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THE RUSSIAN WEB IN THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION

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Nowadays, the Mediterranean region's balance of power is challenged by several conflicts and actors. Russia has taken advantage of this complex and fluid situation, becoming a key actor, expanding its military involvement, and building up political relationships. A key step in this process has been Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict since September 2015. While this was a surprising development, the paper argues that it is nonetheless consistent with Russia's regional interests and its renewed foreign policy.

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Introduction

Although Russia has suffered setbacks in Syria, its political influence is growing due to several factors. To begin with, the end of the siege of Aleppo represented a key military step in the frame of Syrian conflict and an indubitable political victory of the Russian diplomacy. Secondly, the new political and military alliance with Turkey is demonstrated by the recent Russian-Turkish joint airstrikes to support Turkish operation in the al-Bab area. Finally, the peace talks in Astana organized by Russia at the end of January represented both a way to strengthen the trilateral alliance between Russia, Turkey, and Iran and a potentially concrete step toward the conclusion of Syrian conflict. However, it would be a mistake to assume that Russian influence is restricted to Syria, in view of the fact that its military and political links extend throughout the Mediterranean. Consequently, this article first takes into account the Russian military involvement in Syria in the light of the hybrid warfare concept, before focusing in Egypt and Libya. The second part sheds light on Russia's possibility to undermine the EU's role in Syria. In recent years, the EU and Russia have become competitors over parts of the EU's Eastern neighbourhood, a fact which has been epitomised by the eruption of the Ukraine conflict.¹ Through demonstrating certain facets of Russia's influence in parts of the EU's Southern neighbourhood, this article elucidates Russia's role in the region as a potential challenge to the EU's geopolitical objectives.

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Russian military involvement in the Mediterranean

After the war in Ukraine, Russian warfare has been frequently termed "hybrid warfare", denoting a sort of "new" combination of conventional and unconventional types of warfare, along with propaganda and political subversion. In light of Russian involvement in the Mediterranean, two considerations regarding the notion of "hybrid warfare" should be kept in mind. First, 'war is not — and has actually never been — a "pure" military matter';² consequently, there is nothing new in the "hybrid" notion. Secondly, Russian "hybrid warfare" is more a label used by Western scholars than a true Russian doctrine.³ Therefore, in the case of Russian operations in Syria and, to a certain extent, in the Mediterranean region, the notion of "hybrid warfare" is questionable and misleading due to the

¹ A-S. Maass, *EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation*, Routledge, New York 2017.

² J. Raitasalo, Hybrid Warfare: Where's the Beef?, War on the Rocks, April 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/04/hybrid-warfare-wheres-the-beef/>.

³ K. Giles, *Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power*, Chatman House, March 2016 <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/2016-03-russia-new-tools-giles.pdf>.

fact that Russia appears to follow a more conventional and traditional path.

First of all, in recent years Russia has pursued a very efficient A2/AD (anti-air/area denial) strategy along its west borders and in areas of its geopolitical interest, such as the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East, due to the deployment of the S-400 air defense system to Syria in November 2015 and to Crimea in August 2016.⁴ This advanced air defense system prevents Russia's opponents from establishing air supremacy, and it could also threaten naval operations offshore in Syria, due to the deployment of the naval version of the S-300 and the coastal defense system in Tartus. Russia has continued to build its network of anti-air missile systems, and deployed an additional seven advanced S-300 units along the Syrian coast in November 2016.⁵ Moreover, such a defensive system indicates that Russia plans a long-term presence in Syria. In fact, Putin has already signed an order to transform the Tartus Russian naval facility into a permanent base.⁶ Even after the recall of *Admiral Kuznetsov* to the port of Severomorsk, highly-capable vessels remain in the area, such as *Pyotr Velikiy* and *Admiral Grigorovich*. These naval assets strengthen Russia's attack arsenal, and represent the Russian largest naval operation since the Cold War.

