rioting civilians in Tunisia, the long-standing president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia for a political shelter. Consecutively, the protests from Tunisia spread to other MENA countries. Egypt, with high levels of poverty and corruption, came next - hundreds of thousands people gathered in the Tahrir Square, Cairo, and demanded resignation of the president Hosni Mubarak, ruling the country for 30 years. After 18 days of mass protests and 850 casualties, Mubarak capitulated and left the post. The wave of protests spread to Libya and Yemen likewise, resulting in the ouster of both long-standing leaders Muammar Gaddafi and Ali Abdullah Saleh, respectively. Muammar Gaddafi was captured, tortured and executed by the antagonistic rebels in several months after the uprisings (Tahir 2018).

The Arab Spring has dawned on Syria on March 15 in the city Daraa, in southwestern part of the country, neighboring Jordan and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights labeled by people as a 'cradle of the Syrian revolution' (Petkova 2020). In spite of the riots being spontaneous, the Syrian government was anticipating the potential outbreak of the protests amidst the waves of uprisings in other Arab countries and took certain preliminary measures. For instance, as a Syrian human rights activist and one of the demonstrators Obaida Fares (2015, p. 146) recalls, in February and March 2011, the Syrian authorities, fearing replication of the protests in the country on the example of Libya, Tunisia and Egypt, eased grip on people and exercised 'unprecedented kindness towards their citizens', including pardoning some 'traffic and construction violations'. According to the

interview of another Syrian activist, a former student at the University of Aleppo, the regime tried to prevent mass demonstrations by several strategic manipulations regarding social media. Namely, the government allowed Facebook in Syria, inaccessible in the country before the revolution. As the activist explains, the Assad regime allowed Facebook after the realization of the fact that people still were using it through proxy servers, so it would be more useful for them to legalize this online social platform officially, allowing them to control it without circuitous ways after people would start using Facebook legally³ (Wahib, cited in Rodineliussen 2019). However, as the discontent of the people towards the regime was extremely strong and the revolutions in the other Arab countries gave the Syrian people courage and motivation to act, the preventive actions of the government to anyhow avert the same developments in Syria, proved to be predestined for failure. While the Egyptian uprising was put in the center of attention by the politicized Syrian media due to the political tensions between Mubarak and Assad, the Libyan revolution was far beyond the regime's interests, as the Syrian people observed Libya's totalitarianism essentially identical to theirs. The anger accumulated in the Syrian people with the al-Assad family's rule, authoring disappearance of more than 70000 Syrians, displacement of hundreds of thousands, murder of more than 40000 civilians, and imprisonment of an estimated 20000 people since taking power in 1963, created a momentum which could not be trampled easily. The famous slogan of the Arab Spring '*Al-Sha'ab Yurid Isqat al-Nizam*' (people want to topple the regime) approached Syria as well (Fares 2015).

Before the Daraa incident, which initiated the main wave of the protests culminating in the massive uprisings, first alarming signs for the regime appeared soon after the start of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. As Cajsja Wikstrom (2011), correspondent of Al Jazeera, reported on 4th of February 2011, several activists were organizing protests in the major cities of the country against the regime with the demand of 'freedom, human rights and the end to emergency law'

³ As a result, they still had to shut down Facebook in due course, as the spread of the protest through the social media turned out to be uncontrollable (Wahib, cited in Rodineliussen 2019).

through the social media, especially Facebook⁴. According to the news, these demonstrations were endorsed and planned mostly by the Syrians living outside the country, who were more or less secure from the strict responses of the Assad's secret police, such as, for instance, beating up and dispersion of 15 demonstrators in Damascus supporting the Egyptian mass protests by a group of 20 people disguised in civilian clothes, on 3rd of February. Activists and journalists interviewed by Al Jazeera acknowledged the struggles existing in Syria. However, at that point, they did not see Syria as the next country joining the Arab Spring revolts. Assad himself, while interviewed about the ongoing protests in the region by Wall Street Journal in those days, called the period 'new era' in the Middle East, and recognized that reform was important in politics – however, 'not as important and urgent as the people waking every day and they want to eat, to have good health, to send their children to good schools', by this, emphasizing the significance of stability and economy (Assad 2011, as cited in Wikstrom 2011).

On 17th of February 2011, a spontaneous protest consisting of a few hundred traders and other passersby broke out in Souq al-Hamidiya after a police officer assaulted a civilian in the area. It was one of the first times the demonstrators chanted 'The Syrian people are not to be humiliated', becoming later one of the most spread slogans of the Syrian Revolution. This protest was monumental by its meaning as it became the first public gathering in Syria for decades not organized by the leader of the state for its personal political purposes. Furthermore, it was the first protest which was addressed and not repressed by the interior minister Saed Samour, who came to meet the demonstrators in person, making the demonstration historic in a symbolic sense (Turki, cited in Fares 2015). The unprecedented appearance of a high authority during the protest can be considered as a sign of the Syrian government realizing the possible outbreak of the massive riots in Syria, to be avoided at any cost. Whilst reporting about the first waves of the protests, Khaled Yacoub Oweis (2011), journalist of Reuters, titled

⁴ Interestingly, one of the most popular Facebook groups organizing these protests still exists and compared to approximately 13.000 likers in the beginning of February 2011, has 2,050,871 followers nowadays (<https://www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution?ref=ts>).

the article: *Fear Barrier Crumbles in Syrian 'Kingdom of Silence'*. Indeed, the ice of obedience had broken and the 'kingdom of silence' had started shaking with the voices of unheard, for the first time in the Baa'th Party's history.

The Syrian regime tried to prevent domino effect of the demonstrations but the first modest attempts of the protests still transformed into the massive unrest on 15th of March 2011, as a reaction to the security forces kidnapping and torturing 15 teenagers for their antigovernmental graffiti in Daraa, echoing the famous slogan of the ongoing revolts in the Middle East: 'The people want the fall of the regime'. The boys who wrote the motto of the revolts on a wall were 'beaten, electrocuted, burned and had their fingernails pulled out, prompting major unrest on 15 March' (Hasan 2019; Laub 2020). This day, considered as the outset of the Syrian revolution, became a monumental moment from where the civil riots and revolutionary resistance of the protesters in Syria turned into an irreversible process, impossible to halt by any violent means.

However, the Syrian government did not acknowledge complexity of the situation entirely, and continued hampering the riots with the known methods of repression and violence, no more feared as in the past by the revolting Syrian people. The oligarchic rule of the Alawite Assad family, in the original meaning of this term – a few ruling over the majority, aggravated the problem of religious sectarianism in multi-cultural Syria. Although, Assads were successfully manipulating with their affiliation to the minorities of the country by portraying themselves as defenders of the cultural and religious diversity. For this reason, in the beginning of the protests, religious and ethnical minorities such as privileged Alawites, Christians, Druzes and Kurds were reluctant in supporting the protestors to overthrow the regime, while keeping in mind that the future uncertainty, rise of Sunni fundamentalism, and possible political instability could undermine their social and political secureness in the country. These possible developments seemed more realistic and frightening looking at the Iraqi example as well. Similarly, apart from the religious and ethnic minorities, supporters of the regime included members of the upper and middle Sunni classes of the biggest cities in

the country, as dramatic political changes could have been detrimental for their wealth and positions in socio-economic life of Syria (Zisser 2012, p. 105). The government facing the first waves of the revolution heavily depended on these segments of the population as well as on the loyal to the ruling family political establishment. Nevertheless, socially and economically marginalized in decades people continued pressuring the government with ceaseless demonstrations. Their discontent by the regime's absence of desire to drastically reform the country towards more democratic order prevailed those feeling satisfied with the current rule or conformingly fearing the worse developments.

