

A New Russian Strategy: "Why Putin is in Syria"

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Abstract

This paper examines the reasoning behind Vladimir Putin's intervention in the Syrian civil war within the historical context of Russian strategic needs and objectives in Europe and the Middle East. There are three main reasons for Russia's intervention in Syria. The first reason is to protect Russia's long-standing Syrian ally and Russia's Mediterranean naval base located there. A second reason -- both evolving and opportunistic -- is to intensify the Syrian civil war in order to increase refugee migration to Europe and thereby destabilize the European Union (EU) and NATO. The final driver for Putin's Syrian intervention is his desire to become a major stakeholder in the Syrian peace process. Three recommendations for overcoming Putin's strategy are also presented. These include fully funding the United Nations request for Syrian refugees, increasing the participation rate of Gulf States in the mitigation of the refugee crisis, and finally pursuing diplomatic efforts to reach a peace deal inside Syria.

A New Russian Strategy: "Why Putin is in Syria"

In September 2015 when Vladimir Putin intervened militarily in the Syrian civil war, most of the world seemed surprised. It should not have been. There are three logical reasons why Putin is currently involved in Syria and none of them have to do with megalomania or despotism. Additionally, this paper provides three recommendations that serve as counter strategies for Putin's intervention in Syria.

The first reason Putin has intervened is to protect Russia's long-standing Syrian ally and Russia's Mediterranean naval facility. A corroborating reason -- evolving and opportunistic -- is to intensify the Syrian civil war in order to increase refugee migration to Europe and thereby destabilize the European Union (EU) and NATO. The third driver for Putin's intervention in Syria is his desire to become a major stakeholder in the Syrian peace process. All of these give Putin an improved bargaining position in removing sanctions and achieving Russia's long standing European strategic ends.

Countering Moscow's strategy begins with reducing the destabilizing refugee flow into Western Europe. This can be done by fully funding the United Nations financial request for refugee camps. A critical component of creating these safe areas for refugees lies in increasing the participation efforts of Gulf Cooperation Council countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait. Introducing these measures provides the space needed to pursue a diplomatic resolution to the Syrian civil war.

Moscow's military actions in the Middle East have direct implications for Putin's political objectives in Europe. As Clausewitz stated in his book *On War*, "Sometimes the political and military object is the same. In other cases the political object will not provide a suitable military objective. In that event, another military objective must be adopted that will serve the political purpose and symbolize it in the peace negotiations."¹

Putin's Syrian operations must be approached with Clausewitz's principle in mind. Syria is Putin's military operation to gain political objectives in Europe.

To understand the current context, an overview of Russia's historical involvement in the Middle East and Europe is essential. Acknowledgement of historical Russian security concerns and strategic interests further clarifies how Russia's Syrian strategy nests inside Russia's European strategy.

As far back as the 1600's, Russia had two strategic requirements. The first was maintaining its protective belt of countries running from the Balkans down to the Black Sea and the second was a warm-water port.² Throughout Russian history, control of its buffer zone of countries and its control of a series of ports have ebbed and flowed in concert with periods of Russian strength and weakness. Putin's level of dedication to the strategic needs of his country should come as no surprise to anyone who understands this history. The Baltics, Crimea and much of Eastern Europe have been an ongoing project for Moscow for the last 400 years.³

Because Russia has been invaded over the past 300 years by Swedes, Lithuanians, Poles, French and Germans⁴, the Russian state has an understandable paranoia about land invasions from the west, and the requirement for a strong belt of buffer states. Much of what we would consider the former Communist states of the Soviet Union, have been under various stages of Russian rule since the 17th century. The area of today's Transdniestria⁵ was annexed following the Russo-Polish war of 1667⁶. Portions of Estonia and Latvia were taken from Sweden in 1721 after the peace of Nystad. In the 1790's, Catherine the Great took western Ukraine from Poland. And in

the early 1800's, Russia finally established itself as a great European power with the conquest of Finland and Moldova.⁷

During the 18th century, some of these newly acquired lands, like Lithuania and Poland served as important buffers against the Hapsburgs and the Germans.⁸ After the Russian revolution of 1917, Poland re-conquered western Ukraine and Belarus.⁹ Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and Finland all gained their independence following World War I.¹⁰ The Baltics, Ukraine, Belarus, Poland and parts of Eastern Finland would not come back into the Russian sphere of influence until after World War II.¹¹

Russia's attempt to re-gain its traditional buffer zone is consistent with historical precedent. The Eastward retreat of the Soviet Union after its implosion in 1991¹² and the subsequent expansion of NATO, which did not include Russian membership, are simply part of the centuries old ebb and flow of the "intermarium"¹³ between Russia and the West. This area, a buffer zone of countries from the Baltics to the Black Sea has changed hands repeatedly over the years.¹⁴

