

ON RUSSIA'S MOTIVES BEHIND ITS MILITARY INTERVENTION IN SYRIA

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Abstract

This article analyses the causes of Russia's military intervention in Syria as well as the main motives behind its unanticipated decision to get involved. Since the launch of the military operations (i.e. since 30th September, 2015), European and American experts have speculated a lot on the causes and aims of the Russian involvement. This article takes into consideration only the most likely and well-grounded reasons behind Russia's military operation. While neither of them precludes or contradicts the others, an attempt has been made to narrow down the list to the key determinants, considering the high costs of the operation and the risks involved. Getting an insight into the underlying reasons can provide reasonable grounds on which to forecast possible scenarios for Syria and offer "political" approaches to settling the conflicts in the Near East. This article argues in favour of the geopolitical nature of the motives behind the military operation in Syria, and it provides a logical rationale for Russia's striving to regain the position of a world power with a say in resolving vital conflicts in the region and, at the same time, to draw global attention away from the Crimean Crisis and from the failure of the Kremlin's policy in Ukraine, and, last but not least, to overcome its international isolation following the annexation of Crimea.

Key words: Russia, military intervention, Syria, air raids, air and space forces, armed opposition, ISIS, Assad's regime

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Russia's military intervention in Syria came as a surprise to all the parties involved in Near East conflicts and has been yet another intervention conducted with the use of armed forces out of the territory of the former USSR since the Soviet War in Afghanistan in 1979 - 1989. In Russia itself, its former military involvement in Afghanistan and its present-day involvement in Syria is referred to as "military deployment" rather than a military intervention, as in both cases the military operations have been launched at the request of a "legitimate government"² In neither case, however, was the "legitimate government" recognised by a majority of the population, and there was a civil war going on in both the countries, which makes the legitimacy of both the regimes "requesting" foreign military involvement rather dubious. For that reason, it is "intervention" that seems to be the most proper term to denote a foreign state's military interference in a civil war outside its territory.

On 30th September, 2015, Russian military aircraft commenced air strikes on the armed militants opposing the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, firing bombs and rockets at their positions. Russia's political leaders and its top military commanders keep claiming that the fight is aimed against the Islamic State (ISIS)³. As for "other terrorist organisations", these are referred to in similar declarations comparatively rarely. Generally, the Russians declare their military intervention to be "fighting terrorism", by analogy with the US "fight against terrorism" that followed in the wake of the attacks of 11th September, 2001. According to aircraft tracking information reported by Turkish observers, only two out of a total of 57 combat raids performed by Russian Aerospace Forces up to 7th October, 2015 were against the ISIS, while the others targeted other opposition groups, mostly in the north-west of Syria⁴.

2 B.W. Gromow, *Zaszcziszczali, obuczali, stroili. O wypolnienii intiernacionalnogo dolga sowietskimi woinami w Afganistanie*, *Wojenno-istoriczijskij žurnal*, nr 3, 1989; M. Rubin, E. Surnacziewa, *Nocznaja mobilizacija: kak sienatory gołosowali za wwod wojsk w Siriju*, RBK, 30.09.2015, <http://www.rbc.ru/politics/30/09/2015/560be11b9a79472569b26882> (Access: 19.10.2015).

3 ISIS, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, came into being as an al Qaeda splinter group. Its ultimate aim is to create an Islamic state called a caliphate across Iraq, Syria and beyond, with Sharia Law governing all aspects of a Muslim's life, to revive the ancient splendour of the region.

4 *Priemier-ministr Turcii: iz 57 rossijskich awiaudarow tolko dwa naniesieny po IGIL*, 07.10.2015, <http://crime-ua.com/node/11981> (Access: 19.10.2015).



According to the Russians, by 22nd October, a total of 930 air strikes had been conducted and, as a result, 819 “terrorist-operated” objects⁵ had been destroyed. However, most of those attacks were targeted not against ISIS, but against other armed opposition groups and their facilities. According to Thomson Reuters’ analysts, nearly 80% of the air strikes were aimed not against ISIS, but against other opposition groups⁶. In some cases, they even happened to facilitate ISIS’ success. For example, Russian air strikes on the militants and rebels besieging the second largest city of Syria, Aleppo, resulted in the latter giving up the siege and withdrawing from the area north and north-west of Aleppo on 15th – 18th October with a view to avoiding further losses. Their positions were taken over by ISIS militants, who thus made new territorial gains in the north-west of Syria⁷. szsaz

Apart from the air strikes, a missile attack was launched from the warships of the Caspian Sea Fleet (the Russian Navy operation union) on 7th October, when 26 manoeuvring rockets were fired at 11 targets in Syria. These were “Kalibr” winged rocket bombs, and the distance covered by them was that of 1500 km⁸.

“Kalibr” rocket missiles have not been banned under the *Treaty between the USA and the USSR on the Elimination of Their Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles*, signed on 8th December 1987, as they are classified as sea-based missiles and, as such, are excluded from the Treaty’s limits. At the same time, the operating range of missiles of this type exceeds 500 km (see: the Treaty’s limits), and they are even counted among intermediate-range missiles (covering 1000-5500 km)⁹. It is

5 *Giensztab: Osnownyje sily bojewikow w Sirii utratili bojesposobnost*, Wzgljad. Diełowa gazieta, 22 oktjabrja 2015 goda, <http://vz.ru/news/2015/10/22/773881.html> (Access: 23.10.2015).

