



Diploma Thesis Evaluation Form

Author: Marcel Hirling

Title: "Russia's Syria policy: geopolitical interests or defense of great power identity?"

Programme/year: ISSA,

Author of Evaluation (supervisor/external assessor): Ekaterina Ananyeva,
M.A.

Criteria	Definition	Maximum	Points
Major Criteria			
	Research question, definition of objectives	10	10
	Theoretical/conceptual framework	30	30
	Methodology, analysis, argument	40	36
<i>Total</i>		80	
Minor Criteria			
	Sources	10	8
	Style	5	5
	Formal requirements	5	5
<i>Total</i>		20	18
TOTAL		100	94



Evaluation

Major criteria: research question, methodology, theoretical and conceptual frameworks

Minor criteria: formatting, style

Overall evaluation: The thesis looks at the Russian involvement in Syria and suggests a constructivist explanation as an alternative to the dominant neorealist framework. The author seeks to answer the question of why Russia intervened in Syria and what theoretical explanation fits better. To pursue this goal, Hirling applies congruence analysis by Blatter and Haverland (2012). With its help, the author compares neorealist and constructivist frameworks for their explanatory might.

After introducing aims, research questions, and expectations of this research, the second chapter is devoted to the literature review. There, Hirling makes a comprehensive overview of various reasons behind third-party interventions and nicely one-by-one applies them to the Russian case. The third chapter works with the theory behind the research. Due to the focus on two frameworks – neorealism and constructivism – they comprise the core of the respective part. Yet, starting from 3.4, the author inclines towards constructivist explanations of Russian behavior and argues that this framework has better explanatory potential in the chosen case study. At the same time, one issue can be raised: humans is used interchangeably with states (e.g., p.24), although no definition of states as a group of humans is given.

The fourth chapter presents the research design aimed at gaining empirical data for reaching the goals indicated in the introduction. There, Hirling described the congruence analysis and in full detail. For data gathering, he uses categorial-content analysis, which is discussed in 4.2 and in subsequent chapters dealing with data. At the same time, the description of coding frames and categories seems not to be sufficient. How exactly are they formed? Are these frames and categories presented in words or word structures? Moreover, since the analysis is called concept-driven, an elaboration on which concepts are taken and why would be helpful.

Considering the source selection, a broad number of both primary and secondary is taken. Yet, I wonder why the RT was not included if Sputnik is among the primary sources. When it comes to primary data, a differentiation between articles, speeches, and publications is missing. Each of these genres has its own language peculiarities, which, as shown by Burhanudeen (2006)



and Oglesby (2016)¹, might affect the results. As coding frames are broadly discussed in 4.5, it is still information missing on how a unit of analysis is ascribed to a particular frame or pattern. This explanation would provide better transparency.

In the fifth chapter, Hirling turns to the data and its analysis. There, he carefully sets the context of the Russian intervention in Syria by shortly describing the fall of the USSR, NATO enlargement, Western interventions to Kosovo, Iraq, and Libya (all three to the dismay of Moscow) as well as cooperation between Moscow and Washington in the 2000-s. All of them are checked for neorealist explanatory power. Yet, in the case of the fall of the USSR, some other alternative explanations could have been used (e.g., the Soviet Union might have withdrawn its military from the Warsaw pact countries because of the costs falling into its maintenance in these states). Though all these events and proceedings influenced the Russian decision to enter the conflict, the thesis would profit more explanation on why the setting is needed put in the introduction of the respective chapter.

Hirling also actively engages in data visualization that provides a better overview of the results. Since the data is used in their absolute values, it is not entirely visible what share they take and what is the relationship between them. For instance, one could go deeper into the percentage difference between the other and official sources, which of the two is used more often.

After the interim conclusions on the pre-text of Russian intervention, in 5.2, Hirling moves to the intervention itself. There, he profoundly discusses the value Syria holds for Russia before turning to the presentation of content analysis results in 5.3. There, apart from visualization, the author carefully looks at the major coding frames found in the Russian narrative. In 5.3.2, he presents various topics covering Russian attitude towards the international system. Yet, at some points, as, for example, in the case of multilateralism, Russian interest and constant use of this concept in the narrative might be explained by peculiarities of the diplomatic language along with the will to be perceived as an active multilateralist without following its norms. An alternative explanation for the existence of multilateralism in the Russian official discourse and its constant promotion might be the perception of this

¹ Hafriza Burhanudeen, "Diplomatic Language: An Insight from Speeches Used in International Diplomacy," *Akademika* 67, no. 1 (January 2006): 37–51; Donna Marie Oglesby, "Diplomatic Language," in *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy*, by Costas M. Constantinou, Pauline Kerr, and Paul Sharp (1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2016), 242–54. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473957930.n21>



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concept as multipolarity (Lee, 2010; Morozov and Makarychev, 2011; Tsygankov, 2009; Rowe and Torjesen, 2009)² .

Overall, the thesis presents a very well done research on the reasons behind Russian choice to involve in Syria and theoretical frameworks most suitable to explain this choice. Hirling examines neorealist and constructivist theories for their applicability and explanatory force in great detail and provides easy to follow analysis using primary and secondary sources.

Suggested grade: 94%

Signature:

Ekaterina Ananyeva

² H. Lee, "Multilateralism in Russian Foreign Policy: Some Tentative Evaluations," *International Area Studies Review* 13, no. 3 (September 1, 2010): 31–49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/223386591001300302>; Viatcheslav Morozov and Andrey Makarychev, "Multilateralism, Multipolarity, and Beyond: A Menu of Russia's Policy Strategies," *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 17, no. 3 (September 2011): 353–73; Andrei Tsygankov, "Russia in Global Governance: Multipolarity or Multilateralism?," in *Contemporary Global Governance: Multipolarity vs New Discourses on Global Governance* (Frankfurt/ Brussels: Peter Lang Publishing Group, 2009), 51–62; Elana Wilson Rowe and Stina Torjesen, eds., *The Multilateral Dimension in Russian Foreign Policy*, vol. 15. Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series (London: Routledge, 2009).