



საგარეო საკვანძოებსა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი  
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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**PUTIN'S WAR IN SYRIA: ITS CAUSES AND  
STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS**

*GIORGI BADRIDZE*



**EXPERT OPINION**

**2016**



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Putin loves surprises. In September 2015 he once again caught the West off guard when he launched a military operation in Syria. It was clear from the outset that Putin was not driven just by the desire to fight ISIS (as he claimed) or the need to save Assad (one of his very few allies whose situation was becoming critical) but by many other pressing issues as well which were mostly unrelated to Syria. This paper analyzes Putin's intentions and sums up what he has achieved.

Putin's worldview can be best explained by his own words when he described the collapse of the Soviet Union as the "greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century". But to understand his motives in the Syrian campaign one needs to take a closer look at Russia's precarious economic and political situation in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea and continuous undeclared war in Eastern Ukraine and compare it to the spring of 2016 when he declared that he had achieved his main goals and was withdrawing the bulk of his forces from Syria.

Unlike after the 2008 invasion and occupation of large parts of Georgia, when relations with the west returned to normal within a few months, Putin's hybrid war in Ukraine left Russia under economic sanctions and deeply isolated. Coupled with the dramatic fall of the oil prices (which occurred before the sanctions were introduced) this produced a tangible negative impact on the Russian economy. The ruble fell to its lowest point in history, Western investments and loans dried up, and the critically significant technologies for many industries – most importantly for the energy sector - became unavailable.

Under other circumstances Putin would have put a brave face and carried on if only events in the "liberated" Crimea had not turned sour and news of new Russian victories in Donbas had not stopped some time before. It turned out that after becoming a part of Russia the Crimean peninsula became an isolated island without proper supplies of water or electricity and with the famous beaches deserted. Even before the shortages in basic supplies it became evident that Crimea's main industry had suffered a severe blow; tourist seasons of 2014 and 2015 were an utter failure – the Russian authorities failed to attract visitors even from Russia (which were not just encouraged but almost forced to go), let alone from abroad.

There was a shortage of good news from another Ukrainian front – Donbas. It increasingly looked like the Russians got bogged down there, and the prospects of any advances became less than evident.

The combination of bad news from Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, increasing economic pressures, and international isolation were taken as a serious threat to stability of Putin's regime. Putin knew he had to feed his sky-high approval rate with propaganda that would keep his support base from thinking about the real life problems.

This is when, without much warning, Russian forces started arriving in Syria. Putin declared that the main goal of the operation was to fight ISIS, the terrorist organization that had gained control of much of the Syrian and Iraqi territory. Almost immediately it became clear that fighting Islamic terrorists was by far not the main concern for the Russians. They engaged in a systematic and indiscriminate bombing campaign of predominantly Western supported Syrian opposition and civilians, targeting ISIS in less than 10% of their raids.

**Stabilizing the Assad regime** by eliminating his opposition had clearly been one of the top priorities for Putin. This is a well tested tactics which the Russian security forces had used in Chechnya for many years. Initially they targeted the moderate separatists. After eliminating them, they were left with the Islamic extremists. Then the Kremlin could claim that it had been fighting not the people of Chechnya or even some separatists but international terrorists - likes the ones the US fought for years. More or less the same scenario could be observed in Syria.

By the spring of 2016, after only six months after Russia's direct military involvement in Syria, this goal was successfully achieved. Whether or not Putin intends to stand by Bashar al Assad for good is uncertain. However, it is clear that he has brought Assad's regime from the brink and has restored it as a force to reckon with. Moreover, from now on the **US/Western influence in the Middle East has been minimized and the Russia-Syria-Iran axis has emerged as the most powerful force in the region.**

As I stated, this became possible after the Russian forces largely destroyed the so called moderate opposition supported by the Western powers. Moreover, the deliberate targeting of the civilian areas and infrastructure produced unprecedented waves of migration from the Northern Syria into Turkey and Western Europe, creating a humanitarian catastrophe. The Syrian exodus has produced not only millions of refugees but a

political crisis in Europe. In light of Putin's support of the extreme right anti-immigrant political parties in Europe, it appears as if **undermining European governments** that have been refusing to ease sanctions on Russia was another important goal.

