COVERAGE OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT IN THE RUSSIAN AND AMERICAN MEDIA: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract: Mass media in Russia and in the United States have different strategies and goals when it comes to communicating messages about the Syrian civil war. In order to explore the subject, we analyze the techniques employed by the respective national mass media with special interest paid to how the two governments are willing to influence their citizen’s public opinion, manipulate their perception of the civil war and propagate certain ideas.

Key words: mass media, Syrian civil war, discourse, public opinion, manipulation.

“Quatre journaux hostiles sont plus à craindre que mille baïonnettes.”
- Napoléon Bonaparte

“For hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets.”
Napoleon Bonaparte

The on-going political crisis in Syria has resulted in a significant amount of media coverage by international journalists. Coverage has both defended the Bashar Assad government’s legitimacy, while at the same time supported the political aspirations of rebel forces. These differing political positions reflected in media coverage can often be traced back to larger state actors, in this case foreign policies of Russia and the United States. In this article, the language used by media to cover the Syrian conflict will be discussed in order to suggest that mass media is used to manipulate their readers’ perceptions in order to reflect certain foreign
policy positions. This discussion will lead to the conclusion that the media is, in fact, “the fourth estate” – in other words a political actor in the dissemination of either Russian or American views on the Syrian conflict. Last but not least, it will be suggested that the media coverage of the Syrian civil war is non-objective as it most often contains the subjective analysis, interpretations and evaluations of events.

The interrelation of Russian and American public opinion on Syria and its coverage in the national media is examined within the framework of critical discourse analysis, whose principles were introduced by the Frankfurt school critical theory\(^1\). The Frankfurt school and the most prominent followers of the critical discourse analysis, Teun A. Van Dijk and Norman Fairclough, recognized the construction of a social reality by means of directed information\(^2\). The discourse found in media coverage of Syria for the month of September are viewed here as both the cause and the consequence of social processes and patterns in Russia and in the US that comprise national concepts of power, history and ideology\(^3\). The media, in turn, controls and manipulates public opinion with the help of implicit and explicit language tools. These tools are:

1. The use of various lexical stylistic devices such as similes, contrasts and metaphors including the “strict father morality” metaphor\(^4\);
2. The use of pragmatic devices: presuppositions, irony;
3. The use of rhetoric devices in the reported speech;

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\(^1\) FOWLER, Roger; HODGE, Bob; KRESS, Gunther; TREW, Tony Language and Control. London, 1979, p.224.
\(^3\) FAIRCLOUGH Norman, KRESS Gunther. Critical discourse analysis: manuscript. - 1993.
\(^4\) Strict father morality metaphor originates from the metaphor of the nation or the world as a family. The government of a particular country is thought to be responsible for supporting and protecting the family as well as for setting and enforcing strict rules for the behavior of children with rewards and punishments. See: LAKOFF, George: Moral politics: how liberals and conservatives think. – 2 ed. Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 2002, p.451.
4. Grey propaganda (usage of information gained by unknown resources with uncertain reliability\(^5\));

5. Value-based differentiation of information (the author provides value judgments for certain aspects of the issue);

6. The use of figures and statistics for reasonable argumentation.

Firstly it seems important to refer to the conflict itself because its complexity is one of the main factors which has caused the inconsistency in coverage by various national media outlets. In the fall of 2011 the conflict between Bashar Assad government’s forces and various oppositional groups turned into an armed confrontation. Syria plays an important role in the region and, as a result, the world powers (and their media) quickly became involved in this newest conflict as its outcome could shift the balance of power in the Middle East. The situation in Syria is generally characterized by large scale destruction and the high number of casualties, which have been caused by the military incursions of both the government and by rebel forces. This civil war cannot be described as an ordinary two-sided conflict due to the heterogeneity and disunity of the oppositional forces, which are accompanied by religious disagreements. Countries that support the rebel opposition include the USA, Turkey, Canada, Saudi Arabia, and France. Those countries that argue against any intervention from the outside include Russia, China, India, Indonesia, Argentina, Brazil, and Italy.

