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**New voices in
cultural relations**

Navigating the chemical weapons taboo

Russia's response to the OPCW
investigations in Syria, 2013–2022

Jessica Russell

Foreword

I am delighted to present the first edition of our new series *New voices in cultural relations*. In much of the British Council's research portfolio, we focus on the views of young people and bringing to the fore voices that are not often heard in decision making circles. Like the Cultural Relations Collection, from which this new series evolved, the central aim here is to showcase fresh perspectives and innovative thinking, fostering a platform for emerging scholars from the UK and beyond.

I'm especially pleased that we brought this collection to life in partnership with BISA, the British International Studies Association. Given the complex and uncertain times in which we live, the field of international studies is more important than ever, helping us to explore and understand the intricacies of global interactions.

This series of essays was gathered through a competitive process. It asked course leaders in the international relations discipline to put forward outstanding Masters-level dissertations that made an original contribution to their field, either through providing new scholarly insight or offering a new policy direction.

The diversity of the contributors to this series is another aspect we celebrate. Our postgraduate authors come from varied cultural and academic backgrounds, each bringing a distinct perspective to their research. This underscores the idea that international relations is not a monolithic field, but one that thrives on diversity and inclusivity.

I must first congratulate our winner, Louise Sherry, for her dissertation reflecting on the state of climate justice and COP27. The judging panel noted that 'not only does the dissertation tackle a subject of crucial global importance, it has the clear potential to transform thinking on this topic, and, one would hope, policy.' In that regard, it is a worthy winner of our prize.

The remaining essays, each commended by the judging panel, cover topics as varied as the role of information warfare in the global system; the resistance movement in Myanmar; a critique of the 'war on terror'; and an approach to inclusion and anti-discrimination in the EU drawn from interviews with Black politicians in Europe.

I would invite you to engage with the essays with an open mind. The ideas presented here are thought provoking and you may disagree with what you read. But it is in that spirit of engagement and dialogue that we hope that *New voices in cultural relations* will inspire you. And that it will also inspire not only current scholars and practitioners, but also future generations of international relations students, to continue exploring and contributing to this ever-evolving field.

I would like to thank our partners, BISA, for their constructive and energetic approach to this work. Thanks also to my colleagues Reesha Alvi and Purti Kohli for their excellent project management from start to finish. I'm grateful to my colleagues Amanda Alves, James Carey, Dr Lisdey Espinoza, Michael Peak and Devika Purandare for their thoughtful evaluations of the first round of submissions, and to the academic panel – Dr Nancy Annan, Dr Yoav Galai, Dr Victoria Hudson and chair Prof Kyle Grayson – for making the difficult decision of selecting the winner and commended essays.

Lastly, I extend my thanks to all the students who submitted to the competition, and my congratulations to our winner and to the runners-up. It was a pleasure to read your work, albeit a challenge to make judgments on such a diverse range of scholarship, but it is clear that the future of international relations is in good hands.

Christine Wilson
Director Research and Insight
British Council

Introduction

About New voices in cultural relations prize

The British Council works to support peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide. We do this through a range of cultural relations activities which aim to create greater mutual understanding, deeper relationships, and enhance sustainable dialogue between people and cultures.

In this spirit, the British Council in partnership with BISA (The British International Studies Association) have created the New voices in cultural relations Prize for Master's students writing a dissertation in the area of international relations.

The objective is to provide new scholarly insights or propose new policy directions that contribute significantly to the field of international relations. The prize recognizes and promotes exceptional academic achievements that have the potential to influence attitudes, practices, or policies in international relations.

Universities were invited to put forward the strongest Master's dissertation in the field of international relations. Entries were first assessed by an international committee within the British Council and then by a panel of judges convened by BISA.

The publication of this essay is reward for this being one of the shortlisted entries. All shortlisted authors also received 12 month's BISA membership.

About the essay

Navigating the chemical weapons taboo: Russia's response to the OPCW investigations in Syria, 2013–2022

Jessica has explored Russia's strategic information campaign in response to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons' (OPCW) investigations into chemical weapons (CW) use in Syria. Her analysis argues that Russia's response is influenced by the CW taboo and its normative effects on foreign policy behaviour. Jessica analysed statements posted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to construct her argument.

The judging panel noted:

'This dissertation presents a clear, coherent, well researched, and well-structured account of Russia's response to investigations into the use of chemical weapons in Syria. In doing so, it advances valid and important arguments about the role of information warfare in the global system.'



Abstract

This thesis investigates Russia's information campaign regarding the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons' investigations into the use of chemical weapons in Syria. It examines how Russia's response is constructed by the chemical weapons taboo and the normative effects this imposes on foreign policy behaviour. Through a constructivist lens, it conducts a hybrid thematic analysis of 100 statements posted by the MFA. Results found that Russia navigated the constraints of the chemical weapons taboo by framing its response in technical and logistical terms whilst situating the issue in a broader narrative against Western-imposed normative order, constituting a values-based self-image.



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List of Abbreviations

CSP	Conference of the States Parties
CW	Chemical Weapons
CWC	Chemical Weapons Convention
FFM	Fact-Finding Mission
IIT	Investigation and Identification Team
IPI	International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons
JIM	OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OPCW	Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
RT	Russia Today
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States of America



Introduction

“I am convinced that it [the chemical attack] is nothing more than a provocation by those who want to drag other countries into the Syrian conflict, and who want to win the support of powerful members of the international arena, especially the United States.”¹

President Vladimir Putin, 2013

By March 2011 protests in Syria had rapidly escalated into a full-scale uprising, culminating in the bloodiest of the conflicts associated with the revolutionary wave of the Arab Spring.² As an ongoing and multifaceted conflict, the civil war has had immeasurably negative regional and global implications.³ The United Nations (UN) now says over 300,000 people have been killed in the more than decade-long conflict.⁴ Moreover, since the conflict's earliest years it has had a corrosive effect on the West's relations with both Russia and China.⁵ Throughout the war the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has been accused of various crimes against humanity.⁶ The first rumours of chemical weapons being used in Syria occurred in late-2012. Shortly after, President Obama issued his 'red line' comment, threatening Syria that his military calculations would be dependent on the use of CW.⁷ After months

of allegations and suspicion, in August 2013 an attack of at least twelve sarin-filled rockets on Ghouta confirmed without doubt the first significant lethal use of CW by a state in warfare in over a quarter-century and since the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) entered into force in 1997.⁸ In response to the Ghouta attack the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed Resolution 2218 and demanded that the Syrian government destroy its chemical stockpiles, weapons, and production capacity.⁹ Syria then acceded to the CWC in September 2013 and by June 2014 the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) announced that it had shipped Syria's declared CW out of the country for destruction.¹⁰ The OPCW is the implementing body for the CWC, overseeing the global endeavour to permanently and verifiably eliminate chemical weapons.¹¹ Despite the apparent disarmament success, CW attacks continued to be documented and over the course of the Syrian civil war research has found there to have been at least 336 CW alleged attacks, and around 98 percent of these attacks have been attributed to the Assad regime (see Appendix 1).¹² CW face one of the most robust normative structures in the international system, and there is a well-developed set of mechanisms, spanning more than a century, to deal

1 "Syria: Regime 'Ready To Retaliate' To Strike," World, Sky News August 31, 2013.

2 Greg Simons, "Syria: Propaganda as a Tool in the Arsenal of Information Warfare," In *The Sage Handbook of Propaganda*, ed. Paul Baines, Nicholas O' Shaughnessy and Nancy Snow (London: Sage Publications, 2019), 448.

3 Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis," *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 795.

4 Louise Loveluck, "Syrian army responsible for Douma chemical weapons attack, watchdog confirms," *The Washington Post*, January 27, 2023.

5 Ted Galen Carpenter, "Tangled Web: The Syria Civil War and Its Implications," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2013): 7.

6 Michelle Bentley, *Syria and the chemical weapons taboo: Exploiting the forbidden* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 44.

7 White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps," *The White House: President Barack Obama*, August 20, 2012, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps>.

8 Catherine Jefferson, "Origins of the norm against chemical weapons," *International Affairs* 90, no. 3 (2014): 647; Stewart M. Patrick, "Insight: At Stake in Syria – the Chemical Weapons Taboo," *Middle East Voices*, August 25, 2013; Richard M. Price, "Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 4, no. 1 (2019): 37.

9 United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2118 (27 September 2013), S/RES/2118, 2; Human Rights Watch, *Death by Chemicals: The Syrian Government's Widespread and Systematic Use of Chemical Weapons* (United States: Human Rights Watch, 2017), 1.

10 Mallory Stewart, "Symposium on New Challenges in Weapons Inspection: Defending Weapons Inspections From the Effects of Disinformation," *American Journal of International Law* 115 (2021): 107.

11 "About Us," *About Us*, 2023, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://www.opcw.org/about-us>.

12 Tobias Schneider and Theresa Lütkefend, "Nowhere to Hide: The Logic of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria," *Global Public Policy Institute* (2019): 3; Also See "Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012–2022," *Arms Control Association*, May 2021, accessed May 8, 2023, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity#2022>.

with chemical war crimes.¹³ The history of chemical warfare, its prohibition, and the origins of the CW taboo have been extensively covered in academic literature.¹⁴ As the use of CW sparks a particularly intense moral revulsion, the international response and debates about Syria amongst the global community have at times focused heavily on this specific issue.

Rebecca Hersman and Suzanne Claeys write that 'today's shifting security environment has revealed emerging challenges to and increased pressure points on the ways in which norms, taboos, denial of benefit, and deterrence might restrain future chemical weapons proliferation and use.'¹⁵ Crucially, international efforts to prevent CW proliferation and use now take place in an information warzone.¹⁶ This has especially been the case in the Syrian Civil War as videos of alleged CW use seem to be part of propaganda campaigns on both sides of the conflict.¹⁷ Furthermore, the complete politicisation of the issue has led to the obstruction and frustration of CW investigations led by the independent OPCW.¹⁸ Russia allied itself with Syria early in the conflict and has responded to the CW accusations with a full-scale information campaign aimed at shielding Assad, confusing Western public opinion and systematically attacking authoritative

information and institutions.¹⁹ This unprecedented polarisation of international institutions and political manoeuvring has wide-reaching consequences and the underlying motivations of Russia's information campaign speak to the geopolitical lines and broader concerns related to the Syrian conflict.²⁰ Most clearly, it threatens to undermine the OPCW's effectiveness in resolving CW use as well as unravel decades of successful work eliminating the global CW stockpiles.²¹ Not only has the Syrian case challenged and changed the purpose of the OPCW, but it has also broken the long-standing consensus on CW elimination and opened the organisation up to intense politicisation and information attacks.²² Additionally, these systematic information attacks have implications for international norms and taboos. As Richard Price notes, 'Russian President Vladimir Putin rejected assigning responsibility to the Assad regime, but he also did not use the occasion to conventionalize CW. Rather, Putin participated in a discourse that regards CW as sufficient an aberration to warrant unusual interventions.'²³ As such, Russia's actions demonstrate how an actor can challenge the international system whilst upholding, but ultimately navigating and manipulating such a robust norm.

13 Rebecca Hersman, and Suzanne Claeys, "Rigid Structures, Evolving Threat: Preventing the Proliferation and Use of Chemical Weapons," CSIS Briefs (2019): 3; Brett Edwards and Mattia Cacciatori, "The Politics of International Chemical Weapon Justice: Syria 2011–2017," *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, no. 2 (2018): 280–281.

14 See Christopher W. Blair, Jonathon A. Chu, and Joshua A. Schwartz, "The Two Faces of Opposition to Chemical Weapons: Sincere Versus Insincere Norm-Holders," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 66, no. 4–5 (2022): 677–703; Michael Bothe, "Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction," UN Audiovisual Library of International Law, September 3, 1992, accessed May 7, 2023, [https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/cpdpsucw/cpdpsucw.html#:~:text=Chemical%20weapons%20are%20munitions%20and,cause%20death%20or%20other%20harm](https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/cpdpsucw/cpdpsucw.html#:~:text=Chemical%20weapons%20are%20munitions%20and,cause%20death%20or%20other%20harm;); Kai Ilichmann and James Revill, "Chemical and Biological Weapons in the 'New Wars,'" *Sci Eng Ethics* 20 (2014): 753–767; Vladimir Pitschmann, "Overall View of Chemical and Biochemical Weapons," *Toxins* 6 (2014): 1761–1784; Richard M. Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997); Richard M. Price, "A Genealogy of the Chemical Weapons Taboo," *International Organisation* 49, no. 1 (1995): 73–103; Edward M. Spiers, *A History of Chemical and Biological Weapons* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010); Nina Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use," *International Organisation* 53, no. 3 (1999): 433–468; Ahmet Üzümcü, "The Chemical Weapons Convention – disarmament, science and technology," *Anal Bioanal Chem* 406 (2014): 5071–5073; Jean Pascal Zanders, "International Norms Against Chemical and Biological Warfare: An Ambiguous Legacy," *Journal of Conflict & Security Law* 8, no. 2 (2003): 391–410.

15 Hersman and Claeys, "Rigid Structures, Evolving Threat," 4.

16 Hersman and Claeys, "Rigid Structures, Evolving Threat," 5.

17 Rene Pita, and Juan Domingo, "The Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syria Conflict," *Toxins*, no. 2 (2014): 392.

18 On OPCW procedure see: Tatsuya Abe, "Challenge inspections under the Chemical Weapons Convention: between ideal and reality," *The Non-proliferation Review* 24, no. 1–2 (2017): 167–184; Una Becker-Jakob, "Countering the Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria: Options for Supporting International Norms and Institutions," *EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium*, no. 63 (2019): 1–16; Hana Martinková and Michal Smetana, "Dynamics of norm contestation in the Chemical Weapons Convention: The case of 'non-lethal agents,'" *Politics* 40, no. 4 (2020): 428–443.

19 Gregory D. Koblenz, "Chemical-weapon use in Syria: atrocities, attribution, and accountability," *The Non-proliferation Review* 26, no. 5 (2019): 590–591; Julien Nocetti, "Dazed and Confused: Russian 'Information Warfare' and the Middle East – The Syria Lessons," *EUROMESCO Brief*, no. 93 (2019): 1.

20 Simons, "Syria: Propaganda as a Tool in the Arsenal of Information Warfare," 448.

21 Becker-Jakob, "Countering the Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria," 1–2; Brian Whitaker, "Syria, Russia and the politics of chemical weapons," *Al-Bab.com*, July 12, 2019, accessed June 26, 2023. <https://al-bab.com/blog/2019/07/syria-russia-and-politics-chemical-weapons>.

22 Adaku Jane Echendu, "Combatting Chemical Weapon Disinformation," *Academic Letters* (2021): 1–6.

23 Price, "Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo," 41.

The issue of CW use in Syria is no stranger to academic research and has been extensively covered in International Relations and Security Studies. The field is well positioned to understand Syria's political motivations behind the use of this technology as well as the opposing responses and policies of the international community. In addition, significant work has been undertaken to understand the meaning and construction of the CW taboo during the conflict, though scholarship has tended to focus more on the foreign policy of the United States.²⁴ However, despite a number of studies, both academic and journalistic, acknowledging and mapping Russia's information attacks on CW investigations in Syria, there remains a notable gap regarding the theorising of this intricate campaign against the OPCW and by extension its relationship with international norms and the geopolitical agenda.²⁵

This disconnect forms the foundation of this thesis, which aims to explore the complexities of Russia's information campaign and its impact on the broader international order. It hopes to bring together the literature on the Syrian conflict, the CW taboo, international normative order, and Russian foreign policy to produce a rich analysis. The central research question of this thesis is 'How does Russia's information campaign, regarding CW investigations during the Syrian civil war, 2013–2022, navigate the CW norm to advance its geopolitical objectives?' Within this, the thesis explores three sub-questions: What key themes or narratives does Russia employ when discussing CW use in Syria? How does Russia use the issue of CW to present itself as an international actor? As a result, what are the implications of Russia's

information campaign on the CW norm and how it functions in international politics? Multiple scholars have investigated whether the Syrian case has harmed the CW taboo's strength.²⁶ As Price suggests, throughout the information attacks Russia did not choose to outwardly conventionalise CW in any way.²⁷ Indeed the analysis found that Russia went to great lengths to reassert its commitment to the taboo. This thesis acknowledges this research and therefore goes a step further, to explore how Russia continued to support Assad whilst navigating this taboo discourse, even in the face of so many accusations. To investigate these questions the thesis adopts a constructivist theoretical framework and conducts a qualitative thematic analysis of 100 statements posted on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (MFA) website between 2013 and 2022. It is important to note that this thesis does not seek to debate whether CW attacks took place in Syria, or whether such attacks were committed by the Assad regime. It is not designed as an argument in favour or against the diplomatic positions adopted by political actors involved in the conflict, nor to judge the inconsistencies and tensions of these positions.²⁸ Instead it seeks to understand how the Russian position was constructed and the implications of this on the maintenance of the CW norm.

The structure of this thesis is as follows: Chapter One will review the relevant literature to provide a foundation for the study. It will cover topics such as the use of CW in the Syrian Civil War, Russia's role in this

24 For example: Michelle Bentley, "Strategic taboos: chemical weapons and US foreign policy," *International Affairs* 90, no. 5 (2014): 1033–1048; Mohammed Samiei, and Janice Webster, "Hypocrisy & Norm Enforcement: US Responses to Chemical Weapons Allegations against Iraq and Syria," *Middle East Critique* (2023): 1–23; Price, "Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo.," Edwards and Cacciatori, "The Politics of International Chemical Weapon Justice."

25 These works include: Brian Whitaker, *Denying the Obvious: Chemical Weapons and the Information War Over Syria*, Al-Bab.com, 2021, online E-Book edition; Radu G. Magdin, "Russian Propaganda in the Context of the Syrian Crisis," In *The Syrian Crisis: Perspectives on Development in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region*, 195–211 (Singapore: Springer, 2021); Matthew Levinger, "Master Narratives of Disinformation Campaigns," *Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 1.5 (2018): 125–134; Ümit Seven, "Russia's Foreign Policy Actions and the Syrian Civil War in the United Nations Security Council," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 24, no. 6 (2022): 896–911.

26 Edwards and Cacciatori, "The Politics of International Chemical Weapon Justice.," Hersman and Claeys, "Rigid Structures, Evolving Threat.," Price, "Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo.," Richard Price, "Weapons of Mass Destruction, Norms, and International Order: The Chemical Weapons Taboo in Syria," *New Perspectives* 26, no. 1 (2018): 38–44.

27 Price, "Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo," 41.

28 Edwards and Cacciatori, "The Politics of International Chemical Weapon Justice," 282.

contested international debate, the CW taboo, the geopolitical context, and Russian information warfare. Gaps in literature will be identified, ultimately justifying the thesis' research questions. Chapter Two traces the development of analytical frameworks for understanding the CW norm to situate the thesis in theoretical literature. It then introduces a theoretical framework of constructivism, specifically paying attention to the concepts of norms and taboos, identity, and language, and how these concepts can explain and shape a state's foreign policy behaviour. This is followed by Chapter Three which outlines the methodology of the thesis: a qualitative thematic analysis of 100 statements posted by the MFA between 2013 and 2022. Chapter Four will present the empirical results of the thematic analysis. Finally, Chapter Five will discuss these empirical results, examining the complex dynamics and themes of the information campaign, exploring how Russia navigates and manipulates the taboo against CW as well as how the CW norm may have constitutive effects on Russia's identity-making process. The thesis argues that unlike the US, Russia strategically did not invoke the emotional rhetoric attached to the CW taboo and instead used reflexive

rhetoric and strategic narratives, framing the issue in logistical terms and within a context of wider international norms like sovereignty, non-intervention, and legitimacy. This way, Russia could leverage universally accepted standards of behaviour to challenge and critique others. In doing this, Russia is both violating the norm, but simultaneously reasserting it. By constructing itself as a responsible state actor who advocates for transparency and constructive criticism, Russia's efforts to undermine the OPCW's authority and feed counter-narratives, seemingly in defence of the Syrian government, represent a greater challenge to the West's credibility and Western-imposed norms. The study argues that the Syrian case not only provides important insights into Russia's broader foreign policy thinking and positioning as a major power, but also has implications for understandings of norm effects and norm maintenance. The thesis ends with a concluding chapter which considers the study, its implications, and avenues for further research.

Chapter 1 Literature Review

The aim of this first chapter is to conduct a comprehensive literature review to fully contextualize and set up the research questions. The thesis asks: 'How does Russia's information campaign, regarding the CW investigations during the Syrian civil war between 2013 and 2022, navigate the normative constraints against CW to advance its geopolitical objectives?' Furthermore, the thesis has outlined three sub-questions: What key themes or narratives does Russia employ when discussing CW use in Syria; How does Russia use the issue of CW to present itself as an international actor; As a result, what are the implications of Russia's information campaign on the CW norm and how it functions in international politics? The chapter will engage with literature that has addressed the international, Western, and Russian responses to the CW issue in Syria. Finally, the chapter concludes by identifying the gap in the literature and therefore justifying the need for this thesis.