On April 29, the security forces of the Assad's regime arrested and killed 13 years old Hamza al-Khateeb in Saida, 10km east of Daraa. This brutal act of violence conducted by the Assad's authorities, spreading throughout Syria by means of social media immediately, became a breaking psychological moment, paramount in transforming the demonstrations into more aggressive and threatening to the regime riots. According to Al Jazeera, the child spent nearly a month in the custody of the Syrian security agencies, only had been returned to his family on 24th of May. The corpse returned to the family was full of 'the scars of brutal torture: lacerations, bruises and burns to his feet, elbows, face and knees, consistent with the use of electric shock devices and of being whipped with cable'. Furthermore, these techniques of torture have been documented by Human Rights Watch as being generally used in Syrian prisons during the 'bloody three-month crackdown on protestors' (Macleod & Flamand 2011).

The demonstration of remorseless approach of the Syrian security forces in halting the uprisings affected the protestors in several ways. On one hand, it was a clear sign exhibited by the regime that they would not back off and abstain themselves from any immoral measures under no circumstances. In theory envisaged by the government, this should have been a restraining factor for the rebels, making them to acknowledge the readiness of the security forces to defend the government at any cost. Yet, for the new generation, having not witnessed the Hama Massacre conducted by the Assad family, that level of brutality mistakenly seemed in the

past. So, the urge to revenge for the victims of the regime overshadowed the fear so diligently established in decades by the security forces. Thus, massive mobilizations continued unremittingly, and, chiefly, through two paths: at the local level, planned 'day-to-day protest' and at the cyber level, internet activists spreading the information about the demonstrations by means of social media. As a result, the uprisings enclosed the entire Syria, with hundreds of thousands protesting in the most of the cities and towns. The government and security forces, inexperienced in controlling unarmed, though unprecedented amount of masses, gradually lost control over quarters, towns, and cities: 'its security forces, lacking training and experience in crowd control, responded with excessive violence, multiplying its enemies and making funerals occasions for more confrontation' (ICG, cited in Hinnebusch 2019).

In order to put an end to the demonstrations, Assad's administration succumbed to the protests with several concessions. One of the most important from them was abolition of state of emergency in effect for almost 50 years, since 'Assad's Baath Party seized power in 1963 to justify arbitrary arrests and detention and a ban on all opposition' (Oweis 2011). After dozens of demonstrators were killed in the clashes with the security forces in Daraa, Assad sacked the governor of the town addressing one of the demands of the masses (Al Jazeera 2011). In response to the opponents' protests, Assad's government organized pro-Assad rallies with tens of thousands of civilians marching in Damascus and Aleppo. The demonstrators were chanting slogans such as: 'God, Syria and Bashar only' and 'We will sacrifice our lives and blood for you, Bashar'. In order to collect enough people for the rallies, the authorities gave school children day off and 'bank employees and other workers were allowed two hours to attend the demonstrations' (BBC 2011). This political move by the regime further expanded the existing gap between the people against and pro-Assad. In addition, in pursuit of the way outs from the crisis, the government tried to appease the protesting crowds with announcing the measures that would satisfy protestors' demands, including 'decrees to cut taxes and raise government workers' salaries by 1,500 Syrian pounds (\$32.60 US) a month, more press freedoms, increased job

opportunities and curbs on government corruption' (CNN 2011). However, the reforms promised by the regime were not sufficient to assuage the revolting masses that developed immunity for the government's deceptive pledges scarcely coming true. Regarding the regime's a priori doomed attempts to lure the protestors with the false promises, Fadwa al-Hatem (2011), The Guardian's Syrian columnist, observed that the most 'astonishing' aspect of these measures was hypocrisy of the regime mixing violent and peaceful policies to handle the crisis: 'on the one hand it wishes to be applauded for its 'bold' reforms and initiatives, while at the same time its feared security apparatus continues killing, arresting and torturing countless Syrian citizens'. As a consequence of this failed approach, the Syrian people revolting against the government did not seem to be stopped and seduced easily anymore, and the brutality utilized by the regime to save itself gave birth to more violence, finally shoving the situation to the edge of war.

By end of May, the number of casualties reached 1.062 people, while more than 10.000 protestors were arrested by the authorities. The use of repression and other violent methods to halt the protests by the regime had been condemned by the international community, especially the West. The regime faced the United States and European sanctions, 'including assets freezes, travel bans and arms embargoes on Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and other top members of the Baath party' (Al Jazeera 2011)⁵.

While writing about the possibility to prevent war on the stage of demonstrations, Lesch (2019) argues that one of the most tragic aspects of the conflict was the fact that unlike other leaders who were sworn from their positions during the Arab Spring, Bashar Al-Assad enjoyed enough level of popularity in the country to side with the protestors instead of confronting them, and by doing so, could avoid transformation of the uprisings into the bloody civil war. Although, unfortunately, Assad, presumably not without an encouragement of his loyal authorities and leadership of the state, opted for reassuring stability and control over the country

⁵ The International reaction on the Syrian protests will be more deeply assessed in the next chapters of the thesis.

by means of force and cold-blooded violence. Instead of sincerely recognizing socio-political problems and grievances of the Syrian people, the president decided to blame 'unseen forces of conspiracy'. For this reason, the regime decided to handle the crisis through security and military forces, following the old traditions of the *mukhabarat state*. This approach created a fertile ground for civil war, while Assad himself, had been convinced to some level that he was not only going into a conflict for his own survival, but for the survival of Syria as well. Therefore, as 'the regime crackdown hardened and peaceful protest was abandoned', the next months of the uprisings became more and more militarized. None of the parties willing to back off, progressively brought the country to the outbreak of the war.

As the uprisings progressed and transformed into more violent clashes, some of senior military and security officers started defecting to the opposition. Many soldiers and security servants refused to fire shots on the civilians, instead, joined them in the riots. In June 2011, armed rebellion in Jisr al-Shughour, Idlib province, became one of the pivotal moments for the transformation of the demonstrations into civil conflict. According to the report of the Institute for the Study of War, 'on June 4th, regime security forces positioned on the roof of the main post office fired at a funeral demonstration, leading angry mourners to set fire to the building, killing eight security officers in the process'. Later clashes caused death of twenty more soldiers of the security forces, headquarters of which had been overrun by the rebels (Institute for the Study of War, as cited in Holliday 2011, p. 21). As a result, along Deraa and Homs, Idlib province became one of the main epicenters of the uprisings, and marked first serious setback of the regime, actively starting to seek an assistance from international allies. On 29 July, the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), 'an organizational body to coordinate opposition military efforts', composed by the rebels and group of the defected officers officially attested that the country stepped into civil war. Along with the military faction created by the rioters, political opposition groups outside Syria established the Syrian National Council (SNC), a political counterpart of the FSA, which initiated efforts towards international recognition as a legitimate alternative to the Assad's

regime. By late summer and beginning of fall of 2011, the country had already been divided in fighting factions each of them supported by different international actors (Lesch 2019).