Furthermore, Russia has used almost its entire modern and conventional arsenal in Syria. "During the operation in Syria, 162 advanced and upgraded weapons have been tested in combat. They have proven to be highly efficient," Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu commented.⁷ Russia has used a variety of modern aircrafts armed with precision-guided munitions, the new attack helicopter, the KA-52K, and cruise missiles launched both from the Mediterranean Sea and from the Caspian Sea.⁸

Although the Russian advanced A2/AD system shows that Russia is following a conventional rather than a hybrid path in Syria, to a certain extent, Russian strategy has demonstrated a more asymmetrical

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⁴ Institute for the Study of War, *Russia Anti-Access and Areal Denial (A2AD) Range: August 2006*, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20A2AD%20AUGUST%202016_1.pdf.

⁵ K. Weinberger, *Putin Sets the Stage for the Incoming U.S. Administration*, ISW, November 2016, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/putin-sets-stage-incoming-us-administration>.

⁶ Middle East Online, *Russia moves to expand Syria presence*, 23 December 2016, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=80507>.

⁷ Russian Today, *Russia tested over 160 new weapons in Syrian operation – defense minister*, 22 December 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/371302-russian-military-annual-report/>.

⁸ R. Johnson, *How Russia fired missiles at Syria from 1,000 miles away*, 23 October 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/world/russian-cruise-missile/>.

approach. In fact, in Syria, Russia has employed its Special Forces in order to shore up the Syrian Army. This path is rather similar to U.S. operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya or even Kosovo, where Special Forces or elite military units were deployed both to direct precision air bombings and to train and support local allies. In Syria Hezbollah represents the local Russian ally and it has been a useful non-state partner to Russian forces. Moreover, Moscow views Hezbollah a capable ally that has strongly contributed to the survival of the Syrian government.⁹

The Syrian war has highlighted shortcomings in Russia's military capabilities; however, the intervention has to be framed in light of Russian strategy. To begin with, the Syrian conflict could represent an opportunity for Russia to test its weaponry capabilities; secondly, the Syrian war represents just one of the steps that Russia is taking in the Mediterranean region. In fact, Russia has been able not only to maintain its control over key naval bases, such as Sevastopol in the Black Sea, but it has also been able to expand its influence in Syria, Egypt, and Libya. Although the Russia presence in these last two countries is considerably more limited than in Syria, they represent a section of an intricate political, military, and economic web which Russia is constructing in the Mediterranean area.

On the one hand, Russia is tightening its relationship with Egypt,¹⁰ which has allegedly sent army officers to Syria to train alongside Russian advisors. Although Egypt has dismissed this news, Major General Ali Mamlouk, the head of Syria's National Security, paid an official visit to Cairo in October 2016, and more recently it has been said that Egyptian troops could be sent to Syria to observe the implementation of the truce between the Syrian regime and the armed opposition. Previously, from 15 to 26 October 2016, Russia and Egypt undertook a training exercise in the desert area of Alam El-Khadem. The maneuvers involved 500 parachute soldiers in an exercise to liberate buildings from terrorists.¹¹ This renovated political relationship between Russia and Egypt could represent an important diplomatic victory for Putin, and it constitutes a key element for Russian involvement in Libya, where it strongly supports General Khalifa Haftar, a close and loyal ally of Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

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⁹ A. Corbeil, *Russia is Learning About Hezbollah*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2017, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/fa=67651>.

¹⁰ P. Dunai, J. Binnie, *Egypt, Russia sign Ka-52K training agreement*, IHS Jane's Defence Weekly, September 2016, <http://www.janes.com/article/63493/egypt-russia-sign-ka-52k-training-agreement>.

¹¹ Reuters, *Egypt, Russia to hold joint military exercises in mid-October*, October 12 2016.

