The Kremlin's Fight for Relevance

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“Su-34 jets hit an ISIL fortified bunker in the Hama province with guided bombs,” a one-star general reports, standing in a high-tech control room. “Objective monitoring confirmed that one of the bombs destroyed a command post and its infrastructure with a direct hit.” An aerial video shows a row of tiny squares, then an explosion, then a square going up in smoke, and, finally, a black hole in the ground.

This kind of reporting has been all over Russia’s state-run television channels for the past five days now. But the Kremlin's surprise move from words to action in Syria was not really a surprise for a majority of Russians. About a month ago, the war in Ukraine disappeared from screens and Syria took its place: the “murderous Kiev junta” was out, the “barbarian caliphate in the Middle East” (the anchor Dmitry Kiselyov’s way of putting it) was in. Most Russians have apparently accepted the change of terrain as if it were a change in programming.

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State-controlled television is the only kind available to most viewers and television is the main news source for 94 percent of Russians. Although up to 25 percent (42 percent in Moscow) of those polled regularly check news on the Internet, very few are willing and able to compare news sources and ask questions. Most of the questioning happens on social networks or in foreign media accessible to a fraction of the Russian public.

The Kremlin does not feel it owes an explanation to its domestic audience as to why Russia is suddenly at war in the Middle East. The conflict is presented as a media event that should not bother the population in any real way. The channel Russia 24 has even shown a weather forecast that featured conditions for airstrikes in Syria (not a joke). Close to the end of the three-minute-long weather report—all three minutes focused on Syria—the anchor suggested that flight conditions were going to get a lot worse in November. Some commentators concluded that this was an indirect announcement of the timeframe of the campaign.

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But it's unlikely to be that short. Russia’s new adventure abroad is the one and only Kremlin policy that is currently public. Hardly anything else is making national news. “The Kremlin has completely superseded domestic politics by foreign policy,” says Fyodor Krasheninnkov, political columnist for Vedomosti daily. This trick has allowed the Kremlin to push the remnants of the opposition movement to the sidelines.

For a public figure to be featured on television, for a politician to be allowed to run in any kind of election, it’s imperative to be well versed in international politics. Developments in the Middle East, in Europe, and in the U.S. (but not in China or India) are the stuff of daily political routine: everything, including Russia’s economic woes, is explained by foreign-policy-related reasons. The explanations usually run like this: the West is trying to punish Russia for its independent stance, be it Ukraine or Syria, but the Kremlin always gains the upper hand because Obama is weak and Putin is strong. While Obama hits a hospital in Afghanistan, Putin is doing precision bombing in Syria. The domestic agenda sounds dismaly irrelevant against this background. Attempts
to bring up domestic reasons for domestic problems, i.e. bad governance or corruption, are dismissed as unpatriotic or imposed by foreign interests.

The Kremlin intends to keep this convenient deal running during the entire cycle of parliamentary and presidential elections that are due in 2016 and 2018 respectively, suggests Krasheninnkov. Considering the Kremlin’s stellar track record in managing domestic politics by manipulating media messages, it is probably doable. But that’s the easy part. I cannot help thinking that the ease with which the Kremlin is able to pull off one domestic coup after another is preventing it from being serious about the real-life situation in the Middle East.

State-run media has been successfully dumbing down the complexity of the region. Hopefully Russian strategists do not watch their own television. Hundreds of thousands of men who are involved in fighting on various sides do not watch Russian television. “It is clear from the bombing campaign that, so far, the Russians are going after a complete mix of targets, from al-Nusra Front, to some known ISIS ammunition dumps, and various rebel groups supported either by the CIA or Saudi allies,” says Michael Kofman, a Public Policy Scholar at the Kennan Institute. “So far, the air bombing effort has used mostly unguided bombs, with some precision munitions mixed in.”

Russia's deployments are not enough to really alter the course of the conflict, suggests Kofman. The move is about stopping the momentum of Assad's retreat and buying him time. All the important motivations seem political and strategic. “Putin apparently seeks to ruin what is left of U.S. plans, pull Russia out of isolation by force, play with Europeans, and influence the debate on sanctions there,” says Kofman.

But by choosing targets that are threats mainly to Bashar al-Assad’s regime, by siding with the Iranian and Hezbollah forces, the Kremlin is propping up what many on the ground may see as an anti-Sunni coalition. Assad said over the weekend that he was excited about the Russian campaign. Iraq's most powerful Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias said on Monday that they would welcome Russian airstrikes on Islamic State in the country.

Ministers from the Gulf Cooperation Council that includes Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, protested Moscow’s military campaign while meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. According to a Wall Street Journal report, they said Sunni extremist groups, including Islamic State and al Qaeda, will be able to portray themselves as defending Syria’s Sunni majority against an alliance of Russia, the Assad regime, and Shiite militias organized by Tehran.

Russia has already heard from Turkey which said earlier that its F-16 jets intercepted a Russian fighter plane that violated Turkish air space near the Syrian border, forcing the aircraft to turn back.

The fact that Russia has plunged head first into a sectarian conflict and made a dozen enemies in less than a week seems to be of secondary value to the Kremlin. The Kremlin's real goals are all outside the Middle East: it needs a triumphant television war campaign to consolidate its domestic support; it is trying to turn the tables in Europe and have the European Union lift sanctions; it is fighting for relevance on the world stage. But the actual situation in the Middle East may overextend Russia beyond its newly restored and still limited military capacity. The Soviet Politburo never planned for a 10-year campaign when it invaded Afghanistan back in 1979.

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Putin’s Syria policy is popular, but his support this time is nowhere near the levels achieved at the height of the Ukrainian crisis: 40 percent say they support the Syrian policy in general, while 11 percent are against it and 33 percent don’t care; 69 percent are against putting the Russian “boots” on Syrian ground. How long the Russians will continue to readily pay for foreign adventures from their not-so-deep pockets is a question the Kremlin will face in the coming months.

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