When the Soviet Union finally collapsed in the early 1990's, 500 years of territorial expansion ended,¹⁵ and the Baltic States reclaimed their independence. To the further alarm of Moscow, Ukraine with its Crimean warm water port started exploring NATO and EU membership.¹⁶

The Baltic States joined NATO and the EU in 2004.¹⁷ For Putin the expansion of NATO into former Soviet states was a major concern. Russia's National Security Concept- 2000 listed NATO's eastward expansion as a primary concern and "fundamental threat in the international sphere."¹⁸ In 2001, Putin knew he could not initially resist NATO's expansion into former Russian territory.¹⁹ Improving state finances

however, offered a window of opportunity. Based on average budget surpluses of 4% of GDP, Putin planned on using this money to “finance large-scale strategic objectives”.²⁰ By 2005 Putin had increased military spending to five times the amount in 1999.²¹ As can be seen in the chart below, Russia enjoyed strong

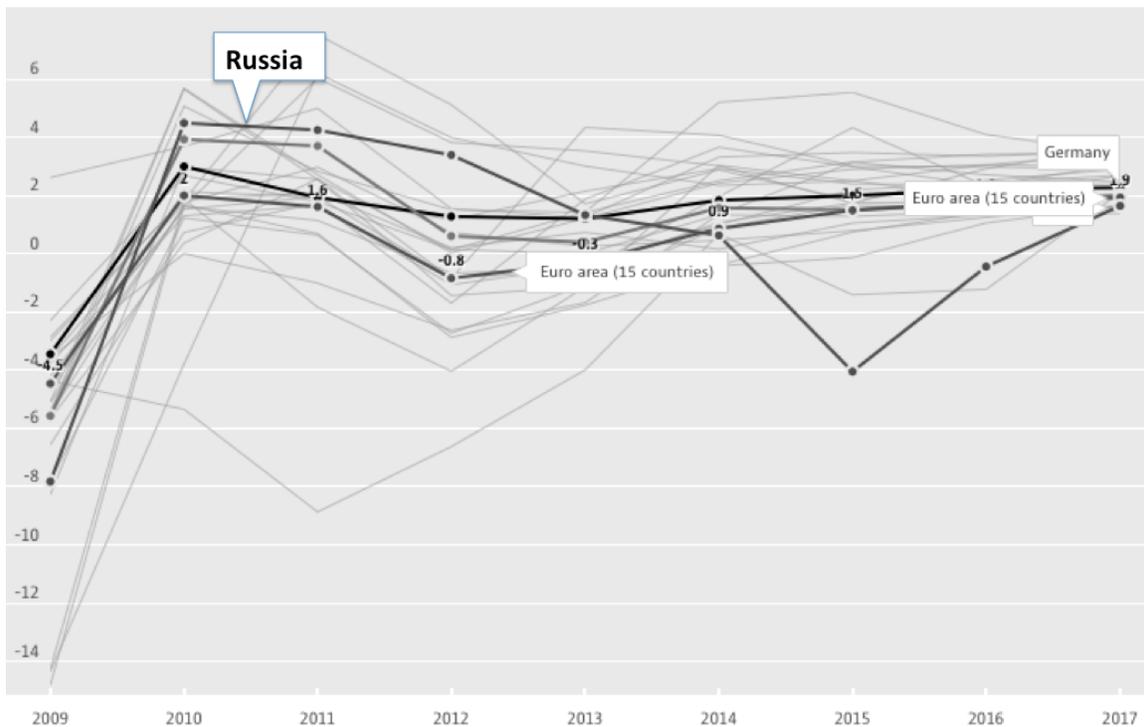


Figure 1. European GDP²²

GDP growth until 2011.²³ The recent decline in Russian currency reserves to \$360 billion and the slowing of the Russian economy²⁴ have up to now not dampened Putin’s adventurism. Instead, foreign affairs are being used as a means of distracting the Russian population from economic hardship brought on by falling oil prices.

Historically, a major strategic Achilles’ heel for Russia was the lack of warm water ports from which to conduct year-round maritime trade. In order to become a great power, Russia required control of such ports. With that in mind, Catherine the Great conquered Crimea in 1783 and Odessa in 1791. In the early 1800’s, the eastern

part of the Black Sea region was taken from Georgia and with that, Russia finally had such secure port access.²⁵

After having Crimea in their sphere for over 200 years, the Russians faced the loss of control over this warm water port in February 2014 following the fall of the pro-Russian government of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. His refusal, ostensibly under Russian pressure, to sign a Ukraine-EU association agreement triggered massive demonstrations and his ouster from power.²⁶ Following Yanukovich's removal, a pro-Western interim government took over. This cemented Moscow's fears of Ukraine's NATO and EU membership. Considering that the port of Sevastopol, the home of the Russian Black Sea fleet, was only leased until 2017, this became an untenable strategic position for Putin.²⁷ After a decade of indirect political intervention and pipeline diplomacy, in which energy prices were manipulated to exert influence, Putin finally took military action and invaded Crimea in 2014.²⁸