6 Dz. Stabbs, *Okolo 80% awiaudarow RF w Sirii nanosjatsja nie po IGIŁ - analiz Riejtier*, Reuters. Rossija i strany SNG, 22 oktjabrja 2015 goda, <http://ru.reuters.com/article/topNews/idRUKCN0SG0SZ20151022?sp=true> (Access: 23.10.2015).

7 Ibidem.

8 SS-N-27 “Sizzler”, according to NATO classification (from “sizzling” – very hot). The rockets flew at a height of 50-100 m at a subsonic speed over the territories of Iran and Iraq following their flight path, and it was probably at the final phase of their flight that they were guided with the use of the Russian satellite navigation system GLONASS. See: D. Majumdar, *Cruise Missile Strikes in Syria: Russia’s Big Ad Campaign?*, The National Interest, 08.10.2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/cruise-missile-strikes-syria-russias-big-ad-campaign-14032> (Access:19.10.2015).

9 L.F. Szaszdi, *The Club-K: A Deadly “Pandora’s Box” of Cruise Missiles*, The Daily Signal, 22.08.2011, <http://dailysignal.com/2011/08/22/the-club-k-a-deadly-%E2%80%9Cpandora%E2%80%99s-box%E2%80%9D-of-cruise-missiles/> (Access: 19.10.2015).



obvious that, should Russians withdraw from the Treaty, it will not be difficult for them to have identical ground-based missiles constructed, including some with nuclear warheads, and to have them deployed e.g. in the Kaliningrad Oblast or in Belarus. This has caused a negative response on the part of both the observers and the experts considering, in particular, that the maximum range of this type of missile (“Kalibr” ZM14), exported by Russia, was only 300 km. Recently, their range has been considerably increased, which went unheeded till the use of the missiles in combat in Syria.

The cost of an American equivalent of the “Kalibr” winged rocket bomb, called the “Tomahawk”, is approximately 1.41 million USD¹⁰. Should it be assumed that the cost of “Kalibr” is even higher than that – considering that its production was launched later and that more state-of-the-art technologies were used, and allowing for the fact that the costs of having such a missile produced in Russia will be higher than in the US, which is also true for the costs of preparing the launch of such a missile – one must ask the question: “Why were such expensive weapons used?” The most expensive Russian steerable air bomb “KAB-500”, used in Syria, costs approximately 50 thousand USD¹¹. Considering such a price difference, manoeuvring rockets are only used against an enemy whose air defence system is highly effective and uses cutting-edge technologies as well as carefully and rationally chosen locations, and their deployment is, as a rule, limited to the initial stage of a country’s military operations aimed at destroying the enemy’s air defence system, which should enable deployment of its own Air Force. That was how the Americans proceeded during their combat operations in Iraq and Yugoslavia.

Syrian militants have no stationary air defence system. Nor do they have many MANPADS (man-portable air-defence systems) dedicated to intercepting aircraft and other targets that fly low and at low speeds. It is obvious that there is no military necessity whatsoever for Russia to use its manoeuvring rockets. Thus, their deployment is more about flexing the muscles, being, first and foremost, the

10 S. Weinberger, *The million-dollar weapon*, The Center for Public Integrity, 25.03.2015, <http://www.publicintegrity.org/2011/03/25/3769/million-dollar-weapon> (Access: 19.10.2015).

11 A. Kreczietnikow, *Kaspijskim „Kalibrom” po Sirii: zacziem eto było nado?*, Russkaja služba BBC, 08.10.2015, http://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2015/10/151008_russia_syria_cruise_missiles_analysis (Access: 19.10.2015).



effect of political stakeholders' interests¹². That is why a broader context of the overall goals and objectives of Russia's intervention in Syria must be considered to answer the question about the motives underlying the firing of Russian navy missiles.

While it commenced unexpectedly, the Russian military intervention in Syria fits into the general trend towards a considerable increase in Russia's military activity outside its territory:

- 1) August 2007: patrols over the North Atlantic Ocean conducted on a permanent basis by Russian strategic bombers Tu-160 were reinstated, whereby Cold War practices were revived;¹³
- 2) August 2008: the first, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, combat operations of Russia's armed forces outside its territory, conducted during Russia and Georgia's Five Day War, which resulted in Georgia's failure to reintegrate the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia into Georgia, and in Russian military bases being built in the two separatist states¹⁴;
- 3) February-March 2008: Russia's military intervention in Crimea which ended up in the first territorial gains and annexation through the use of force in post-Soviet states;
- 4) Since 30 September, 2015: Russia's first military intervention outside the territory of the former Soviet Union.

Why was it Syria that became the target of Russian military intervention? The following are the points made by experts in an attempt to provide a rationale that explains the motives behind that operation:

1. The Russian military are striving to retain their naval base in the Syrian port of Tartous, which is the only Russian foothold in the Mediterranean and will inevitably be lost should Assad's regime be defeated by the rebels.
2. The Russian Military-Industrial Complex has an interest in advertising Russian weaponry in use during an armed conflict considering the large volumes of arms

¹² D. Majumdar, *Cruise Missile Strikes in Syria: Russia's Big Ad Campaign?*, The National Interest, 08.10.2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/cruise-missile-strikes-syria-russias-big-ad-campaign-14032> (Access:19.10.2015).