7 International Reaction to the Syrian Protests

Since the outbreak of the peaceful demonstrations, subsequently evolving into a war, Syria has become an important component of discordance and confrontations between powerful state-actors and international organizations. As the Russian actions towards Syrian conflict can be utterly comprehended solely through the international political prism, this chapter will briefly overview political stances and moves of the other arguably most crucial international actors on the issue of Syria, by that, building an informative background for the further analysis of the main topic of the thesis.

United States

At the international arena, the United States can be considered as one of the heaviest opponents of the Assad's regime, with the substantial assistance to the Syrian rebels and the Syrian Democratic Forces. In the first period of the demonstrations, the United States limited its policy regarding Syrian Crisis with the condemnation of the violence from both sides, the government and the protestors. However, as the protests progressed and the regime enhanced using brutal methods in quelling them, Barack Obama took considerably more stern position by expressing support to the Syrian people at first, and from August 2011, already officially demanding from Assad to resign (Radio Free Europe 2011; Brower 2011).

Before interfering in the Syrian civil war militarily in the later years, the policy revised by Donald Trump during his term, the Obama administration pressured the Assad regime by economic sanctions, political criticism on international arena, and

different types of material and political support of the opposition rebels and their factions. The use of chemical weapon by Assad's forces in 2013 against the civilians has become a 'red line' for the United States political leadership, which, led by Obama, asked authorization to the United States Congress to launch direct military operation in Syria for the first time. Thus, during the Obama's administration, the United States' policy towards the regime could be considered as clear and strictly adversary. However, Donald Trump's presidency has marked beginning of the controversial and at some level inconsistent approach towards the regime (Juul 2019; Lubold 2013; ABC 2018).

Iran

Along with Russia, Iran has been the biggest ally for the Syrian regime in their quest in preserving the power. As a historic partner of the Alawite Assads family, Iran has supported the regime from the start of the uprisings to the present war. In the first months of the demonstrations Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, left no doubt about the country's allegiance to the Syrian regime by blaming the United States and Israel in plotting the revolution: 'In Syria, the hand of America and Israel is evident. Wherever a movement is Islamic, populist, and anti-American, we support it' (Khamenei, cited in Abdo 2011).

Apart from the political support, from the phase of the demonstrations of the conflict, Iran has been supplying the regime with the necessary technological, military, police, security, logistical machines and specialists to quell the riots, including technological devices to 'to monitor e-mail, cell phones, and social media', or weapons and surveillance tools. Iran has continued supporting the regime on the world political stage with all the necessary military, security, intelligence and financial aids to preserve Bashar al-Assad in charge. Among the crucial aspects of military assistance to the regime has been the endorsement from Iran to the Iraqi Shi'a militants and the Hezbollah fighters to back Assad by combating in Syria (Fulton et al., 2013; Abdo 2011; Tisdall 2011; Sherlock 2014).

Turkey

Whilst being involved in the Syrian Civil War actively in political and military terms since the eruption of the war, Turkey sided itself among the opponents of the Assad regime. When Assad started brutal crackdown on the protestors in Syria, Turkey officially condemned the use of violence as a mean for crisis resolution. As the riots continued, and the regime did not abstain from using violent methods, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan publicly called Assad to resign: 'Without spilling any more blood, without causing any more injustice, for the sake of peace for the people, the country and the region, finally step down' (Erdogan, cited in Burch 2011).

In the first years of the conflict Turkey was militarily, financially and politically assisting Free Syrian Army to topple the regime. However, since late 2016 Turkish policy has shifted away from overthrowing Assad's government, mostly due to establishment of closer relations with Russia, Assad's biggest ally. From 2016 Turkey conducted several military operations in Syria, and focused on the goals such as 'blocking westward expansion of the American backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF); frustrating American military operations east of the Euphrates River; working through Russia to ensure that Syria remains a unitary state after the conflict ends; resettling displaced people in Turkish controlled territory in northern Syria' (Stein 2018; Fisk 2017; Wilks 2019).

China

In company with Russia and Iran, China has become one of the main international supporters of the Assad's regime. Even though unlike Moscow and Tehran, Beijing restrained itself from direct interference in the crisis, China's protection of the Syrian government on international level with the vetoes against the Security Council's condemning and anti-regime resolutions has been an important factor in

boosting Assad's positions outside the country (Al-Ghadhawi 2020). On the early stages of the conflict, 11th of October 2011, China vetoed the UN resolution against the regime, justified by the UN ambassador Li Baodong as a move opposed to an 'interference in (Syria's) internal affairs.' According to him, 'sanction or threat of sanction does not help resolve the question of Syria' but 'may further complicate the situation' (Li Baodong, cited in BBC 2011).

It should be noted that China has not changed its policy regarding the Syrian case since 2011 and vetoed several anti-Assad resolutions afterwards. By creating a certain 'anti-Western duo' in the UN Security Council with Russia, China exhibited its irreconcilability with the West imposed, perceived as hegemonic political agenda in international affairs. Furthermore, unlike Russia's strategic interests in Syria, China's motivation to back Assad lies in different calculations. Namely, by its vetoes and anti-Western position regarding Syrian turmoil, China demonstrated 'to the world that the country will take a more proactive approach in future international conflicts' (Wong 2012).

European Union

The position of the European Union towards the Syrian protests has been critical to the Assad regime since the utilization of the violent methods in order to stop the riots. On 22nd of March 2011, the EU strongly condemned the regime's crackdown against demonstrators resulting in casualties. The EU's foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton published a statement, noting that the EU: 'strongly condemns the violent repression, including through the use of live ammunition, of peaceful protests in various locations across Syria'. At that point of the riots, the EU was only demanding from the regime 'to listen to the legitimate aspirations of the people and address them through inclusive political dialogue', instead of the violent response (Ashton 2011). However, the tone and demands of the EU roughened along with the continuation of the brutality by the security forces, and finally

evolved into the calls for resignation addressing Assad, by declaring that he ‘had lost all legitimacy and had to step aside’ (Vogel 2011).

In June 2013 the EU introduced a new official strategy for Syria replacing the previous one crafted in 2007. The new strategy outlined the goals mostly focused on humanitarian assistance, peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction, without mentioning Assad, resignation of whom had been actively requested by the EU beforehand (Turkmani & Haid 2016).

