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## **GUARDIAN OF (IN) SECURITY: THE RUSSIAN ACTION IN SYRIA**

### **Summary:**

*Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, the Russian Federation has had a role of great importance. Even it is considered sometimes controversial, given that the Russian Federation at the beginning of the conflict has blocked some drafts of resolutions to the conflict preventing, especially that Western powers acted in Syria. Later, with the worsening of the conflict added to the migratory crisis and the establishment of the Islamic state in Syria, the Russian government decides to act incisively in Syria to slow down migration and grounded in the narrative of the "war on terror ". Thus, it can be questioned whether this attempt to bring the narrative of "war on terror" seemed an experiment to test a coalition with the US, with a view to approach history of these two actors previously under the umbrella of terrorism, or even a movement of Russian foreign policy to show that the post-Cold War moment no longer exists, and that this is not a time to see Russia as a defeated country anymore, but a US nemesis.*

### **Keywords:**

*Foreign Policy, Russia, Security, Syria*

## **Introduction**

The present research has as broad focus a theoretical contribution to the identity of the States, considered here one of the main actors of the international system. Bearing in mind the importance of identities for the analysis of the motivations of States for their actions regarding their respective external policies. The different Russian approaches to Syria are some episodes that illustrate quite clearly moments of tension with the so-called "West", which are important for the present analysis in an attempt to understand possible motivations for such reactions. To that end, postcolonial approaches will be used to explore the constant identities tensions of the Russian Federation over the last decades. In view of the fact that at times the Federation vociferated against the "West" and its practices, and at other times acts in the same way as the "West", so post-

colonial approaches may be useful in the present research, since they have the potential to demonstrate the moments in which Russia would act as a subaltern actor and when he speaks as a hegemonic actor.

The attempt is to bring a plural look that illuminates the conformation of a "non-traditional" identity that directly implies the role of great powers in the international scene. In addition, hybridity and the liminality of identity point to the limitations in traditional theories, incorporating a possible expectation of non-conflict roles, but hybrid and contingent roles, such as the role of "leader" that does not conform to the expectations, given the hybridity of a great power that is also subaltern.

It is not difficult to find analyzes that attempt to assess the motivations for the actions of agents in various areas of contemporary international relations, especially given the dynamic nature of the foreign policy of states. However, some analyzes, even if they are critical they are not always able to demonstrate certain "subcategories", as, for example, is the case of some studies about the concept of identity, that even when they demonstrate the fluid nature of State's identities, so end up giving a treatment, to some extent, rigid. This means that, given a structure of roles, contained in a social structure of international relations, a great power possesses its socially constructed identity, it is fluid, but still, many times, it is still treated in a contained way within certain expectations arising from the role of great power, rather than looking at the contingencies of such identities.

The assumption here is that the Russian Federation possesses in its identity elements of a great power, while living with elements of a "subaltern" state that is, living with the ambiguity of identity. After all, broadly, the term "subordinate" refers to individuals or groups that have their limited agency and end up being deprived of the prevailing international hegemonic order, which makes it impossible for them to be properly heard. Therefore, the case of the Russian Federation was chosen to illustrate the proposed theoretical analysis. However, the possibility that the theoretical analysis proposed in the present research cannot be applied to other major powers that have not undergone colonization, but still demonstrate in their roles and identities postcolonial traits, is not ruled out. In this sense, the Russian case study is of great relevance to be analyzed.

The paradox of Russian actions in terms of its foreign policy is precisely related to the hybridity and the liminality of its identity, because depending on the situation speaks on behalf of the subordinates or as a great international power, generating perplexity in the international scenario by having a foreign policy considered Ambiguous.

One of the great moments that demonstrate the supposed paradox of Russian foreign policy is the state's performance within the scenario of the crisis in Syria, in which, at first, it blocks the Western actions of a possible intervention, and this is a moment in which the Government of the Federation speaks on behalf of the subordinates, being one of the great critics of the Western models

of interventions. However, Moscow later claims to have "special responsibilities" of a great power and intervenes in Syria by using the "war on terror" to confront the Islamic state in Syria, and to some extent mimic its "colonizer."