¹³ D. Litowkin, *Choroszo, czto "Miedwiedi" lietajut!*, Izwiestija, 21.12.2007, <http://izvestia.ru/news/331871> (Access: 19.10.2015).

¹⁴ *Czurkin: wojennyje bazy Rossii w Jużnoj Osietii i Abchazii sposobstwujut miru*, RIA Nowosti, 02.09.2015, <http://ria.ru/world/20150902/1225852641.html> (Access: 20.10.2015).



and military equipment exported by Russia, which accounts for a substantial proportion of its export earnings.

3. The Kremlin is making endeavours to save the regime of Bashar al Assad, its last ally in the Near East, grasping the opportunity to show that Russia has the proven ability to defend its allies and is willing to honour alliance commitments¹⁵.
4. Russia fights international terrorism, thus lowering the terrorist threat level for the RE, as it is claimed by Russian politicians and military men and by pro-Kremlin experts, publicists and journalists. The threat is from approximately 5-7 thousand Russian citizens, mostly from Northern Caucasus, who are fighting on the side of ISIS. Should ISIS win, those militants can come back to Russia and continue their fight against “the infidel” with the use of terrorist methods. Thus, it is better for Russia to have them killed outside its territory, in the course of military operations conducted abroad, than to fight them at home.
5. The Kremlin is striving to stop the spread of “coloured revolutions” sweeping through the post-Soviet states, North Africa and the Near East, to ensure that at least one counter-revolutionary regime comes out victorious, and to discredit revolutionary ideals and democracy by referring to all militants as “terrorists” (“the Nazis” in Ukraine).
6. Russia is working to regain its status of a world power with force projection capabilities as well as that of an “unsubstitutable player” in the Near East conflicts and in solving global problems¹⁶. No doubt, Near East conflicts are of tremendous importance globally, and the region itself used to be a battleground of the Cold War for the USSR and the USA. Indeed, Russia is striving to regain its position in the Near East. Moreover, its operation in Syria is expected to distract the attention of both the global community and Russians from Ukraine and from the Ukrainian crisis. Such a distractive effect should facilitate the

¹⁵ K. DeYoung, *Russia's Syria intervention may force choice on Obama: Act or yield*, The Washington Post, 07.10.2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/russias-syria-intervention-may-force-choice-on-obama-act-or-yield/2015/10/07/a88f9996-6d16-11e5-9bfe-e59f5e244f92_story.html (Access: 20.10.2015).

¹⁶ J. Nocetti, *Syrie: la puissance russe en question*, Liberation, 01.10.2015, http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2015/09/29/syrie-la-puissance-russe-en-question_1393438 (Access: 23.10.2015).



lifting of the sanctions imposed on Russia as well as putting an end to Russia's international isolation following the annexation of Crimea¹⁷.

While none of the above points contradict the others, it is advisable to make a clear distinction between the main motives underlying the intervention and those of secondary importance, as the combat operations in Syria have involved both a considerable risk for the Russian political system and high costs. Therefore, it is only the motives considered to be the most crucial ones by those at the helm in Russia that could have outweighed all the "cons" when the issue of military intervention was decided. For some of the motives, it is somewhat difficult to explain the causal relationship with the Russian power projection in Syria. For that reason, all the above listed motives should be analysed.

The Russian naval base in Tartous, Syria, is of no particular importance to the Russian navy. In Soviet and Russian terms, what there is in Tartous is actually not a base, but a logistic support station with facilities enabling current ship repairs and restocking. No regular ship basing function has been stipulated for¹⁸ in this case. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been much discussion in Russia as to whether to maintain the base or to abandon it, the same as the bases in Vietnam or Cuba¹⁹ at an earlier time.

The proponents of the option to maintain the base till 2014 claimed that, sooner or later, Ukraine would decide against extending the lease allowing Russia's Black Sea Fleet to be stationed in the naval base in Sevastopol, as a result of its inevitable "drifting" westwards. Should this be the case, they suggested that some ships of the Black Sea Fleet be rebased from Sevastopol to Tartous²⁰ considering that the small Russian part of the Black Sea shoreline in the Caucasus would not afford an opportunity to base a fleet²¹. However, that suggestion met with criticism as the

17 R. Herzinger, *Putin schaut höhnisch auf den Westen*, Die Welt, 23.10.15, <http://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article147937823/Putin-schaut-hoehnisch-auf-den-Westen.html> (Access: 23.10.2015).

18 I.M. Kapitaniec, *Na służbie okieanskomu flotu, 1946-1992*, Andriejewskij flag, Moskwa 2000, s. 137.

19 P.R. Dubjagin, *Na Sriediziemnomorskoj eskadrie*, Andriejewskij flag, Moskwa 2006, s. 86.

20 I. Kramnik, *The Black Sea Fleet: The Cost of Power*, RiaNovosti, 5 May 2010, <http://en.rian.ru/analysis/20100505/158884172.html> (Access: 19.10.2015).