1.1 Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo

The Syrian conflict has been studied extensively in International Relations and Security Studies. The geopolitical importance of the civil war especially has been addressed from a variety of different theoretical and methodological standpoints.²⁹ However, the use of CW and its relation to the CW taboo more specifically has tended to remain within the broad umbrella of constructivist studies and qualitative methods of analysis, understandably, given its focus on norms, narratives, and rhetoric.

One of the most pressing questions explored across the literature is where the Syrian case stands in the trajectory of the CW taboo, and whether Assad's indiscriminate use of these weapons has irreversibly damaged the taboo's strength. From a constructivist perspective, as in this thesis, the taboo ultimately underpins why conversations on Syrian conflict has, for many months at a time, been consumed by the issue of CW.

Various scholars have chosen the Syrian conflict as a case study through which to assess the strength of the CW taboo.³⁰ At first glance, it could be assumed that the continual use of CW by a state party to the CWC would undermine the strength of the taboo. Indeed, Brett Edwards and Mattia Cacciatori note that despite the repeated violation of such an internationally sacrosanct norm, the diplomatic discourse on the Syrian issue has increasingly been described as impotent.³¹ Similarly, Una Becker-Jacob highlights that the international community has yet to create accountability for the perpetrators of these CW attacks.³² This would lead to the conclusion that the taboo has been weakened as a result of a distinct lack of an international punitive response towards the beginning of the conflict. However, Price notes that in 2017, missile strikes on Syria marked the first time the world had witnessed a military response targeting a state following the violation of the CW taboo.³³ He also writes that the retaliatory missile strikes from the US, UK and France that followed in 2018 would give pause to any other potential government

29 For example: Juraj Medzihorsky, Milos Popovic, and Erin K. Jenne, "Rhetoric of civil conflict management: United Nations Security Council debates over the Syrian civil war," *Research and Politics* (2017): 1–10; Osman Şen, and Mehmet Şahin, "Miscalculation in Proxy War: The United States and Russia in Syrian Civil War from the Neoclassical Realist Perspective," *Akademik Bakış* 14, no. 27 (2020): 243–260.

30 Geoffrey Chapman, Hassan Elbahtimy and Susan B. Martin, "The Future of Chemical Weapons: Implications from the Syrian Civil War," *Security Studies* 27, no. 4 (2018): 704–733; Brett Edwards, and Mattia Cacciatori, "Syria and the Future of the Chemical Weapon Taboo," *E-International Relations* (2016): paras. 1–15, accessed May 5, 2023, <https://www.e-ir.info/2016/03/21/syria-and-the-future-of-the-chemical-weapon-taboo/>; Edwards and Cacciatori, "The Politics of International Chemical Weapon Justice,"; Price, "Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo."

31 Edwards and Cacciatori, "The Politics of International Chemical Weapon Justice," 280.

32 Becker-Jacob, "Countering the Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria," 1.

33 Price, "Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo," 37.

user of CW.³⁴ Moreover, these scholars have demonstrated that the widespread international condemnation and swift action by the UNSC did constitute a harsh response to the use of CW in Syria. Others such as Edwards et al. have focused on the effects of CW violations on disarmament regimes and global governance institutions.³⁵ Gregory Koblentz highlighted the importance of holding Assad's government accountable, stressing that this is central to the CWC's, and by extension the taboo's, legitimacy.³⁶ Although not perfect, the UNSC and OPCW can consider the Syrian disarmament process a success story.³⁷ Koblentz's article is valuable to this study as he pin-points an important stage in the OPCW's history, the introduction of an attribution mechanism, and begins to unpack the political challenges this created.³⁸

In line with his seminal genealogical approach to the CW norm, Price situates the Syrian case in a longer history of CW use. He argues that Syria's actions may embody a conscious attempt at applicatory contestation of the CW norm, namely testing the limits and boundaries of using certain chemical agents.³⁹ His article emphasises the importance of third-party reactions when assessing the strength of a norm, demonstrating that the CW norm remained strong because immediately after the violation, all major global powers supported Syria's accession to the CWC. When placed in a broader historical perspective, Price shows that the high-point of these third-party reactions mark an unprecedented raising of enforcement from the last previous violation of the CW taboo, by Iraq in the 1980s.⁴⁰ From a rationalist perspective, Geoffrey Chapman, Hassan Elbahtimy and

Susan Martin examined cases of Syrian CW use in the first years of the conflict and found that CW demonstrated limited military utility in Syria, both tactically and as a tool of civilian victimisation.⁴¹ They also argue that the costs, effort and involvement of the international community from using CW by far outweighs any benefits.⁴² As such, the article concludes that the Syrian case is unlikely to lead to increased proliferation and use of these weapons.⁴³

34 Price, "Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo," 37.

35 See Brett Edwards et al., "Meeting the Challenges of Chemical and Biological Weapons: Strengthening the Chemical and Biological Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Regimes," *Frontiers in Political Science* 4, (2022): 1–15; Wissam Aldien Aloklah, "International Efforts Against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria: Is There Hope for International Justice?" *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 20, no. 3 (2022): 541–569.

36 Koblentz, "Chemical-weapon use in Syria."

37 Edwards, and Cacciatori, "Syria and the Future of the Chemical Weapon Taboo," para. 2.

38 Koblentz, "Chemical-weapon use in Syria," 590–591.

39 Price, "Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo," 38.

40 Price, "Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo," 49.

41 Chapman, Elbahtimy, and Martin, "The Future of Chemical Weapons," 704.

42 Chapman, Elbahtimy, and Martin, "The Future of Chemical Weapons," 704.

43 Chapman, Elbahtimy, and Martin, "The Future of Chemical Weapons," 733.

Following a constructivist perspective, Bentley's book, which analyses the American foreign policy towards Syria, argues that the CW taboo inherently is not 'good'.⁴⁴ In fact, she asserts that the taboo can exacerbate a conflict and does so by skewing understandings of international security, establishing chemical arms as an exclusive focal point and misinterpreting conflicts.⁴⁵ Bentley's argument is certainly provocative and provides a major rethink of the CW taboo. Rather than viewing the taboo as a social construction, this analysis argues that actors can exert significant agency over the taboo and the way in which it is employed in political discourse. Though this thesis does not follow Bentley's argument, her choice to focus on the taboo in one place and time provides useful insights into how states interact with the taboo to advance political aims. Apart from Bentley, there appears to be a strong consensus across the literature that the Syrian case is not indicative of the erosion of the robust international norm that prohibits the use of CW in warfare.⁴⁶ Indeed many of these authors emphasise that the norm has done more than just survive, it has become stronger, and the Syrian case has

worked to reaffirm the moral revulsion and stigma tied to these weapons.⁴⁷

Expanding on this, much of the work produced has chosen to focus on the impact that the Syrian case has had on the international community more generally. Edwards and Cacciatori rightly state that international disagreements over Syria are embedded in deeper struggles related to the international system.⁴⁸ They place practices and discourses of international criminal justice at the centre of their analysis, demonstrating how these factors continue to influence events and political decision-making.⁴⁹ Through a historical case study, their article is well-positioned to unpack the substantive disagreements between states on issues of justice and highlight how states justify their actions in relation to broader international politics. Another important theme of analysis, which has been covered by some scholars, is the differing interpretations of the Syrian disarmament process. The major debate here is whether Syria's accession to the CWC and subsequent chemical disarmament was a result of cooperation or coercion.⁵⁰ For example, Hanna Notte highlights that from the Russian perspective it was incredibly important to stress the consent-based, voluntary dimension of disarmament.⁵¹ This is a valuable insight for this thesis as it sheds light on how Russia wanted themselves and Syria to be perceived as legitimate actors.⁵² Karim Makdisi and Coralie Hindawi suggest that the model of hybrid disarmament seen in Syria was able to accommodate both narratives, resulting in a successful disarmament process.⁵³ Lastly, several scholars have studied the case from a legal

44 Bentley, *Syria and the chemical weapons taboo*, 2.

45 Bentley, *Syria and the chemical weapons taboo*, 2; Michelle Bentley, "The Problem With the Chemical Weapons Taboo," *Peace Review* 27, no. 2 (2015): 234.

46 Price, "Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo," 37.

47 Chapman, Elbahtimy, and Martin, "The Future of Chemical Weapons," 733.

48 Edwards and Cacciatori, "The Politics of International Chemical Weapon Justice," 281.

49 Edwards and Cacciatori, "The Politics of International Chemical Weapon Justice," 281.

50 Wyn Bowen, Jeffrey W. Knopf & Matthew Moran, "The Obama Administration and Syrian Chemical Weapons: Deterrence, Compellence, and the Limits of the "Resolve plus Bombs" Formula," *Security Studies* 29, no. 5 (2020): 797–831; Karim Makdisi, and Coralie Pison Hindawi, "The Syrian chemical weapons disarmament process in context: narratives of coercion, consent, and everything in between," *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 8 (2017): 1691–1709; Medzihorsky, Popovic, and Jenne, "Rhetoric of civil conflict management,"; Hanna Notte, "The United States, Russia, and Syria's chemical weapons: a tale of cooperation and its unravelling," *Non-proliferation Review* 27, no. 1–3 (2020): 201–224.

51 Notte, "The United States, Russia, and Syria's chemical weapons," 209.

52 Notte, "The United States, Russia, and Syria's chemical weapons," 210.

53 Makdisi and Hindawi, "The Syrian chemical weapons disarmament process in context," 1691.

justice perspective, exploring on one hand how the international community could or should judge and punish Syria for violating the CW taboo, but also whether the punitive strikes by Western states can be justified under international law.⁵⁴

Many of the most useful and thought-provoking contributions for this thesis from a theoretical perspective – examining the relationships between the Syrian case, the CW taboo, and the international community – focus solely on the US and their foreign policy towards Syria. As discussed previously, Bentley argues that the use of CW was constructed as a trigger for US foreign policy in respect to Syria.⁵⁵ Whilst tracing US policy and rhetoric, from President Obama’s ‘red line’ comment in 2012 to President Trump’s missile strikes in 2017, she employs the concept of strategic narratives to show how the CW taboo only entered presidential discourse once Obama could not ignore the issue any longer, and when it did come into rhetorical play, it was carefully constructed on Obama’s terms.⁵⁶ Price also chooses to focus on Obama when assessing dynamics of norm contestation, arguing that the US President made a decision not to respond aggressively to CW use so as to not sabotage peace talks with Russia.⁵⁷ If Price identifies the Syrian case as the most conscious attempt at norm contestation, then it can be assumed that Russia was also heavily involved in this process, and is thus worth studying.

Other scholars have used framing theory and/or media analyses in conjunction with traditional constructivism to examine how the Syrian issue was constructed in the US.⁵⁸ Notably, Anna Geis and Gabi Schlag’s article on the impact of media framing on the US administration raises important questions of hypocrisy, legitimacy, and selective law enforcement.⁵⁹ Greg Simons, although acknowledging the use of propaganda on all sides of the conflict, chose to focus his work on the official narratives present in Western mass media.⁶⁰ Interestingly he found that ‘the carefully scripted framing of the physical sphere in the information sphere reveals the geopolitical lines of the conflict.’⁶¹ His analytical framework is rooted in literature on propaganda and expanded into the realm of information warfare, explaining that the information domain is constantly in competition.⁶² Though focused on Western narratives, Simons’ framework is valuable for this thesis as he investigates how states manipulate and distort information when scripting their policy.⁶³ There is a clear imbalance of studies, leaning towards the US, that seek to connect constructivist concepts such as norms, narratives, and discourse with official responses to the Syrian conflict. This thesis therefore aims to build off these studies when engaging with the official Russian stance towards CW use in Syria.

54 See: Edwards and Cacciatori, “The Politics of International Chemical Weapon Justice,”; Gavan Patrick Gray, “Evidentiary Thresholds for Unilateral Aggression: Douma, Skripal and Media Analysis of Chemical Weapon Attacks as a *Casus Belli*,” *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 13, no. 3 (2019): 133–165; Charles Hyun, “The Prohibition of Chemical Weapons: Moving Toward *Jus Cogens* Status,” *Southern California Law Review* 88 (2015): 1463–1492; Mirko Sossai, “Identifying the Perpetrators of Chemical Attacks in Syria,” *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 17 (2019): 211–227.

55 Bentley, “Strategic Taboos,” 1033.

56 Bentley, *Syria and the chemical weapons taboo*, 39.

57 Price, “Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo,” 44.

58 Christian Baden, and Katsiaryna Stalpuskaya. “Maintenance of News Frames: How US, British and Russian News Made Sense of Unfolding Events in the Syrian Chemical Weapons Crisis,” *Journalism Studies* 21, no. 16 (2020): 2305–2325; Raluca Cozma, and Claudia Kozman, “The Syrian Crisis in the News,” *Journalism Practice* 9, no. 5 (2015): 669–686; Ebrima Jatta, Omar Samba, and Ahmad Sahide, “The Use of Chemical Weapons: The United States Response and Strategies in the Syrian Civil War,” *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding* 10, no. 1 (2023): 305–320.

59 Anna Geis and Gabi Schlag, “‘The facts cannot be denied’: legitimacy, war, and the use of chemical weapons in Syria,” *Global Discourse* (2017): 1–19.

60 Simons, “Syria: Propaganda as a Tool in the Arsenal of Information Warfare.”

61 Simons, “Syria: Propaganda as a Tool in the Arsenal of Information Warfare,” 448.

62 Simons, “Syria: Propaganda as a Tool in the Arsenal of Information Warfare,” 445.

63 Simons, “Syria: Propaganda as a Tool in the Arsenal of Information Warfare,” 443.

1.2 Russia, Syria, and the Use of Chemical Weapons

When it comes to Russia's response to the use of CW in Syria, the literature tends to fall into three categories: the direct impact of Russia's (dis)information campaign on OPCW investigations, Russian media as a tool for disinformation, or Russia's policy and diplomatic actions on an international level. Whilst there has been some attempt at assessing Russia's actions through a theoretical lens, there are significantly fewer works that discuss how the CW taboo functions in Russia's decision-making. It is also noteworthy that a lot of this literature appears more when searching for studies on Russian disinformation as opposed to security studies on Syria. This could explain the theoretical gap in the literature.

The timeline of the information campaign has been detailed extensively in online sources such as Bellingcat and journalist Brian Whitaker's E-Book, *Denying the Obvious*.⁶⁴ Despite the non-academic nature of these sources, they provide the most comprehensive and detailed overviews of Russia's disinformation activities regarding the CW use and OPCW investigations in Syria; they are therefore a good starting point for understanding this topic. Moreover, there exists an extensive body of work on Russian disinformation and hybrid warfare to help understand the tactics involved in this campaign.⁶⁵ Various authors have covered the information campaign to assess its

implications on the OPCW's investigations.⁶⁶ Mallory Stewart stresses that the Russian campaign's aim to undermine the credibility of weapons inspectors and CW expertise has been an almost unmitigated success.⁶⁷ They also write that the disinformation encountered by the OPCW inspectors are merely one manifestation of the growing challenge that is the lack of public trust in expertise.⁶⁸ Others have chosen to focus in on one aspect of the campaign which targets the White Helmets, a voluntary humanitarian rescue group in Syria.⁶⁹ The White Helmets have been identified as an important focal point of the information attacks through which Russia can attack both the West and the OPCW's objectivity and professionalism.⁷⁰ In a similar vein, Hersman and Claeys analysed Russian disinformation that specifically addressed the IIT mission.⁷¹ Similarly to Stewart, they highlight how the general lack of CW

64 Bellingcat and Newsy, "Chemical Weapons and Absurdity: The Disinformation Campaign Against the White Helmets," Bellingcat, December 18, 2018, accessed June 15, 2023, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/12/18/chemical-weapons-and-absurdity-the-disinformation-campaign-against-the-white-helmets/>; Whitaker, *Denying the Obvious*.

65 For Example Ondřej Filipec, "Hybrid Warfare: Between Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism," *Central European Journal of Politics* 5, no. 2 (2019): 52–70; André W. M. Gerrits, "Disinformation in International Relations: How Important Is It?" *Security and Human Rights* 29 (2018): 3–23; Christina La Cour, "Theorising digital disinformation in international relations," *International Politics* (2020): 704–723; Alexander Lanoszka, "Disinformation in international politics," *European Journal of International Security* 4 (2019): 227–248; Steven Livingston and Jack Nassetta, "Framing and Strategic Narratives: Synthesis and Analytical Framework," *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 38, no. 2 (2018): 101–110; Ben Nimmo, "Anatomy of an Info-War: How Russia's Propaganda Machine Works, and How to Counter It," *StopFake.Org*, May 19, 2015, accessed June 25, 2023, <https://www.stopfake.org/en/anatomy-of-an-info-war-how-russia-s-propaganda-machine-works-and-how-to-counter-it/>; Mason Richey, "Contemporary Russian revisionism: understanding the Kremlin's hybrid warfare and the strategic and tactical deployment of disinformation," *Asia Eur J* 16 (2018): 101–113.

66 Hersman and Claeys, "Rigid Structures, Evolving Threat,"; Levinger, "Master Narratives of Disinformation Campaigns,"; Catharine Starbird, "Understanding the Structure and Dynamics of Disinformation in the Online Information Ecosystem," (technical proposal, University of Washington, 2018); Stewart, "Symposium on New Challenges in Weapons Inspection."

67 Stewart, "Symposium on New Challenges in Weapons Inspection," 108.

68 Stewart, "Symposium on New Challenges in Weapons Inspection," 108.

69 Levinger, "Master Narratives of Disinformation Campaigns,"; Starbird, "Understanding the Structure and Dynamics of Disinformation in the Online Information Ecosystem."

70 Notte, "The United States, Russia, and Syria's chemical weapons," 217.

71 Hersman and Claeys, "Rigid Structures, Evolving Threat."

expertise across many 'quiet middle' states heightens the vulnerability of these countries to the growing challenge of disinformation, information warfare, and conspiracy theories, which seek to sow doubt and mistrust in institutions and leaders.⁷²

Most studies looking at the campaign have done so through analysing Russian media platforms. These studies often fall inside the scope of Journalism or Communications Studies rather than IR or Security Studies. It is generally assumed that the Russian media is heavily influenced by their embeddedness with the authorities and has served as a mouthpiece of the country's political leaders.⁷³ From a methodological perspective, Russian media is a popular sample choice as it captures the essence of what the Russian government wish to project to the public. Using a mixed-method approach to the study of 'big' social data, Catharine Starbird investigates how the information online echo-system works.⁷⁴ With respect to Syria, she found that the information campaign intersected with attempts to challenge and undermine the activities of Western states in Syria.⁷⁵ Radu Magdin assesses the Russian news services Russia Today (RT) Arabic and Sputnik to grasp the drivers of Russian policy.⁷⁶ Magdin observed recurring pro-Kremlin narratives that sought to absolve the Assad regime of responsibility for CW attacks as well as

undermine the credibility and independence of the OPCW.⁷⁷ Julien Nocetti watched over 40 hours of RT/RT Arabic and Vesti reports and programmes between September 2015 and March 2016.⁷⁸ He found that the news services express without any nuance the opinion of the Russian government and frame the Syrian war solely through the lens of the legitimate Syrian regime's counter-insurrection against a 'radical' opposition largely made of 'terrorists', financed and equipped from the outside to ignite a regime change.⁷⁹ These studies are highly valuable as they emphasise the narratives that the Russian government believes to be most important in the public domain.



72 Hersman and Claeys, "Rigid Structures, Evolving Threat," 6.

73 Dmitry Strovsky, and Ron Schleifer, "The Russian Media as a Promoter of Manipulative Approaches: The Case of the Syrian Civil War," *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 11, no. 1 (2020): 1.

74 Starbird, "Understanding the Structure and Dynamics of Disinformation in the Online Information Ecosystem."

75 Starbird, "Understanding the Structure and Dynamics of Disinformation in the Online Information Ecosystem."

76 Magdin, "Russian Propaganda in the Context of the Syrian Crisis," 195.

77 Magdin, "Russian Propaganda in the Context of the Syrian Crisis," 199.

78 Nocetti, "Dazed and Confused," 4.

79 Nocetti, "Dazed and Confused," 4.

The final category of the literature, Russia's policy actions on an international level, focuses less on the CW investigations specifically yet still offers important theoretical insights. There is an extensive body of literature on Russian foreign policy from constructivist theoretical perspectives.⁸⁰ Constructivist analyses of foreign policy emphasise the influence of norms that are shared by international society and how the identity of a state can be constructed and presented through foreign policy.⁸¹ In the early years of the conflict scholars of Russian foreign policy such as Roy Allison argued that Russia's international behaviour relating to Syria reflected instrumental concerns about political legitimacy and state cohesion within Russia and its near abroad.⁸² Derek Averre and Lance Davies challenged this domestic focus; they analysed Moscow's attitude through humanitarian norms such as Responsibility To Protect (R2P) to show that the Syria case reflects important developments in Russia's broader foreign policy.⁸³ Of use for this thesis is their assessment of Russia's normative position in 2015 which they noticed had begun to be accompanied by values-based narratives that fundamentally challenged western liberalism.⁸⁴ This particularly speaks to the thesis' second sub-question and will be interesting to explore how these narratives have matured in the last seven years of the conflict.



