

In Syria, Putin Risks Repeating the Soviet Union's Afghanistan Mistake

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Russia can't fight a war in both Ukraine and Syria while also maintaining troops throughout the post-Soviet space, but Putin appears set on trying.

Despite the Kremlin's massive and sustained propaganda campaign, anti-regime voices still find their way in Russia. They express disapproval of the country's involvement in Syria, concerned it could become Russia's new Afghanistan -- a war that, by many accounts, contributed significantly to the fall of the Soviet Union.

On September 7, the only anti-Vladimir Putin opposition member in the Russian parliament (Duma), Dmitry Gudkov, sent an official request to Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu. "Two things interest me," Gudkov wrote on his Facebook page, "First, are our soldiers really fighting for Assad, and second, if yes, why is this done in secret, without the parliament's approval? On the one hand, we strongly criticize America over Iraq, NATO over Yugoslavia -- and on the other, it seems we send troops to support a far from pleasant regime."

In May, Putin amended an existing decree on state secrets. Among other changes, he put Russia's military losses on the list of state secrets even in peace time, "during special operations." Recalling this incident, Gudkov wrote, "We thought this is about Donbass [in Ukraine] -- but it turned out about Syria too."

In trying to explain Putin's motivations for increased involvement in Syria, journalist Evgeniy Kiselev wrote in the liberal-oriented *Echo Moskvy*, "[Putin's] authoritarian regime, faced with internal problems, seeks to compensate for them in the direction of foreign policy." He added that throughout Russia's history, similar wars turned out to be foreign policy disasters, from the Russo-Japanese war in 1904-05, to the Crimean war of 1853-56.

Kiselev further wrote, "36 years ago we got bogged down in Afghanistan. Last year, we got bogged down in Donbass -- and now we will get bogged down in Syria?...That the military intervention in Syria is adventurism -- and a deadly one at that for Russia -- I personally have no doubt."

"Does this situation not remind us of Afghan history? As back then, the top [leadership] of the USSR, without any public discussion, made a decision to introduce a 'limited contingent' of Soviet troops in Afghanistan," said analyst Oleg Ponomar. "During this time, the already decrepit Soviet economy collapsed under the weight of military spending and social discontent, dragging to hell the whole Soviet regime."

Even some supporters of the Kremlin's pro-Assad policy believe Russia should not get involved in Syria militarily. "Russia has no right to get into an adventure from which it will be impossible to get out. We do not need a second Afghanistan -- especially against the background of the already-sucking-all-juices-from-our-country Ukrainian crisis," wrote Mikhail Rostovkiy, who spent time in Syria 15 years ago as a guest of the Russian embassy.

Russia's military involvement in Syria may differ in some respects from the Soviet Union's involvement in Afghanistan. But for some Russians, certain parallels are striking. Russia is facing a deep economic crisis. Its current military expenditures are unsustainable, and the country is facing a severe demographic decline. Russia can't fight a war both in Ukraine and in Syria, while also maintaining troops throughout the post-Soviet space as it currently does. But Putin appears set on trying.

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

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