This action reflects, perhaps, this ambiguity of Russian foreign policy, its movement between being among the subordinates and being a great power, of not fitting perfectly in a place within the international scene.

It is alleged here that this crisis situation in Syria can be read as an attempt to purge the coloniality of Russian thinking. That is to say, such action developed in the context of Russian foreign policy would be an attempt at emancipation, of establishing a new locus of enunciation, of decolonization, in that sense. Given that the government of the Russian Federation does not seem to care about the criticism received by the West in the face of its contradictory actions, that is, the Moscow government seems to be looking not only for a new place on the international scene, but to change The centre of international hegemony establishing a new "new" pattern, leaving behind the modernity centred on Westernism, but still, as a result of its hybrid identity, using Western-centred cultural, social, and normative concepts. Maybe even be a proposer of a new alternative.

The questions raised about "Putin's Russia" vary, ranging from doubts about a possible Russian expansionism, how this state adapts to the international scene, among many other questions. In a scenario of prevalence of certain political and economic systems, in which certain imperatives of international law and its derivatives are in place, the Russian Federation does not seem to be integrated<sup>1</sup>.

Faced with such a scenario about what is happening with the Russian Federation there are various concerns such as whether Russia is a democracy or an anocracy<sup>2</sup>, what would be the next step in Russian foreign policy, as other concerns as what would be the motivations of the Russia to act in a certain way in the face of international events, because at times it seems to act as a spoiler<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a suggestion that, in some measure, Russian Federation does not fit perfectly to the international scenario demands. Maybe this state is connected to a condition of being a hybrid actor, in a liminal position.

<sup>2</sup> The term "anocracy" means, broadly, that a regime is not a "pure" democracy, but something in between a democracy and an autocrat regime. See: J. R. Vreeland, *The Effect of Political Regime on Civil War: unpacking anocracy*, "Journal of Conflict Resolution", June 2008, vol. 52, no. 3, p. 401.

<sup>3</sup> F. Lukyanov (et. al), *Talking Point: the logic of Russian foreign policy*, "Russia and Beyond", December 2012, <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/oliver-carrollfyodor-lukyanov-marie-mendras/talking-point-logic-of-russian-foreign-policy>> (01.06.2017).

Instead of this type of analysis, what we are trying to understand here is a broader and more integrated scenario, in the sense of appreciating the dynamism that Russia is experiencing now, and not just focusing on specific questions, such as: Help the Syrian government? It is believed here that it is more productive to try to understand the whole scenario which involves not only the international scope of their relations, the understanding of the Russian population's thinking and its elites, but also how such actors influence the political processes involving the Russian government, Internally and externally, and how such actors relate to the political tendencies of the state concerned.

Amid so much turmoil, certain trends tend to be obscured in the process, but there is still a need to look at the political trends for the Russian Federation. Even if, for methodological purposes, attempts are made to separate the spheres, the political, economic and social dispositions that circulate in the Federation end up entwining and forming a meander of possibilities to try to understand which place and which role of Russia in the contemporary international scene, and whether that role and place will be taken by Russia or delegates to the country.

### Theoretical Contribution

In order to begin to appreciate these omissions about state identities, it is important to bring the contribution of Albert Paolini<sup>4</sup>, who places identity as a central issue in international politics, as well as the space of differentiation, fragmentation, Cultural particularisms, among others. In the words of Paolini: "International Relations denies the contingent basis of modern life by enclosing the possible and the realistic within the modern state. In so doing it becomes a discourse of limits and boundaries"<sup>5</sup>.

