

Russia's Syria Propaganda

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News about Syria has quickly replaced news about Ukraine in the Russian media, thanks to the Kremlin's propaganda.

"This is our land...our sacred land!" proclaimed Russian parliamentarian Semyon Bagdasarov about Syria on the state-run Rossiya-1's leading TV talk show *Evening with Vladimir Solovyev* in early October.

"Civilization came to us precisely from there...If there was no Syria, there would be no Russia," continued Bagdasarov, tracing Russia's history to the time when Syrian priests, "not Greeks or God knows who," came to Russia from Antioch.

In the build-up prior to Russia's Syria intervention on September 30, opinion polls indicated that the majority of Russians opposed military involvement there. The Kremlin's propaganda machine struggled briefly to find the right message about Syria. The Russian Defense Ministry took several days to respond to journalists' questions and, when it did, sometimes it simply chose to not comment. It seemed top Russian officials lacked a clear understanding of the government's intentions: Kremlin press secretary Dmitry Peskov suggested that the majority of the Western-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) had joined ISIS, while Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said the FSA is not a terrorist organization and should be part of a political solution.

But a message quickly emerged. Syria, a beautiful, peaceful and tolerant country was thriving until "terrorists" came, with their "Western" ideas of "freedom," and tore the country apart in a matter of months. Syria, it also turned out, is intrinsically connected to the very creation of Russia, as Bagdasarov suggested. Meanwhile, the West is responsible for the rise of terrorism in Syria and continues to support terrorist groups in a geopolitical struggle to undermine Russia. Putin, in this view, is leading the true effort on eradicating terror -- although no clear definition of terrorism is provided. The Russian Orthodox Church, which the Kremlin uses as its soft power tool, quickly supported the Kremlin. Head of the Church's public affairs department Vsevolod Chaplin said, "the fight against terrorism -- is a moral struggle, if you like -- a holy struggle, and our country today is probably the most active in the world that

resists terror."

News about Syria quickly replaced news about Ukraine. It became a new drug, or as political analyst Andrei Piontkovsky said, an "imperial narcotic" that allows the public to "forget about the failed Ukrainian embarrassment, return the intoxicating air of triumph of Russian Spring 2014, and at the same time remove the awkwardness and discomfort that Russians still experienced when killing the so-similar-to-them Ukrainians."

Yet the message on Syria is different. On Ukraine, images that dominated the media were designed to appeal to a humanitarian impulse to save fellow brethren from persecution by Western-sponsored "fascists." Thus, the news showed violence, terrified people running and screaming.

On Syria, the images are sterile. Sometimes they remind one of action movies or video games: planes take off, bombs fall onto buildings, while commentators discuss, for example, whether the weather in Syria is favorable to air strikes. The Defense Ministry provides regular news briefings with colorful maps and reports about successful missions. There are interviews with Assad's forces who are grateful for Russia's help. Critically, reports indicate that Russian pilots in Latakia get plenty of rest, read books, and eat hearty meals in clean facilities in their free time.

Emotion is not absent from discussion on Syria. For example, the lyrical song "Syria, My Sister, Your Russian Brother Will Save You" details interviews with Syrians about the brutality of the Western-backed "extremists." It promotes the message that everyone in Syria fighting Assad is a monster who tortures and kills in most horrific ways. Images of innocent people, especially children, being blown up show blood and gore, and reinforce the message that there are no other alternatives to Assad -- who himself is the only source of order and peace.

But in terms of what Russia is actually doing in Syria, the Kremlin wants the Russian public to see a painless, distant campaign. Syria is not Ukraine, and it is hard to justify an intervention in a faraway land when Russia had experienced no direct attacks on the Russian soil from this country. It helps to convince the public if the message is that the country is not incurring serious costs.

To be sure, it also helps that many of the Kremlin's messages on Syria are not entirely new. The claim that the West both created ISIS and organized protests on Maidan in Ukraine and used them as instruments of geopolitics, and that the U.S. supports Muslim extremists in Syria who kill Christians in order help the U.S. assert hegemony in the Middle East and carve out the region to its liking, is at least several years old. Same goes for the claim that the West's sole interest in Syria is to remove Assad's legitimate government. The media also had emphasized years before the close connection between Syria, especially the Assad family, to Russia. One talk show, for example, focused on Bashar al-Assad's cousin, Siwar Assad, and his Russian wives in Paris: Images of Siwar as a caring father holding his children, a family that jokingly calls itself "Assadov" to emphasize closeness with Russia, and Russian women who entered fairy tale lives with an Arabian prince who swept them off their feet.

It did not take long for the propaganda to take effect. In late October, polls showed record growth in Putin's approval ratings of 89.9%. They attributed Putin's actions in Syria as one reason for this increase, while only a minority was still against Russia's involvement there. But how much can we believe the polls, and how long will this approval last?

First, the rise in Putin's overall approval should not be overstated: It is only an increase of several percentage points prior to the Syria intervention. In the short term, the propaganda has been effective. But Lilia Shevtsova, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, cautions that the Communist party had 99.9% approval ratings a month before the Soviet Union collapsed. "Such ratings are the reason for the authorities to worry, not to rejoice: they say that society has stopped telling truth," she wrote me in an email. Putin may sound confident -- or to be more accurate, overconfident -- but this confidence is fragile.

The high approval ratings are unlikely to last. "[T]he drug effect would be very short because Russians do not understand how their interests could be connected to this faraway region," wrote Shevtsova. "These ratings and the

popular support are not sustainable. Otherwise, why should the Kremlin have switched from the Ukrainian military adventure to Syrian? Why is it desperately looking for new drugs? One poll should tell us how fragile and conditional is the Russians' support of the War with Ukraine -- only 16 percent of Russians are ready to sacrifice for the state."

Here is another insight into Putin's approval. When Putin came to Sevastopol in Crimea on May 9 last year (Russia's Victory Day) to observe the parade held annually to commemorate victory over the Nazis, he was greeted with tens of thousands of people chanting thanks for "returning" Crimea to Russia. But in face-to-face conversations with at least one Russian journalist, Sevastopol residents pointed to economic and other problems that Russia's annexation created. "But if the people have major problems, why did they welcome Putin so much today?" asked the journalist. "Because so far there has been no disillusionment," responded one resident. "We are hoping for the best. For now, we are waiting."

Approval for Putin is also often confused with lack of alternatives to him. In private conversations I had with Russians in my travels to the country in recent years, I heard such expressions. I also felt distrust towards the government. It is subtle and hard to capture in a poll, but it is there. Deep down, many Russians feel their government is lying to them, even as they are confused by the incessant propaganda.

At the World Congress of Russian Compatriots living abroad on November 5-6 in Moscow, Kyrgyzstan representative Stanislav Epifantsev said that after the missile strikes from the ships of the Caspian Flotilla on "terrorist" positions in Syria, even the "insolent Saudis" felt Russia's might. Prior to these events, he said, "Only the lazy did not spit into a weakened Russia." Meanwhile, Putin promised little of substance at the meeting as the organization's new coordinating council chairman Mikhail Drozdov proclaimed that "compatriots experienced a sense of extraordinary elation" after Crimea and Syria. Even if Putin finds another, post-Syria drug, such euphoria does not last. Instead, it comes crashing down.

Anna Borshchevskaya is the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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