United Nations

When in March 2011 the Assad’s security forces launched extensive crackdowns on the peaceful protestors, the UN voiced concern about the brutality against the demonstrators. The Secretary-General of the UN, Ban Ki-moon, noted that, ‘as elsewhere, it is the responsibility of the government in Syria to listen to the legitimate aspirations of the people and address them through inclusive political dialogue and genuine reforms, not repression’ (Ban Ki-Moon 2011). On 22 August 2011, the Human Rights Council established the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. According to the UN Human Rights Council (2019), the Commission has already produced over 20 reports, ‘in addition to numerous periodic updates, exposing human rights violations committed throughout the country based on interviews with over 6,000 witnesses and victims’.

In pursuit of the peaceful way out from the conflict, the UN Security Council adopted several resolutions condemning Assad regime, calling for ‘immediate end to human rights abuses’, and endorsing the Arab League peace initiative, most of them vetoed by Russia and China (United Nations 2011). Thus, the political disagreement on the issue of Syria between the big international state actors has made the UN’s aspirations in conflict resolution futile. For this reason, the UN’s main role since the eruption of the crisis in Syria has been chiefly humanitarian assistance and political support of the peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Arab League

Even though the Arab League condemned the brutal quelling of the protests by the regime since the beginning of the demonstrations, the international organization also tried to mediate with less success between the confronting factions. As a result of the dialogue between the organization and the parties of the Syrian crisis, the Arab League declared that 'Syria has agreed to end its crackdown on anti-government demonstrations, pull troops from the streets and release prisoners jailed during months of protests', although, these pledges from the regime have never been implemented in reality. For this reason, on 12th of November 2011, Syria has been suspended from Arab League (Reuters 2011; CNN 2011; Batty & Shenker 2011).

As the civil war in Syria continued, the Arab League still tried to mediate between the parties with peace plans, yet, unsuccessfully. In August 2013 the Arab League blamed Assad for using chemical weapon against the Syrian civilians in Ghouta. However, the organization positioned itself against military intervention in Syria by underlining that this type of operation could not be a proper resolution to the conflict, as only the United Nations' actions were able to bring peace to the country. As Assad regained its positions in Syria, the prospects of the country joining the organization again under the regime started to seem more viable (Al-Jazeera 2013; United Nations 2012; Middle East Monitor 2019).

8 The Russian Response to the Syrian Protests

If we attempt to comprehend the Russian reaction to the Syrian protests in protecting the regime, and conversely, the West's support to the opposition powers in overthrowing Assad in the historical context, quite a lot could be understood. However, this understanding would not be absolutely exhaustive as the Syrian

protests started in the light of the successful revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and, therefore, the main international actors had to hastily adapt to the newly emerging political realities in the Middle East. When Russia firstly faced the possibility of Assad's departure due to rising unrest, the Middle East already had not been the same as several months before. The revolutionary political changes in the region causing mental metamorphosis of the deeply dormant and violently silenced for decades people of the Middle Eastern authoritarian states would not leave Syria untouched (as we witnessed in the demonstrations chapter, after the chain of riots in other Middle Eastern countries start of the protests in Syria was just a matter of time, needing simply a trigger finally 'provided' by the security forces), so Russia was forced to react sternly, and most importantly - rapidly. It would be misleading to argue that if the Syrian protests had started before the Libyan or Egyptian ones, Russia would not have acted as it did, because the Russian stance and policy on the issue of Syrian demonstrations was a product of profoundly ingrained geopolitical framework regarding the country and the region in general. However, the fresh examples of Egypt, Tunisia and especially, Libya, shaped many crucial aspects of the Russian reaction. In this sense, Russian response to the processes was a certain mixture of the protracted national interests in Syria, dictating how Russia should position itself regarding the crisis, and the adaptive policy to the expeditiously fluctuating circumstances, changing on a daily basis. Compared to the Syrian regime and partnership with the Assad's family, Russian stand was not as rigid regarding other authoritarian rules in the region, so in the beginning of the Arab Spring the Kremlin acted more yieldingly - what appeared to be a mistake after undesirable developments in Libya. Therefore, if in Libyan case Russia did not stick to an invariable posture, even Medvedev calling Ghaddafi to resign at some point (Medvedev, cited in Ria Novosti 2011), with Syria the Kremlin adopted consistent policy from the moment of the first demonstrations.

When the protests in Syria started, the regime answering with brutal methods, Russia immediately made clear its position that it would not side with the West pushing Assad to stop the violence, the statements which later transformed

into the calls for resignation. Russia was not denying that the demands from the protestors should have been met through the reforms undertaken by the Assad's government, although, strictly opposed ouster of the regime or any type of military intervention, even the one potentially legitimized by the UN Security Council, as it happened in Libya. This stern position became evident from the first stages of the protests when intensified demonstrations were addressed with ruthless quelling from the regime, causing waves of concerns and condemnations in the West. In turn, amid steadily hardening tone towards Assad in the West, Alexander Pankin, Russia's deputy permanent representative to the United Nations, declared in late April 2011, that 'the current situation in Syria, despite the increase in tension, does not represent a threat to international peace and security', therefore, intervention in Syria would be 'an invitation to civil war' (Pankin, cited in Freedman 2013, p. 203). By this statement Russia underlined that replication of the Libyan scenario, even though it was partially endorsed by the Kremlin itself with its stance against Gaddafi, would not be acceptable for Moscow anymore. The same narrative was maintained by the foreign minister of Russia, Sergey Lavrov, at the end of May, warning the United States and European countries that encouraging anti-government riots in Syria with the prospect of military support as in Libya was 'a very dangerous position'. Furthermore, Lavrov noted that Assad made steps towards reforming the country and the situation in Syria did not pose threat to international peace and security. On the contrary, due to the importance of the country in the Middle East 'destabilizing Syria would have repercussions far beyond its borders' (Lavrov, as cited in Meyer et al., 2011).

After failure in Libya, Russia wanted to dominate over the Syrian case, as the Kremlin would not let another Western-led intervention ending with an ouster of the regime, especially, in the historically closest ally state in the Middle East. For Russia, inherently opposing to the spread of the Western 'liberal democracy' agenda, be it by means of soft power, or frequently through forcible military methods, the realization of one more Western-led revolution resulting in toppling of the pro-Russian authoritarian regime would have meant geopolitical defeat, distancing the country from the initial goals in the Middle East, including curtailment

of the Western influence in the region, while parallelly advancing its own national interests in the strategically important area. In this sense, it appears that Russia might have been reluctant in several political moves confronting the West and many Middle Eastern countries but the Kremlin knew exactly what it did not want to witness as a result of the Syrian demonstrations - resignation of Assad. Fall of the regime in Syria could have caused at least one factual and one potential undesirable outcome for Moscow: Russia for fact would have lost its loyal ally in the region, and, per contra, it most probably would have found it difficult to maintain the same close ties with the Western-supported, victorious opposition after their arrival in power. However, despite this clear understanding of the desired development and strong posture against the Assad's overthrow, it was impossible to deny the regime's apparent violence against the demonstrators, so Russia had to adopt a public stance that on the one hand would condemn the regime's brutality, call for the end of violence and speeding up of the reforms, but on the other hand would resist any foreign intervention, while cunningly underlining that violence was used not only by the regime but by the protestors as well. When the Syrian security forces sieged and bombarded more than hundreds of thousands of protestors, killing more than hundred people, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement recognizing that more than 100 people were killed by the Syrian forces, although, the statement also underlined that according to the official sources, 'eight policemen were killed in Hama in clashes with armed extremists', therefore, 'the use of force both against civilians and against members of governmental agencies is unacceptable and must be discontinued forthwith', concluded the MFA (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2011). This statement clearly demonstrated that Russia would generalize the use of violence from both sides in order to portray the situation as mutually violent and evade the regime from full responsibility. For this reason, the Kremlin, while being unable to fully deny the obvious and well documented brutality utilized by the Assad's security forces⁶, urged both the Syrian government and opposition 'to