Although some may disagree, Putin has actually displayed a very measured approach to foreign policy. He prefers to lead with diplomatic, information and economic instruments of national power, reserving the military option for last. In the case of Ukraine, he attempted to keep the country in the Russian sphere with economic and political pressure. Only after Ukraine began to develop closer economic ties with the West, and after Putin's attempts to control Ukrainian politics failed, did he resort to military action. Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic are currently in the same diplomatic, information and economic stage of Putin's foreign policy. In each of those countries, Putin is supporting pro-Russian media outlets and political candidates.²⁹ In the Czech Republic, the Russian oil company, Lukoil, financially supported the 2013

candidacy of president Milos Zeman.³⁰ In Hungary, Putin has pledged a \$10.8 billion loan towards the modernization of a nuclear power plant.³¹ Pipeline diplomacy, another favorite compliance tactic, is also being used.³² Russian natural gas prices are commensurate with a country's level of political cooperation. For example, Germany and France pay below average prices for their gas.³³ Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, former Soviet states that have chosen to exit the Russian sphere and ally with the West, pay 22% more for gas.³⁴ Hungary, which is considered compliant with Russia's interests, pays only 10% above average for natural gas.³⁵ Should Putin's political and economic "carrots and sticks" approach fail, Moscow will consider resorting to harder-power options including military threats to nudge these countries deeper into the Russian sphere of influence.

Russia's Middle East involvement, like its quest for buffers, dates back centuries. Russia's large Muslim population and its interactions with Islam and the Middle East have been influential for a thousand years.³⁶ Just as importantly, the Bosphorus waterway became a strategic concern after the Turks closed it to Russian ships during the Crimean War.³⁷ Against the backdrop of this history, the Syrian port of Tartus is linked to Russia's warm water port in Crimea via the Bosphorus.³⁸

This has made Syria an important ally for Moscow and hence the recipient of billions in foreign aid, direct investment and military cooperation.³⁹ Again, it should not come as a surprise that Putin would step in to protect the pro-Russian regime of Syrian President Bashir Al Assad, Russian financial interests, and cement Russia's Middle East influence in the face of Western intervention.

Putin's overall strategy in Syria, which is the main focus of this paper, can be broken down into three key elements. The first is protecting an ally and retaining the 45 year old naval facility at Tartus. The second is unrestrained conflict intensification to increase the refugee flow to Europe. And the third is becoming a key stakeholder in the Syrian peace process.

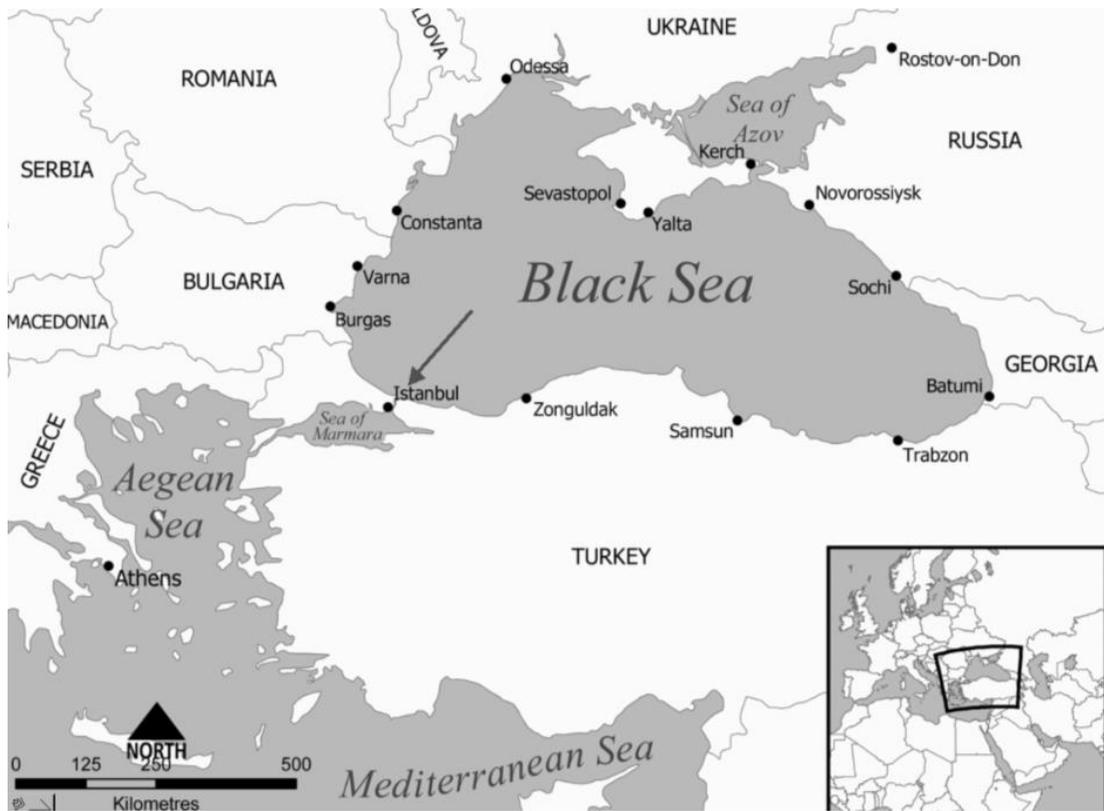


Figure 2. Map of Bosphorus⁴⁰

LOE 1: Protect Russia's Long-Standing Syrian Ally and Russia's Mediterranean Naval Base