21 W. Gundarow, *Noworossijsk nie prinimajet*, <http://flot.com/news/other/novoros.htm?print=Y> (Access: 19.10.2015).



fleet in Tartous could easily be exposed to attacks because of its location far away from the Black Sea and from other bases. After the annexation of Crimea, Russia solved the problem of a base for its Black Sea Fleet, and Tartous was no longer needed as a “substitute” for Sevastopol. While Tartous might have been considered in the context of Russia’s permanent military presence in the Mediterranean Sea, no rationale could be provided for developing a Russian naval base in Tartous in the new situation.

In the 1970s, the Russian Naval Fleet in the Mediterranean had 70-80 vessels (including approximately 30 surface warships, 4-5 nuclear submarines and about 10 “classical” submarines, 1-2 floating workshops, 3-4 tankers, minesweepers, fleet support ships, general cargo vessels, refrigerated cargo ships, hospital ships and rescue vessels, salvage tugs, and other auxiliary vessels)²². In terms of its combat potential, that naval squadron could have competed in the Mediterranean Sea against the US Navy, represented by the US Sixth Fleet (30 - 40 warships including two aircraft carriers, a landing helicopter dock, 2 guided missile cruisers, 18-20 versatile guided-missile cruisers, destroyers and frigates for anti-aircraft support, amphibious assaults and expeditionary strike groups, approximately 6 nuclear multipurpose submarines)²³.

Over decades, the Soviet Union had at its disposal 8 naval bases in the Mediterranean Sea (in Bizerta and Safakis, Tunisia, in Tripoli and Tobruk, Libya, in Marsa-Matruh and Port Said, Egypt, and in Latakia, Syria)²⁴. The commanders-in-chief of the Russian Navy declared that the Mediterranean Squadron be reinstated as of 1st June, 2013, thus providing for the permanent presence of Russian warships in the Mediterranean Sea²⁵. However, the new squadron has weaker capacity compared to its Soviet equivalent as it consists of only 16 warships (including auxiliary vessels), with no aircraft carriers or cruisers²⁶. Moreover, in the years

22 Zob. W.W. Zabrodskij, *Sowietskaja Sriediziemnomorskaja eskadra*, Niezawisimoje wojennoje obozrienije, 13 nojabrja 2006.

23 D. Winkler, *Cold War at Sea: High-Seas Confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis 2000, pp. 49-52.

24 Zob. I.W. Kasatonow, *Flot wyszeł w okiean*, Andriejewskij flag, Moskwa 1996.

25 Ł. Gradowa, *Sriediziemnomorskaja eskadra budiet ryczagom wlijanija*, Utro.ru, <http://www.utro.ru/articles/2013/05/18/1119561.shtml> (Access: 20.10.2015).

26 *Wozrozdienije Sriediziemnomorskoj eskadry*, <http://sdelanounas.ru/blogs/34831/> (Access: 20.10.2015).



2013-2015 there were no more than 7-9 Russian warships at a time operating in the Mediterranean.

A naval base for such a small number of warships is not a must considering that warships can replenish at sea, where it is also possible to rotate ships. The Mediterranean Squadron cannot “compete” against the NATO naval forces. What such a small number of warships can suffice for is only reconnaissance missions and naval surveillance of the operations of other forces in the region. By way of example, it was, most probably, Russian ships on reconnaissance missions that provided Assad’s regime with intelligence information about the operations of NATO’s and Israel’s naval forces at the time when the USA and their allies were about to make a decision to attack the Syrian forces loyal to the regime and were busy “pacifying” the rebels. As a result, the element of surprise was lost and the Syrian air defence forces whose anti-aircraft warfare capacity is larger than that of e.g. Libya and who use more modern technologies could have been more successful at intercepting the missiles and at counter-attacking the NATO aircraft. However, it is not necessary to have a naval base in order to conduct reconnaissance operations, either. This is why Russia’s determination to maintain a naval base in Tartous could not have been the main argument for the Russian military intervention.

The Russian producers of arms and military equipment are satisfied with an opportunity to increase their exports. Pro-Kremlin journalists have collectively joined a famous campaign advertising Russian weapons: “After their admirable performance during the military confrontation in the Syrian sky, Russian aircraft “Sukhoi” have a chance to become the most desirable merchandise in the international arms market. (...) While Su-24 is being phased out, the next two developments, Su-25 and Su-34, may become a hot novelty coveted by air forces worldwide. The manoeuvring rockets used in the shelling of terrorists’ hiding places are also likely to gain popularity”²⁷. Similar “morale-boosting” declarations can be heard in most Russian mass media outlets²⁸.

²⁷ *Szest nieożidannyh riezultatow rossijskich awiaudarow w Sirii*, 16.10.2015, http://cont.ws/post/135020?_utl_t=fb (Access: 20.10.2015).

²⁸ O. Sołowiew, *W pridaczu k naziemnym i wozdusznyim siłam Rossija sosriedotocziwajet u bieriegow Sirii swój flot*, Free News, <http://free-news.su/politika/5301-rossiya-napravila-eskadru> (Access: 20.10.2015).