80 For example: Margot Light, "In search of an identity: Russian foreign policy and the end of ideology," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 19, no. 3 (2003): 42–59; Valentina Feklyunina, "Russia's foreign policy towards Poland: Seeking reconciliation? A social constructivist analysis," *International Politics* 49, no. 4 (2012): 434–448; Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Assessing Cultural and Regime-Based Explanations of Russia's Foreign Policy: 'Authoritarian at Heart and Expansionist by Habit?'" *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 4 (2012): 695–713; Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Finding a Civilisational Idea: 'West,' Eurasia," and "Euro-East" in Russia's Foreign Policy," *Geopolitics* 12, no. 3 (2007): 375–399; Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity* (Blue Ridge Summit: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019).

81 For example: Henning Boekle, Volker Rittberger, and Wolfgang Wagner, "Constructivist foreign policy theory," in *German foreign policy since unification: Theories and case studies*, ed. Volker Rittberger (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001); Trine Flockhart, "Constructivism and foreign policy," in *Foreign Policy: Theories Actors, Cases*, 3rd Edition, ed. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Timothy Dunne (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Valerie M. Hudson, *Foreign Policy Analysis: Classic and Contemporary Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006); I. Gede Wahyu Wicaksana, "The constructivist approach towards foreign policy analysis," *Indonesian Journal of Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2009): 1–17.

82 Allison, "Russia and Syria," 796.

83 Derek Averre, and Lance Davies, "Russia, humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: the case of Syria," *International Affairs* 91, no. 4 (2015): 813.

84 Averre, and Davies, "Russia, humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect," 814.

Notte and Ümit Seven's respective studies address Russia's position in the Syrian CW debate most directly.⁸⁵ As previously mentioned, Notte studies Russia's behaviour through the US-Russia disarmament debate. She alludes to the broader political motivations of Russia, namely to uphold the legitimacy of Assad's regime in the face of Western criticism, that were primarily achieved through systematically attacking the OPCW institution.⁸⁶ Seven's article is most similar to this thesis in terms of theory and methodology as it examines Russia's policy actions in Syria using a social constructivist approach and thematic analysis.⁸⁷ The article analyses meeting records from the UNSC, finding that Russia represented itself as a global power upholding international norms against the US-led perspective.⁸⁸ Seven's analysis closely aligns with this thesis, arguing that through the conflict in Syria, Russia projects itself as a constructive actor in the process of self-image making.⁸⁹ Crucially, these two studies analyse the Russian position through official policy and discourse as opposed to a media platform. They are therefore incredibly useful to this thesis as they provide a foundation from which the study could form.

1.3 A Gap in the Literature

This chapter has addressed the existing literature on responses to CW use in Syria through a variety of lenses: the CW taboo, US policy, Russian disinformation, and Russian foreign policy. As has been stated, there is a clear imbalance of studies regarding Russia's relationship with the CW taboo. Whilst the US response towards Syria has been comprehensively theorised, Russia's information campaign has remained within journalistic and communication studies. This thesis therefore addresses a neglected side of the story. On the one hand, it will contribute to literature on the relationship between state identity, foreign policy, and norm contestation. On the other hand, it will provide a sharper case study analysis of how the CW taboo can operate in a shorter period, shaping a state's behaviour. It builds on Seven's argument, analysing Russia's self-image making process through the CW norm, but its own institution, the MFA, rather than the UNSC. Setting up a clear and robust analytical framework is greatly necessary as it creates generalisability and repeatability for future research. This thesis also fills a methodological and empirical gap. Though the Russian information campaign regarding Syria has been evaluated through media platforms, and a thematic analysis has been conducted on official UNSC statements, there is yet to be a study that connects these elements together or that focuses on official foreign policy statements when discussing CW specifically.

85 Notte, "The United States, Russia, and Syria's chemical weapons.": Seven, "Russia's Foreign Policy Actions and the Syrian Civil War in the United Nations Security Council."

86 Notte, "The United States, Russia, and Syria's chemical weapons," 221–223.

87 Seven, "Russia's Foreign Policy Actions and the Syrian Civil War in the United Nations Security Council," 897, 902.

88 Seven, "Russia's Foreign Policy Actions and the Syrian Civil War in the United Nations Security Council," 897.

89 Seven, "Russia's Foreign Policy Actions and the Syrian Civil War in the United Nations Security Council," 897.

Chapter 2 Developing an Analytical Framework

After months of allegations, the August 2013 sarin attack confirmed without doubt the first significant lethal use of CW by a state in warfare in over a quarter-century.⁹⁰ Ever since, the Syrian conflict often been discussed in terms of CW, and this has shaped international debates and foreign policy behaviour of great powers such as Russia and the US. But why were CW specifically, and not the use of other weapons or the long list of crimes against humanity committed by the Assad regime, the lynchpin around which an international response would be considered? The reason lies with the norm against the non-use of CW. This thesis builds from Price's understanding of the CW taboo, understanding the norm as socially and politically constructed. However, this thesis is not simply concerned with explaining the taboo, but about how the CW norm manifests in the context of the Russian response to CW use in Syria. To best understand this, the chapter develops a constructivist analytical framework, focusing on the relevance of norms, identity, and language: what they are, how they are contested, and how they interact with states to guide foreign policy behaviour. It ends by discussing how this framework will apply to the study.

2.1 Constructivism: Norms, Identity, and Language

Constructivism is less a theory of International Relations or Security, but rather a broader social theory which informs how analysts might approach the study of security.⁹¹ Key to constructivism is that ideational structures matter as much as material structures; ideas take centre stage and are privileged within constructivist analyses.⁹² Social 'facts' differ from objective reality in that they depend, by way of collective understanding and discourse, on the attachment of collective knowledge to reality.⁹³ According to Alexander Wendt, a fundamental principle of constructivist theory is that people act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them.⁹⁴ There are four key constructivist propositions: a belief in the social construction of reality; a focus on ideational as well as material structures, such as norms; a focus on the role of identity in shaping political action; and a belief that structures and agents are mutually constituted.⁹⁵ As Seven's study demonstrates, constructivism is a well-positioned analytical framework for this thesis as it works to understand how Russia's information campaign is a process in which norms, national identity, and values are constructed socially in international politics.⁹⁶

90 Price, "Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo," 37.

91 Matt McDonald, "Constructivisms," in *Security Studies*, ed. Paul Williams (London: Routledge, 2012), 64.

92 Christine Agius, "Social Constructivism," in *Contemporary Security Studies: Sixth Edition*, eds. Alan Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 74.

93 Emanuel Adler, "Constructivism in International Relations: Sources, Contributions, and Debates," in *Handbook of International Relations: Second Edition*, eds. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons (London: SAGE Publications, 2013), 121.

94 Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics," *International Organisation* 46, no. 2 (1992): 396–397.

95 Flockhart, "Constructivism and foreign policy," 84.

96 Seven, *Russia's Foreign Policy Actions and the Syrian Civil War in the United Nations Security Council*, 908.

Martha Finnemore and Katherine Sikkink define a norm as ‘a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity.’⁹⁷ From a rationalist perspective, norms are general prescriptions of behaviour which regulate intentions and effects.⁹⁸ However in constructivist theory, norms are considered as a set of intersubjective understandings and collective expectations, entailing a collective evaluation of behaviour in terms of what ought to be done.⁹⁹ As such, norms constitute state identities and interests.¹⁰⁰ They do not determine outcomes but shape realms of possibility, influencing the probability of occurrence of certain courses of action.¹⁰¹ A taboo, according to Nina Tannenwald, is a particularly forceful kind of normative prohibition that deals with ‘the sociology of danger’.¹⁰² Weapons taboos are a special breed of socially constructed norms that, once internalised, make the use of such weapons unthinkable for international actors.¹⁰³ The CW taboo is upheld as a powerful normative pressure within international relations and thus explains why the use of these weapons in Syria could not be overlooked.¹⁰⁴

Though the previous chapter briefly outlined how the use of CW in Syria has been theorised, this was not contextualised by broader understandings of the taboo. For many decades scholars have attempted to explain why CW almost alone have come to be stigmatised as morally illegitimate, despite countless technological innovations in weaponry. Rationalist explanations focus primarily on the limited military utility of chemical agents and the logic of mutual deterrence.¹⁰⁵ This perspective widely developed in the Cold War era of arms control. Pioneering this view, in 1968, Frederic Brown noted that despite chemical warfare being an extremely versatile and usable choice, the logistical requirements, such as the need for sophisticated training, were too complicated to make their use worthwhile.¹⁰⁶ Others have pointed to the inherent nature of CW as to why they arouse special dread: they cause unnecessary suffering, are insidious, unseen, secretive, they attack indiscriminately, and because their physical effects can be so vividly imagined.¹⁰⁷ This represents more of an essentialist explanation that highlights a human aversion to toxic substances, which Michael Mandelbaum argues can run as deep as human chromosomes.¹⁰⁸ Along similar lines some scholars emphasise the psychological distress attached to the military use of gas and the fear of asphyxiation that crosses the border of a ‘rational’ reaction to the perceived threat.¹⁰⁹ For instance Catherine Jefferson notes that ‘the response of the British press to the first chlorine gas attack was one of horror and

97 Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics and Political Change,” *International Organisation* 52, no. 4 (1998): 891; Peter Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 5.

98 Annika Björkdahl, “Norms in International Relations: Some Conceptual and Methodological Reflections,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 15, no. 1 (2002): 13.

99 Björkdahl, “Norms in International Relations,” 15.

100 Christian Reus-Smit, “Imagining society: constructivism and the English School,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 4, no. 3 (2002): 493; Nina Tannenwald, “Ideas and Explanation: Advancing the Theoretical Agenda,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7, no. 2 (2005): 19.

101 Tannenwald, “The Nuclear Taboo,” 435.

102 Tannenwald, “The Nuclear Taboo,” 436.

103 Thomas M. Dolan, “Unthinkable and Tragic: The Psychology of Weapons Taboos in War,” *International Organisation* 67 (2013): 37.

104 Bentley, “Strategic taboos,” 1034.

105 Michal Smetana, Marek Vranka, and Ondrej Rosendorf, “The lesser evil? Experimental evidence on the strength of nuclear and chemical weapon “taboos,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 40, no. 1 (2023): 6.

106 Frederic J. Brown, *Chemical Warfare: A Study in Restraints* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968).

107 Price, “A Genealogy of the Chemical Weapons Taboo,” 79.

108 Michael Mandelbaum, *The Nuclear Revolution: International Politics before and after Hiroshima* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), ch. 2. Also See Leonard A. Cole, “The poison weapons taboo: Biology, culture, and policy,” *Politics and the Life Sciences* 17, no. 2 (1998): 119–132; Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of our Nature, the Better Angels: Why Violence has Declined* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

109 Smetana, Vranka, and Rosendorf, “The lesser evil?” 6.

moral outrage, portraying the German use of gas as an illegitimate act of inhumanity.¹¹⁰

Price first published his constructivist-oriented, genealogical explanation in 1995 and his article has since been considered the seminal paper on the CW taboo. He argues that the CW taboo is socially and politically constructed, and explanations cannot be reduced to simply strategic interests nor the inherent nature of CW.¹¹¹ The genealogical method historicises the accepted moral interpretations of CW in the social construction of norms, prioritising discourses and power.¹¹² Price's approach reflects the constructivist turn in the 1990s, seeking to understand how political constructions across history have shaped subsequent attitudes towards CW. Regarding the Syrian case, Price's approach is most convincing, yet his overarching aim is to place Syria in a longer historical story. In his article on Syria, Price emphasises the importance of third-party reactions in assessing the strength and contestation of the norm.¹¹³ Whilst his aim is to historicise the long-term impact of the Syrian case on the taboo, this thesis instead builds from Price's insights on third-party reactions to investigate how the norm manifests in a specific time and place. Nevertheless, this plethora of academic work has led to a much clearer understanding of the historical and sociological processes through which such norms are developed and maintained at the international level. Furthermore, Edwards and Cacciatori show that such conceptualisations of the taboo also point to how norms can be quietly undermined in ways which are often ignored, a process which is analysed in this thesis.¹¹⁴

The more recent trends of constructivist scholarship have gradually moved away from the understanding of norms as 'things',

instead seeing norms as 'processes' that are subject to constant development through discursive interventions by relevant actors that challenge and temporarily fix the actual meanings of these norms.¹¹⁵ This thesis takes the view of critical constructivists such as Antje Wiener, that norms are inherently contested and constituted through practice.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, any given norm can operate in several ways and may have multiple effects; therefore it is analytically useful to think about different effects of norms and how they work.¹¹⁷ Price and Tannenwald explain that norms may function instrumentally and that they can have regulative or constraining effects, but they can also have enabling effects, whereby practices are made possible that would not exist in the absence of the norms.¹¹⁸ This enabling effect goes some way to explain how the West were able to justify military action against Syria as the violation of such a sacrosanct norm opened up the possibility and justification for an aggressive response.¹¹⁹ Particularly emphasised by constructivists is that norms can have a constitutive effect. This refers to how rules and norms, through actor practices, can create or define forms of behaviour, roles, and identities.¹²⁰ The constitutive effect is significant for understanding the Syrian case and speaks to the core of the thesis' research question as it helps to understand how Russia's role and response to the OPCW investigations was defined by, and navigated within, the CW taboo.

110 Jefferson, "Origins of the norm against chemical weapons" 656.

111 Price, "A Genealogy of the Chemical Weapons Taboo," 75.

112 Price, "A Genealogy of the Chemical Weapons Taboo," 87.

113 Price, "Syria and the Chemical Weapons Taboo," 42.

114 Edwards and Cacciatori, "Syria and the Future of the Chemical Weapon Taboo," para. 8.

115 Martinková and Smetana, "Dynamics of norm contestation in the Chemical Weapons Convention," 430.

116 Antje Wiener, *A Theory of Contestation* (New York: Springer, 2014).

117 Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo," 437.

118 Price, *The Chemical Weapons Taboo*, 10; Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo," 437.

119 For example, Bentley, *Syria and the chemical weapons taboo*, 17.

120 Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo," 437.

Similarly to established norms, identity guides international behaviour and conflict as it lies at the core of national and international interest. Constructivists consider identity a central theoretical concept because it tells us who actors are, what their preferences and interests are, and how those preferences might inform their actions.¹²¹ Norms and identity are closely related, and together make up the building blocks of international relations by providing the limits for feasible and legitimate action.¹²² Identities are formed by states attaching themselves to tacitly understood norms and accepted practices.¹²³ Moreover, as per the constitutive effect, norms secure identities. Price writes that abiding by or violating social norms is an important way by which we gauge 'who we are'.¹²⁴ Identification with certain norms also enables these actors to define themselves as proper members of a certain community, while referring to this community as 'we'.¹²⁵ For instance, the non-use of CW norm is deeply embedded in the fabric of the social system and so states must change their practices and discourses when discussing these weapons.¹²⁶

2.2 The Chemical Weapons Taboo's Influence on Russia's Behaviour

Prohibitory norms, such as the CW taboo, are not merely restrictive but are productive in that they constitute identities, imposing meanings of what is considered legitimate reality.¹²⁷ As such, norms, identity, and language all work together to have a significant impact on foreign policy decision-making. In international politics, identification with a strong norm can give political actors

legitimacy. For instance, it is an indicator of the international salience of the CW taboo that Syria, a non-party state to the CWC, sought to gain diplomatic benefits by accusing its enemies of violating it and diminishing their opponent's legitimacy.¹²⁸ Though norms do not establish clear policy options, Annika Björkdahl argues that they provide roadmaps for states' foreign policy actions.¹²⁹ Additionally, norms affect the way actors connect their preferences to policy choices as they provide both legitimation and establish the boundaries for what is appropriate.¹³⁰ Just as importantly, states must be consistent when basing their political claims on a set of certain norms so as to not lose their credibility and legitimacy.¹³¹ Consequently, even if political actors simply pay lip service to the norm for instrumental reasons, they can become rhetorically coerced or entrapped into following the logic of the norm.¹³² Language is used as a mediating tool to then communicate decision-making. If political actors successfully frame something as a problem relating to a given norm, then certain policy solutions become thinkable, if not inevitable.¹³³

121 Agius, "Social Constructivism," 76–77.

122 McDonald, "Constructivisms," 71.

123 Price, "A Genealogy of the Chemical Weapons Taboo," 87–88.

124 Price, "The Chemical Weapons Taboo," 10.

125 Vanesa Šramková, "Forming the EU Disinformation Policy," (master's thesis, Charles University, 2019) 7.

126 Dolan, "Unthinkable and Tragic," 40.

127 Price, "A Genealogy of the Chemical Weapons Taboo," 87.

128 Price, "A Genealogy of the Chemical Weapons Taboo," 38.

129 Björkdahl, "Norms in International Relations," 22.

130 Björkdahl, "Norms in International Relations,"

131 Frank Schimmelfennig, "International Socialisation in the New Europe: Rational Action in an Institutional Environment," *European Journal of International Relations* 6, no. 1 (2000): 119.

132 Medzihorsky, Popovic, and Jenne, "Rhetoric of civil conflict management," 1.

133 Medzihorsky, Popovic, and Jenne, "Rhetoric of civil conflict management," 1.

Attention to language is crucial in developing this analytical framework. Critical constructivists emphasise that language is a mediating instrument which brings social practices into a communicative and institutionalised framework.¹³⁴ If norms and identities are types of social rules that govern international politics, then through language actors create and recreate the rules of interaction that forms the rules of the game.¹³⁵ Building on this, the strategic narrative paradigm has previously been used to understand Russian information warfare, and provides a useful tool for understanding how Russia constructed its response to the OPCW investigations.¹³⁶ Strategic narratives are a means for political actors to construct shared meanings of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors.¹³⁷ Bentley notably applied this concept to the US's foreign policy to demonstrate how CW were strategically constructed as a trigger for Obama's policy in Syria.¹³⁸ This thesis departs from Bentley in that it holds a different understanding of the inherent nature of norms and taboos. Nevertheless, it agrees on the utility of strategic narratives as a theoretical construct as Russia's information campaign, in essence, is an intentionally constructed 'compelling storyline' by which Russia can craft perceptions of the Syrian conflict.

Weapons taboos are critical to non-proliferation regimes. A prohibition regime cannot be sustained over time on coercion alone, it requires an internalised belief among its participants that the prohibited item is illegitimate and abhorrent.¹³⁹ Before Russia could even construct its information

campaign or foreign policy decisions on the Syrian CW issue it already had to face certain boundaries set by the norm. Most obviously, the taboo defines CW as an unacceptable weapon; it is part of a broader discourse of international society defining what it means to be a 'civilised' member of the international community.¹⁴⁰ Therefore there is a definite constraining effect on Russia, in that it cannot be seen under any circumstances to be using, or supporting the use of CW. To do so, as a party to the CWC, would be to lose hypocritical and would bring into question the authenticity of Russia's moral commitments and moral character.¹⁴¹ Looking more critically, the CW taboo constitutes Russia's interests, identities, and practices. Being seen to unflinchingly uphold the CW norm, Russia uses reflexive rhetoric to secure its identity as a legitimate and superior global power.¹⁴² As will be discussed further in chapter five, Russia's practice of upholding the CW taboo is a form of leveraging, and the norm shapes the ways in which it can object to the behaviour of Western states in Syria. Overall, the taboo continues to have a strong influence over the behaviour and preferences of the major political actors in the Syrian conflict, not least Russia.¹⁴³

134 Jef Huysmans, "Defining Social Constructivism in Security Studies: The Normative Dilemma of Writing Security," *Alternatives Special Issue 27* (2002): 44.

135 Seven, "Russia's Foreign Policy Actions and the Syrian Civil War in the United Nations Security Council," 901.

136 For example Viljar Veebel, Illimar Ploom, and Vladimir Sazonov, "Russian information warfare in Estonia, and Estonian countermeasures," *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review 19* (2021): 75.

137 Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (London: Routledge, 2014), 2.

138 Bentley, *Syria and the chemical weapons taboo*.

139 Nina Tannenwald, "How Strong Is the Nuclear Taboo Today?" *The Washington Quarterly 41*, no. 3 (2018): 104.

140 Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo," 437.