However, so that there is no destruction of the "other," demonization and recurrent reification of otherness is necessary<sup>6</sup>. For this, the contribution of Bahar Rumelili<sup>7</sup> helps in the proposition of different possibilities. The passage that follows is quite elucidative with regard to the determination of what is liminality and how it can be used as an analysis tool. In the words of Rumelili: "Turner stressed that liminals have antistructural effects not only because of their presence as peripheral and in-between actors, but because of the ways in

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<sup>4</sup> A. J. Paolini, *Navigating Modernity - Postcolonialism, Identity & International Relations*, London 1999.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> D. Campbell, *Writing Security: United States foreign policy and the politics of identity*, Minneapolis 1992; W. E. Connolly, *Identity and Difference in Global Politics*, [in:], M. Shapiro, J. Der Derian, *Intertextual Relations - Postmodern Readings of World Politics*, New York 1989, pp. 323-342.

<sup>7</sup> B. Rumelili, *Liminal identities and processes of domestication and subversion in International Relations*, "Review of International Studies", No. 38, 2012, pp 495-508.

which they act on their positions. He observed that these groups form communities, a community which is characterised by the absence of social structural positions and status, and which breaks in through the interstices of structure, transgressing the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships. [...] Mainly, it contends that the theoretical lens of liminality enables us to understand and appreciate certain limits and contradictions in the social structure of international politics, particularly concerning the Self/ Other distinctions that are constitutive of state identities and international normative hierarchies"<sup>8</sup>.

This excerpt of Paolini is useful in the attempt of the present research to demonstrate the possibility of difference, that there is not a single path to be followed, the question that arises from the passage above is that the difference should be appreciated. In this way, digging up a narrative from a postcolonial approach is, in a sense, trying to bring to the surface a certain marginalization of a particular encounter. For this reason, Connolly<sup>9</sup>, who presents the "discovery" of America, poses the complexity of the encounter of difference, and how (re) construction of identity occurs in those encounters, in which, even though there is an attempt to marginalize, or even cover up the "other", these turn out to be empty attempts. For the encounter brings with it the simultaneous reading of the creation of identity intermediaries, the "I" will no longer be the same, nor the "other", the encounter of difference produces changes. That is, there is no paralysis of these agents involved in the colonial encounter, Western universalism as well as Russian particularism are created and recreated, without remaining in the continuity of their interactions.

From this long excerpt from the work of Rumelili<sup>10</sup> we can begin an analysis of the possibility of the liminality of identities. Still in Rumelili<sup>11</sup>, the liminality is something contextual, it is something contingent, which means that not necessarily a state, for example, will always be in a position to protect an injunction identity. What can be applied to the case of the Russian Federation, this being the empirical study chosen to illustrate the theoretical questions raised, when analyzing the identity construction of this State, since it does not always occupy the same space, nor does it always act in the same way. In looking at Russia in the last decades, his behaviour varied at different times, he was on the side of the West, behaving like an ally, as he also demonized the same West in so many other moments, and moved away from it.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 496.

<sup>9</sup> W. E. Connolly, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> B. Rumelili, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

According to Rumelili<sup>12</sup>, liminality has characteristics that are not domesticated. This type of narrative can be considered typical of modernity, where national states presuppose certain characteristics, behave according to certain internationally accepted norms, belong to a certain space and time. Some states do not fit this profile perfectly, and are often criticized.

In this sense, the liminality exposes the structural breaches of the international system, because an actor, when operating in a preliminary manner, is not an aberration, but a contestation of the hegemonic discourses. After all, what is it to be a democracy? This answer is already given as a natural thing, but what liminality exposes is that democracy, just as so many other concepts in international relations are subjective, are interpreted by the actors in different ways, and the same then should not be considered aberrations of the system International.

In Rumelili's words: "Concepts akin to liminality have figured prominently in post-colonial approaches to world politics, which have always sought to uncover spaces of dialogue, interstitiality, and localisation under conditions of Western hegemony. Particularly relevant in this respect is Homi Bhabha's theorisation of the implications of hybridity for colonial rule. Bhabha has stressed that colonial discourse does not produce the colonised as an Other anti-thetical to Self, but rather as a hybrid, 'discriminating between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles'. (...) Thus, as a liminal actor, the colonised is able to subvert the dominance of colonial authority, not through the pro-active agency of an autonomously calculating agent that manifests itself in oppositional resistance, but through an agency that emerges within the master discourse, but manifests itself innovatively in episodes of hybridization and localisation"<sup>13</sup>.