However, propaganda objectives cannot be referred to as the rationale behind so vital a decision as one related to a military intervention. Also, it should be clear that the Russian defence industry lobbyists have a limited capacity to influence political decision making. What needs to be pointed out in this context as well is the Kremlin's long-lasting dissatisfaction with the performance of the Russian Military-Industrial Complex which it has often expressed publicly. Showing their dissatisfaction on a number of occasions, the Ministry of Defence of the RF and the President as the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armed Forces decided to buy e.g. Italian armoured equipment, Israeli unmanned aircraft systems and French landing craft. Stakeholders from the Russian arms sector viewed such decisions as a publicly delivered "slap in the face" or "demarketing" Russian weaponry in global markets. Additionally, Russian defence industry lobbyists, however "vitaly" interested in arms exports, could not have possibly influenced political decisions on Russia's military involvement, at least not when it came to giving priority e.g. to Syria over Ukraine as a target area for such involvement.

The next motive that needs to be considered, i.e. support offered by the Kremlin to its former ally to demonstrate Russia's honouring its alliance commitments, doesn't seem too convincing, either. Russia did not take any special measures to protect its other allies against "coloured revolutions", including Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia, Saddam Hussain in Iran, Muammar Kaddafi in Libya, and Askar Akayev in Kyrgyzstan. During the "Rose Revolution" in Georgia in 2003, the Kremlin delegated its "mediator", foreign affairs minister, ethnic Georgian on the mother's side, Igor Ivanov, to conduct peace talks between the unpopular president and the opposition. In fact, the delegation was only a way to gain time and enable Shevardnadze to remain in power²⁹. Ivanov's mission ended in failure, which might have been the reason for his quitting ministerial post a few months after that³⁰. Later on, the Kremlin embarked on a series of operations intended to split the opposition, and, as a result, President Mikhail Saakashvili was confronted by another popular leader of the "Rose Revolution", Nino Burjanadze.

An identical tactic was employed by Russian "political engineers" after the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine in 2004. Instead of standing up for the pro-

29 N. Nugajried, *Kljucz k rieszeniju gruzinskogo krizisa vlasti nachoditsja w rukach Moskwy*, <http://eup.ru/Documents/2003-12-01/2771A.asp> (Access: 21.10.2015).

30 Ibidem.



Russian candidate running for the president's office, Viktor Yanukovich, the Kremlin decided to come to terms with Julia Timoshenko and bring the leaders of the Revolution, Viktor Yushchenko and Julia Timoshenko, into conflict with each other. The ensuing conflict and the political paralysis following the "Orange Revolution" left the Ukrainians disappointed. Viktor Yanukovich returned to power in the 2010 Presidential Election without much need for further support from the Kremlin. A similar tactic was also used by Russia in Iraq, where Moscow managed to streamline its relationship with the new Iraqi government, representing the Shia majority, after the fall of Saddam Hussain's regime in no time at all, and to ensure Baghdad's support in its combat operations in Syria. The pragmatic policy followed by the Kremlin in its relations with its "client regimes" can be summarised as "It's nothing personal, it's just business"³¹.

In the course of the Geneva Talks on Syria and when contacting the US representatives and their allies on other occasions in the years 2012-2014, the Russian partners in the negotiations agreed to "give Assad up" on certain conditions. Russian politicians may use the same tactic in Syria. The spread of military conflicts in the Near East in the wake of ISIS' successes might result in an increase in the price of crude oil and earth gas, which might mitigate the crisis in Russia whose economy depends on these prices in the global market of hydrocarbon raw materials. Moreover, there are a lot of former Iraq's Sunni officers among the ISIS military commanders, and quite a number of them were educated in Russia and speak Russian fluently. The Kremlin might use them as a "diplomatic leverage" mechanism in its contacts with ISIS or with any other group after a defeat of Assad's regime. However, Russia's retreat from such tactics of which it used to approve in post-Soviet states after their "coloured revolutions" is not so much a natural outcome of its open-hearted support for a loyal ally, provided on a constant basis, Bashir al-Assad, as some experts believe it to be. There seem to be other motives and reasons behind it.

Russia's determination to fight terrorism and push the terror threat away from Russia does not sound a convincing motive, either. It is Sunnis who account for a vast majority of Russia's Muslim population, approximately 20 million. The

31 *Eto biznes, niczego licznego? Ukrainskije pozicii w „gazowom konflikcie”*, RIA Nowosti. Ukraina, <http://rian.com.ua/analytics/20090112/78077430.html> (Access: 21.10.2015).



insignificant Shia minority in Russia includes ethnic Azerbaijanis and some ethnic communities in Dagestan. Thus, the Shias pose no threat to Russia. During the wars in Chechenia and when other Russian regions were struck by acts of terror, Shia-dominated Iran publicly declared itself against terrorism in Russia on quite a number of occasions, and it firmly refused to support radical Islamic groups in the North Caucasus and in the Volga Region. Iran's stance on that issue was appreciated by Moscow which, in return, chose to ignore Israel's anxiety about the activities of the Shia terrorist organisation of Hezbollah, supported by Iran and by Assad's regime. In Russia, Hezbollah has not been on the list of terrorist organisations, which means that, for Russia, Hezbollah militants are "good terrorists" in contrast to "bad terrorists", i.e. Sunnis from Hamas. The Shia-Sunni sectarian confrontation is one of the important lines along which the Near East is divided in its conflicts.