By ensuring the survival of the Assad regime, Russia shows solidarity with a key ally and demonstrates its influence in the region. Russia has been an ally of Syria since 1830 when it opened a consulate in Aleppo.⁴¹ By 1905, Moscow had established 74

schools in Syria. Moscow lent strong support to the Syrian Communist party in 1925 and again supported the Ba'athists in the 1960's.⁴² Moscow officially recognized the new Syrian Republic in 1944, two years before any other countries did.⁴³ During the 1970's and 1980's, Syria became Russia's most important Middle East ally and as a result received a steady stream of Russian military equipment.⁴⁴ Russia's port in Tartus was established in 1971.

Although the level of support Russia could provide to Syria fell off dramatically after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia still considered its presence in the region a counter-weight to United States' hegemony.⁴⁵ In 2000, shortly after he was elected, Putin improved Syrian-Russian relations partly to show the positive aspects of Moscow's Middle East involvement and to promote Russia's image as a Muslim-friendly nation.⁴⁶ This level of support and the Eastern Mediterranean influence that goes along with it has been a concern for U.S. administrations dating back to the Eisenhower presidency.⁴⁷

Committing to the survival of the Assad regime protects Russia's only Mediterranean port. This is critical to Moscow's ability to project naval and air power into Europe and the Middle East.⁴⁸ Tartus is more than just a naval facility in the Mediterranean Sea, it represents the key Southern part of an equation that added to Sevastopol, home of the Black Sea fleet, allows Russian ships to transit the Bosphorus.⁴⁹ These ports compensate for Russian land-locked geographical constraints.⁵⁰ After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia was able to hang on to Tartus by writing off 73% of Syria's \$11 Billion debt burden.⁵¹ Were the Assad regime to fall, Russia would not only lose the port but probably also lose the billions in write-offs associated with it. As Vice

Admiral Viktor Chirkov, the Commander in Chief of the Russian Navy, succinctly put it, “This base is essential to us.”⁵²

Economics plays no small role in Russia’s Syrian intervention. Supporting Syria is insurance on investment: no Assad regime in Syria, no loan payback to Russia. The \$3.6 billion in debt that Syria still owes Moscow is 27% of the total debt that Putin did not forgive in 2003.⁵³ It is likely that Putin wants this money back. Were the current Syrian regime to fall, there is a high potential that Syria’s outstanding debt might be wiped out.

Regime failure or change would also risk any future infrastructure contracts. Back in 2003, Syrian Oil Company and Russian oil company, Zarubezhneft, signed joint venture documents.⁵⁴ It comes as no surprise that Russia is interested in protecting its commercial and economic interests within Syrian territory.

LOE 2: Intensify the Syrian Civil War in Order to Increase Refugee Migration to Europe

Putin’s Syria strategy involves intensifying the Syrian refugee crisis and using it as an oxidizer to expose and exacerbate the political and economic fault lines within the European Union.⁵⁵ Although this aspect of Putin’s strategy may not have been pre-planned, he is certain to leverage it now that it is occurring. By intensifying the conflict and increasing the refugee flow, Putin calculates a politically overloaded EU, focused internally on its own crisis, is weaker and less likely to expand. Considering NATO consists primarily of EU countries, this proportionally weakens NATO as well.

This validates Clausewitz’s principle that the military objective may be different from the political objective, as noted above.⁵⁶ Putin also appears to be following Clausewitz’s principle of “maximum exertion” which states that whatever one combatant does to intensify his war effort, the other combatant will match; forcing both sides to

extremes.⁵⁷ By stepping into the midst of the Syrian war and launching a massive bombing campaign against rebel forces and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Putin is planning on his opponent's intensification of effort. As each side steps up its brutality, Syria will be turned into a wasteland and the civilians in the middle will suffer the most.