Rumelili's<sup>14</sup> excerpt is a great elucidation and intersection between the issue of liminality, postcoloniality, Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity and mimicry. The ideas of Bhabha<sup>15</sup> are useful for the present research in some ways, but here one of the main focuses will be on their concept of hybridism and mimicry and how these may correlate with the project's empiria.

According to Bhabha<sup>16</sup>, the encounter between colonizer and colonized produces several effects on both sides, that is, the conviviality between these two sides imply possible modifications on the two sides involved in this relation. One of these effects is what the author calls ambivalence, which, roughly

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 500-501.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>15</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *Culture's in-Between*, [in:] S. Hall, P. Du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London 1996, pp. 53-60.

<sup>16</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817*, "Critical Inquiry", Vol. 12, No. 1 (1985), p. 159.

speaking, would be the feeling, somewhat ambiguous between colonizer and colonized. This ambivalence corroborates a dual feeling on both sides and their respective identities, and which can be noted, for example, in colonial or post-colonial literature, which ends up having features of the colonized and the colonizer, which Bhabha calls Hybridism. It should be emphasized that the present research does not intend to work with literary texts, for example, or even with any other type of artistic productions, considering that this type of analysis has become quite common regarding the postcolonial approaches.

According to Bhabha, the notion of ambivalence, that is, the paradoxical feeling between colonized and colonizer is closely intertwined with the notion of mimicry, important for the present research. For from the ambivalence, that is, from the feeling of the colonized, in the last instance, of hatred of the colonizer, and at the same time the notion that the colonizer is a source of knowledge and power, the colonized ends up imitating the colonizer, and the Mimicry can occur at several levels. Mimicry is both a product and a condition of hybridity and ambivalence.

Thus, the notions of hybridism and mimicry, and as Rumelili puts it, localization creates conditions for the colonized agent to have a certain liberation from the judgment of his colonizer. This means that to some extent the very colonial encounter between the Russian Federation and the other Western culminated in conditions for the creation of its liminal / hybrid identity, of being at the same time an almost Western actor as well as subaltern, and making possible that they sometimes questioning of Western practices and norms, and at other times acting in the same way and using Western narratives to create their own discourse legitimizing their foreign policy practices.

To deal with "plural" notions of identity construction conforms as an attempt to transcend "traditional" notions. What comes out of this creative notion between the limitations and possibilities between colonial and modernity tends to emphasize the demands for alternatives that are not treated as "otherness", "non-Western", but instead another dimension of Possibility of action within the contemporary international scenario, which does not follow the so-called hegemonic guidelines. The diversity privileged by identity as an indirect colonial heritage, emphasizes that its multiple influences should not be read as antagonistic enclaves. Thus, it is important to emphasize the importance of this identity condition in order to understand the role of this state as an actor in the international scenario. After all, identity does not become direct action, hence the need for other theoretical tools to try to gain a better understanding of what, and as liminal and hybrid identities imply in the function of states.

The main intention of bringing this brief exposition about the possibilities of identity construction is to show the feasibility of denaturalizing state identi-

ties, even if, somehow, critical approaches of International Relations have already been proposed to carry out this project. However, approaches such as that of Campbell<sup>17</sup>, among others, for example, attest that identities are built in the relationship between the "self" and the "other" in a subordinate way to the conflict. Likewise, post-colonial perspectives on the identity construction of previously colonized states have been posited, but only apply to them<sup>18</sup>.

Instead, it is proposed here that identities are not only multiple but also much more complex, and sub-categorized, intended for a wide variety of discourses and influences.