⁶ According to the Human Rights Watch, during the Siege of Hama 'the killings occurred as a result of heavy machine gun fire from military vehicles, which sometimes penetrated people's

exercise maximum restraint' and launch 'a comprehensive responsible and meaningful dialogue to address the pressing domestic political, economic and social problems in the interests of all Syrians' (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2011)

Russian support for Assad was crucial in avoiding the fall of the regime not only domestically but most importantly on the international arena. On 27th of February 2012, Vladimir Putin published an article where he stressed that the Arab Spring, initially perceived with a hope for positive change, soon appeared to be passing around 'a civilized scenario' - that's why foreign interference in support of one side of a domestic conflict as that happened in Libya, ending with 'slaughter' of Gaddafi, 'gave developments a negative aura', and therefore, 'no one should be allowed to use the Libyan scenario in Syria' (Putin 2012).

Having said this in 2012, in fact, Russia acted with the same idea already in 2011. On 4th of October 2011, France, Germany, Portugal and United Kingdom drafted a Security Council resolution condemning 'grave and systematic human rights violations' in Syria, and warning of 'options for action to be considered against the Government of President Bashar al-Assad if the unfolding situation warranted, including measures under the section of the United Nations Charter that allowed sanctions'. This resolution, which could have played a detrimental role to the regime on international arena, has been vetoed by Russia and China with the arguments that the Council should have prioritized dialogue between the parties above the threats of sanctions, while collapse of President Assad's Government would destabilize the region (United Nations 2011).

In the meantime, Russia tried to pressure Assad to implement political changes that would satisfy demonstrators and keep the favored regime in power (Osborn 2011). Analysis of the demonstrations clearly exhibit that there were virtually no reforms apart from the resignation that would persuade the rioters to

homes or hit them randomly; shootings by security personnel manning checkpoints or by snipers when residents tried to travel in or out of cordoned-off neighborhoods; or during arrests' (Human Rights Watch 2011).

stop. This apparent reality, which became more and more evident as the demonstrators did not stop filling the streets after series of authorities firing or constitutional changes making the country look more democratic, would not have been unknown for Russia, actively engaging in the crisis. Thus, Russia's demands to Assad to speed up the reforms seem to be constituted as a façade for the international community that the Kremlin in fact did realize the need of the reforms and legality of people's discontent, while, simultaneously, being a signal to the regime that more effective, decisive and astute measures were needed. In this sense, a Russian envoy, Mikhail Margelov, hosting the opposition leaders in Moscow in the middle of the protests in Syria, appeared as an alarming sign for the regime that they might have fallen out of Russia's favor. In addition to the possible frustration of the regime, Margelov noted at the meeting that 'leaders come and go, politicians come and go, but for Russia there remains a single reliable and trusted friend: the Syrian people', which sounded like Russia was softening its unconditional support to the regime (Margelov, cited in KyivPost 2011).

In fact, Russia never really considered giving up on Assad, as once supporting him under the criticism of interventions and violation of sovereignty abandoning him would have meant one more significant geopolitical and ideological defeat on the foreign stage⁷. This potential development, a certain blow to Russia on the international arena, could have brought disastrous results domestically likewise, as it would have been perceived as a weakness of the regime inside Russia itself. Hence, all the statements indicating a possible deviation in Russian support to the Syrian regime were merely political maneuvers aiming demonstration of pretentious backing of the protesters, while, in a parallel way, assisting and strengthening the regime to stay in power. Regarding this issue, Freedman (2013, pp. 206-208) argues that another explanation of the Russia's duplicitous policy in this certain period of the protests, strengthened by Medvedev's

⁷ According to Souleimanov & Dzutsati (2018), the fear of 'a lost war' and its domestic consequences still drives Russia to stay in Syria, the situation described by the authors as 'a strategic trap'.

statement that 'if the Syrian leadership is incapable of conducting reforms, it will have to go' (Medvedev, cited in Freedman 2013, p. 206), might have been the Kremlin's attempt 'to salvage its reputation in the Sunni Arab world', fiercely opposing the Assad regime in Syria: 'by backing Syria, it was alienating most of the Sunni Arab world, especially the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), led by Saudi Arabia'.⁸ Also, Russia was preparing for alternative developments - if Assad would not be able to hold its power, the Kremlin would need to be in good terms with the former opposition, by that time in charge instead of the Ba'ath party.

Having all these in mind, Russia backed the Arab League's resolution of the conflict that called for dialogue and excluded the possibility of the foreign intervention, so rigorously confronted by Moscow. Lavrov (cited in Freedman 2013, p. 207) clearly underlined that Russia was supporting the plan as it was calling for a dialogue between the Syrian government and the opposition, and most importantly, it had an 'aim of taking the path of conciliation without any external interference'. In the meantime, Assad not only eased its repressions on the demonstrators in Syria but increased the severity of the crackdowns to the higher levels, without any consideration of human rights, making any type of even artificial negotiations between the parties unrealistic. Moscow could not play the role of mediator that aspired to bring peaceful resolution to the crisis anymore. Russia was forced to abandon its pretentious gambling and fully devote itself to the position intrinsically taken since the beginning of the protests - fully supporting Assad: 'when the Arab League, witnessing Assad's accelerated crackdown, suspended Syria's membership, Lavrov called the suspension 'incorrect' and blamed the United States and NATO for it' (Freedman 2013, p. 207)

Thus, the Russian full support to Assad has become a relief to the regime that did not find itself confronting the whole international community, as it happened to Gaddafi, subsequently losing his personal war against all. Despite the formal expressions by the Russian side on the concerns about human rights violations, Assad knew and felt from the dawn of the protests that he was not alone

in this battle for survival. This crucial support from Russia was containing both practical and mental aspects, and with the exacerbation of the situation it has become even greater. The necessary diplomatic shield covering the Syrian regime from sanctions, military interventions, critical resolutions, and other leverages of international pressure, has been bolstered with supplies of weapons and ammunition. A Russian naval flotilla visited the Russian base in Tartus, and Russian ships provided the regime's security forces with necessary armament. At that point, it became clear that Assad, with the help of Russia, survived the uprisings phase of the crisis and was ready to fight further, already in an imminent civil war - where the Russian political support and officially requested by the regime military intervention in 2015 aiming liquidation of the extremists (Mcdonell et al., 2015) played even greater role in keeping Assad's government alive.