Putin's aggressive bombing campaign is being directed against anti-Assad regime forces more so than ISIS.⁵⁸ Russia is currently launching more sorties per day than the U.S. led coalition.⁵⁹ The Russians are bombing the north-south axis of major cities like Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Homs to the Damascus border area and Debaa.⁶⁰ This is causing the refugee flow to increase and it is extremely unlikely that Russian involvement will slacken in intensity or reduce the refugee flow.⁶¹

Russian forces are using cluster munitions which increase civilian casualties because they scatter over a wide area and act as de-facto land mines.⁶² Of particular concern is evidence that Russian jets are specifically targeting civilian areas where opposition forces are deriving support.⁶³ Amnesty International has reported that Russian jets are willing to bomb hospitals and markets in an attempt to kill a few rebels.⁶⁴ With the support of Putin's bombing campaign, Syrian regime forces have been able to renew their offensive and have recently taken Latakia and Dera'a.⁶⁵ They have also increased the number of people under siege to 400,000.⁶⁶ The number of people in remote areas that are in desperate need of relief supplies is now estimated at four million. There are reports that Syrians are starving and eating grass and pet cats to stay alive.⁶⁷ Mercy Corps is reporting that in the lead up to the Syrian peace negotiations, the regime has tightened down on besieged areas in a ploy to increase its

bargaining power,⁶⁸ which would be impossible without Russian airstrikes supporting regime intentions.

The goal of escalation is to prevent the 7.6 million internally displaced civilians⁶⁹ from ever returning to their homes. Displacing these civilians has two benefits for Damascus and Moscow. Once these people are gone, they can no longer challenge the Assad regime. The second benefit, mostly for Moscow, is that once these civilians lose hope of ever returning home, they will make their way to Europe where they are opening up the Southern front in Putin's struggle to destabilize the EU and help him regain influence on historic Russian buffer countries.

Putin has correctly assessed that the critical vulnerability of the European Union is its fragile political union. A loose federation of 28 different nations that has already been severely strained by a debt crisis and a weak economy will prove easier for Putin to exploit.⁷⁰

In what may be one of the greatest political miscalculations of the 21st century, German Chancellor Angela Merkel decided to invite an unlimited amount of refugees into Germany. By saying there is no legal limit to the number of asylum seekers Germany can accept,⁷¹ Merkel instantly opened the flood-gates for people who have virtually no hope of ever returning to their homes in Syria. It is easy to see how this would rapidly increase the refugee flow to over one million people per year and attract growing German domestic opposition. As a point of reference, the same number of undocumented aliens enter the United States every year.⁷² The difference between the two countries is that the U.S. has a population of 320 million versus Germany's 80 million. America also has decades of experience and federal control of its borders to

combat the flow of undocumented aliens.⁷³ Compare that to Europe where the refugee flow is concentrated in a few countries and there is no unified help yet at the EU level to deal with the problem. This has overwhelmed financially distressed southern European countries through which these refugees must travel in order to get to Europe.⁷⁴ Hungary and Austria have erected border controls in an attempt to stem the flow. This strikes at the heart of the Schengen Agreement which provides for the removal of border controls between EU countries in order to facilitate the free movement of goods and people. Erosion of the Schengen agreement strikes at the very soul of the EU.⁷⁵ In one of life's great ironies, Merkel who is one of the staunchest proponents of EU integration, may bring about the weakening of the EU with her stance on immigration.

The raising of border controls to stem the refugee flow is simply a physical manifestation of the political and economic differences that plague the EU. Many southern or peripheral EU countries like Greece, Italy and Spain face unemployment rates upwards of 20% and weak economies.⁷⁶ Countries like Italy, Spain and France are in favor of increased fiscal stimulus by the European Central Bank.⁷⁷ They are pitted against Germany whose government and citizens favor austerity.⁷⁸ The message from Germany is that there is little money to help struggling Europeans but plenty of money for jobless migrants. Without the overarching political structure to hold the financial structure together, each country is likely to pursue its own financial interests to save its economy.⁷⁹

Migrants enter the European Union primarily through Greece and Italy. Then work their way through the Balkans into Hungary and then Austria. Greece which is in the middle of a debt crisis, does not have the resources to cope with this onslaught of

refugees. Greece has a debt to GDP ratio of 177% and an unemployment rate of 27%. German enforced austerity measures have built up great resentment as well.⁸⁰