### Postcolonialism

Would it be impracticable to apply this approach to the case of great powers that have not been formally colonized critical postcolonial approaches? After all, postcolonial approaches tend to be about colonized states. What is conjectured as an omission from the postcolonial/postcolonial perspective. It is questioned the motivation for such approaches to focus on subaltern agents, as already said, usually the silenced, states that are former colonies, and that even after independence remain largely colonized, either in economic or cultural terms, among other forms. Subalterns, silenced, speak the language of their colonizers, even when trying to "gain space" on the international stage, as an example of Brazil trying to be permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, is speaking the language of the colonizer, and reifying this imaginary Westernist from this angle, what would be the cause of neglect of other subordinates? The present research precludes the belief that only the "Orientals", the "Africans", among others, may be objects of postcolonial studies, so the Russian post-coloniality and its subalternity are given by way of illustration in order to fill This space of the postcolonial perspectives in not treating of great powers like subaltern actors and with hybrid identities.

In fact, it may be rather complicated to say that a postcolonialist critical approach can be brought to light in an analysis of large strong states, for as post previously, postcolonial approaches emerge as a proposition for analyzing ex-colonies, but What is proposed here is that there is a re-reading of post-colonial approaches seeking to give voice to those who are on the margins. It is interpreted here that for a long time the Russia, which is an empirical case that has been marginalized from important decisions on the international scene, and that currently seeks to show that differences need to be accepted, but that its political thinking is nevertheless colonized, and that it tends to place the West in the Center of their decision-making, for example.

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<sup>17</sup> D. Campbell, *op. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> P. Darby, A. J. Paolini, *Bridging International Relations and Postcolonialism*, "Alternatives: Global, Local, Political", Vol. 19(3), 1994, pp. 371–397.

Moreover, it is agreed here that somehow Russia "self-colonized." According to Dragon Kujundzic<sup>19</sup>, from the moment Russia decided that it would be "in the right time", it is the moment in which its colonization process began. For this author the colonization of Russia did not take place in a formal way, but it was a colonization of thinking, of acting, of the way of managing the State.

The work of Dragon Kujundzic<sup>20</sup> brings an interesting starting point for the possibility of a postcolonial analysis of major international powers, demonstrates how these colonial encounters are not static, and continue to occur, how much this colonial encounter may not have occurred in a formal way, but cultural colonization, for example, can create ties as strong as formal colonization. What Dragon Kujundzic<sup>21</sup> brings attractive to the present research is the question of self-colonization, which eventually became one of the norms of self-surveillance of foreign and even domestic politics, for in determining which was the north to be followed Russia should be structured and restructured in relation to this north.

Russia, like other great powers, has never been formally colonized, but its self-colonization may have occurred because of the advent of modernity as a cultural and expropriating tool that imposes right and wrong, "right" temporality, just as theories of the modernization they bring. In order, not to be kept in a "wrong" moment, modernity that puts what should be of a nation, especially in creating binarisms and demonizations between modern and primitive, which is an example of this. In addition to the modern and primitive pair, modernity tends to homogenize, delimits what is rational, delimits that the hyper-masculinity of the modern state is the "correct" way to behave, since it delimits and produces scientific truths of male domination on the feminine, for example. That is, what is not modern is a threat, a threat to the homogeneity of modernity<sup>22</sup>. According to Nandy, Western colonialism, which not only generated formal colonialism but also the colonization of the mind, is also responsible for the behavior of resistance structures, as we see anticolonialism, for example. For even resistance to Westernism must be rational, masculine, technological, and, finally, meet certain prerequisites of coherence<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> D. Kujundzic, "After": *Russian Post-Colonial Identity*. MLN, Vol. 115, No. 5, *Comparative Literature Issue*, December 2000, pp. 892-908.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> A. Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, Delhi 1983.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

### For now...

When talking about Syria and the role Russia is playing since the beginning of the conflict in this State is quite tricky. It is very easy to say "it is all about power politics", and I am not saying it is not, just maybe we can explore some other options.

As was put in the abstract of this work, in a first moment Russia totally blocked "Western" countries from acting in Syria conflict. More recently Russian government called the West to join Russia on the war on terror, to fight the Islamic State.