9 Why did Russia Succeed in Saving the Assad's Regime from Collapse?

On 16th July 2016, during the interview with NBC Nightly News (available on YouTube), Bashar al-Assad (2016), while asked about the Russian intervention as a breaking point in turning the civil war in Assad's favor, agreed with the interviewer with the words: 'definitely, the Russian support of the Syrian Army has dipped the scales against the terrorists. It is [a crucial factor], it is definitely. At the same time, Turkey and Saudi Arabia has sent more troops since that Russian legal intervention started. In spite of that, it [Russian assistance] was the crucial factor.' Indeed, in this case, it is difficult to argue with the president Assad that Russian diplomatic and military support has been one of the most principal factors in saving Assad's regime, if not the most. Since the start of the unrest in Syria, Russian backing of the regime has become instrumental in making Assad resistant to the public uprisings. From political and diplomatic support in the beginning of the protests, to financial and military assistance as the demonstrations escalated into the armed combats, Russia endorsed the regime in practically every aspect

needed. In the interview with the NBC, Assad emphasized that advancements of the Syrian government's positions in Syria has been multifactorial. It would not be exaggerated to assume that Russian input in every possible factor enhancing the regime's status in the conflict has been of paramount importance. Apart from the diplomatic protection, it should not be neglected that this vigorous commitment to the Syrian regime contains substantial financial sides as well, costing Russia around a billion dollars a month to conduct airstrikes against the Assad's opponents (Saunders, cited in Souleimanov 2016, p. 113). Given the disastrous condition of the Syrian economy because of the war and subsequent short of funding to the Syrian army, we can easily assume that Assad would not have been able to undertake such expensive and difficult military operations on his own without adequate financial and technical assets. With the insufficient leverages and lobby influence, if not for the support of the allies orchestrated by Russia, the regime would not have been able to turn the situation on international political arena in its favor either. Russia infiltrated the Syrian state military and political institutions on every level, the depth of relations and the levels of cooperation between the two governments reaching the highest peak since the Soviet times. In this sense, Russian success in keeping Assad in charge has been greatly facilitated with its strong positions inside Syria itself and the rich political experience and intelligence the Kremlin possesses in the country. These elements constructed a fruitful background to assist the regime in all the vital directions. The full cart-blanche and freedom of actions in Syria granted by Assad to Russia, in addition with the historically strengthened positions in the country and the great knowledge of its internal political peculiarities, made the Kremlin not simply a foreign assistant with limited capabilities but practically a domestic power operating from inside with full array of benefits the local regime owned. While the opposition forces were chiefly assisted from outside with plethora of logistical obstacles, Russia basically played on the home-ground against the Western-supported opponents, having full control and access to the entire state apparatus. This crucial factor further enabled Russia to reinforce the regime in multitude segments. As a result, the intersection of both important aspects, on the one hand Russia being

able to freely act from inside of Syria as a practically domestic power, and on the other hand Russia's readiness not only partially but fully aid the regime in all the critical spheres from political to military one constructed the indispensable base for achieving the main goal - retaining Assad in power, which, as it turned out, inescapably meant transformation of the protests into a civil war in Syria.

As it has been mentioned in the theoretical part of the literature review, according to Regan (2014), there are three main types of interventions in civil wars: external diplomatic interventions, military interventions, and economic interventions. In this sense, while publicly fighting against the Western-led intervention and the liberal democratic agenda of the forcible regime changes orchestrated from outside, Russia interfered in the Syrian internal affairs on every stage of the conflict, from the demonstrations to the war, with assistance to the regime in 'state capturing' against the people's will. This interference on every stage of the crisis has proven to be vital in achieving main goals in Syria. By protecting Assad, Russia intervened in the Syrian domestic affairs against the protestors brutally suppressed by the regime, which lost its legitimacy once started firing shots on its own people with violation of the universal human rights. It would be erroneous to argue that destabilized Syria is in Russia's primary interests. However, given Russian endeavors to keep Assad in power at any cost, we can assume that Russia prefers Syria in war but with Assad over peaceful Syria but without him, and what's most undesirable - with a leadership of a pro-Western or Islamist party. Successful intervention on every phase of the crisis to avoid this possible development speaks of this extra motivation Russia has in Syria. For Russia, Syria, as one of the most loyal allies not only in the region but in the entire international arena, is much more vital than for the West, including the United States. This extra motivation is not simply a motivation without further actions but a strong stimulus forcing Russia to act more decisively and committedly, even closing its eyes on the apparent human rights violations from the regime, either totally ignoring them or calling them fake news and fabricated footages by the Western intelligence and media units. Indeed, as Souleimanov et al. (2018) argued, Russia might have been fallen into a strategic trap without knowing exactly

what can be considered as Russian victory in Syria. However, keeping status quo in Syria is already a victory for Moscow - a victory which needs to be regained on a daily basis. In addition, the future of Russian operation in Syria indeed might be blurred as it is unclear at this stage when the Kremlin will be able to calmly abandon the policy of complete interference in the internal affairs of Syria knowing that its position in the country is not under threat anymore - although, Moscow knows exactly what would be undesired developments of the events, and avoiding these developments is already a geopolitical win. In this sense, the vivid awareness of what Russia does not want to see in Syria is strong enough for the country to put much more effort in keeping Assad in charge than his opponents on international stage have done so far. In other words, the greater motivation of Russia to prevent the ouster of the regime as a catastrophic development of the conflict, facilitated much more decisive and resulting response of the country than its opponents on every stage of the crisis, from the beginning to the present. And the fact that Russia started actively working on the Syrian case since the start of the demonstrations, not only after escalation of the riots when saving Assad would have been already late, has proven to be pivotal in achieving the most tangible goal so far. Achieving this goal by assisting and supporting Assad since the start of the demonstrations facilitated the transformation of the demonstrations into a war as strengthened Assad became able to resist the riots more fiercely. For Russia, the main facilitators of the war still remain those powers who opposed the regime, and not Russia, Iran or China that helped Assad to withstand uprisings even into a war.

Speaking of extra motivation of Russia as one of the reasons behind its successful commitment in retaining Assad in charge, we should not neglect internal factors pushing the Kremlin to act more vehemently. Examining Russian involvement in the Syrian Civil War, Souleimanov et al. (2018, p. 48) observe that 'it is a well-known phenomenon in international-relations theory that rulers are likely to face domestic revolt after a lost war abroad'. This general statement is especially accurate for Russia-type authoritarian regimes that base their reputation and popularity rather on state's greatness and mightiness on international arena than preserving democratic values and guaranteeing social wellness inside the

country. For the Kremlin, this concept of *greatpowerhood*, providing legitimation for the government in the eyes of public with the regime's strength beyond the state, is an essential cornerstone for remaining popular among people. Concurrently, according to the polls, majority of the Russian population also considers that Putin's one of the main achievements so far as a president was restoration of Russian status as *velikaya derzhava* (Great Power) in the world (Levada, cited in Reshetnikov 2018). Thus, for Putin, achieving designed goals in the Syrian Civil War was not a simply ordinary foreign affair, it was a representation of his own power as a forceful commander leading Russia on the international arena while vigorously withstanding the Western hegemony. Once Russia backed Assad at dawn of the crisis and activated whole nationwide propagandist media demeaning the opposition forces, failure in keeping Assad in charge would have been perceived domestically as a weakness of Putin who at that times was already facing waves of demonstrations at home (Elder 2011). Contrary to the Western governments supporting ouster of Assad, the Russian authorities felt this extra domestic pressure driving them to commit and act more expeditiously and effectively.