Almost immediately after his involvement in Syria **Putin declared that the United States and its EU allies had to engage with him** in order to resolve the crisis. Initially the response was less than enthusiastic. However the Paris terrorist attacks and his successful campaign on the ground in Syria changed everything. Putin's isolation was ended and he started receiving important visitors from Paris and DC and Russia became a key international player again. Because of the lack of evidence, Putin cannot be accused of masterminding the Paris and Brussels attacks, but the fact is that **in combination with his role in Syria, the wave of terror in the heart of Europe has helped him regaining a place at the top international table. And after ending the political isolation Putin is now trying to blackmail his way out of the economic sanctions.** Whether he will succeed is open to question but this, in my view, was perhaps the most important goal that Putin had been pursuing from the very outset.

However, **not everything in his Syria campaign went smoothly.** Putin has faced a serious complication in an unexpected place – Turkey. For years Russo-Turkish relations had been developing steadily. And the personal rapport between Putin and Erdogan was a positive factor in the bilateral ties. Many observers pointed out that the two had similar leadership styles (e.g. tendency for authoritarianism and assertiveness). Whether it's true or not, but Putin had to discover that an affinity with Erdogan would cost him a serious setback when the Turkish leader proved that he was anything but a pushover. I refer to the Russian SU24 bomber incident which resulted in a major crisis between the two countries.

Turkey has been an important player in Syria, with its interests often conflicting with those of the Western nations and Russia. Like the US and its European allies, Turkey had been opposed to the Assad regime, considering it as a main source of instability. At the same time, Turkish authorities had not been actively involved in fighting against neither Assad's forces nor ISIS. While supporting a limited number of the anti-Assad fighters (predominantly the Syrian Turkmen militias), Turkey considered the Kurdish forces in Syria (with their ties with PKK) - not ISIS - as the main threat to its security.

In these circumstances Russia chose to actively target the Turkmen controlling the territories adjacent to the Turkish border. During raids, Russian bombers violated the Turkish airspace several times. Turkey, unhappy with the systematic bombing of its allies and extremely angry with the violations of its sovereign borders, issued numerous warnings and at one occasion shot down a Russian aircraft.

This incident caused a deep crisis not only in bilateral relations but effected Russia's international standing: if the Paris attacks gave Putin a critical opening and forced the French President to argue for the inclusion of Russia in the anti-terrorist coalition (which was one of Putin's ultimate goals), the unexpected conflict with Turkey limited Russia's international progress significantly.

Instead of settling the issue, both Putin and Erdogan pushed the conflict to an impasse. Erdogan refused to apologize and Putin retaliated with sanctions – he imposed an embargo on Turkish imports and banned Russian tourists from visiting Turkish resorts. The sanctions did hurt the Turkish economy, but Putin's revenge came at a cost – both economic and political.

Regardless, **Putin has achieved one very important goal – he refocused Russian minds from the ruble and stalemate in Ukraine on something much more exciting.** For months, the Russian propaganda machine had been reporting about the victories of the Russian armed forces in a faraway land thus proving that Russia was great again. Russians watched how their missiles flew from the Caspian Sea (they of course were not told that not all of them reached Syria, let alone their intended targets). All in all, in the virtual war between the TV and the fridge the former gained upper hand again.

To sum it up, with his military campaign in Syria, Putin has achieved the following:

1. He saved Assad's regime and created an alliance with Syria and Iran that now represents a formidable force in the region, while weakening the position of the United States and its allies;
2. With the wave of the Syrian refugees resulting from the relentless bombing of the civilian areas he created a source of political instability in the European Union and has weakened the position of its leaders who have refused to lift sanctions on Russia.

3. He ended the diplomatic and political isolation in which he found himself after the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. Unlike six months ago, he is consulted by the Western leaders on the future of Syria and on the threat of terrorism;
4. Whereas, by mid 2015, Russians discovered that Putin couldn't win a war against Ukraine (which he claimed was not even a real country) and couldn't take care of tiny Crimea – by achieving all of the above, he created an impression that Russia is back as the great power and has consolidated his own position which could be threatened if Russians continued to think about Crimea, Donbas and their economic woes.
5. However, not all the consequences of his adventure in Syria were planned or beneficial to the Kremlin. Putin has turned Turkey from a friend to a foe which will cost him at least in the short and medium term perspectives. Among other things, prospects for a new major Russian gas pipeline that would connect Russia to the Southern European gas network via Turkey - the only alternative to the dead South Stream gas project – have disappeared with the demise of the Russo-Turkish partnership.

In conclusion the West must not give in to Kremlin's interests and blackmail. The West should not pretend that Putin can be a partner in fighting terrorism or stabilizing the Middle East. Russia's conduct has been based on the Cold War paradigms which can no longer be ignored.