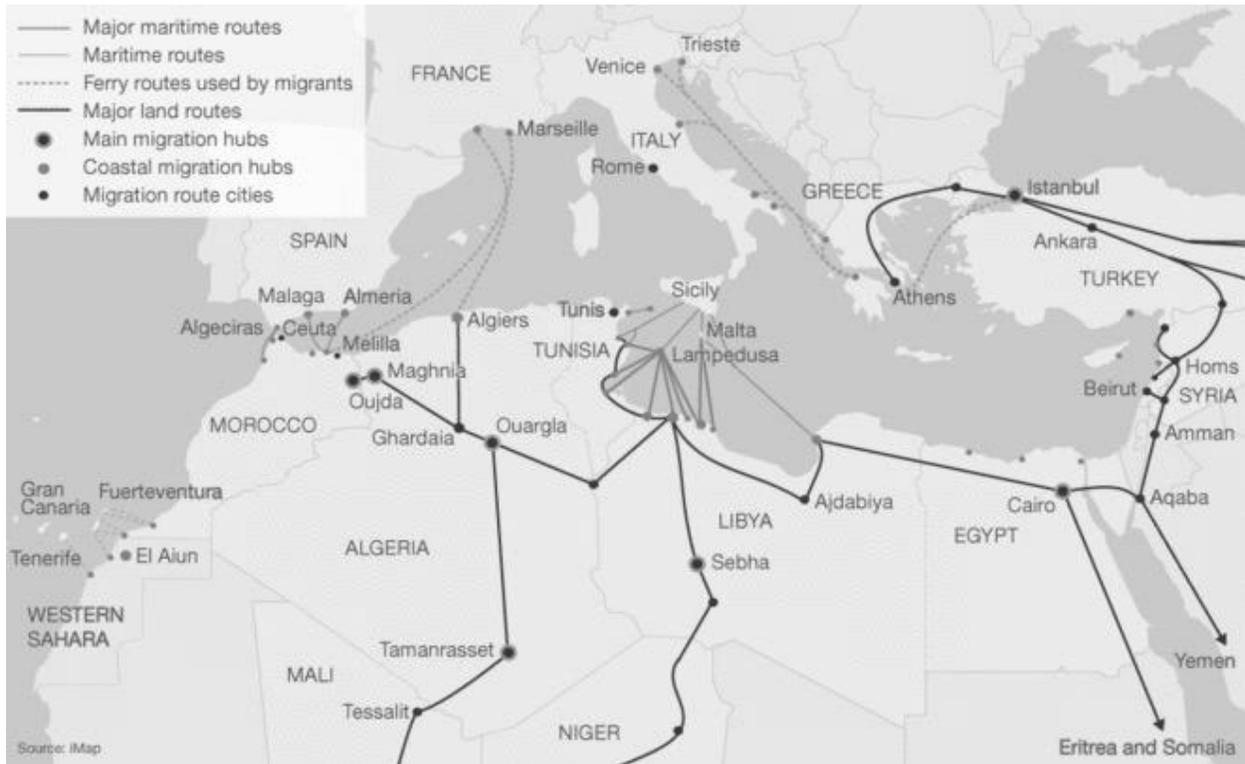


Figure 3. Migration Routes⁸¹

The problem with all of this is that Greece is tasked by the EU with protecting the periphery of the European continent. “With hundreds of thousands having entered Greece from

Turkey in 2015, the focus is on forcing Athens to tighten controls and surrender some sovereignty over its borders by passing authority to EU agencies, a quantum leap and an intolerable precedent for the present generation of nationalists.”⁸²

The Italians who guard another major section of the European border are in slightly better shape. With unemployment hovering around 13% and a debt to GDP ratio of 133%, second only to Greece, the Italian economy is still smaller than it was in 2008

before the European debt crisis.⁸³ Because Italy only spends 1.2% of GDP on defense, the Italian navy is completely underfunded and lacks the resources to patrol the Mediterranean and interdict migrants.⁸⁴ With a struggling economy and few resources from the EU, many Italians wonder why they should bear the cost of stemming the flow of refugees partly attracted by their rich German neighbor to the north. In fact, the second largest political party in the Italian parliament openly supports a referendum on whether to leave the Union.⁸⁵

Although the countries tasked with guarding the periphery of Europe are in the worst economic shape, the rest of Europe as a whole is not much better. Overall GDP growth is 1.4% and GDP debt ratio is 86.8%. With an estimated cost to house and feed all the migrants at \$21.5 billion, the question for many countries who lack the resources is who will pay for all this.⁸⁶ Many countries like Macedonia and Hungary do the only thing they can do: shut down their borders. France recently refused to take more refugees under a quota pushed by Germany.⁸⁷ The list of countries that have introduced border controls includes Austria, Czech Republic, France, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Macedonia, and Sweden. All have erected borders in violation of the Schengen agreement.⁸⁸ The situation is worsening when Sweden, which has one of the most liberal asylum policies in Europe, has established border controls. The widespread belief that the EU system is dysfunctional is leading many countries to look after their own interests.⁸⁹ If the EU cannot facilitate the free movement of goods and people around the EU as part of the Schengen Agreement, why bother with EU membership with its associated costs and compromises?

European political cohesion with regard to sanctions against Russia is also weakening. Putin will surely exploit this through diplomacy and trade. Europe is Russia's largest trading partner and the sanctions that Europe has imposed hurt the European as well as Russian economy.⁹⁰ Estimates indicate that the sanctions cost the EU economy \$114 billion.⁹¹ With its anemic economic growth, it is no surprise that the French president suggested that Russian sanctions should be lifted if Putin will agree to the Minsk II treaty.⁹² (*Minsk II is the proposed successor of the failed Ukrainian cease fire accord, Minsk I.*)⁹³ The reassuring thing for Putin is that sanctions must be unanimous across the 28 member states.⁹⁴ Considering Europe's disunity, France's position on the treaty, and Russia's investments in Hungary and the Czech Republic, Putin may be closer than we think to overcoming sanctions.