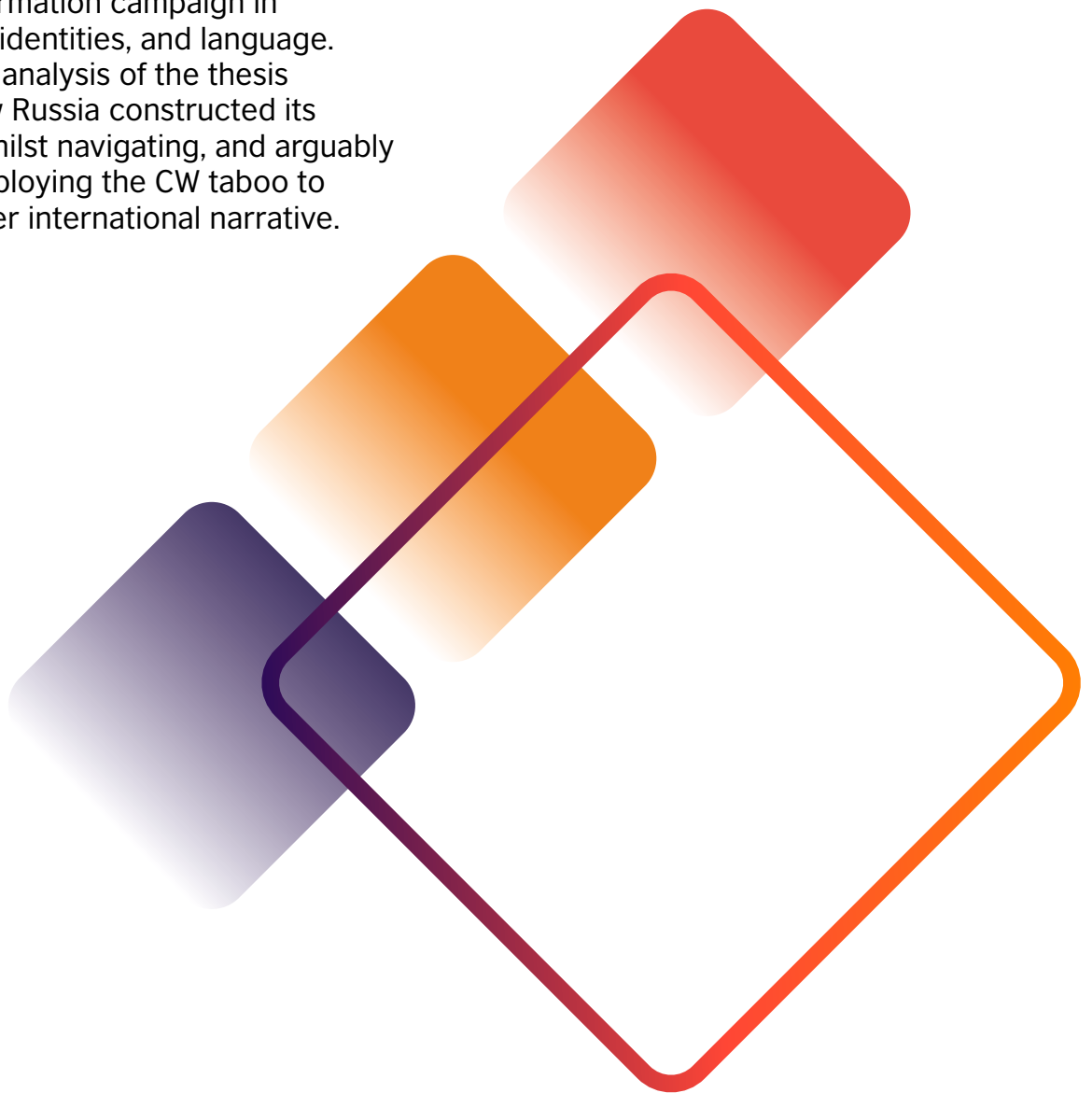
141 Martha Finnemore, "Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity: Why Being a Unipole Isn't All It's Cracked Up to Be," *World Politics 61*, no. 1 (2009): 74.

142 See Nocetti, "Dazed and Confused," 2; Jon White, "Dismiss, Distort, Distract, and Dismay: Continuity and Change in Russian Disinformation," *Policy Brief no. 13* (2016): 2.

143 Güneş Murat Tezcür, and Doreen Horschig, "A conditional norm: chemical warfare from colonialism to contemporary civil wars," *Third World Quarterly 42*, no. 2 (2021): 367.

2.3 Conceptualising Russia's Information Campaign

This chapter has developed an analytical framework using constructivism to understand how Russia's response to the OPCW investigations is shaped by the CW taboo. The chapter cultivated a comprehensive overview of how norms work and how they can affect identity and foreign policy. The importance of language was highlighted as a mediating instrument to communicate these policies. To conclude, it has demonstrated the utility of viewing the Russia's information campaign in terms of norms, identities, and language. The subsequent analysis of the thesis investigates how Russia constructed its foreign policy whilst navigating, and arguably strategically employing the CW taboo to favour its broader international narrative.



Chapter 3 Methodology

The previous chapter outlined the author's choice to adopt a constructivist framework to best understand the research question. The purpose of this chapter is to set up the methodological framework through which to evaluate the research question. Essentially this asks how Russia has confronted the contentious issue of the use of CW in the Syrian Civil War by investigating how Russia constructed an information campaign against the OPCW that navigates international norms and constraints against CW. To do this, the thesis adopts a hybrid qualitative thematic analysis to examine the selected statements posted by the MFA. First the chapter introduces thematic analysis, why it was chosen, and defines key terms. Subsequently, it explains the sampling, data collection, and data analysis process. The chapter concludes with a discussion of limitations and how these have been mitigated.

3.1 Thematic Analysis

Before providing an explanation as to how this specific study utilised thematic analysis, it is essential to first discuss the method itself, its usefulness as a research method in International Security, and how it can be used in conjunction with epistemological frameworks. Thematic analysis is rooted in the older tradition of content analysis, of which it shares many principles and procedures.¹⁴⁴ Whilst content analysis focuses primarily on the frequency of occurrence of categories, thematic analysis was designed to go a step further, beyond purely observable material.¹⁴⁵ As such, thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns of meaning (themes) in a data set.¹⁴⁶ For this thesis, a 'theme' refers simply to a specific pattern of meaning found in the data. This can contain manifest content – for example, something directly observable such as mentions of systemic, institutional issues across a series of MFA statements – or it could incorporate latent content, such as an implicit understanding of the CW taboo. The aim of thematic analysis is to highlight the most salient patterns of meaning present within the data, tapping into both the manifest and latent drivers concerning an issue.¹⁴⁷

Though Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke developed this method for psychology studies, thematic analysis is a widely accepted and used methodology across many disciplines due to the theoretical freedom it offers.¹⁴⁸ Thematic analysis is praised for its unobtrusive data collection,

144 Helen Joffe, "Thematic Analysis," in *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health and Psychotherapy: A Guide for Students and Practitioners*, First Edition, edited by David Harper and Andrew R. Thompson (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 210.

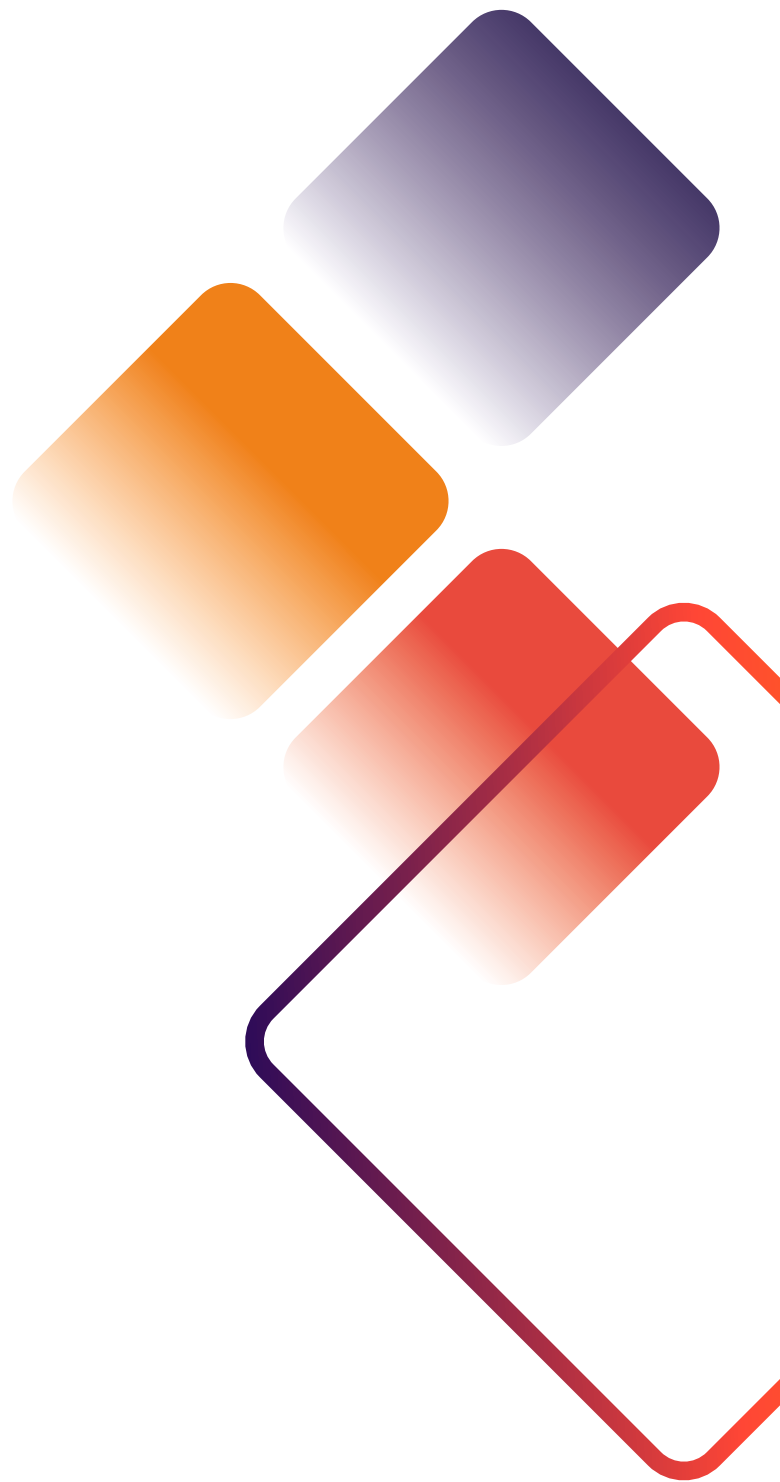
145 Robert K. Merton, "Thematic Analysis in Science: Notes on Holton's Concept," *Science* 188 (1975): 336.

146 See Jennifer Fereday, and Eimear Muir-Cochrane, "Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme Development," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5, no. 1 (2006): 82; Richard E. Boyatzis, *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1998); B. Crabtree, and W. Miller, "Using codes and code manuals: A template for organizing style of interpretation," in *Doing Qualitative Research* 2nd Edition, ed. B. Crabtree, and W. Miller, 163–178 (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1999).

147 J. Daly, A. Kellehear, and M. Gliksmann, *The Public Health Researcher: A Methodological Approach* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997); Joffe, "Thematic Analysis," 209.

148 Virginia Braun, and Victoria Clarke, "Using thematic analysis in psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2006): 77; Michelle E. Kiger, and Lara Varpio, "Thematic analysis of qualitative data: AMEE Guide No. 131," *Medical Teacher* 42, no. 8 (2020): 847.

transparent and replicable process, and flexibility. As one of the main intellectual and textual research methods, thematic analysis has been extensively used in International Security Studies investigating agenda setting, disinformation, and more recently, to understand new concepts such as ‘hybrid warfare’.¹⁴⁹ For example, in a study of Russian disinformation messages about Ukraine, Alla Yarova harnessed thematic analysis in order to identify meta-themes of Russian disinformation such as sanctions against Russia, the USA, and Ukrainian refugees.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, a distinguishing feature of thematic analysis is its ability to work well with theory. The research epistemology guides what you can say about your data and informs how you theorise meaning.¹⁵¹ Thematic analysis can be an essentialist or realist method, in which case it reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants.¹⁵² Thematic analysis conducted with a constructionist framework, as in this thesis, seeks to theorise sociocultural contexts and structural conditions, emphasising how meaning and experience are socially produced and reproduced.¹⁵³ Seven’s article demonstrates this as it employs a social constructivist thematic analysis to examine Russia’s foreign policy actions in Syria.¹⁵⁴ In sum, this method allows for a rich, in-depth, and interpretive exploration into a wide range of data. Given the multifaceted nature of this thesis, thematic analysis creates the one of the best opportunities to delve into various perspectives, narratives, and myth constructions surrounding Russian foreign policy positions, information campaigns and international norms.



149 For example, Alla Yarova, “Thematic Patterns of Russian Disinformation,” *Baltic Journal of Legal and Social Sciences*, no. 4 (2022): 158; Klaudia A. Rosińska, “Disinformation in Poland: Thematic Classification Based on Content Analysis of Fake News from 2019,” *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* 15, no. 4 (2021): article 5.

150 Yarova, “Thematic Patterns of Russian Disinformation,” 160.

151 Braun and Clarke, “Using thematic analysis in psychology,” 85.

152 Braun and Clarke, “Using thematic analysis in psychology,” 81.

153 For example, Vivien Burr, *An Introduction to Social Construction* (London: Routledge, 1995).

154 Seven, “Russia’s Foreign Policy Actions and the Syrian Civil War in the United Nations Security Council,” 897.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

The collected data for this study consisted of 100 posts/statements uploaded to the MFA website. The MFA is the central government institution charged with leading the foreign policy and foreign relations of Russia.¹⁵⁵ Currently led by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, the MFA is understood to be ‘point-zero’ when announcing foreign policy. Therefore, the data was limited to this site for consistency, but also because it is the most comprehensive platform to understand Russia’s formal diplomatic position on the issue of CW in Syria. The data contains a wide range of sources such as news conferences, articles, meetings, UN and CSP statements and addresses by President Putin. Though actual foreign policy decisions do not always match official discourses, focusing on the MFA records allows for the study to contextualise and understand Russia’s expressed position, objectives, and fears in and beyond Syria.¹⁵⁶ The date range of the selected posts, 2013–2022, was carefully decided based on the timeline of CW investigations in Syria. The first reports of CW use began in late-2012, leading to US President Barak Obama’s famous ‘red line’ comment.¹⁵⁷ However, Rene Pita and Juan Domingo identify March 19, 2013, as an inflexion point on CW accusations, when the Syrian government directly accused terrorist groups of firing a chemical rocket at Khan Al Asal.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, the Syrian Arab Republic became a State Party to the Chemical Weapons Convention, and a Member State of the OPCW, in October 2013. Lastly, the first mission with a mandate to work on CW issues in Syria – the OPCW-UN Joint Mission – was also established in October 2013.¹⁵⁹ For these reasons, 2013 was selected as the start year. Although the OPCW Secretariat is still conducting Limited In-Country Activities (LICAs) in Syria, the study ends in 2022 for

practicality and feasibility. This wide date-range spanning the conflict means the study can analyse how the information campaign evolved in response to new attacks and allegations, as well as how Russia’s actions may have been influenced by geopolitical shifts.

155 “Homepage,” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023, accessed August 2, 2023, <https://mid.ru/en/>.

156 Seven, “Russia’s Foreign Policy Actions and the Syrian Civil War in the United Nations Security Council,” 897.

157 White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps.”

158 Pita and Domingo, “The Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syria Conflict,” 392; Edwards and Cacciatori, “The Politics of International Chemical Weapon Justice: Syria 2011–2017,” 285.

159 “Syria and the OPCW,” Media Centre, 2023, accessed August 3, 2023, [https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/featured-topics/opcw-and-syria#:~:text=The%20OPCW%2DUN%20Joint%20Mission%20\(October%202013%20%E2%80%93%20September%202014,country%20accession%20to%20the%20CWC.](https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/featured-topics/opcw-and-syria#:~:text=The%20OPCW%2DUN%20Joint%20Mission%20(October%202013%20%E2%80%93%20September%202014,country%20accession%20to%20the%20CWC.)

This study used the advanced search setting on the MFA site to find and filter the relevant data. The date range was fixed between 1st January 2013 and 31st December 2022. Data was searched for using combinations of the following terms: 'Syria,' 'chemical weapons,' 'chemical weapons attacks,' 'chemical weapons investigation,' 'Syria OPCW.' The advanced search ordered results by 'most relevant' and only the top 100 results were extracted. Results that appeared in multiple searches were only extracted once and the next 'most relevant' was included instead. Onwuegbuzie, Collins, and Jiao, identify 20 to 30 units of observation as an adequate size for a similar research design of grounded theory, so this justifies 100 results as more than enough to achieve acceptable saturation and conduct a good thematic analysis.¹⁶⁰ Moreover, the final themes were present throughout the entire range of data, also indicating acceptable saturation. The study did not impose a minimum number of results per year as this might have impeded the thematic analysis. As such, most search results were published between 2017–2019. This is in line with the scale of OPCW investigations and so made sense not to alter.

3.3 Data Analysis

When conducting thematic analysis, the researcher becomes the instrument for analysis; they must make judgements about coding, theming, and contextualising data.¹⁶¹ This study adopts a latent-level thematic analysis as opposed to a manifest-level. The analysis goes beyond the semantic content of the data to identify and examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations – and ideologies – that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data.¹⁶² This is far more productive than a manifest-level analysis as it produces work that is theorised rather than simply described. Given the extensive literature written on international norms, Russia's stance on the Syrian Civil War, and disinformation, the second decision made was to conduct a hybrid thematic analysis rather than a solely inductive or deductive approach.¹⁶³ The deductive aspect allows for this thesis to build from themes found in previous studies. As previously mentioned, in a study of UNSC meeting records, Seven identified five theoretically driven themes: normative divergence; self-perception, feelings and emotions; self-driven competition with western powers; perception of international politics and the role of the UN; and fear of the spillover in the Syrian civil war.¹⁶⁴ Whilst these themes were not formed specifically in relation to CW-use, Seven was analysing the construction of Russian foreign policy in relation to the Syrian conflict. This thesis examines one narrative of this foreign policy discourse and thus it can be inferred that they are applicable to this study. This approach is best suited to this research question as it allows

160 Kathleen M. T. Collins, Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie, and Qun G. Jiao, "A Mixed Methods Investigation of Mixed Methods Sampling Designs in Social and Health Science Research," *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 1, no. 3 (2007): 273.

161 Lorelli S. Nowell, Jill M. Norris, Deborah E. White, and Nancy J. Moules, "Thematic Analysis," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (2017): 2.

162 Braun and Clarke, "Using thematic analysis in psychology," 84.

163 Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, "Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis."

164 Seven, "Russia's Foreign Policy Actions and the Syrian Civil War in the United Nations Security Council," 903–907.

the theoretical tenets of constructivism, notably the role of norms, and identity, and attention to language to be integral to the process of deductive thematic analysis while allowing for themes to emerge direct from the data using inductive coding.¹⁶⁵

Braun and Clarke suggest six phases to conducting a good thematic analysis: (1) familiarising yourself with your data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Before analysis began, the data was first cleaned.¹⁶⁶ This involved formatting the data in a generic format and arranging into chronological order. Where a piece of data focused on multiple foreign policy issues, such as a news conference, the researcher only reviewed content related to Syria and/or CW. After extensive familiarisation with the data a codebook was created to record and define each code. As this study utilised a hybrid approach, the deductive codes were compared with inductive codes and new thematic codes were added or modified where necessary. The researcher used manual mind-maps to visualise the relationship between codes, themes, and various levels of themes. Ongoing analysis helped to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.¹⁶⁷ The final themes of analysis were derived from multiple rounds of coding and cross-comparison of similarities and differences; this eventually established an endpoint of the analysis.

3.4 Limitations and Mitigations

One of the criticisms of thematic analysis is that it can be poorly demarcated.¹⁶⁸ As with all forms of analysis, thematic analysis needs to be rigorous, and it is important to make the process as visible, or transparent, as possible so that the reader can follow and appraise how it was carried out.¹⁶⁹ To mitigate this risk, this chapter has clearly outlined the methodological process undertaken in the study. The most obvious limitation to this study is the language barrier as the researcher does not speak Russian. This means that the contextual meaning of specific phrases or words may be lost or lessened in the analysis. However, the MFA publishes their statements in English, as well as Russian, which mitigates the limitation and allows for an analysis of official and reliable translated statements. Moreover, it can be assumed that as these are official translations, and aimed at an international as well as domestic audience, the messages conveyed will be accurate to the Russian stance. Another limitation of the study is that the analysis does not attempt to distinguish which audiences statements are aimed at specifically, and so it is sometimes unclear whether a piece of data was intended for diplomatic purposes. Nevertheless, as most of the data discusses the OPCW it is assumed that the central narratives will have reached the intended international institution.

165 Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, "Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis," 82–83.