Although examples of the political discourse on Syria can be readily found in print, radio and television media, for our purposes we will concentrate here on reputable newspapers: Rossiyskaya Gazeta (Российская газета), Izvestiya (Известия), Kommersant (Коммерсантъ), New York Times, Daily Mail and Washington Post. Our investigation will focus on the period from 1 September to 30 September 2013 – exactly one month. The articles of the mentioned period were

\(^5\) КАРА-МУРЗА, Сергей: Манипуляция сознанием, с.128.
chosen deliberately as a representative discussion of the Syrian conflict within the international community, which reached its highest point, attracting intense public scrutiny in support of and in opposition to Western military intervention. During this media campaign, the relevant international political actors were trying to use the most powerful arguments to convince their citizens about the correctness of their political positions.

As stated, the Russian and American media reflect the foreign policies of their political leaders. In this way, the governments project their political positions, thereby winning the “hearts and minds” of their citizens before official political actions are taken. One might suggest that this is like laying the foundation before a structure is to be built – governments argue their position in the media before they officially announce a policy initiative. Thus the American journalists have given the arguments for the intervention to overthrow Assad’s regime, trying to draw attention to the cruelty of the conflict in Syria and the humanitarian crisis: they call Bashar Assad’s government the “murderous regime of Bashar Assad” that “uses deadly, banned sarin gas on people” so that the US needs to organize “a targeted strike against Syria’s Bashar Assad for his criminal use of chemical weapons” (Daily Mail) or reference their own humanity: “the Pentagon is planning strikes that would minimize risk to civilians” (New York Times). Correspondingly in the press release posted on the Department of State website John Kerry, the Secretary of State, claims that “the Assad regime unleashed an outrageous chemical attack against its own citizens...a dictator and his family’s personal enterprise, in their lust to hold onto power, were willing to infect the air of Damascus with a poison that killed innocent mothers and fathers and hundreds of their children...”. Accordingly the Department of Defense posted the following news proving the serious intentions of the US: “The commander in chief noted he has asked U.S. military forces to stay ready to conduct the limited strikes he has proposed, which
would aim to reduce Assad’s chemical weapons stocks and means of delivering them without putting U.S. boots on the ground.”

Russian articles in their turn articulate the intentions of the Russian authorities to protect Syria from any military operations from the outside, placing the emphasis on the negative results of past Western interventions, suggesting that another intervention can only provoke a more dangerous confrontation and political crisis in the Middle East. For instance, in a Rossiyskaya Gazeta article devoted to a US Congressional session, readers are reminded of the Second World War: “8 December 8 in 1941 both houses of Congress supported America's entry into World War II. It was the last time those lawmakers almost unanimously (with only one vote against) supported the Secretary of State’s military plans and this led to the beginning of hostilities. What consequences will the voting in the Congress for support of a military strike against Syria bring this time? The beginning of a Third World War?” Russian newspapers also often praise the Syrian government: “the Syrian government complies with the terms of the chemical weapons agreement” (Kommersant) or “Syria did not respond to US provocations which tried to locate Syrian radar systems” (Rossiyskaya Gazeta). Indeed, the Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, told at the press-conference after the negotiations with John Kerry that “the armed intervention scenario will result in new wave of terrorism in Syria and in neighboring countries, as well as in a sharp increase in the flow of refugees”. The US accusation of Syrian government regarding the use of the chemical weapons is considered to be a provocation, as Sergey Lavrov puts it an official interview: “the countries which politically, financially and militarily sponsor the opposition are responsible for ensuring that the opposition did not try to put their hands on any stockpiles of chemical weapons, get it from somewhere else and arrange provocations inside Syria to put the blame on the government and thus try to provoke external blows...”. Lastly, at
the UN Security Council meeting Lavrov clearly states that the prerequisite for the successful resolution on Syria is considered to be the Damascus’ “real willingness to cooperate faithfully and constructively with international inspectors”.

However, in order to win the wide support of the public, it is not usually enough to express this or that political position. The media has to manipulate the reader’s perception of events with a subtle form of ideological pressure using various language tools to exert a powerful, yet imperceptible influence; various stylistic, pragmatic, rhetoric and other devices are employed to involve readers mentally and emotionally.