Aside from the obvious financial costs of the refugee crisis, there is also great social stress in the European Union. Sweden has admitted the highest number of refugees per capita due to its extremely liberal immigration policies. It also now has the honor of being the rape capital of Europe with the highest number of rapes.⁹⁵ Germany has recently experienced mass sexual assaults on a scale not seen before.⁹⁶ A recent police report indicated that out of 19 suspects arrested, 10 were asylum seekers and the other 9 were in Germany illegally.⁹⁷ And prior to that, the terror attacks in Paris left the French in shock and contemplating the benefits of EU membership. Since most of the perpetrators are Middle Eastern men, it is not hard to see that many Europeans are connecting the dots on immigration, a rise in crime, and the erosion of European values.

If economic stresses were not enough to give the Euro-skeptic nationalistic parties traction, the migration crisis and terror fears have certainly done so. Poland just

elected a nationalist government.⁹⁸ This government recently criticized Germany regarding its stance on the migration crisis as well as Russian sanctions.⁹⁹ Hungary has a pro-Russian prime minister.¹⁰⁰ And the anti-immigration Swiss People's Party just won 29.4% of the vote in recent elections.¹⁰¹ Mr. Putin is willing, of course, to take advantage of this course of events. Russia's opportunism is obvious. According to author Anne Applebaum, "The Kremlin doesn't invent anti-European or anti-establishment ideas, it simply supports them in whatever form they exist."¹⁰² There is growing evidence that Putin is financially supporting nationalist political leaders across Europe.¹⁰³ Marine Le Pen's Euro Sceptic National Front party received a \$9 million Russian bank loan with \$21 million more is supposedly on the way.¹⁰⁴ What Putin needs in order to undermine the EU are not necessarily pro-Russian governments but simply anti-EU ones. The Euro Sceptic Nationalist parties that run on an anti-migrant platform seem to be the biggest beneficiaries of the migrant crisis.¹⁰⁵

LOE 3: Become a Major Stakeholder in the Syrian Peace Process

Putin's military presence in Syria relates to the old maxim that, "possession is nine-tenths of the law." With his physical military force, Putin will have greater influence over the Syrian Peace process. Greater influence means more negotiating leverage.

According to author Francois Heisbourg, the refugee crisis and Russia's involvement in Syria has changed the Middle East priorities of the EU. The priority now is to stop the refugee flow first, then destroy ISIS.¹⁰⁶ Ending the refugee crisis, the greater existential threat to Europe, will require a dialogue with Putin.¹⁰⁷ Getting rid of Bashir Al Assad will also require negotiating with Vladimir Putin. The Russian military presence is keeping Assad in power and this situation is unlikely to change in the medium term. Putin's bombing campaign has been successful in reversing the

battlefield setbacks of the Assad regime.¹⁰⁸ With government forces now holding the advantage, progress is unlikely in peace talks unless Putin wants progress. A recent Israeli intelligence statement that, “Anyone who wants anything done in the region is beating a path to Moscow”, emphasizes Putin’s influence over the situation.¹⁰⁹

Based on recent statements from several of the parties involved in the Syrian peace negotiations, this paper assesses that the Syrian conflict will continue. On February 21st, John Kerry stated that, "We have reached a provisional agreement in principle on the terms of a cessation of hostilities that could begin in the coming days".¹¹⁰ Moscow’s control of the situation in Syria as the only International Syria Support Group (ISSG) member with significant, physical, in-theatre military forces, contrasts sharply with other ISSG members who are limited only to an influence role.¹¹¹ Statements from the International Syrian Support Group that they are, “ready to influence”, “unanimously committed to immediately facilitate” and ready to, “press for the end of any indiscriminate use of weapons” are indicators that they have little control over implementation of a permanent lasting peace deal.¹¹² White House press secretary Josh Earnest admitted that the 21 February agreement would be “difficult to implement.”¹¹³ Additionally, the High Negotiations Committee, representing anti-regime forces, does not believe that the Assad regime and its allies will halt their campaign; a hint that opposition forces are preparing to continue the fighting.¹¹⁴ The fact that ISIS and the Nusra Front are not included in the temporary cease-fire complicates matters further. This also presents a large window of opportunity for Russian and regime forces to continue their bombing of anti-regime forces by labeling them as “extreme terrorist organizations” like ISIS. The Russians bomb terrorists and terrorists include any party

that is opposed to the Assad regime.¹¹⁵ According to U.S. military sources, the Russians have a clear track record of bombing anti-regime forces while stating publically that they are targeting ISIS.¹¹⁶ The notion, that anti-ISIS operations in Syria are somehow supposed to continue during a fragile ceasefire without re-igniting the conflict, is foolhardy at best.