166 David R. Thomas, "A General Inductive Approach for Analysing Qualitative Evaluation Data," *American Journal of Evaluation* 27, no. 2 (2006): 241.

167 Braun and Clarke, "Using thematic analysis in psychology," 86.

168 Braun and Clarke, "Using thematic analysis in psychology," 77.

169 Jon Swain, "A Hybrid Approach to Thematic Analysis in Qualitative Research: Using a Practical Example," in *Sage Research Methods Cases Part 2* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2018).

Chapter 4 Empirical Findings

After following the methodological process outlined in the previous chapter, the fourth chapter of this thesis presents the empirical findings of the qualitative thematic analysis. Over the 100 statements analysed, the thesis identified four broad themes: the perception of the OPCW as an institution; the West as a competing actor; Russia's role in international politics; and the logistics of an information campaign. These categories contain eight final sub-themes: the degradation of the OPCW as an effective institution; trust in OPCW reports and expertise; the Western agenda and geopolitical context; a Western disinformation campaign; Russia's self-perception as a constructive international actor; international norms and moral considerations; counter-narratives and alternative explanations; the overarching tactics of Russia's information campaign. This chapter addresses the first two sub-questions of the thesis: (1) What key themes or narratives does Russia employ when discussing CW use in Syria? (2) How does Russia use the issue of CW to present itself as an international actor? The themes, sub-themes, and codes are demonstrated at the end of the chapter in Table 1, demonstrating the process at which the study arrived at its final categories of analysis.

4.1 The Perception of the OPCW as an Institution

4.1.1 The Degradation of the OPCW as an Effective Institution

The OPCW is the international body responsible for overseeing the implementation of the CWC. Russia's information campaign subjects the organisation to intense scrutiny, questioning its reputation, credibility, and authority. Their attacks on the institutional nature of the OPCW often took the shape of criticisms against the scope of its mandate. This narrative spiked with the introduction of the IIT, which introduced an attribution mechanism and allowed the OPCW reports to allocate blame for the CW attacks.

'The IIT that was set up and is dominated by the US-led interested Western countries contradicts the provisions of the convention. The activities of this quasi-procuratorial group trample over the exclusive prerogatives of the UN Security Council.'¹⁷⁰

'The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) states that everything must be done by consensus. However, the Technical Secretariat obediently tolerates gross violations of the Convention.'¹⁷¹

The data indicated a growing concern in the independence of the OPCW as the conflict progressed. The study found that as the OPCW's investigations intensified, and their resulting reports began to accuse Assad's government of CW use, the MFA started to state that the OPCW had become a politicised organisation, no longer capable of its original, important technical purpose. From 2021, the 'politicisation' of the OPCW's Technical Secretariat was accompanied by accusations of 'privatisation'. The OPCW was no longer acting in consensus and did

170 "Comment by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova on an OPCW Executive Council decision to accuse Syria of violating the Chemical Weapons Convention," Foreign Policy, July 10, 2019, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1436828/.

171 "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Rossiya 24, Moscow, November 1, 2021," Foreign Policy, November 1, 2021, accessed July 22, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1784744/.

not represent the views of Russia, nor many other states such as China and Iran. The information campaign seeks to exploit this divide to shape narratives that align with its interests in Syria, potentially impacting the trust of international society in the OPCW's findings and actions.

'Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the contents of the OPCW Special Mission's report are largely biased, which suggests that the activities of this organisation are politically motivated.'¹⁷²

'The Western countries have long privatised the Technical Secretariat by having their representatives appointed to the key positions within this structure.'¹⁷³

Crucially, the Russian statements would carefully construct the OPCW as a passive actor in this process. The caution taken to not directly accuse the OPCW of corruption indicates Russia's awareness of the importance of the OPCW in the history of chemical disarmament. Russia consistently highlights the historically excellent work of the OPCW whilst reaffirming its support for disarmament. The MFA constructs its accusations as concerns for the overall health of the OPCW, and by extension CW taboo, which it feels is in systemic crisis.¹⁷⁴

'We will do our best to resist the politicisation of the OPCW and some countries' attempts to use the Syria chemical file as a distasteful means of attaining pre-planned geopolitical goals.'¹⁷⁵

'We note with deep regret that the crisis that emerged in the OPCW several years ago is gradually becoming systemic. As a cancerous tumour, it corrodes all areas of the OPCW

work, undermines efforts to universalize the Convention and trust to the Organization as an outpost of non-proliferation of chemical weapons and disarmament.'¹⁷⁶

4.1.2 Trust in OPCW Reports and Expertise

In conjunction with the politicisation of the OPCW, Russia systematically attacks the procedure, process, and methodology of the OPCW's reports, regardless of who they accuse.¹⁷⁷ The impartiality and professionalism of mission staff, especially on the JIM, is repeatedly questioned. Whenever the data mentions Russian experts or Russian-led reports, which is rarely as Russia did not want to be seen to be interfering in an objective investigation, it is careful to note that these investigations were verified by OPCW laboratories.¹⁷⁸ Regarding methods, Russia always outlines the rules of OPCW investigations before accusing the inspectors of not following them. Statements note the dubious collection of evidence, especially pointing to the use of remote investigations and video evidence provided by the White Helmets.¹⁷⁹

172 "Comment by the Information and Press Department on US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley's statement concerning the OPCW Special Mission's report on the use of chemical weapons in Syria," Foreign Policy, June 30, 2017, accessed June 18, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1549273/.

173 "Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's article «Staged incidents as the Western approach to doing politics», published in Izvestia newspaper," Foreign Policy, July 18, 2022, Accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1822333/.

174 "Statement by the delegation of the Russian Federation at the 25th session of the Conference of the States parties," Foreign Policy, December 3, 2020, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_organizations/1448251/.

175 "Comment by the Information and Press Department regarding the results of the 56th Special Session of OPCW Executive Council," Foreign Policy, November 25, 2017, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1557704/.

176 "Statement by the delegation of the Russian Federation at the 25th session of the Conference of the States parties."

177 "Foreign Ministry statement in connection with the UN Security Council vote on a draft sanction resolution on Syria under Chapter VII of the UN Charter," Foreign Policy, March 1, 2017, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1543171/.

178 "Comment by the official representative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Alexander Lukashevich regarding the UN mission investigating possible uses of chemical weapons in Syria," Foreign Policy, August 29, 2013, accessed July 22, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1621550/.

179 "Comment by the Information and Press Department on the Syrian chemical dossier," Foreign Policy, April 7, 2017, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1545123/.

‘It would be important to urge the OPCW Fact Finding Mission to fully investigate the reported incident on location under the mandatory condition that a list of the Mission’s personnel taking part in the investigation should be submitted to the UN Security Council.’¹⁸⁰

‘Russia sees a number of fundamental drawbacks in the investigation: non-compliance with the basic principle of ensuring the protection of evidence; the absence of a conclusion with regard to the key issue of how precisely sarin was used, which was neglected by the FFM...’¹⁸¹

Following the publication of FFM, JIM, or IIT reports, the MFA went to great lengths to refute the reports’ conclusions. The content of reports was examined and questioned in detail. Russia’s evaluations of these reports were based off procedural technicalities and scientific jargon. This was then referred to for justifying political decisions, most notably when Russia vetoed and killed the extension of JIM’s mandate.

‘The staff of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission and the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) do not even come to the scene of events. Nor do they take soil samples or make postmortem examinations. Their conclusions are mostly based on internet data and interviews with dubious

‘witnesses’, chiefly opposition members, who are questioned in neighbouring countries rather than directly in Syria.’¹⁸²

‘Indicatively, experts of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria did not even bother to try and obtain in the same manner a crumpled metal pipe that can be clearly seen on photos showing the crater gouged out by the explosion and to study the pipe accordingly. One can only speculate about the current location of this pipe which could actually shed some light on the sarin-use method.’¹⁸³



180 “Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, April 5, 2017,” Foreign Policy, April 5, 2017, accessed July 14, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1544973/#4.

181 “Press release on Director of the Foreign Ministry Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Mikhail Ulyanov’s briefing on the alleged Syrian “chemical dossier,”” Foreign Policy, July 6, 2017, accessed July 14, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1549420/.

182 “Director of the Foreign Ministry Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Mikhail Ulyanov’s interview with the Interfax Agency, April 6, 2017,” Foreign Policy, April 7, 2017, accessed July 14, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1545063/.

183 “Remarks by Director of the Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Mikhail Ulyanov at a briefing for accredited diplomats on the Syrian “chemical dossier,” Moscow, July 5, 2017,” Foreign Policy, July 6, 2017, accessed July 14, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1549417/.

4.2 The West as a Competing Actor

4.2.1 The Western Agenda and Geopolitical Context

The use of CW in Syria has unfolded in a complex geopolitical context. An overarching theme throughout the entire data set is Russia's highlighting of perceived biases and agendas of Western countries against the Assad regime, but also Russia itself. This Western 'troika'¹⁸⁴, consisting of the US, UK, and France, are accused of using the issue of CW to push their own geopolitical agenda, which Russia argues is ultimately regime change in Syria. Some statements go as far as to accuse the West of working alongside terrorist groups to achieve this aim.¹⁸⁵ According to the MFA, this has had the detrimental effect of polluting the international consensus on CW. They suggest that CW, as they hold such strong normative power, are being used by the West as the pretext and justification for intervention.

'This is the most shockingly fraudulent conclusion in the history of chemical weapons.'¹⁸⁶

'This verges on outright shielding of terrorists.'¹⁸⁷

'But without waiting for the OPCW

inspectors even to start their work, the United States, Britain and France hastily declared that everything was clear to them: there could be no doubt that the Assad government was to blame.'¹⁸⁸

This narrative is supported by continuously drawing historical and contemporary parallels.¹⁸⁹ Russia writes statements entirely focused on documenting Western countries' false accusations as pre-texts for aggression, going back centuries.¹⁹⁰ At the heart of it, Russia argues that the Syrian case is just one more attempt by the West to rule over the international community.

'Washington expects to follow up with inevitable punishment for Bashar al-Assad after this provocation. This scenario has been repeatedly used with regard to Iraq, Yugoslavia, Libya, and also other countries too.'¹⁹¹

'[The West] have embarked on a path towards destroying the UN-centred security architecture, and are trying to replace the generally recognised norms of international law laid out in the UN Charter with some 'rules-based order' that suits them.'¹⁹²

- 184 "Foreign Ministry statement in connection with the UN Security Council vote on a draft sanction resolution on Syria under Chapter VII of the UN Charter."; "Statement by the Foreign Ministry in connection with attempts to distort Russia's position regarding the vote on a Draft UN Security Council Resolution to Extend the Mandate of the Joint Investigative Mechanism," Foreign Policy, October 25, 2017, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1555843/; "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with BBC HardTalk," Foreign Policy, April 16, 2018, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1568826/; "Opening remarks by Russia's Permanent Representative to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons Alexander Shulgin at a news conference following a briefing at the OPCW with residents of Douma (SAR), The Hague, April 26, 2018," Foreign Policy, April 28, 2018, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1569912/; "Comment by the Information and Press Department on the Paris meeting of the "International Partnership Against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons," May 17–18, 2018," Foreign Policy, May 23, 2018, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1572024/.
- 185 "Comment by the Information and Press Department on White House Press Secretary's statement about Syrian authorities' alleged preparations for a chemical attack," Foreign Policy, June 28, 2017, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1549080/.
- 186 "Comment by the Information and Press Department on the latest reports by the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission and Human Rights Watch on the use of chemical weapons in Syria," Foreign Policy, May 6, 2017, accessed June 18, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1546555/.
- 187 "Statement by the Foreign Ministry in connection with attempts to distort Russia's position regarding the vote on a Draft UN Security Council Resolution to Extend the Mandate of the Joint Investigative Mechanism."
- 188 "Opening remarks by Russia's Permanent Representative to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons Alexander Shulgin at a news conference following a briefing at the OPCW with residents of Douma (SAR), The Hague, April 26, 2018."
- 189 "Interview with the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs S. V. Lavrov by TV Channel "Russia Today", on 8 October 2013, Bali, Indonesia," Foreign Policy, October 9, 2013, accessed July 15, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1636685/; "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's answer to a question from Rossiya-1 television channel August 9, 2015," Foreign Policy, August 9, 2015, accessed July 22, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1512729/; "Comment by the Information and Press Department on the OPCW Executive Council's decision on Syria," Foreign Policy, November 12, 2016, accessed July 14, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1538044/; "Statement by Mr. Konstantin Vorontsov, Deputy Head of the Delegation of the Russian Federation, Deputy Director of the Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, at the Thematic Discussion on Other Weapons of Mass Destruction in the First Committee of the 77th Session of the UN General Assembly, New York, 19 October 2022," Foreign Policy, October 20, 2022, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1834494/.
- 190 "Western countries' false accusations against Russia in the context of numerous historical examples of the West-fabricated pretexts for aggression," Press Service, February 20, 2022, Accessed July 13, 2023, <https://mid.ru/en/1799521/>.
- 191 "Comment by the Information and Press Department on White House Press Secretary's statement about Syrian authorities' alleged preparations for a chemical attack."
- 192 "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks at the 9th Moscow Conference on International Security, Moscow, June 24, 2021," Foreign Policy, June 24, 2021, accessed July 22, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1766576/.

4.2.2 A Western Disinformation Campaign

The West is repeatedly accused of conducting an information war against Russia and Syria.¹⁹³ Especially when discussing OPCW reports, there are multiple mentions to the distortion of facts by the West. According to the data, the West distorts facts to suit its own goals of regime change. They emphasise that when questioned on the validity of their information, the West often provides no alternative explanation and waves the issue away.

‘We draw attention to the mass filling of information space with different materials, the purpose of which is to impose responsibility for the alleged use of chemical weapons in Damascus on the Syrian officials before the results of the UN investigation are presented.’¹⁹⁴

‘Unfortunately, in this document, our US colleagues have stooped to outright distortions of the facts. It appears that they didn’t give a second thought to the substance of their far-fetched allegations either from the standpoint of professional ethics or basic common sense.’¹⁹⁵

The use of fake news, disinformation and propaganda are seen as important parts of this information war. In many instances of a new CW allegation, Russia immediately dismisses it as a provocation, and often suggests that the attack did not even exist. They respond these allegations with logic, questioning the evidence, and emphasising the importance of truth and facts. This works to create distrust in Western information so that when reports surface that blame Assad of CW use, Russia has extensive documentation of how they are untrue.

‘How insane should the Syrian authorities be to position themselves as war criminals and outcasts? Maybe these fakes on the chemical attacks in Syria were merely an orchestrated campaign that played into the hands of the opponents of Syria’s legitimate government?’¹⁹⁶

‘The massive missile attack on Syria back in April 2017 was triggered by photographs of children allegedly exposed to sarin in Khan-Sheikhoun. However, the symptoms of the affected individuals (the dilated pupils) did not correspond to the clinical picture of exposure to sarin. This was confirmed by several international independent experts. But the deed was done. The excuse to attack Syria was created.’¹⁹⁷

193 “Director of the Foreign Ministry Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Mikhail Ulyanov’s interview with the Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, September 18, 2015,” Foreign Policy, September 18, 2015, accessed July 22, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1514822/; “Foreign Ministry statement on US allegations regarding chemical attacks in Syria,” Foreign Policy, January 24, 2018, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1561820/.

194 “Comment by the Information and Press Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the investigations into the use of chemical weapons in Syria,” Foreign Policy, September 4, 2013, accessed July 22, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1622913/.

195 “Comment by the Information and Press Department on US attempts to distort Russian approaches to investigating the use of chemical weapons in Syria,” Foreign Policy, January 19, 2018, accessed June 18, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1561441/.

196 “Director of the Foreign Ministry Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Vladimir Yermakov’s remarks a joint Defence Ministry and the Foreign Ministry briefing on investigation into the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria, Kubinka, June 22, 2018,” Foreign Policy, June 22, 2018, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1573587/.

197 “False Information and Disinformation,” Foreign Policy, March 16, 2022, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_organizations/1804597/.

4.3 Russia's Role in International Politics

4.3.1 Russia's Self-Perception as a Constructive Actor

Throughout the information campaign, Russia portrays itself as a great power that promotes transparency and offers superior and constructive criticism to the OPCW investigations in Syria. Any criticism of the OPCW or its investigations is framed out of concern for the long-term health of the norm against CW. When discussing CW use and investigations, Russia attempts to construct themselves as an objective actor in contrast to the West, who they accuse of playing on the emotional and moral revulsion attached to CW. In many statements, the MFA emphasises that it is leaving the OPCW alone to do its work; this contrasts with the West who are interfering in missions and inspections.¹⁹⁸ Russia speaks exclusively in facts, truth, and logic, avoiding speculative statements altogether.

‘Contrary to the U.S. statements, the Russian military police in Syria have never interfered with the investigation. On the contrary, it ensured the safety of OPCW experts working in Douma. This was highly appreciated by the leadership of the OPCW Technical Secretariat and reflected in the final report of the FFM.’¹⁹⁹

‘I would like to stress once again that this criticism is not designed to discredit the FFM but to improve its operations and fully adjust them to the CWC and today's realities.’²⁰⁰

The data also reveals Russia's perceived negative self-image in international politics. A priori codes established in Seven's analysis such as feelings of being accused, ignored, and insulted appear frequently across the data set.²⁰¹ These codes appear more frequently when Russia offers a diverging opinion or alternative evidence to that presented in the official reports.²⁰² This is reflective of Russia's broader international status, prestige, and the feeling of being an underdog during this decade. As such, in response to being ignored, Russia takes a solid position on Syria, both to protect its interests but also to stand up to the West.

‘To our deep regret, Russia has tried, to no avail, to draw attention to the endless recurrence of chemical terrorism in Syria and Iraq for more than three years.’²⁰³

198 “Statement by the Head of the Russian Delegation, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW, Ambassador A. V. Shulgin at the 58th Meeting of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Executive Council, The Hague, April 16, 2018,” Foreign Policy, April 17, 2018, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/en/foreign_policy/un/1568861/.

199 “Comment by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the U.S. Report on Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Non-proliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments (ACNPD) (to be added to the comment by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs of May 5, 2019),” Foreign Policy, September 9, 2019, accessed July 24, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1469764/.

200 “Statement by Ambassador Alexander Shulgin, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), at the 92nd Session of the OPCW Executive Council on the performance of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria, The Hague, October 10, 2019,” Foreign Policy, October 18, 2019, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1472895/.

201 Seven, “Russia's Foreign Policy Actions and the Syrian Civil War in the United Nations Security Council,” 904.

202 “Comment by the Information and Press Department on the release of a report by the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism,” Foreign Policy, October 27, 2017, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1555968/.

203 “Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, May 25, 2017,” Foreign Policy, May 25, 2017, accessed July 14, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1547385/.

'Damascus is groundlessly accused of crimes and Moscow is charged with allegedly providing cover. They lie without shame.'²⁰⁴

'His remarks with respect to our country are unacceptable, both in terms of their tone and their content. In effect, we were presented with an ultimatum: Russia must do this and that. In this context I have to say that you cannot speak to our country in a language of ultimatums. Those who have made such attempts in the past have learned that from their own bitter experience. You can only negotiate with Russia, but this should be done on an equal basis and with mutual respect.'²⁰⁵

4.3.2 International Norms and Moral Considerations

In conjunction with Russia's self-image as a constructive actor in the OPCW investigations, the MFA also asserts itself as upstanding actor in international society, going to significant efforts to uphold and respect international norms. This is shown through Russia largely crediting itself for the successful destruction of Syria's CW.²⁰⁶ Russia always condemns any use of CW, paying lip service to the taboo.²⁰⁷ For instance, statements often begin by reaffirming Russia's commitment to the CWC, highlighting their own swift and successful chemical disarmament. This is then followed by a comment criticising the US for not doing the same.²⁰⁸

'Russia consistently speaks out against the use of chemical weapons by anyone anywhere and under any circumstances. Our country's overall commitment to the aims and tasks of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) is affirmed by the early conclusion of the national programme to eliminate our chemical arsenals in 2017, three years ahead of schedule.'²⁰⁹

Though framed in the context of the Syrian disarmament debate, Russia's concern for international norms of sovereignty and non-intervention runs through the data. Whenever the disarmament is discussed, Russia emphasises Assad's active cooperation and consent with the OPCW. The purpose of this is to secure the legitimacy of Assad's government and avoid a repeat of Libya. The consent versus coercion debate is broadly reflective of the diverging meaning of sovereignty between Russia and the West and is also another demonstration of Russia's assertive foreign policy behaviour.²¹⁰

'The Syrian side fully cooperated with the inspectors and gave them unlimited access to all buildings and premises they wanted to see; the analyses of the samples taken there showed absence of traces of 'scheduled chemicals'; the inspectors did not find any signs of activities that would contradict Syria's commitments under the Convention on the Prohibition and Elimination of Chemical Weapons (CPECW).'²¹¹

204 "Statement by the Foreign Ministry on the UN Security Council vote on the resolution to extend the JIM's mandate," Foreign Policy, October 24, 2017, accessed June 25, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1555757/.