Explanation of the Russian success in saving Assad from ouster, and by that facilitating escalation of the crisis into a war, would be deficient without particular emphasis on other concomitant, uncontrolled by Russia factors bolstering the Kremlin interests in Syria. One of these aspects helping Russia to succeed in Syria, which has already been touched indirectly in the previous chapters, was the uncoordinated, ineffective, and non-unanimous policy by the foreign opponents of the regime, especially the West. Whilst Russia started undertaking its policy in Syria from the very beginning of the demonstrations by interfering almost in every aspect, with the support of Iran and China, the West did not manage to come up with a coherent and compelling plan that would force Assad to leave the post. As Trombetta (2016, p. 38) observes about the EU measures towards the Syrian crisis, 'the perception of the EU policy from the outside is that there is a wide gap between rhetoric and the EU's real ability to support and intervene', and, therefore 'the various EU institutions have to improve

their coordination in assessing, planning and implementing action'. As for the UN Security Council's anti-Assad resolutions condemning the violence and crafting peace plans, they have been vetoed by Russia and China, and the Western states have been left without this leverage as well. Apart from this factor, at least other two crucial independent aspects coincidentally or deliberately helping Russia in saving president Assad can be detected.

First of all, as the discussion in the previous chapters has demonstrated, opposition of the regime has been eclectic and fragmental, without a particular leader who would be perceived as an alternative candidacy instead of Bashar al-Assad, and who would be able to gather masses around him not only as fierce opponents of the regime but passionate supporters of a new, real substitute. For the Syrian public that did not experience real democracy in the history at any point of the state's existence, a charismatic and, to some degree, an authoritarian leader is a necessary condition to triumph in riots. This is a template how the regimes have changed in the Middle East in the past, and moreover, this is how revolutions mostly work. Such a leader was absent in the Syrian case. As Lesch (2013, p. 82) points out, this was one of the reasons why Syrian people hesitated to protest in the beginning of the processes in the Middle East: 'as long as Assad remained the only viable alternative in the minds of many Syrians, they were not going to participate in an opposition movement that could destabilize the country'. Many of those reluctant people witnessing crowds of compatriots and brutal response from the regime still marched to the streets after all, motivated and passionate to change the violent regime in the country. However, the lack of unity, leadership and a particular leader who would be trusted by the people still remained as an obstacle, and this weakness was efficiently used by the regime. Not only the opposition lacked leadership, but in and outside of the country it has been 'for most of 2011 and into 2012 uncoordinated and often divided' (Lesch 2013, p. 84). Without doubt, this particular important aspect played in favor of Bashar al-Assad and Russia, trying to keep him as a president of Syria.

And secondly, Russia would have been left completely alone and in a quite complicated situation on international level in backing Assad without Iranian and Chinese substantial political, diplomatic, financial and military support. Strength of Russia's strategic positions in Syria was never under question, therefore maneuvering inside Syria would not be difficult for the Kremlin in any case. However, the same cannot be said about Moscow's prospects internationally, where most of the powerful actors were against the Assad's regime. For this reason, the Iranian and Chinese support has become critical for Russia on international level as the Kremlin was not left alone against the rest of the world. Iran and China, two solid international players that share Russia's anti-Western hegemony sentiments, made their strong positions clear since the beginning of the crisis in Syria.

China's policy regarding the Syrian case has been 'cautious and pragmatic', although, Beijing strictly followed Russian discourse that the fate of Syria should be determined by the Syrian people, and 'Syria's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity must be respected and upheld'. Most importantly, in a practical sense, China backed Russia in a diplomatic battle about Syrian crisis on international arena by vetoing various 'anti-regime resolutions' at the UN Security Council, usually crafted by the Western states (Cafiero 2020).

As for Iran, Tehran's support for Assad was not limited only by diplomatic or humanitarian assistance as in China's case. In fact, Iran's backing of Assad can be assessed as an unequivocal and a multifaceted support, which included diplomatic, political, military, intelligence and financial aspects. As Fulton et al. (2013) put it, 'Iran has conducted an extensive, expensive, and integrated effort to keep President Bashar al-Assad in power as long as possible', including assistance in security and intelligence issues, conducting military trainings, providing military supplies, sending Shi'a militants to protect the regime, and helping the Syrian forces through the military and political resources of Hezbollah. It would be exaggerated to argue that Iranian and Chinese support for Russia in helping Assad's government was the breaking point in saving the president's post

but, by following their political agendas and foreign interests, these two countries indeed provided substantial endorsement for the Kremlin to pursue its goals in Syria.

Another important factor in play, being one of the primary reasons of the Russia's strong mobilization and efficiency, was the Kremlin's experience gained from the Libyan case. When Muammar Gaddafi declined to resign and instead started thwarting demonstrations brutally, the West headed an anti-regime resolution at the UN Security Council, with the aim to defend civilians from the government's violent response. According to Suslov (2012, cited in Dannreuther 2018, p. 5), Medvedev 'was inclined to back the Western initiative believing it was critical to preserve the 'reset' agenda'. Finally, after discussions and signs of hesitations in the Russian political establishment, Russia abstained from Resolution 1973, by that giving NATO green light to initiate air strikes and provide military support to the opposition, 'leading to the overthrow of the Libyan regime and the execution of Muammar Gaddafi' (Dannreuther 2018, p. 5).

This final outcome of the Libyan protests and the course of development of the Arab Spring was not perceived positively by then prime-minister Vladimir Putin, who in his article evaluated the processes in strictly critical manner: 'instead of the affirmation of democracy, instead of defending the rights of the minority, there was increasingly the expulsion of the enemy, coups d'état, where the domination of one side becomes an every aggressive domination of the other' (Putin 2012). Furthermore, as Stepanova (2016, cited in Dannreuther 2018, p. 6) points out, the tragic fate of Ghaddafi was regarded by Putin as 'an exemplar of Western duplicity and illegality'. Therefore, Russia learned its lessons from the Libyan case, and once the processes started escalating in Syria, the Kremlin was already well aware that succumbing to the Western-imposed policy would not bring favorable results to the country's foreign interests in the Middle East, especially in a partner state of strategic importance. Stemming from these calculations, while simultaneously

being confident with the military capabilities⁹, Russia committed to protect Assad's regime from the start of the protests in Syria. With this powerful shield, Assad became able to withstand internal and international pressure, finally pushing the country to the bloody civil war.