The examples of lexical stylistic devices can be found practically in every text. In a Rossiyskaya Gazeta article the American intervention is followed with a metaphor “the shady enterprise invented by Americans”. With this characterization the author tries to raise doubts about the purity of purpose and in the professionalism of the American government. The Washington Post in its turn is trying to question the competence of the UN-affiliated Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons using the metaphor “the obscure agency” and a simile comparing its headquarters with “a building in The Hague that looks like a round of Edam cheese missing a wedge”. A strong simile is also used in the Daily Mail with the reference to John Kerry’s statement: “Bashar Assad has now joined the list of Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein in gassing his own civilian population”. With the help of this comparison, the American newspaper (as well as John Kerry and the State Department) are willing to create a monstrous image of Bashar Assad and to call for his public condemnation. An interesting simile can be found in Rossiyskaya Gazeta that calls France the jackal from the Mowgli stories and the USA with the tiger Shere Khan. Thus the author hints to the reader that in the story about Syria, Russia is Mowgli who has to defeat the tiger and his sneaky servant. Middle Eastern countries like Qatar in their turn are metaphorically called
“dwarfs bloated with petrodollars” assuming that they have nothing but oil and want to corrupt all of the countries as well as to pay to the Congress for the intervention into Syria. American newspapers as well as American political leaders carry on the tradition of “strict father morality” metaphors: “Retired Army Gen. David Petraeus has stepped out in favor of a military intervention that would punish Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime for allegedly using chemical weapons against its own people” (Daily Mail). The reader feels that there exist some family relations between the countries, whereby the United States is the strict father and Syria is the disobedient child. Now, the “child” has no options, other than to be severely punished and to be given a lesson, aka undergo a military intervention and certain sanctions.

In the next example, the author uses both presupposition and irony in contrasting a “tiny” room with an “enormous” portrait (obviously like those of Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin or Mao Zedong in reference to earlier personality cults) to make an impression that Russia has not yet abandoned its communist and authoritarian past: “a tiny Russian meeting room at the United Nations, with an enormous portrait of President Vladimir Putin on the wall” (Washington Post). With this trick, the reader is made to think about the regime in Russia and the unlimited power of Putin. Russian journalists can also be ironic; one of the articles in Rossiyskaya Gazeta is entitled “Obama burned up the peace pipe”. As everybody knows, the correct variant of the idiom is “to smoke the peace pipe”, which means to stop arguing or fighting in order to find a peaceful resolution to conflict, basically what the countries are supposed to do when they what bring a confrontation to an end. But here the author expressly replaces the word saying that the American administration wants actually to make war.

Likewise, for the sake of persuasion, various rhetorical devices are employed (mostly while reporting some official’s speech). Trying to convince its readers of
the necessity for military intervention the *Daily Mail* cites a persuasive Secretary
John Kerry who effectively used repetitions, parallel constructions and gradation:
“*Each day that goes by, this case is even stronger. We know that the regime
ordered this attack . . . We know where the rockets came from. We know where
they landed. We know the damage that was done afterwards... This is not the time
for armchair isolationism. This is not the time to be spectators to a slaughter.
Neither our country nor our conscience can afford the cost of silence*”. The author
of *Kommersant* uses irony and rhetorical question in his own words trying to
persuade more people about the failure of American policy: “*The Nobel Peace
Prize laureate reported to his political opponents what he had done for the
preparation of a military operation against Syria... Will the Swedes ask him this
time how the use of "Hatchets" against Damascus correlates with the advancement
of international diplomacy?*”

The purpose of the so called “grey propaganda”, which is also used by the
media to manipulate public opinion, is to impose the acceptable interpretation of
the events by the usage of both reliable and unreliable sources. Very often the
media falsifies the facts and provides subjective analysis of information. That can
be proved by the fact that the articles are accompanied by references to various
unknown sources. For example, the Russian press refers to “*a Russian diplomatic
source in Geneva*, “*secret services*, “*local observers*” as well as to some
nongovernmental law firms and organizations. Somehow the editors of the Russian
*Kommersant* managed to get “*the transcript of a telephone conversation between
two Syrian officers*”. In American newspapers, mostly the well-known leaders and
officials are quoted with rare exceptions (the *Daily Mail’s* reference to a Syrian
nun, the *Washington Post’s* to some “*Arab analyst*”). Though the information
could be authentic, the attentive reader begins to doubt the informant. Once the
readership realizes that the print media is manipulating political views, even the most reputable papers with respected reports will be treated with suspicion.