205 "Remarks by the Russian Permanent Representative at the OPCW, head of the Russian delegation, Ambassador Alexander Shulgin at the 56th meeting of the OPCW Executive Council (Re: JIM's seventh report), The Hague, November 9, 2017," Foreign Policy, November 9, 2017, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1557229/.

206 "Statement by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the completion of the removal of chemical weapons from Syria," Foreign Policy, June 23, 2014, accessed July 9, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1614242/; "Press release on Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov's meeting with Special Envoy of the Chinese Government on the Syrian Issue Xie Xiaoyan," Foreign Policy, April 27, 2018, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1569870/.

207 "Reply by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova to a question by Rossiya Segodnya information agency regarding the use of chemical warfare agents by terrorist groups," Foreign Policy, April 12, 2016, accessed July 22, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1526373/.

208 "Statement by H.E. Ambassador Shulgin, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW at the 99th Session of the Executive Council, General Debate, Hague, March 8, 2022," Foreign Policy, March 15, 2022, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1804392/.

209 "Remarks by Head of the Russian delegation Georgy Kalamonov during the 4th Special Session of the Conference of the States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), The Hague, June 26–28, 2018," Foreign Policy, June 29, 2018, accessed July 14, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1573841/.

210 Seven, "Russia's Foreign Policy Actions and the Syrian Civil War in the United Nations Security Council," 903.

211 "Remarks by the head of the Russian delegation, Russian Permanent Representative to the OPCW Ambassador Alexander Shulgin at the 85th session of the OPCW Executive Council (general debates), The Hague, July 11, 2017," Foreign Policy, July 13, 2017, accessed July 14, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1549665/.

4.4 The Logistics of an Information Campaign

4.4.1 Counter-Narratives and Alternative Explanations

The final theme focuses on answering the ‘how’ in the research question. To combat the OPCW’s findings in a constructive manner, and still being seen to support the CW taboo, Russia’s information campaign introduces counter-narratives and alternative explanations to challenge the mainstream understanding of chemical attacks. When there is indisputable evidence that a CW attack has taken place, the MFA attributes blame to terrorists and non-state actors. By playing on a long-standing fear of chemical terrorism, this draws attention to terrorist issues in the Syrian conflict, which Russia sees as foreign policy priority, whilst simultaneously deflecting attention from the Syrian regime’s actions or Russia’s own involvement.

‘Regrettably, when the terrorists ousted from Iraq move their chemical research base to war-torn Syria, the number of incidents involving the use of chemical agents is bound to grow. It is easy to guess who will be accused of them – of course, the armed forces and the Government of Syria.’²¹²

Where Russia can argue that a report’s findings are dubious and attack the methods and procedure used to obtain evidence, the MFA questions whether a chemical attack even occurred to begin with. The codes ‘staged’, and ‘provocation’ were used to indicate when Russia questioned the authenticity of chemical attacks. In the earlier years of the study, it would be non-state actors or terrorist groups accused of faking an attack. However, from 2017 accusations overwhelmingly accused the opposition and the White Helmets of staging attacks, providing the OPCW with fake evidence, and working for the West to incite political destabilisation in Syria. These

accusations were especially heated following the CW attack in Douma, in April 2018, as it was followed by US, UK, and French military action against Syria. The MFA thus accused the West of using an alleged CW attack as a pretext for intervention. Many statements following these ‘staged provocations’ would unpick and refute this evidence in great technical detail with the aim of disputing its credibility and authenticity.

‘It would be obvious to any intelligent person that this incident was a staged provocation. Perhaps our Western colleagues did not want this obvious fact to become even more glaring.’²¹³

‘... that chemical provocation by the White Helmets, skilled in such staged video productions...’²¹⁴



212 “Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, May 25, 2017.”

213 “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir, Moscow, August 29, 2018,” Foreign Policy, August 29, 2018, accessed July 14, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1575236/.

214 “Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, April 15, 2021,” Foreign Policy, April 15, 2021, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1419825/.

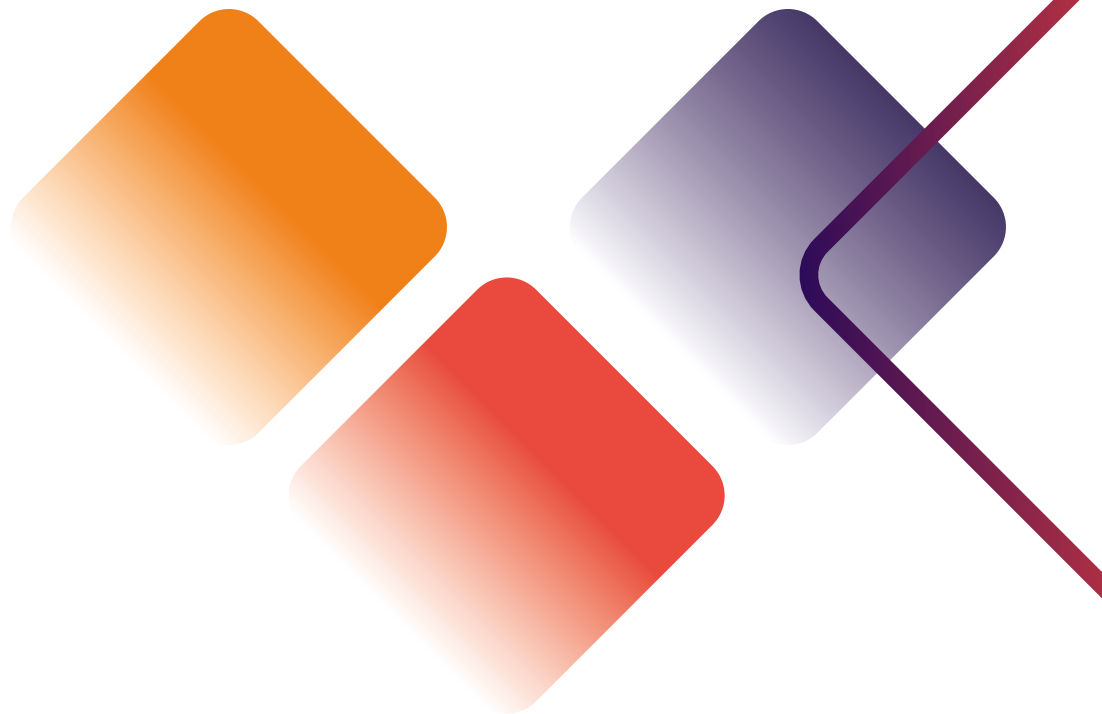
4.4.2 Overarching Tactics of Russia's Information Campaign

The information warfare aspect of Russia's campaign involves deploying disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda to manipulate opinion. The analysis found that Russia fit more closely to the 'four Ds' framework (distract, dismiss, dismay, distort) than the 'firehose of falsehood' framework.²¹⁵ Importantly, no statement ever acknowledges or entertains that Assad could be responsible for conducting a chemical attack. Yet rather than introduce its own, fabricated version, the statements tended to dismiss existing evidence or deflect blame where possible. Furthermore, statements would frequently blur or synthesise information to create confusion and sow doubt. For example, often it was unclear if the MFA was accusing a terrorist group, rebel actors, government opposition, the White

Helmets, or the West. Misinformation tactics such as the selective use or prioritisation of facts, hyperbole, and inflammatory language are employed to ridicule the West's explanation of events, take control of the information sphere and advance Russia's foreign policy narrative.

'Absent from the JIM conclusions are many technical parameters, and there are many inconsistencies. ... It would be amiss not to mention the positive elements of the fourth report, such as the need to carefully investigate the criminal actions with the use of toxic agents in Syria committed not only by ISIS, but also by many other terrorist and extremist organisations in Syria, in particular Jabhat al-Nusra.'²¹⁶

'Some of the stories planted by the White Helmets resulted from their ties to terrorist groups.'²¹⁷



215 See Richey, "Contemporary Russian revisionism."; Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" propaganda model," *Rand Corporation* 2, no. 7 (2016): 1–10; White, "Dismiss, Distort, Distract, and Dismay."

216 "Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, October 27, 2016," *Foreign Policy*, October 27, 2016, accessed July 14, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1537140/.

217 "Examples of Western countries fabricating pretexts for aggression against other states," *Foreign Policy*, February 20, 2022, Accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/historical_materials/1804825/.

Table 1. A qualitative analysis of MFA statements on CW uses in Syria: from code to theme.

Broad Category/ Theme	Sub-Theme	Code
The Perception of the OPCW as an Institution	Degradation of the OPCW's Effectiveness	OPCW institution and its reputation. Authority and scope of OPCW mandate. Compliance with protocols and international norms. Systemic crisis and integrity concerns. Privatization and politicization of chemical weapons issue.
	Trust in OPCW Reports and Expertise	Evaluation of OPCW reports and experts' credibility. Bias and potential delays in reporting. Efficiency and professionalism in handling chemical weapon investigations. Impartiality and reliability of the findings. Importance of evidence, scientific detail, and accuracy. Procedure, process, and methodology of investigations.
The West as a Competing Actor	Western Agenda and Geopolitical Context	Allegations of the West's geopolitical agenda and bias against Russia and Syrian Government. Geopolitical implications and aim of regime change. Troika relationship (US, UK, France). Blaming the Syrian Government for CW attacks. Accusations and blame related to other contemporary events. Historical timeline of Western violations – referencing Iraq, Libya, and Yugoslavia. Accusations of hypocrisy by Western countries.
	Western Disinformation Campaign	West conducting their own information war. Distortion and manipulation of facts. Distrust in Western information. Accusations of fake news. Accusations of propaganda.

Russia's Role in International Politics	Russia's Self-Perception as a Constructive Actor	<p>Russia as a global power in international politics.</p> <p>Confidence in adopting a constructive approach.</p> <p>Emphasising the importance of facts, transparency, and truth.</p> <p>Anti-Russian sentiments and Russophobia.</p> <p>Feeling of being accused.</p> <p>Belief of being ignored.</p> <p>Feeling of being attacked.</p> <p>Feeling of being insulted.</p> <p>Feeling of distrust.</p> <p>Avoiding speculative statements.</p>
	International Norms and Moral Considerations	<p>The role of the international community in CW issues.</p> <p>Diverging opinions on norms.</p> <p>Emphasizing Syrian consent and legitimacy of Assad's actions.</p> <p>Compliance with international laws and conventions.</p> <p>Upholding international norms.</p> <p>The significance of international law and conventions.</p> <p>Highlighting successes and positive outcomes in Syria.</p> <p>The timeline of CW disarmament and adherence to international norms.</p> <p>Russia's success in CW disarmament.</p> <p>Moral aspects related to CW use.</p>
The Logistics of an Information Campaign	Counter-Narratives and Alternative Explanations	<p>Suggestions of staged events and provocations.</p> <p>Accusations of chemical terrorism and the prioritisation of this issue.</p> <p>Involvement of White Helmets, pseudo-humanitarian group in providing dubious evidence.</p> <p>Aim to refute arguments put forth by the West.</p>
	Overarching Tactics of Russia's Information Campaign	<p>Distract, dismiss, dismay, distort.</p> <p>Deflection over denial where possible.</p> <p>Creating confusion and sowing doubt.</p> <p>Hyperbole/Exaggeration/Inflammatory language.</p> <p>Synthesisation of non-state actors: terrorist groups, rebel groups, government opposition.</p>

Chapter 5 Discussion

The previous chapter outlined and discussed the results of the thematic analysis of MFA statements with the aim to explore the construction of Russia's response to OPCW investigations in Syria, 2013–2022. Providing a comprehensive answer to the first two sub-questions of the thesis, the analysis found four broad themes, which could then be further delineated into eight sub-themes, covering the OPCW, Russia's perception of both itself and the West, and finally the logistics of the information campaign. The last chapter aims to discuss these findings in the context of the central research question: How does Russia's information campaign, regarding the CW investigations during the Syrian civil war, 2013–2022, navigate the CW norm to advance its geopolitical objectives? The chapter argues that unlike the US, Russia strategically did not invoke the emotional rhetoric attached to the CW taboo and instead employs reflexive rhetorical strategies that strategically frame the issue in logistical terms and wider international norms. In doing this, Russia is both reasserting the norm, but simultaneously violating it. By constructing itself as a responsible state actor who advocates for international norms and constructive criticism, Russia is engaging in a self-image making process, and asserting its position as a global power. Russia's efforts to undermine the OPCW's authority and feed counter-narratives, seemingly in defence of the Syrian government, represent a greater challenge to the West's credibility and Western-imposed norms. Structurally, the chapter is divided into three sections which each in turn address the root issue of the thesis' sub-questions: (1) Framing the issue of CW in the information campaign, (2) Asserting Identity: Russia versus the West, (3) Implications for the CW norm in international politics.

5.1 Framing the Issue of Chemical Weapons in the Information Campaign

Russia's information campaign has, for over a decade, systematically attacked and criticised the OPCW's work in Syria. Due to the robust taboo against CW in the international community, Russia's response to the OPCW investigations in Syria must navigate certain normative boundaries. At the most fundamental level, often argued by rationalists, the taboo places constraining effects upon Russia's behaviour.²¹⁸ Throughout the conflict to date, all sides in Syria have continued to deny that they have used CW as part of their arsenal.²¹⁹ Russia is no exception to this; if they were to be seen to be shielding a regime proved to be using CW, Russia would risk being accepted as a legitimate member in the international community. This firm denial of CW use reaffirms the view that CW use is morally unacceptable. Nevertheless, Russia has, somewhat successfully, undermined the credibility and public trust in the OPCW when investigation results have not aligned with their political objectives. This thesis demonstrates that Russia navigates the CW taboo by framing itself as a constructive actor in international politics, employing language tools such as strategic narratives and reflexive rhetoric when discussing the OPCW's work.

218 Chapman, Elbahtimy, and Martin, "The Future of Chemical Weapons," 704.
219 Price, "Weapons of Mass Destruction, Norms, and International Order," 41–42.

The information campaign subjects the OPCW to intense scrutiny, questioning its reputation, credibility, and authority. However, the institutionalisation of the CW taboo shapes the ways in which Russia frames these attacks. Throughout the data, Russia expresses a growing concern for the independence of the OPCW, anxious that the organisation was progressively becoming corrupted and deviating from its core, technical purpose. The Russian statements took caution to frame the OPCW as a passive actor in this process, indicating its awareness of the OPCW as the embodiment of the CW taboo. Instead, Russia firmly placed the blame on Western governments for politicising, corrupting, and privatising the organisation. Mirko Sossai argues that the strongest critical remarks from Russia focused on the institutional aspects of the OPCW.²²⁰ The analysis found that the issues over voting procedures,

such as by consensus, and an attribution mechanism were especially targeted in Russian statements.²²¹ Russia accused the attribution mechanism, introduced through the IIT, of exceeding the mandate assigned to the OPCW by the CWC as it meant a shift in the nature of OPCW action from providing technical assessments to political judgements.²²² Moreover, statements labelled these attribution efforts as examples of Western states using international bodies to service their narrow national interests.²²³ This, according to Russia, had the potential to undermine the entire disarmament process in Syria.²²⁴ As such, Russia frames itself as anxious about protecting such an important international institution, and by extension the sanctity of the norm against CW.

220 Sossai, "Identifying the Perpetrators of Chemical Attacks in Syria," 214.

221 "Foreign Ministry statement in connection with the UN Security Council vote on a draft sanction resolution on Syria under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.;" "Comment by the Information and Press Department on US statements on the use of chemical weapons in Syria on August 21, 2013," Foreign Policy, August 22, 2017, accessed June 18, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1551046/; "Briefing «SYRIAN CHEMICAL DOSSIER: THE RUSSIAN VIEW» by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov Head of the Russian delegation in UNGA First Committee, Director of the Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control of the MFA of Russia on the margins of the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly," Foreign Policy, October 16, 2017, accessed June 27, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1555147/; "Remarks by Head of the Russian delegation Georgy Kalamonov during the 4th Special Session of the Conference of the States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), The Hague, June 26–28, 2018.;" "On the first report of the OPCW Investigation and Identification Team on chemical incidents in Al Lataminah (SAR)," Foreign Policy, April 22, 2020, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_organizations/1430837/; "Comment by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova on an OPCW Executive Council decision to accuse Syria of violating the Chemical Weapons Convention.;" "Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, April 15, 2021.;" "Statement by the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW A. Shulgin at the Second Part of the Twenty-Fifth Session of the Conference of the States Parties to the CWC under agenda subitem 9 d) "Addressing the threat from chemical weapons use", The Hague, April 20, 2021," Foreign Policy, April 22, 2021, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1420182/; "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Rossiya 24, Moscow, November 1, 2021."

222 Sossai, "Identifying the Perpetrators of Chemical Attacks in Syria," 219.

223 Notte, "The United States, Russia, and Syria's chemical weapons," 221.

224 Sossai, "Identifying the Perpetrators of Chemical Attacks in Syria," 219.

American rhetoric has played on the emotional and moral aspects of the CW taboo, with Presidents referring to children killed by chemical gases and the barbaric nature of CW to justify US missile strikes in Syria.²²⁵ In contrast Russia sticks to a logical and technical assessment of alleged CW use, framing itself as objective in the matter, purely concerned for the health of the OPCW. Particularly following the publishing of reports, statements pick apart the findings, highlighting inconsistencies in data and dubious methodology. For instance, in multiple statements Russian officials discuss craters supposedly caused by chemical rockets as part of the Khan Sheikhoun incident on April 4, 2017, and Douma incident on April 7, 2018.²²⁶ Statements questioned in detail the theories on how, or if, the chemicals were delivered, as if shown to be dropped from a significant height, this would prove whether Assad's forces had used CW.²²⁷ When accused of spreading disinformation, Russia would point to Russian and Western experts, who shared the same scientific opinions but had been silenced by the Western-dominated OPCW.²²⁸ Russia uses these disagreements to establish its concern for the independence of the OPCW, which it believes is in systemic crisis. Therefore, any challenges to the investigations are framed through a constructive lens as Russia argues that if the organisation is to survive

and thrive, it must follow official procedures correctly and impartially. This narrative allows Russia to further its political interests by casting doubt on the sincerity of the West in upholding the taboo.

Lastly, Russia frames the issue of CW use within its broader concerns in Syria. In addition to acting as a diplomatic shield for Syria in the UNSC, Russia provided ample military and economic aid to government forces over the conflict.²²⁹ Their overarching aim in Syria was to keep the Assad government intact and in power, avoiding another Libya situation, regional escalation, and a loss of control over Syria's CW stockpile.²³⁰ The propagating of alternative and counter-narratives regarding CW attacks helped to achieve this goal. All parties in the conflict understood the consequences of their name being attached to the use of CW. Responding to alleged uses of CW, Russia connected the incidents to any group that opposed the Syrian government. For instance, this includes the Syrian Civil Defence, British and US Intelligence, Turkish foreign experts, and unnamed 'militants'.²³¹ Most prominently, Russia continuously warns of 'terrorist' groups obtaining, growing, and using a large chemical stockpile. Accusations of chemical terrorism incite a certain fear in the international community as non-state actors may not hesitate to use these weapons indiscriminately and cannot

225 "Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013," The White House: President Barack Obama, August 30, 2013, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/30/government-assessment-syrian-government-s-use-chemical-weapons-august-21>; Michelle Bentley, "Instability and incoherence: Trump, Syria, and chemical weapons," *Critical Studies on Security* 5, no. 2 (2017): 169.

226 "Remarks by Director of the Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Mikhail Ulyanov at a briefing for accredited diplomats on the Syrian "chemical dossier," Moscow, July 5, 2017."; "Remarks by the head of the Russian delegation, Russian Permanent Representative to the OPCW Ambassador Alexander Shulgin at the 85th session of the OPCW Executive Council (general debates), The Hague, July 11, 2017."; "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's answers to media questions on the sidelines of the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly, New York, September 22, 2017," *Foreign Policy*, September 23, 2017, accessed July 14, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1553725/; "Remarks by the Russian Permanent Representative at the OPCW, head of the Russian delegation, Ambassador Alexander Shulgin at the 56th meeting of the OPCW Executive Council (Re: JIM's seventh report), The Hague, November 9, 2017."; "Comment by the Information and Press Department on US attempts to distort Russian approaches to investigating the use of chemical weapons in Syria."; "Remarks and answers to media questions by participants in the news conference "Who is using chemical weapons in Syria?" organised by the Permanent Representation of Russia to the OPCW, The Hague, July 12, 2019," *Foreign Policy*, July 14, 2019, accessed July 13, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1465814/.

227 "Comment by the Information and Press Department on US attempts to distort Russian approaches to investigating the use of chemical weapons in Syria."