However, the coalition of Iran, Iraq, Assad's Syria and Hezbollah, probably joined by Russia, is a Shia-dominated block. The rebels in Syria, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, and the terrorist organisations operating in Syria and Iraq, belong to Sunni Islam, and so do the terrorist organisations in Russia itself. The intervention in Syria may result in a significant activation of Sunni terrorism in different Russian regions. Before the Russian involvement, it was the USA who were ISIS' main enemy, as the organisation was headed by some of the former top Iraqi officials / officers in the days of Saddam Hussein's regime.

After 30th September, 2015, it was Russia who became ISIS' Number Two enemy. The main argument raised by pro-Kremlin experts that terrorists may infiltrate into Russia from Syria³² does not seem very likely. To do so, terrorists would have to cross the Sunni-hostile territories of Iraq and Iran, populated by Kurds and Shias, as well as Azerbaijan, which is a predominantly secular state dominated by Shias. Another way to infiltrate into Russia would be through Turkey which is also populated by Sunni-hostile Kurds and Turks involved in fighting terrorism, and then through the territory of Christian Georgia. In addition, Russia's southern border in the Caucasus is well protected by large military units.

32 *WKS RF nanieśli udary po 49 obiektam „Islamskogo gosudarstwa” w Sirii*, RIA Nowosti, http://ria.ru/syria_mission/20151017/1303648529.html (Access: 22.10.2015).



On the other hand, should a real threat of terrorist infiltration into Russia be analysed, it is likely to come from another direction: from Afghanistan and Central Asia. It is the Taliban and other radical terrorist groups in Afghanistan that have significantly increased their activity over recent months and achieved considerable military success. In particular, they have strengthened their position in the Province of Kunduz. That province borders the territory of Tajikistan, and in the west – the Afghan province of Balch, populated by an Uzbek minority and bordering Uzbekistan. It is in those provinces that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and other terrorist organisations made up of ethnic Uzbeks have their bases. As for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the pro-Russian sentiments among their populations are quite strong, and there are Russian military bases in their territories. From this perspective, the situation is fundamentally different in Uzbekistan, the largest Central Asiatic country with over 31 million inhabitants, which is much more than the combined population of Syria and Afghanistan. Uzbekistan proclaimed its neutrality (2012) and resigned its membership of a number of Euro-Asiatic integratory organisations under Moscow's protectorate, but it has retained its membership status in organisations with China's participation.

In Uzbekistan, there are periodic outbursts of anti-Russian sentiments. At the same time, dissatisfaction caused by the exceptionally bad social and economic situation and the high level of unemployment affecting a majority of Uzbek people, youths in particular, is increasing. There are no democratic and liberal-minded groups in Uzbekistan capable of exerting any significant influence. All this has combined to create a situation in which slogans of radical Islamism including, in particular, those on social justice, are becoming really catchy to young and poorly educated Uzbeks. Should there be a coup d'état in Uzbekistan, terrorists will have an opportunity to turn the country into their base and launching pad for terrorist operations aimed, first of all, against Russia.

The 1,397 km long border between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan is fully open³³, the same as the 7,513 km long border between Kazakhstan and Russia. Russia has no resources with which to safeguard the border that used to be an internal, "virtual"

33 A. Asrorow, *Ptica nie prolietit, koń nie proskacziet*, Gazeta.kz, <http://articles.gazeta.kz/art.asp?aid=150110> (Access: 21.10.2015).



border between the former USSR republics³⁴. What makes it even more difficult to exercise control over the above said borders is a very low population density and vast open space areas in the trans-border regions. This is where drug trafficking routes cross the border into Russia and into other European countries³⁵. The armed forces and the law and order maintaining forces in the states neighboured by Uzbekistan can easily be paralysed by means of terrorist operations inside the territories controlled by them. The well-known Russian spaceport of Baikonur is leased from Kazakhstan, not far away from Kazakhstan's border with Uzbekistan. Baikonur is within the reach of Uzbekistani tactical weapons, which poses a substantial threat to Russia's security.

Should it be true that the Kremlin has decided to fight terrorism and use it as an opportunity to show off its strength, why does not it focus on the terrorism in Afghanistan and in Central Asia, posing a much greater threat to it? It cannot be claimed that the latter is being ignored by Russia, as some of its anti-terrorist measures are currently under way to boost security in the above mentioned region³⁶. Still, why is it Syria and not the regions of Central Asia – which are a much greater threat to Russia's security – that has become a top priority battleground for Russia in confronting terrorism? From what has been said, it clearly follows that fighting terrorism should not be viewed as the only motive behind the Kremlin's intervention in Syria.

The idea of the “conservative counter-revolution” aimed against “coloured revolutions” is being widely discussed and popularised in Russia. It was devised and propounded by Aleksandr Dugin, the main ideologist of Neo-Eurasianism. His ideas are popular with a considerable part of the Russian population. The “conservative counter-revolutionaries” level bitter criticism against the apparently passive policy of the Kremlin towards the “coloured revolutions” in post-Soviet states. Supposedly, the Russian authorities have a “reactive” instead of “proactive” style of leadership and management. The proponents of the “counter-

34 S. Gorszenin, *Rossijsko-kazachskaja granica: argumenty i fakty*, http://magazines.russ.ru/oz/2002/6/2002_06_34.html (Access: 21.10.2015).