Value-based differentiation presupposes that newspapers are in the position to provide relative values to issues, thereby imposing their own principles of right and wrong on the readership. They also try to highlight the aspects that correspond to the government’s political views and at the same time ignore the issues which can undermine their position. Thus in Rossiyskaya Gazeta, the hesitation of Congress to execute military intervention in Syria is interpreted by Russia as a prolonged business negotiation between the rich Middle East oil powers and American congressmen. The assertion is that a corrupt American government is motivated only by profit and that their interest in the region is financed by rich petrol states. This kind of speculation can be found in the American print media as well. In The Washington Post, Russian policy in the Middle East is reduced to the “fulfilling the vacuum”: “Two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union affirmed the United States as the dominant power in the Middle East, a resurgent Russia is seeking ways large and small to fill the vacuum left by the departure of American troops from Iraq...” Similarly, the author evokes memories of the Cold War to further support his argument. Although Russia has its own goals and expectations in the region, Russia’s participation in the Syrian conflict is more complex than “fulfilling the vacuum left after American troops” and certainly should not be described in Cold War rhetoric in order to influence the American reading public.

The use of figures and statistics by different national newspapers reveals both the manipulation and the bias of information. Numerical information usually makes the points of view appear more credible and important than it might be in fact. Expectedly, Russian and American media are reporting different figures, trying to support the different conclusions they draw on the Syrian conflict. For
example, the Russian *Kommersant* states that there were 300 people killed as a result of a chemical attack, referring to French intelligence data while the *Daily Mail* claims that there were 1429 casualties. Even if we do not know the truth, these figures indicate the misuse of data either by one or the other side. A high number of casualties advocates for the immediate military intervention of outside forces while a relatively small number of casualties suggests that the Syrian people should be left alone to solve their own problems. Thus, there is much more to reveal in the statistic than either the statistic can tell or the presenter of the statistic wants the reader to know. A lot of American articles refer to the number of children killed (400 most often) which undoubtedly causes a negative reaction in readers towards the Syrian government. The American press uses significantly more statistics, often provided by dubious sources: “and as the fighting raged Wednesday in Maaloula, more than 80 frightened villagers took shelter in a convent that's already home to 13 nuns and 27 orphans” (Daily Mail); “the United States has identified at least 45 sites associated with Syria’s chemical weapons program and has suggested that half of them had “exploitable” quantities of chemical warfare materials” (New York Times).

In conclusion, this brief look at much larger issues suggests that national media influence public opinion and in this way propagate the corresponding foreign policy intentions of their respective governments. Given that most information on the Syrian civil war remains classified, the authority with which newspapers provide strong opinions would suggest some sort of an alternate reality. Within this parallel reality, media outlets depict the military conflict in Syria in ways that are logically sound, morally and politically correct, and, most certainly, guided by the policy directives of their respective governments.

According to Walter Lippmann, the author of the well-known "Public Opinion", it is impossible to obtain truthful information from the media. In this
article we suggest that the coverage of the conflict in Syria in the Russian and American media is non-objective, based on the assumption that everything that the readership learns is received through the prism of the judgments, opinions and views of either the source of information or politically motivated officials. Information is altered more than once on its way to the reading public, especially the coverage of military conflicts.

After all, scholars say that "Any political action is prepared, accompanied, controlled with the language and undergoes the influence of the language»⁶. As a result, we might identify language as a political actor, in as much as the press, as early as the beginning of the 19th century, was called the “fourth estate” by Thomas Babington Macaulay. Today language is being used as a mighty weapon to fight for power. As it can be inferred by this article, both the Russian and American media are trying to apply this tool to the fullest extent and thus to rationalize their actions, fears and aspirations by transforming the conflict into reality.

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