228 Anton Utkin, "The End of OPCW-UN mechanism. What Stands Behind the Russian "No?" RIAI, June 20, 2018, accessed June 25, 2023, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/the-end-of-opcw-un-mechanism-what-stands-behind-the-russian-no/>; Richard Lloyd and Theodore A. Postol. *Possible Implications of Faulty US Technical Intelligence in the Damascus Nerve Agent Attack of August 21, 2013* (Washington DC: MIT, 2014); "Remarks and answers to media questions by participants in the news conference "Who is using chemical weapons in Syria?" organised by the Permanent Representation of Russia to the OPCW, The Hague, July 12, 2019."; RIAI round table, "Chemical Weapons in Syria: Russia's Position and the New US Accusations," RIAI, February 7, 2018, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/news/riai-chemical-weapons-in-syria-russia-s-position-and-the-new-us-accusations/>.

229 Maksymilian Czuperski, John Herbst, Eliot Higgins, Frederic Hof, and Ben Nimmo. *Distract, Deceive, Destroy: Putin at War in Syria* (Washington: Atlantic Council, 2016), 1–7; Nocetti, "Dazed and Confused," 2–3; Şen, and Şahin, "Miscalculation in Proxy War," 252.

230 Notte, "The United States, Russia, and Syria's chemical weapons," 206.

231 Bellingcat and Newsy, "Chemical Weapons and Absurdity"; Makdasi and Hindawi, "The Syrian chemical weapons disarmament process in context," 1696.

legally be held to account.²³² Statements often conflate the term ‘terrorist’ with all Syrian opposition, accusing these groups of using CW but also staging attacks to provoke Western intervention. This works to stigmatise and ‘other’ the opposition, creating the impression that they are all extremists.²³³ A significant alternative narrative in the information campaign accused the White Helmets humanitarian group of helping to stage CW evidence and spread fake news. This NGO is consistently accused of being Western puppets. This contributes to Russia’s narrative of the West always interfering and damaging the OPCW and CWC for their own political gain. Russia juxtaposes itself as an objective and constructive actor in defence of a legitimate sovereign nation, always seeking the truth and transparency.

Framing is a form of rhetorical action used by policymakers to persuade observers that an event or issue is a problem of a particular kind, prescribing a particular response.²³⁴ The ‘issue’ constructed by Russia in their information campaign is that of the West using the potency of the CW taboo to push their geopolitical agenda in Syria. In contrast, Russia frames itself as a constructive and objective actor, anxious about the overall health of the OPCW and CWC. Through this navigation of the normative boundaries set by the CW taboo, Russia could justify its direct challenges to the accusations against Assad’s government and openly criticise the OPCW’s reports, in effect breaking the consensus it claims is so important to uphold. The following section will demonstrate how the prohibitory norm against CW helps to constitute Russia’s identity and impose meanings of what is to count as legitimate reality.²³⁵

5.2 Asserting Identity: Russia versus the West

Russia’s response to the OPCW investigations is embedded in deeper struggles related to the architecture of the international system.²³⁶ The norm against CW constitutes Russia’s interests, identities, and practices at a time when Russia’s foreign policy was taking a more assertive stance. Being seen to unflinchingly uphold the CW taboo, Russia uses reflexive rhetoric to secure its identity as a legitimate and superior global power, in contrast to Western states’ hypocritical behaviours and thus challenging Western-centric normative order. Russia’s process of upholding the CW taboo is a form of leveraging, and the norm shapes the ways in which it can object to the actions of Western states in Syria.

232 Cairtriona McLeish, "Recasting the Threat of Chemical Terrorism in the EU: the Issue of Returnees from the Syrian Conflict," *European Journal of Risk Regulation* 8 (2017): 644.

233 Maksymilian Czuperski, Faysal Itani, Ben Nimmo, Eliot Higgins, Emma Beals, *Breaking Aleppo* (Washington: Atlantic Council, 2017), 56

234 Medzihorsky, Popovic, and Jenne, "Rhetoric of civil conflict management," 2.

235 Price, "A Genealogy of the Chemical Weapons Taboo," 87.

236 Edwards and Cacciatori, "The Politics of International Chemical Weapon Justice," 281.

Russia projects its 'great power' identity and strong foreign policy through various narratives in its response to the OPCW investigations. Throughout the information campaign, Russia creates a moral narrative in which it feels superior in its efforts to respect and uphold the CW taboo during the Syrian conflict. Statements consistently reaffirm Russia's commitment to the CWC and highlight Russia's successful chemical disarmament, completed three years ahead of schedule, whilst also reminding that the US has failed to do the same.²³⁷ Additionally, the analysis found that Russia largely credited itself for the destruction of Syria's chemical stockpile. The voluntary nature of Syrian cooperation, backed up by Russia, in the disarmament process is a very important element in the campaign's narrative because it at once legitimates Assad's government and congratulates Russia for avoiding a potentially global escalation of the Syrian Civil War.²³⁸ Makdisi and Hindawi argue that Russia clung to this consent narrative to have a better negotiation position in the UNSC, and more effectively contrast Assad as a reliable statesman with the assortment of rebel 'terrorist' groups.²³⁹ This consent narrative counters the coercion narrative fuelled by the West, which stressed that Assad only gave up his chemical stockpile under the hanging threat of military intervention in a Libya-like scenario.

By emphasising its positive role in the Syrian conflict, Russia uses the issue of CW to counter its perceived self-image in international politics. Similarly to Seven's study, this analysis discovered that Russia draws inferences from perceived facts and evidence and then develops an understanding of what others think about Russia.²⁴⁰ Moreover, Russia's concern about being ignored is a recurring theme throughout the data; statements discuss Russian evidence and expert findings that have been sidelined by the Western-leaning OPCW Technical Secretariat.²⁴¹ This frustration is most clearly shown by a lack of international action against non-state actors in Syria, despite Russia's repeated insistence on the importance of chemical terrorism. The MFA also highlights instances of Western states talking down to Russia, and not viewing them as an equal actor.²⁴² Statements heavily criticise the International Partnership against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons (IPI), a US-French initiative convened in Paris to which Russia, insultingly, was not invited.²⁴³ Believing that its interests are ignored, Russia takes a solid position to be more assertive in protecting its interests.²⁴⁴

Therefore, Russia embodies the CW norm to constitute its identity as a legitimate and major power, as well as constitute its practices in the form of a more confident foreign policy. NATO's military campaign in Libya during 2011 demonstrated the evolution of what Russia saw as regime change operations.²⁴⁵ Arguably abusing the principle of R2P and humanitarian intervention, the Libya campaign resulted in the overthrow of the authoritarian and

237 "Remarks by Head of the Russian delegation Georgy Kalamonov during the 4th Special Session of the Conference of the States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), The Hague, June 26–28, 2018."

238 Makdisi and Hindawi, "The Syrian chemical weapons disarmament process in context," 1701.

239 Makdisi and Hindawi, "The Syrian chemical weapons disarmament process in context," 1701.

240 Seven, "Russia's Foreign Policy Actions and the Syrian Civil War in the United Nations Security Council," 904.

241 "Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, April 5, 2017."

242 "Comment by the Information and Press Department on White House Press Secretary's statement about Syrian authorities' alleged preparations for a chemical attack.;" "Remarks by the Russian Permanent Representative at the OPCW, head of the Russian delegation, Ambassador Alexander Shulgin at the 56th meeting of the OPCW Executive Council (Re: JIM's seventh report), The Hague, November 9, 2017.;" "Statement by the Head of the Russian Delegation, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW, Ambassador A. V. Shulgin at the 58th Meeting of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Executive Council The Hague, April 16, 2018."

243 "Foreign Ministry statement on US allegations regarding chemical attacks in Syria."

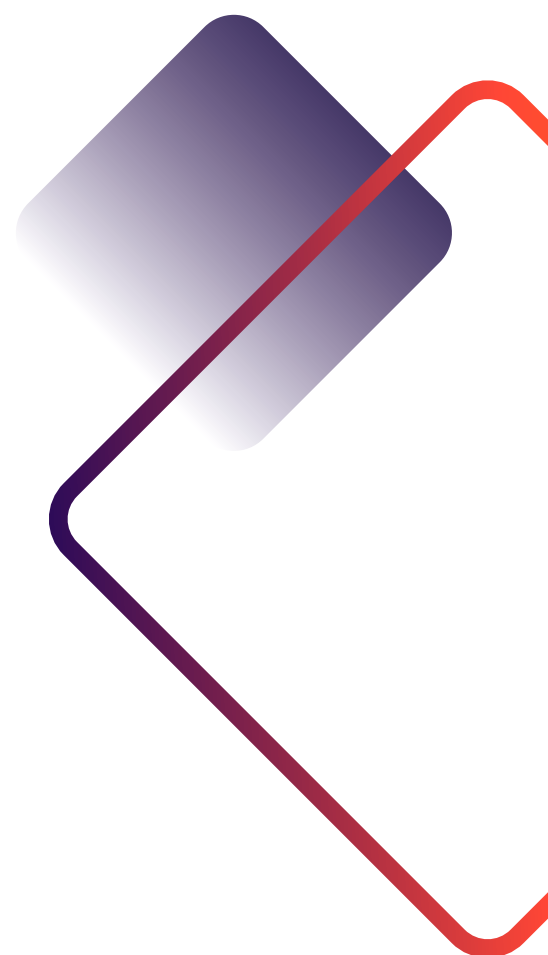
244 Seven, "Russia's Foreign Policy Actions and the Syrian Civil War in the United Nations Security Council," 904.

245 Yury Barmin, "From Ideology to Pragmatism: How Putin Changed Russia's Focus in the Middle East," *Al Sharq Expert Brief* (2017): 2.

anti-West Libyan leader, Muammar al-Qaddafi.²⁴⁶ Yury Barmin contends that this left the Kremlin feeling tricked, since it chose not to veto the UNSC resolution approving the operation.²⁴⁷ Similar to the military intervention in Iraq, Russia saw Libya as a breach of the two most sacrosanct international norms: sovereignty and non-intervention. In 2012, Putin once again became President of the Russian Federation and set his country on a more assertive, aggressive and revisionist course, seeking to enlarge its role on the world stage and make Russia a strong nation that could not be ignored by others.²⁴⁸ Engagement in Syria created an opportunity to do so, Russia had a permanent seat on the UNSC and held the power to veto any resolution that came through the Council. Furthermore, Averre and Davies claim that Russia's wider normative position has been accompanied by values-based narratives which fundamentally challenge western liberalism.²⁴⁹

Consequently, in addition to shaping its own identity, Russia's information campaign also leverages the CW taboo to challenge Western dominance over international politics. Russia firmly asserts its position on international law and norms, privileging Assad's sovereignty throughout the CW accusations. Moreover, Russia uses reflexive rhetoric to argue that the West weaponizing the CW taboo as a pretext for military intervention and regime change in Syria, just as they did with the R2P norm in Libya, and the claim that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. This narrative is placed within an almost 200-year-long timeline of Western hypocrisy and aggressive actions dating back to 1823.²⁵⁰ In the latter years of the analysis, statements increasingly referred to the Syrian case in conjunction with the Novichok poisonings of the Skripal

family and Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny to give the impression that the West were continually harnessing the accusation of CW use to isolate Russia.²⁵¹ Matthew Levinger illustrates why the White Helmets, and their allegations of Russian war crimes, were such an obvious target for Russian disinformation.²⁵² Knowing the consequences of CW use, Russia accuses the White Helmets as being a Western tool to collect fake evidence and incite political destabilisation in Syria.²⁵³ Russia aims to characterise the role of the West in Syria by distrust, accusations of manipulation and violation of international law and criticisms of what is termed as 'double standards' of the West.²⁵⁴



246 Alan J. Kuperman, "A Model Humanitarian Intervention? Reassessing NATO's Libya Campaign," *International Security* 38, no. 1 (2013): 105.

247 Barmin, "From Ideology to Pragmatism," 2.

248 Richey, "Contemporary Russian revisionism," 103; Whitaker, *Denying the Obvious*, 47.

249 Averre and Davies, "Russia, humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect," 814.

250 "Examples of Western countries fabricating pretexts for aggression against other states."

251 "Statement by the delegation of the Russian Federation at the 25th session of the Conference of the States parties."

252 Levinger, "Master Narratives of Disinformation Campaigns," 129.

253 "Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, April 5, 2017."

254 Seven, "Russia's Foreign Policy Actions and the Syrian Civil War in the United Nations Security Council," 905.

As demonstrated, a norm can constitute an identity. Adhering to the norm against CW is part of a broader discourse of international society defining what it means to be a 'civilised' member of the international community.²⁵⁵ The Syrian case marked the first time the OPCW was faced with a substantial violation of the CWC. Therefore, the purpose of the organisation shifted in response to the political context in which it operated, entering uncharted waters and an already politicised arena. Notably the biggest shifts in procedure were the decisions to vote by majority, rather than consensus, and to introduce attribution mechanisms.²⁵⁶ Demonstrated by the thematic analysis, these changes led to high level disagreements about what the procedure and role of investigative bodies should involve. By accusing the West of not properly adhering to the CW taboo, distorting its true purpose, and changing the rules of the OPCW, Russia could in turn criticise the Western imposed normative order and put pressure on the global institutions by which it is upheld. Russia's criticisms can thus be understood as part of the organisational power games taking place within the OPCW and illustrate how a state can replicate and challenge certain norms in a crisis of legitimacy.

5.3 Implications for the Chemical Weapons Norm in International Politics

Norms are inherently contested, and as such it is the nature of international politics that different forms of behaviour have the power to reassert or challenge a norm.²⁵⁷ In their response to the OPCW investigations in Syria, Russia performs a dual role, at once violating the norm against CW but simultaneously reasserting it. The analysis found that at the heart of this performance is legitimacy, illustrating how a state can invoke a norm to build legitimacy in international politics. Russia's systematic challenging of technical bodies and independent investigations could be seen to undermine the norm against CW in many ways. Most importantly, Russia is challenging the accepted legitimacy and credibility of the OPCW and eroding its foundational aim of countries working in consensus to achieve a world without CW. More broadly, this begs the question of whether Russia's actions going forward may influence others to quietly undermine norms in careful and subtle ways which are often ignored.²⁵⁸

Nevertheless, Becker-Jakob asserts that international norms are constituted and shaped by words as well as actions.²⁵⁹ Russia's verbal affirmation of the CWC and condemnation of any use of CW thus contribute to upholding the CW taboo. Additionally, the ferocity with which Russia shields Assad's government from CW accusations and shifts the blame elsewhere implies that they accord significant importance to the norm even if they do not themselves respect it – otherwise there would be no need to deny the violation.²⁶⁰ Christopher Blair et al. label this behaviour as 'insincere norm-holding', yet still maintain that Russia and Syria's actions have likely reinforced the CW norm and increased the

255 Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo," 437.

256 Koblenz, "Chemical-weapon use in Syria," 590.

257 Wiener, A Theory of Contestation.

258 Edwards and Cacciatori, "Syria and the Future of the Chemical Weapon Taboo," para. 8.

259 Becker-Jakob, "Countering the Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria," 11.

260 Becker-Jakob, "Countering the Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria," 11.

expected costs of openly opposing it through a second mechanism: vivid information.²⁶¹ This illustrates Russia's awareness of being constrained by normative boundaries, in that to accept Assad's use of CW would be to lose international legitimacy. Yet, it also highlights the constitutive effects of the norm in its ability to grant or remove legitimacy. Hersman and Claeys argue that norm contestation in the arena of information warfare is simply part of the broader competitive environment.²⁶² They illustrate that by using the rules and procedures in the CWC to press compliance, Russia's practices actually reinforce norm resilience and reduces the risk of conflict or crisis at higher levels of escalation.²⁶³ Overall, Russia's dual-role of 'norm-upholder' and 'norm-challenger' reveals the complex range of effects that a state can have on the operability of a norm in international politics, and vice versa.

Scholars focusing on the negative effects of Russia's disinformation campaign on the OPCW have often circled back to the importance of accountability. Indeed, Koblentz believes that holding a government accountable for CW violations is central to the CWC's legitimacy and the CW disarmament regime.²⁶⁴ He writes that 'the ability of a CWC party to violate the treaty with impunity erodes the OPCW's credibility and its ability to enforce the treaty.'²⁶⁵ Similarly, Stewart contends that the campaign to undermine the credibility of weapons inspectors and CW expertise has been an almost unmitigated success.²⁶⁶ Despite direct attributions to the Syrian government for actions in violation of the CWC and numerous UNSC resolutions, the international community as a whole has yet to impose any consequences.²⁶⁷ These arguments come back to the idea that a norm violation must be followed by punishment in order for the norm to remain intact. Taking a linear view

of norms, these arguments also suggest that contestation exposes weaknesses in traditional mechanisms used by international institutions to uphold norms. However, this thesis has found that norm maintenance is a process, it cannot simply be solved as if it were an equation.²⁶⁸ Importantly, the idea of a violation at all continues to exist throughout and beyond the Syrian case. In addition, future OPCW actions and policy decisions are likely to be shaped by its organisational history, which was in large part formed and tested through the Syrian case. These insights support Price's genealogical understanding of the CW taboo, demonstrating that the longer cultural and social timescales of international politics matter. The use of CW in Syria, and Russia's response to the investigations, have not eroded the norm against CW. Instead, the information campaign should be viewed as a discursive intervention by Russia which is challenging the meaning of the CW norm in international politics.

261 Blair, Chu, and Schwartz, "The Two Faces of Opposition to Chemical Weapons," 686.

262 Hersman and Claeys, "Rigid Structures, Evolving Threat," 9.

263 Hersman and Claeys, "Rigid Structures, Evolving Threat," 9.

264 Koblentz, "Chemical-weapon use in Syria," 592.

265 Koblentz, "Chemical-weapon use in Syria," 592.

266 Stewart, "Symposium on New Challenges in Weapons Inspection," 108.

267 Stewart, "Symposium on New Challenges in Weapons Inspection," 108.

268 Martinková and Smetana, "Dynamics of norm contestation in the Chemical Weapons Convention," 430.

5.4 Chapter Conclusion

The final chapter of this thesis discussed the findings of the thematic analysis in the broader frame of the research questions. It illustrated how and why Russia framed themselves as a constructive actor in the Syrian CW debate. By sticking to logical and so-called objective assessments of the CW issue, Russia was able to unemotionally challenge the material findings of the OPCW investigations, justifying the use of their UNSC veto and thus providing a diplomatic shield to Assad's regime. These narratives and themes were framed by both the constraining effects of the CW taboo, but also its enabling effects. The chapter then put this in the wider context of how the CW norm constituted Russia's identity at the global level. It demonstrated that by framing itself as a constructive actor in the CW issue, Russia was contributing to its self-image making process of a strong and assertive global actor. Importantly, the CW norm became a mechanism through which Russia could more broadly challenge the West and the growing institutionalisation of Western normative order. Finally, the chapter concluded with a discussion of the implications for the CW norm. It focused on Russia's dual role in the Syrian case, showing how a state can balance normative boundaries and contestation, at once violating a norm, but simultaneously upholding it. It was shown how this has broader implications for how scholars should conceptualise norm contestation and maintenance.



Conclusion

This thesis investigated Russia's information campaign regarding the OPCW's investigations into the use of CW during the Syrian Civil War between 2013 and 2022. It specifically took interest in how Russia's response is constructed against the CW taboo and the normative effects this imposes on Russia's foreign policy behaviour. The thesis had a central research question: How does Russia's information campaign, regarding the CW investigations during the Syrian civil war, 2013–2022, navigate the CW norm to advance its geopolitical objectives? Within this, the thesis explored three sub-questions: What key themes or narratives does Russia employ when discussing CW use in Syria? How does Russia use the issue of CW to present itself as an international actor? As a result, what are the implications of Russia's information campaign on the CW norm and how it functions in international politics?

Chapter One provided a comprehensive overview of the literature. It demonstrated that scholars have focused on whether the strength of the CW taboo is altered by Syria, the US's foreign policy rhetoric on Syria, and how the Syrian disarmament debate has played out in international society. The chapter highlighted a distinct lack of academic work connecting Russia and the CW taboo. Chapter Two developed an analytical framework based around a constructivist understanding of the CW taboo. It unpacked the constructivist concepts of norms, – emphasising their constitutive effect – identity, and language, showing how these three elements work together to influence Russia's foreign policy behaviour in this case. Chapter Three outlined the methodology for the study, a qualitative, hybrid, thematic analysis. In addition to justifying the method, it explained in detail the sampling, data collection, and data analysis processes, whilst also mitigating the limitations

imposed by the method. Chapter Four presented the empirical findings of the thematic analysis. The study established four overarching themes, and eight-sub-themes, to explain how Russia's identity, values, and understanding of the CW norm was socially constructed through its information campaign. These themes covered Russia's characterisation of the OPCW as an institution in crisis, the West as a competing actor attempting to assert superiority, Russia's perception of its own role in international politics as a constructive and moral actor, and finally the logistical elements of Russia's information campaign, notably the use of alternative and counter-narratives, synthesising information, and sowing doubt in international investigations.