35 A. Asrorow, *Ptica nie proletit, koń nie proskacziet*, *Gazeta.kz*, <http://articles.gazeta.kz/art.asp?aid=150110> (Access: 21.10.2015).

36 D. Diemkin, R. Nurszajewa, *Rossija i SNG szimajut kułak dlja otpora na granice z Afganistanom*, *Reuters*, 16.10.2015, <http://ru.reuters.com/article/topNews/idRUKCN0SA0N720151016?sp=true> (Access: 21.10.2015).



revolution” are of an opinion that preventive measures should be taken, including interference in the domestic affairs of the states in which “coloured revolutions” are looming, also with the use of military force. The counter-revolutionaries claim that the revolutions in question were inspired from abroad, by western states, and intended to instate the hegemony of the West worldwide. This gives them hope for the success of Russia’s intervention. The master idea referred to in this paragraph has not been and is not likely to become binding in the top political management in Russia.

Analysts and experts close to the Kremlin are not so biased or naïve to believe that “coloured revolutions” may be inspired or brought from abroad, or imported. For a majority of Russians, this argument is being used rather as an element of intensified official propaganda. The thing is more about playing with the idea of the “conservative counter-revolution” by the Russian political system than believing in it. This is why there is a niche for “conservative counter-revolutionaries” in the Russian mass media space controlled by the Kremlin. Considered to be on the margins of the Russian politics in the 1990s, Aleksandr Dugin, a supporter of the extreme rightist National Bolshevik Party, rose to the position of a “thinker”, “philosopher” and “man with community spirit”³⁷ in the first decade of the new millennium.

The strategy used by the Russian political system to counter “coloured revolutions” does not consist in preventing them from occurring, but in discrediting their results and showing that revolutions are not a road to success or development, but a roadmap to chaos, anarchy, civil war, and deterioration in the socio-economic status of the people. This is what the Russian policy toward Ukraine has been about. Following the Maidan events, both the annexation of Crimea and the provoking of an armed conflict in the Donbass region were intended to destabilise the situation in Ukraine. The standard of living of the Ukrainian people has been reduced, indeed, which is being explained by Russian propaganda as being a result

³⁷ B. Kálnoky, *Putin-Ideologe Dugin will Österreich auflösen*, <http://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article136928614/Putin-Ideologe-Dugin-will-Oesterreich-aufloesen.html> (Access: 23.10.2015).



of Maidan³⁸ transformations and not a consequence of the Russian intervention and Russia's economic and energy policies towards Ukraine.

It cannot be excluded that elements of such tactics are also being used in Syria. It should rather be doubted that Assad's regime will manage to restore its control over the whole Syrian territory. Syria is probably in for fragmentation and splitting into several ethnic and religious enclaves, and for a long period of instability. At best, the conflicts in Syria can be "refrigerated", but not solved. The Russian propaganda is and will be referring to the Syrian crisis as to one caused by an external intervention aimed at overthrowing Assad's regime by way of a "coloured revolution". Should Assad's regime fail, which will only be possible if the armed opposition receives extensive support from the Near East states, it will become evident that the Russian intervention has only increased the death toll and caused more damage. Having recognised the above motives as expedient, one cannot possibly consider them to have a decisive impact on Russia's external policy. Russian armed forces do not embark on interventions only to fail.

What seems to be the best grounded of the points made is the one regarding Russia's striving to regain its former status of a global power, and this is the main motive behind its intervention in Syria. That geopolitical task is a multidimensional one. By way of illustration, the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the latter's interference in the domestic affairs of Ukraine was intended to cause a split by creating pro-Russian Novorussia out of the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, and to discredit and delegitimise the so-called "Kiev regime", i.e. Ukraine's new government. The "Novorussia Project" has failed³⁹, however. The Ukrainian army and Ukrainian people managed to stand united by their new government and offer resistance to the adherents of the idea of the "Russian World" and to the Russian interventionist forces which supported them. To an overwhelming majority of Ukrainians, including ethnic Russian people, European prospects proved to be more appealing than joining the "Russian World". The failure of the

38 *God poslie „Majdana”: kak razruszili Ukrainu*, RG.RU, <http://www.rg.ru/2015/02/21/ukraina-site.html> (Access: 23.10.2015).

39 W. Diergaczew, D. Kirilłow, *Projekt „Noworossija” zakryt*, http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2015/05/19_a_6694441.shtml (Access: 23.10.2015).



“Novorussia Project” is fairly estimated by numerous Russian people, including Russian nationalists⁴⁰, to be a failure of the Kremlin’s external policy.

This being the case, the Kremlin needs “a small victorious war”, which in Russian political jargon means an attempt at blocking the internal revolutionary processes with an external political success, or at disguising a failure in Russia’s external policy by means of a small, but successful military operation whose importance would be exaggerated by the state propaganda. That term was used for the first time in January, 1904, by Vyacheslav von Plehve, a minister of the interior of the Russian Empire: “To stop the revolution we need a small victorious war”⁴¹. In the war unleashed against Japan (1904-1905), Russia was defeated, and a year later, in January 1905⁴², a revolution broke out. The “small victorious war” technique can be attributed to the Chechen campaign started by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in 1999, which, no doubt, had a bearing on his victory in the presidential election.