While the United States, the European Union and the Arab League continue to debate the future of the Syrians, the response seems to be closely intertwined with Russian issues. Despite criticism and speculation, Russia remains alongside Damascus and is opposed to an intervention. The current Russian president claims that the West and its interventions have already caused much chaos, and he disagrees with the Western will to impose its wishes on the rest of the world, as can be seen in the following passage, in the words of Vladimir Putin: "In my view, something like this is already happening, when strong nations are trying to impose their own rules of conduct and moral codes on weaker states".

There is much speculation about Russian motives for intermingling between Syria and the West, and to a large extent there is talk of material matters. Since the 1970s, Syria has been a major Russian ally in the Middle East, and has since been a consuming country of Russian warlike artefacts. During the 1990s, Moscow and Damascus were in constant contact as a result of Syrian demand for modernization of some areas of their war industry, acquiring rifles, grenades and ammunition. Already between 1990 and 2005, between negotiations and actual purchases, Syria negotiated with Russia systems of anti-aircraft defences, anti-missile defences, helicopters, among other artefacts, with billionaire contracts. Following the 2005 contracts, between 2007 and 2008 another contract between the parties had been concluded for the modernization and repairs in the aviation sector of Syria. Since then, trade agreements between Russia and Syria have tended to be large-scale, and since 2006 they have added substantial amounts<sup>24</sup>.

Another point that would be of vital interest to Russia would apparently be the strategic importance of the port of Tartus, which has been used since 1977 by the Soviet Union, and later inherited by Russia. There are those who say that this would be a Russian military base, but the place does not even have many ships that dock at the same time, and do not even have a defence system.

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<sup>24</sup> M. Barabanov, *Russian Interests in Syria: myths and reality*, Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST) – Moscow defense brief – 30/04/2012, <<http://mdb.cast.ru/mdb/42012/item1/article1/>> (01.06.2017).

The third Russian point of interest in the region would be political issues. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has tried to re-establish itself in the Middle East and secure strategic partnerships in the region in order to counterbalance the US position, according to a realistic logic. Syria would be too important, since its other two great allies have already been "co-opted" by the West, Iraq, and Libya.

These two possible material motivations for Russian interest in Syria can be persuasive, but not enough to explain such a position. Although, it is important to remember the ideational factor, that seems to play a strong role in this involvement. One contribution for Russian involvement in Syrian conflict can be to re-establish its position in the Middle East, so the intervention in Libya was a key factor, as can be seen in the words of Lavrov about the resolution 1973: "(...) allows anyone to do whatever they want for the sake of anything (...) the permanent members are interested in his body issuing documents that are clear, since the Security Council's decisions are under the auspices of international law, and international law should not tolerate ambiguity. Just as we warned earlier, we are now dealing with the unpleasant situation where [the resolution] can be interpreted differently. (...) If the opposition is truly interested in social and governmental reforms in Syria, then brushing aside such proposals (to hold talks) is simply unacceptable, this raises the suspicion that we are in fact not talking about reforms, but "regime change"<sup>25</sup>.

This excerpt from Lavrov's speech in 2011 can show us at least two movements, one of them, Russia putting itself next to the "powerless", at the same time that puts itself as a great power with veto power at the UN Security Council that has the power to be in great decisions.

So, when Russian government decided to intervene in Syria, it is a movement of Mimicry, Russia with its hybrid identity tries to "look like" its colonizers, the intervention in Syria, unilaterally is what the "West" means to Russia (only one aspect).

And when Putin decides to "help" in the Syria conflict, fighting against ISIS, again it looks like it is mimicking the "West". Although, when Putin calls Western nations to join Russia in this endeavour, it may be a sign that Russia no longer wants to be a sidekick, but the leading actor. In this sense, extrapolating its "master", i.e., doing the same, but still a little bit different, and the difference is in its support to Assad's regime as "the only way to fight the extremists". This is a demonstration of a hybrid identity.

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<sup>25</sup> *Russia Hopes UN Won't Issue "Vague" Resolutions Again*, Russia Today, 2011, <<http://rt.com/politics/lavrov-juppemoscw-meeting/>> (01.06.2017).

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