The final chapter of this thesis discussed the empirical results in the context of the research questions and analytical framework. It found that Russia's information campaign was strategically framed within and shaped by the CW taboo. Russia reflexively framed their attacks on the OPCW institution and investigations through a lens of concern, allowing themselves to be presented as a constructive actor, anxious about the health and longevity of the taboo and the organisations that uphold such a norm, whilst the West was portrayed as a hypocritical and bias actor. The campaign's rhetoric was simultaneously reasserting and violating the taboo against CW use as Russia was not only breaking consensus by contesting the accusations against Assad, but was also contesting the right of Western powers to judge them altogether. This represents the broader structural problems that surround the Syrian conflict, and how Russia views itself in the international community. By standing in opposition to the West, and what it argues is Western interference in international organisations, Russia used the issue of CW use in Syria to reassert itself as a major, legitimate global power that can have

a serious impact upon normative debates.

Implications and Future Research

These findings have several key implications for understanding actor discourses on norms. Firstly, the dual role adopted by Russia, in both reasserting and violating the CW taboo, reveals the complex ways in which a state can position itself diplomatically within normative prescriptions. The study found that Russia has constructed a decade-long, systematic information campaign that can strategically navigate and promote international accepted standards of behaviour whilst manipulating them, using the taboo to their advantage to contest international investigations. By centring a campaign around the CW norm, Russia was able to accuse the West of hypocrisy and criticise their right to judge other international actors. These findings underscore the intricacy and complexity of international politics and highlight how a state can use normative discourses to enhance their legitimacy and reputation in the international community. Future analyses therefore need to employ a nuanced understanding of state behaviour. More than investigating if Russia's information campaign has eroded the CW taboo, as many academics have, this thesis sheds light on normative resistance. The importance lies not with the norm violation necessarily, but with the mode of response. Russia's actions are an example of how a non-Western actor can criticise an institution, initially set up to promote Western norms, to create a broader effect of harming the norm entrepreneurs in the first place. The analysis also suggests that norm contestation is more than simply a state challenging an established norm. It involves careful processes of leveraging norms to shape narratives and perceptions of actors in international society.

This study was limited by a few factors. Due to a concern for conciseness, the analysis was fixed between 2013 and 2022 to ensure a reliable and comprehensive analysis.

However, future research could study Russia's rhetoric prior to the beginning of the official OPCW involvement in Syria, analysing Russia's stance from the very first allegations of CW in 2012. This would have a couple of benefits. Firstly, this earlier period would encompass US President Obama's infamous 'red line' comment. Many of the studies that focus exclusively on the US's response on Syria analyse 2012 in detail; a study of Russia's early response to CW allegations and accusations would rectify this imbalance. Secondly, as has been demonstrated, Russia primarily used the OPCW as a mechanism through which it could contest the Western order. As such, it would be informative to compare the pre-OPCW and post-OPCW rhetoric to see how, if at all, Russia engaged with the CW norm differently when the OPCW was not involved. By the same logic, these conclusions highlight the need for a comparative analysis of Western and Russian information campaigns regarding CW use in Syria. This could provide valuable information about how major global powers navigate the CW norm to aid in their political objectives. Finally, although this analysis focused on the CW taboo, it provides theoretical insights on norms and how they operate in foreign policy discourse. Future academic advancements could focus on how non-Western norms resist the traditionally Western-imposed order of international politics.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Figure 1: Confirmed Incidents of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria, 2013–2018.²⁶⁹

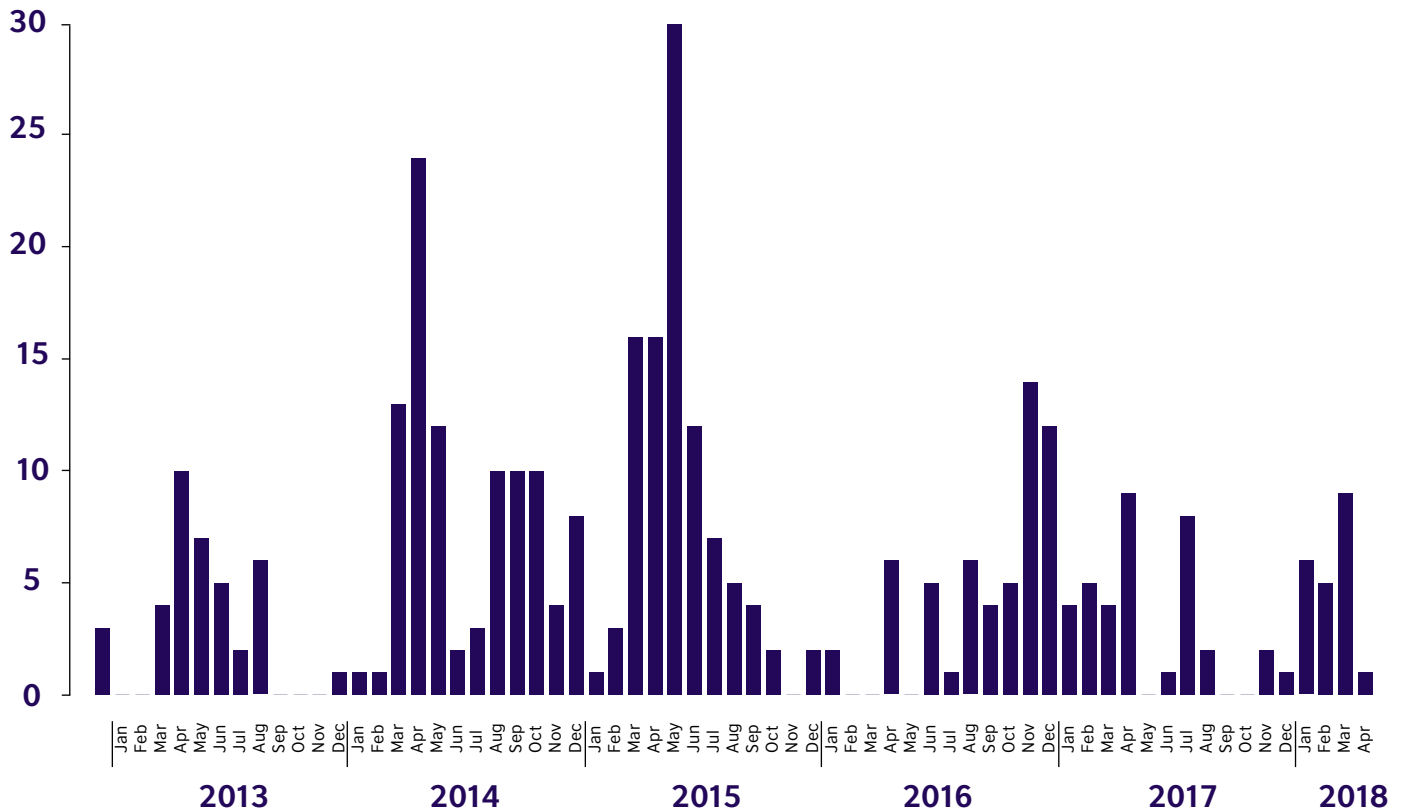
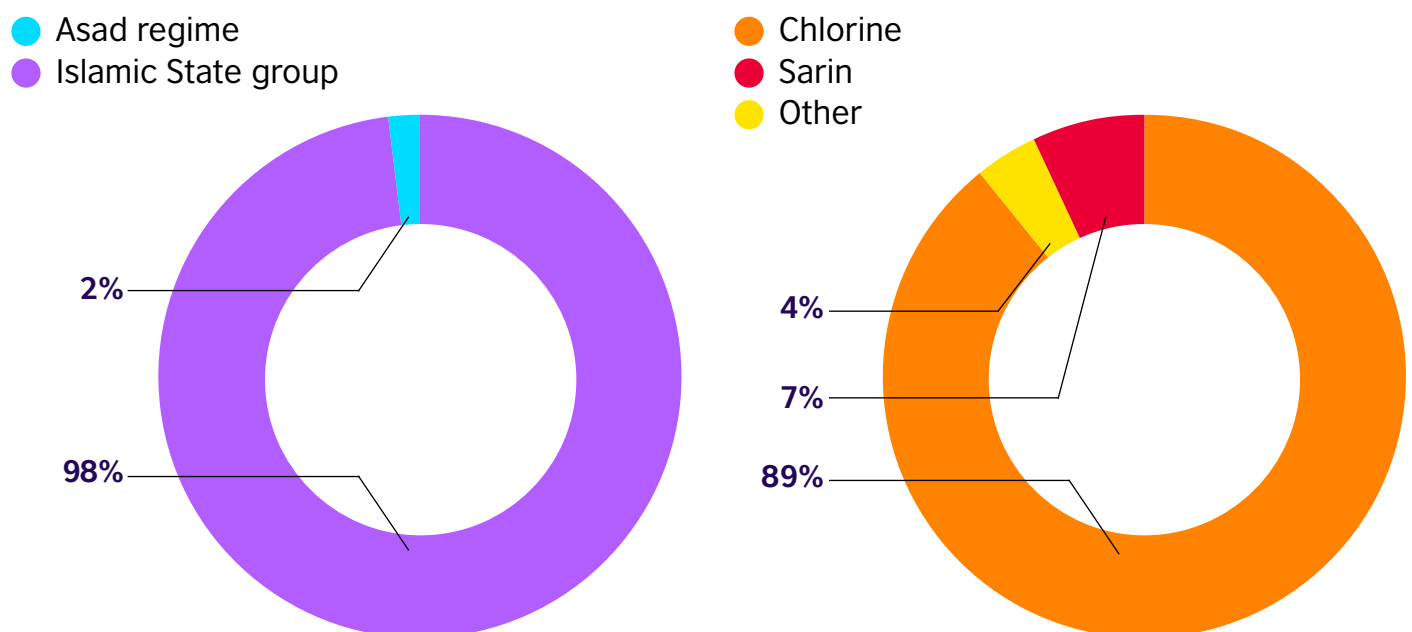


Figure 2: [Left] Share of Confirmed Incidents by Perpetrator, [Right] Shares of Identified Chemical Agents.²⁷⁰



²⁶⁹ Schneider and Lütkefend, "Nowhere to Hide," 11.

²⁷⁰ Schneider and Lütkefend, "Nowhere to Hide," 12.

Appendix 2

Figure 1: Table of Raw Sample Data

Title	Date	Link
Announcement by the official representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia Alexander Lukashevich regarding the messages about the use of chemical poisonous weapons in Syria	21/08/2013	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1619169/
Comment by the official representative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Alexander Lukashevich regarding the UN mission investigating possible uses of chemical weapons in Syria	29/08/2013	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1621550/
Comment by the Information and Press Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the investigations into the use of chemical weapons in Syria	04/09/2013	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1622913/
Comment by the official representative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Alexander Lukashevich regarding the commencement of practical steps for the liquidation of chemical weapons in Syria	07/10/2013	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1636051/
Interview with the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs S.V. Lavrov by TV Channel “Russia Today”, on 8 October 2013, Bali, Indonesia	09/10/2013	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1636685/
Comment by the Information and Press Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding Russia’s assistance in ensuring the safe removal of chemical weapons from Syria	08/04/2014	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1718325/
Comment by the Information and Press Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the use of poisonous chemical weapons in Syria by militants.	14/04/2014	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1724826/
Statement by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the completion of the removal of chemical weapons from Syria.	23/06/2014	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1614242/
Speech by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his answers to questions from the mass media during the press conference summarising the results of the activities of Russian diplomacy, Moscow, 21 January 2014	21/10/2014	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1731533/

Comment by the Information and Press Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Syria's materials forwarded to the OPCW to prove that terrorists used chlorine gas as a weapon	19/12/2014	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1724290/
Remarks by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the Conference on Disarmament, Geneva, March 2, 2015	02/03/2015	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1584370/
Comment by the Information and Press Department concerning the UN Security Council's adoption of the resolution regarding the use of chlorine as a chemical weapon in the Syrian Arab Republic	12/03/2015	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1505490/
Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's answer to a question from Rossiya-1 television channel August 9, 2015	09/08/2015	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1512729/
Director of the Foreign Ministry Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Mikhail Ulyanov's interview with the Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, September 18, 2015	18/09/2015	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1514822/
Comment by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova in connection with Ankara's statements on the revelation of Turkey's illegal sarin gas supplies to Syria	25/12/2015	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1520620/
Reply by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova to a question by Rossiya Segodnya information agency regarding the use of chemical warfare agents by terrorist groups	12/04/2016	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1526373/
Director of the Department for Non-proliferation and Arms Control Mikhail Ulyanov's interview with the Rossiya Segodnya News Agency, May 24, 2016	24/05/2016	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1528857/
Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, October 27, 2016	27/10/2016	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1537140/
Press release on Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov's consultations with Syrian First Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad	28/10/2016	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1537304/
Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, November 3, 2016	03/11/2016	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1537706/#16
Comment by the Information and Press Department on the OPCW Executive Council's decision on Syria	12/11/2016	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1538044/

Foreign Ministry statement in connection with the UN Security Council vote on a draft sanction resolution on Syria under Chapter VII of the UN Charter	01/03/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1543171/
Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, April 5, 2017	05/04/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1544973/#4
Comment by the Information and Press Department on the Syrian chemical dossier	07/04/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1545123/
Director of the Foreign Ministry Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Mikhail Ulyanov's interview with the Interfax Agency, April 6, 2017	07/04/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1545063/
Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Moscow, April 12, 2017	12/04/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1545317/
Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran Mohammad Javad Zarif and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Syrian Arab Republic Walid Muallem, Moscow, April 14, 2017	14/04/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1545405/
Comment by the Information and Press Department on the latest reports by the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission and Human Rights Watch on the use of chemical weapons in Syria	06/05/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1546555/
Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, May 25, 2017	25/05/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1547385/
Comment by the Information and Press Department on White House Press Secretary's statement about Syrian authorities' alleged preparations for a chemical attack	28/06/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1549080/
Comment by the Information and Press Department on US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley's statement concerning the OPCW Special Mission's report on the use of chemical weapons in Syria	30/06/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1549273/

Remarks by Director of the Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Mikhail Ulyanov at a briefing for accredited diplomats on the Syrian “chemical dossier,” Moscow, July 5, 2017	06/07/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1549417/
Press release on Director of the Foreign Ministry Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Mikhail Ulyanov's briefing on the alleged Syrian “chemical dossier”	06/07/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1549420/
Remarks by the head of the Russian delegation, Russian Permanent Representative to the OPCW Ambassador Alexander Shulgin at the 85th session of the OPCW Executive Council (general debates), The Hague, July 11, 2017	13/07/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1549665/
Comment by the Information and Press Department on US statements on the use of chemical weapons in Syria on August 21, 2013	22/08/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1551046/
Press release on Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov’s meeting with Edmond Mulet, Head of the Leadership Panel of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism on the use of chemicals as weapons in Syria.	07/09/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1551921/
Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s answers to media questions on the sidelines of the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly, New York, September 22, 2017	23/09/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1553725/
Briefing «SYRIAN CHEMICAL DOSSIER: THE RUSSIAN VIEW» by Ambassador Mikhail Ulyanov Head of the Russian delegation in UNGA First Committee, Director of the Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control of the MFA of Russia on the margins of the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly.	16/10/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1555147/
Comment by the Information and Press Department on the Syrian chemical dossier	23/10/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1555698/
Statement by the Foreign Ministry on the UN Security Council vote on the resolution to extend the JIM’s mandate.	24/10/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1555757/

Statement by the Foreign Ministry in connection with attempts to distort Russia's position regarding the vote on a Draft UN Security Council Resolution to Extend the Mandate of the Joint Investigative Mechanism	25/10/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1555843/
Comment by the Information and Press Department on the release of a report by the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism	27/10/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1555968/
On The Times comment "Putin approved the use of chemical weapons"	31/10/2017	https://mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1556093/
Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, November 9, 2017	09/11/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1556657/
Remarks by the Russian Permanent Representative at the OPCW, head of the Russian delegation, Ambassador Alexander Shulgin at the 56th meeting of the OPCW Executive Council (Re: JIM's seventh report), The Hague, November 9, 2017	09/11/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1557229/
Remarks by the Russian Permanent Representative at the OPCW, head of the Russian delegation, Ambassador Alexander Shulgin at the 56th meeting of the OPCW Executive Council (Re: OPCW Fact-Finding Mission), The Hague, November 9, 2017	09/11/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1557261/
Comment by the Information and Press Department on the interview with The New York Times by Edmond Mulet, head of the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism for Syria.	11/11/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1556759/
Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Argentinean Minister of Foreign Affairs and Worship Jorge Marcelo Faurie, Moscow, November 16, 2017	16/11/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1557109/
Statement by the Foreign Ministry	17/11/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1557274/
Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference with Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs Luis Videgaray Caso, Moscow, November 17	17/11/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1557206/
Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, November 23, 2017	23/11/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1557579/

Comment by the Information and Press Department regarding the results of the 56th Special Session of OPCW Executive Council	25/11/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1557704/
Interview with Director of the Foreign Ministry Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Mikhail Ulyanov for Rossiya Segodnya news agency, December 18, 2017	18/12/2017	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1559752/
Comment by the Information and Press Department on US attempts to distort Russian approaches to investigating the use of chemical weapons in Syria	19/01/2018	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1561441/
Foreign Ministry statement on US allegations regarding chemical attacks in Syria	24/01/2018	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1561820/
Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov's comment regarding the Paris meeting of the so-called International Partnership Against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons	25/01/2018	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1561895/
Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement at the Conference on Disarmament, Geneva, February 28, 2018	28/02/2018	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1564914/
Remarks by Russia's Permanent Representative to the OPCW, Ambassador Alexander Shulgin, at the 87th Session of the OPCW Executive Council, The Hague, March 14, 2018.	14/03/2018	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1565981/
Comment by the Information and Press Department on the investigation into the alleged use of chemical weapons in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic	11/04/2018	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1568396/
Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with BBC HardTalk	16/04/2018	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1568826/
Statement by the Head of the Russian Delegation, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the OPCW, Ambassador A. V. Shulgin at the 58th Meeting of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Executive Council, The Hague, April 16, 2018.	17/04/2018	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/en/foreign_policy/un/1568861/
Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova's comment on the OPCW inspectors' visit to Douma, Syria.	21/04/2018	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1569307/
Destruction of Syria's chemical weapons	23/04/2018	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_organizations/1569376/

Press release on Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov's meeting with Special Envoy of the Chinese Government on the Syrian Issue Xie Xiaoyan	27/04/2018	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1569870/
Opening remarks by Russia's Permanent Representative to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons Alexander Shulgin at a news conference following a briefing at the OPCW with residents of Douma (SAR), The Hague, April 26, 2018	28/04/2018	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1569912/
Joint Statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey on Syria, Moscow, 28 April 2018	28/04/2018	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1570055/
Address by Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the European Union Vladimir Chizhov at the Second International Conference "Supporting the future of Syria and the Region", Brussels, 25 April 2018	28/04/2018	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1570071/
Comment by the Information and Press Department on the Paris meeting of the "International Partnership Against Impunity for the Use of Chemical Weapons," May 17-18, 2018	23/05/2018	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1572024/
Director of the Foreign Ministry Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control Vladimir Yermakov's remarks a joint Defence Ministry and the Foreign Ministry briefing on investigation into the alleged use of chemical weapons in Syria, Kubinka, June 22, 2018	22/06/2018	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1573587/
Remarks by Head of the Russian delegation Georgy Kalamonov during the 4th Special Session of the Conference of the States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), The Hague, June 26-28, 2018	29/06/2018	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1573841/
Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir, Moscow, August 29, 2018	29/08/2018	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1575236/
Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, May 23, 2019	23/05/2019	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1461891/#8

Remarks and answers to media questions by participants in the news conference “Who is using chemical weapons in Syria?” organised by the Permanent Representation of Russia to the OPCW, The Hague, July 12, 2019	14/07/2019	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1465814/
Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, July 17, 2019	17/07/2019	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1466061/###10
Comment by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the U.S. Report on Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Non-proliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments (ACNPD) (to be added to the comment by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs of May 5, 2019)	20/09/2019	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1469764/
Statement by Ambassador Alexander Shulgin, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), at the 92nd Session of the OPCW Executive Council on the performance of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria, The Hague, October 10, 2019	18/10/2019	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1472895/
Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks at the Moscow Non-proliferation Conference on, “Foreign Policy Priorities of the Russian Federation in Arms Control and Non-proliferation in the Context of Changes in the Global Security Architecture” Moscow, November 8, 2019	08/11/2019	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1475160/
Acting Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to questions at an MGIMO University branch in Uzbekistan, Tashkent, January 16, 2020	16/01/2020	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1424940/
Foreign Ministry’s answers to media questions for a news conference on Russia’s diplomatic performance in 2019	17/01/2020	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1424976/
Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, January 23, 2020	23/01/2020	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1425353/#q1
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