Russia’s real or apparent military successes are to a large extent conducive to strengthening its government. According to the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre, President Putin’s approval ratings rose from 89% in June, 2005, to 89.9% on 17th – 18th October, 2015, as a result of the Syrian intervention and despite yet another sharp devaluation of the Russian ruble in the months of July-August, 2015. If this data is considered reliable, one should view it more as a result of ideological mobilisation and propaganda than rational approval of his policy. This effect is typical of totalitarian regimes: on the eve of the 1989 revolution and the overthrow of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s regime in Romania, the presidential approval rating reached 94%⁴³. In Russia, however, such approval ratings indicate at least the consent of a majority of Russians to the intervention in Syria.

It must be remembered that the Russians are affected by the so-called “Weimar Syndrome” after the collapse of the Soviet Union, territorial losses and Russia’s

⁴⁰ A. Dugin, *Noworossija — krach ili vzliet dlja Rossii*, <http://news-front.info/2015/05/10/novorossija-krax-ili-vzlet-dlya-rossii-aleksandr-dugin/> (Access: 23.10.2015).

⁴¹ A. Sitnikow, „*Nam nužna malieńkaja pobiedonosnaja wojna*”, *Swobodnaja priessa*, <http://svpressa.ru/society/article/66186/> (Access: 23.10.2015).

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ W. Szendierowicz, *Osoboje mnienije*, *Echo Moskwy*, 22 października 2015 roku, <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/personalno/1644372-echo/> (Access: 23.10.2015).



considerably lowered international status. Vladimir Putin's presidency is being viewed by them as a period of uninterrupted increase in Russia's international impact and of repairing its status⁴⁴. The Near East used to be one of the main areas of confrontation for the US and the USSR during the whole of the Cold War period. At the same time, the Soviet Union never allowed any direct intervention in the Near East states during their armed conflicts, giving preference to supporting its allies through e.g. providing them with weapons and with military advisors, although the Soviet Union had by far greater capacity for military intervention compared with today's Russia. Russian military advisors and specialists actively participated in the military conflicts and a number of them were killed in Syria and Egypt during the wars with Israel. In the USSR, however, that fact was rather passed over in silence. Today, Russia's intervention in Syria is intentionally overt and demonstrative. It is obvious that it aims to show Russia's meaningful role not only in regional (Near East) politics, but in global politics⁴⁵ as well.

The practical import of the intervention in Syria is about drawing world attention away from the Ukrainian crisis, in which Russia found itself in an impasse and cannot withdraw without noticeable losses. The Syrian intervention was precisely timed. The Western states had become disillusioned with their capacity to support moderate opposition since, as the conflict between the fighting sides escalated, lots of moderate insurgents sided with terrorists and radicals, taking away American weapons with them, and public opinion in Europe was disquieted at the inflow of immigrants from the regions of the Near East and North Africa affected by the conflict.

Given somewhat ambiguous circumstances, one may be tempted to make simple and radical decisions. It might have been the anticipated support from some sectors of European public opinion and from some European political and social movements, mainly those of radical, rightist and ultra-rightist nature that the Kremlin counted on. Indeed, Europeans' fear of a surge of migrants is being aptly used by the Russian government so as to cause a split in European public

44 C. Black, *Russia's Weimar Syndrome*, National Review, July 9, 2015, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/420932/russia-weimar-syndrome-west> (Access: 23.10.2015).

45 J. Nocetti, *Syrie: la puissance russe en question*, Liberation, 01.10.2015, http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2015/09/29/syrie-la-puissance-russe-en-question_1393438 (Access: 23.10.2015).



opinion over EU foreign policy. Additionally, in the Near East, Russia is rising to the status of a superpower that has to be respected by all the others involved in the conflict, which provides an opportunity for political bargaining and for a variety of changes⁴⁶. By way of illustration, voices are being raised in European countries in favour of doing away with the economic sanctions imposed on Russia or making other concessions. This is what the Kremlin has bargained for.

Thus, the main motives behind the Russian intervention in Syria are of geopolitical nature and are not limited to fighting terrorism, maintaining a naval base, promoting Russian weapons or supporting a client regime. As it has already been said, the military intervention in Syria was precisely timed, and so was the annexation of Crimea. Should the building of the Crimean Supreme Council have been occupied by Russian forces 10 days earlier or 10 days later than it actually was, the further scenario might have been quite different and much less favourable for Russia. Russia's quick, precisely timed, purposeful and firm actions in Crimea and in Syria prove the high strategic competencies of the Russian political and military management.

However, tactical successes are no substitute for a strategic perspective and long-term strategies. Tactical victory may turn into strategic defeat: the costs of the annexation of Crimea and of interfering in the domestic affairs of Ukraine have proved to be much higher than what followed from the Kremlin's original calculations. The Syrian intervention may have even more devastating results for Russia.

⁴⁶ R. Herzinger, *Putin schaut höhnisch auf den Westen*, Die Welt, 23.10.15, <http://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article147937823/Putin-schaut-hoehnisch-auf-den-Westen.html> (Access: 23.10.2015).



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