Significant progress on a Syrian peace deal will not be made until Moscow receives significant diplomatic concessions from Europe and the United States. While no one can be sure what those demands will be, there is a good chance they will include removal of sanctions. Since the peace talks are currently unfolding, this is a strategic forecast based on likely outcomes. Putin is sure to take advantage of Clausewitz's previously mentioned principle number 11; "The Political Object Now Comes to the Fore Again."¹¹⁷ The military object and the political objective need not be the same.¹¹⁸ Moscow is unlikely to cede its military initiative in Syria without achieving political objectives elsewhere. Putin also knows that the "less involved the population and the less serious the strains within states and between them, the more political requirements in themselves will dominate and tend to be decisive."¹¹⁹ In other words, Russia's willingness to use military force exceeds Europe's and the United State's willingness to do so, relegating the latter groups to political solutions. Trying to hold the EU together by ending the refugee crisis is far more important to Brussels than continuing its sanctions against Russia over Crimea.

Recommendations

Stopping the politically destabilizing refugee flow to Europe is one of the most critical elements in overcoming Putin's strategy. Overcoming the refugee flow accomplishes three things. It removes a major line of effort in Putin's strategy of

undermining the EU, demonstrates a strong EU/NATO narrative and finally, re-focuses the world's attention on the true problem; Russia. Due to Europe's difficult economic situation and its aversion to military deployments, these recommendations focus on low cost non-military solutions. Stopping the refugee flow is best accomplished by creating refugee safe havens, enlisting the help of Gulf State partners and diplomatically pursuing an end to the Syrian conflict.

Fully funding, via the international community, the United Nations request for Syrian refugees, creates safe camps to house them. The current funding level stands at only 40%. This means that some refugees are living on only \$13.50 a month.¹²⁰ Failure to provide adequate safe havens where refugees are properly clothed, housed and fed means that refugees are incentivized to displace to Europe. This is evidenced by a EUROPOL report which states that refugee smuggling is the "fastest growing criminal market in Europe." And that "This turnover (of 6 billion euros) is set to double or triple if the scale of the current migration crisis persists in the upcoming year."¹²¹

Secondly, diplomatic pressure must be applied to increase the participation rate of Gulf States in solving the refugee crisis. "Gulf countries including Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain have offered zero resettlement places to Syrian refugees."¹²² "More than 4 million refugees from Syria (95%) are in just five countries Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt."¹²³ Unemployment has significantly increased in Jordan since Syrian refugees began to arrive in 2011.¹²⁴ Despite Turkey having the largest economy in the region, resources and public patience are wearing thin.¹²⁵ Without international assistance, overly strained countries like Turkey, become part of the problem. Rather than stop the refugee flow inside their borders, nations like

Turkey are incentivized to “pass the buck” and end up transitioning refugees to other countries.¹²⁶

Continue diplomatic efforts on a peace deal inside Syria but with the understanding that the removal of Assad may be a difficult and unavailable option. Pressing for the removal of the Assad regime gives Putin leverage to achieve political objectives elsewhere. Western diplomatic goals run the risk of becoming negotiating chips for Putin. Additionally, increasing pressure for the removal of the Assad regime is likely to be viewed as a threat to Russian interests in Syria. This is likely to be met with an increased Russian military presence on the ground. This could lead to a further escalation of the conflict and more refugees.

In conclusion, Putin’s involvement in Syria incorporates three major concepts. Ensuring the survival of Bashir Al Assad is a means of protecting the Russian naval facility at Tartus and Russian economic interests. Secondly, the refugee crisis provides Putin with the best avenue for burdening and potentially fracturing EU political resolve. NATO’s top Commander, General Breedlove, recently illustrated this concept with the following statement. "Together, Russia and the Assad regime are deliberately weaponizing migration in an attempt to overwhelm European structures and break European resolve."¹²⁷ Although it might not totally unravel the EU, it will certainly help divide the 28 member countries politically, making a concerted effort to counter Putin’s moves on the European periphery more difficult. Tying up the EU and ultimately NATO assets in the protection of Europe’s southern flank gives Moscow more freedom to maneuver in other areas, primarily the pursuit of access and buffer zones. These areas include the Baltics, the Intermarium and Crimea. Finally, a physical military presence in

Syria gives Putin greater leverage over the peace process and relegates other world powers to bystander status with limited influence over the situation. This negotiating leverage is critical to Russia as it seeks to alleviate the economic effects partially caused by Western sanctions.

In order to de-couple Putin's military objectives in Syria from his political objectives in Europe, the EU must demonstrate its resolve by halting the refugee crisis. Halting the refugee crisis by establishing safe havens and pursuing an end to the Syrian war, removes one of Putin's greatest strategic distractions. At that point the true problem in Europe must reveal itself as Russia.

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