10 Conclusion

The thesis dealing with one the most tragic political developments of the 21st century attempted to answer on the existing issues of high relevance around the topic through exhaustive analysis of the events. From the literature and primary sources about the Syrian Civil War it is apparent that Russia with its political, financial and then military support played a crucial role in keeping Bashar al-Assad in power, the basis that in turn largely caused transformation of the protests into the lingering civil war. The conducted research distinctly displayed that without Russian support Bashar al-Assad would not be able to hold onto his power, and most certainly would have repeated Muamar Gaddafi's facing the domestic protests and foreign pressure without such a powerful ally. In this sense, Russia with its assistance and protection of Assad domestically and on international arena facilitated escalation of the situation in Syria and further transformation of the uprisings into a civil conflict. Solely with the backing of such powerful state actors as Russia would Assad be able to resist the demonstrations, and thanks to the diplomatic shield provided by the Kremlin, avoid strict international sanctions or interventions - the circumstance later publicly admitted by Assad himself. However, while focusing on the transformation period of the protests into the war as a crucial

⁹ The August 2008 Russian Military Intervention in Georgia demonstrated serious shortcomings of the country's military competence. This has become a signal for the Russian government that modernization was necessary, finally starting with a military reform plan (2008-2020). When the revolutionary processes started in Syria, Russia was already feeling much more confident with its military capabilities, giving the Kremlin possibility to act more sternly (Haas et al., 2020).

moment of the Assad's survival, and in reverse, assessing the Assad's survival as a crucial aspect of the war outbreak from the demonstrations, the main research questions of the thesis lied in revealing how and why did Russia manage to triumph in saving Assad, and meticulously explaining the pivotal factors behind this geopolitical success.

In order to locate the thesis in the theoretical context and obtain well-grounded answers on the research questions through qualitative analysis of the available sources, the dissertation has been structured in following way: firstly, to familiarize readers with the topic, place the thesis in the abundant literature around the Syrian Civil War and identify the gaps the dissertation would try to fill up, it introduced the ongoing scholarly debate around the topic. The literature section itself has been divided in two parts. The first part - mostly discussing the theoretical spectrum of the dissertation, namely, foreign interference and interventions in the domestic affairs of a country as a general conceptual framework of the thesis, and the second part - more precisely overviewing the scholarship about the Russian involvement in the Syrian Arab Spring and consequent civil war. The scrutiny of the scholarship facilitated the exposure of the parts of the existing literature which could have been further enriched with thorough qualitative research of the Russian involvement in the Syrian crisis. Thus, the thesis aimed to comprehensively examine and offer complete recount of the crucial factors regarding the Russian support to the Assad regime in Syria, which, in its turn, bolstered the process of escalation of the demonstrations into the conflict.

While progressively approaching the main discussion of the study, the thesis provided essential recount of the historical and political context of the Russian impact on the Syrian Civil War in two directions. Firstly, in the chapter about the Russo-Syrian relations the dissertation focused on the necessary review of the historical ties between two countries in order to display and accentuate Russian positions in the Syrian political life, as well as, by demonstrating the historic partnership between the states during and before Bashar al-Assad, make clear why would Russia be interested in engaging with the Syrian crisis so

emphatically. This section of the thesis emphasized the historically embedded geostrategic importance of Syria to Russia and the decades old partnership between the Kremlin and Assads family.

Furthermore, before focusing on the Russian involvement part in the Syrian crisis again, the next chapter introduced the essential political background of the demonstrations in order to make evident the inner nature and causes of the Syrian protests, crucial in understanding the whole picture of the crisis. The examination of the background of the protests made understandable that the motivation behind the uprisings of the Syrian people was rooted deeply in the lingering social and political struggles with the Assad's authoritarian regime. This was followed with a detailed account of the processes leading the uprisings transform into the war. This particular sector of the thesis was paramount in explaining how and why inherently peaceful demonstrations became violent, finally resulting into the war. Among other reasons, the resistance and unwillingness of the demonstrators to give up, and the government's violent response to their protests, were put in the center of attention. The general assessment of the riots shifting into the conflict also depicted a complete picture of the events, which facilitated in comprehending the following chapters focusing chiefly on the Russian role in this transformation, as a main discussion of the thesis. Finding answers on this question was further assisted with the brief overview of the international reactions on the Syrian protests, which aimed putting the Russian response in the international context. Additionally, this part of the dissertation demonstrated how did the Syrian case become an important point of collision between the powerful state actors of the international politics.

On the basis of the essential background for the further discussion created by the previous chapters, the final two chapters of the dissertation predominantly concentrated on the Russian role in keeping Bashar al-Assad in charge and by that, playing its role in augmenting the crisis into the conflict. Through the qualitative analysis and comprehensive scrutiny of the available sources and evidences, the study found out that the reason behind Russia's success in keeping

Assad in charge and by that, facilitating transformation of the demonstrations into the war was a combination of various crucial factors: (1) historically, Russia had strong positions and valued experience in Syria, enriched by the robust partnership with the Assad family since the Soviet times, giving Moscow full cart-blanche in actions, which, altogether, helped the Kremlin to successfully navigate through the crisis; (2) lack of unity, organization and absence of a strong leader in the opposition as an alternative to Assad; (3) strong international allies like Iran and China - the first, helping Assad from the moment of the protests in security, intelligence, financial, political and military terms, and the second, under the ideology of the dictated anti-Western liberal democracy, siding with Russia in vetoing the UN Security Council's resolutions and easing international pressure on the regime; (4) the realization of the mistakes with the Libyan case, and on the basis of this lesson, further avoidance of the same blunders with Syria; (5) inconsistent, incoherent and in some places indecisive response from the West; (6) extra motivation of the Russian political elites to save themselves inside their country by not losing an external war; (7) fully committing to the survival of the regime on every phase of the crisis, starting from the first demonstrations to the civil war.

The study demonstrated that mixture of the above-mentioned factors chiefly ensured Russian accomplishment in salvaging Assad's regime from certain collapse. Russia achieved its aim and kept the loyal dictator in charge, at least for now. However, it has been nine years since the outbreak of the protests in Syria, seeking dramatic democratic changes, and what we see now barely can be called achievement. Instead, the violently suppressed for decades people sacrificing themselves for the country's brighter future found it dragged into the greatest civil war and chaos Syria has ever witnessed. Taking under consideration current unenviable situation and confronting interests of various internal and external powers, unfortunately, it is beyond anyone's capability to foresee when will Syria finally be able to live in peace. The humanitarian catastrophe, severe violation of human rights, migration crisis, raised terrorism, poverty, collapse of the state, and other countless devastating consequences of the Syrian Civil War should make

the policymakers and academics to reconsider their attitude and actions towards the resolution of the bloody conflict. In this sense, by focusing on its eruption phase through examination of the causes and facilitator actors, this thesis plays a humble role in raising awareness about the crucial aspects of this particular war, and similar internationalized civil conflicts in general. Further studies in this direction, spotlighting the crucial factors behind the escalation of the domestic crises would enrich the scholarship with clearer understanding of the essence of the conflicts leaving incurable marks on people's lives.

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