Moreover, Russia is attempting to reinvigorate its economic, political, and military relationships with Libya, following the deterioration which occurred after the end of Gaddafi regime. Libya was an important customer in heavy industry and military equipment from Soviet Russia and, as a consequence, thousands of Soviet engineers and military instructors worked there, and some even participated in the Gaddafi conflicts.¹² Simultaneously, Libyan officers attended specialized courses in the USSR, one of whom, General Khalifa Haftar, commander of Libya's eastern army, is today a key, if controversial, figure in Libya. Haftar visited Moscow twice in 2016, and, in January 2017, visited the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, positioned off the Libyan coast. Haftar requested a more integrated role for Moscow in Libya and, above all, weapons and military equipment. Russia would be willing to accept such requests in case of the lifting of the UN embargo, and, in the meantime, Russia is using its local allies, Egypt and the UAE, to support Haftar. Russia's goal in Libya is twofold. First, Russia wants to re-activate the economic deals worth about \$10 billion that were signed with Gaddafi and included weapons sales and the construction of a rail link between Sirte and Benghazi. Secondly, Russia could ask Haftar for the possibility to use the military base at Benghazi, as proposed by Gaddafi when Russia was in search of Mediterranean naval bases. Nowadays, Russia does not need such an installation because it can use Tartus; however, Benghazi could represent both a useful second naval facility and a further element of Russian power in the Mediterranean.

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Russia's political investment in the Mediterranean

Russia's increasing military and political role in the Mediterranean encourages international observers to speculate about the Kremlin's motivations for nurturing its influence in the region. Mark Galeotti, from the European Council on Foreign Relations, argues that Russia's motivations to engage with Syria, for instance, was "at least in part [due] to counter attempts to isolate it diplomatically and to force the West to engage with it".¹³ He argues that, since September 2015, the Kremlin has not invested in its disengagement from the Syrian conflict because, according to some Russian officials, this would have implied losing "leverage in the region and with the West"

The latest version of the Russian Foreign Policy Concept, published on December 1 2016, is an example of Syria's geopolitical importance in

¹² F. Saini Fasanotti, *Russia and Libya: A brief history of an on-again-off-again friendship*, Brookings Institution, September 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/experts/federica-saini-fasanotti/>.

¹³ M. Galeotti, *Heavy Metal Diplomacy: Russia's Political Use of its Military in Europe since 2014*, European Council on Foreign Relations, December 2016.

Russian foreign affairs. One of the objectives of the Foreign Policy Concept is to “consolidate the Russian Federation’s position as a centre of influence in today’s world”.¹⁴ In this way, it reflects one of the main narratives of this document’s previous versions. With regard to Russia’s relations with Syria, the Concept states that “Russia supports the unity, independence and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic as a secular, democratic and pluralistic State with all ethnic and religious groups living in peace and security and enjoying equal rights and opportunities”. Libya and Egypt play a comparatively more moderate role in Russian foreign affairs; they are not mentioned in the Concept.

The trilateral alliance built first in December 2016 between the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, and his Turkish and Iranian counterparts, and then cemented during the Astana conference is a reminder of Russia’s role in the shaping of Syria’s geopolitical future. The Astana peace conference was anticipated by two consecutive meetings. A meeting in Moscow on 28 October gave the three ministers the opportunity to exchange their points of view regarding the future of Syria at the height of continued shelling in Aleppo. On 20 December, the Russian, Iranian and Turkish foreign ministers reconvened in Moscow in an attempt to prepare the peace deal of Astana which could serve as the foundation for the settlement between Syrian rebels and the regime of the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. A meeting in this format is unprecedented. Despite the consecutive meetings between Lavrov and the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, a representative from the US was not present during the meeting.

No less surprising is the absence of a representative from the EU, despite its concern for Syria, which was stated in the Global Strategy for the EU’s Foreign and Security Policy. According to the Strategy, “the EU will act at different levels of governance: conflicts such as those in Syria and Libya have local, national, regional and global dimensions which must be addressed. Finally, none of these conflicts can be solved by us alone. Sustainable peace can only be achieved through comprehensive agreements rooted in broad, deep and durable regional and international partnerships, which the EU will foster”.¹⁵

Despite the Global Strategy’s ambition to contribute to the resolution of the Syrian crisis by cooperating with other actors, in the latest attempt to resolve the crisis, the EU was sidelined.

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¹⁴ http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-asset_publisher/CptICkBgBZ29/content/id/2542248.

¹⁵ *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign And Security Policy*, https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/regions/files/eugs_review_web.pdf.

Another preparatory step to Astana and a further example which demonstrates Syria's key role in Russia's foreign policy is the Russian-Turkish plan agreed on 29 December 2016 to establish a cease-fire in Syria. This plan, which was approved by the UN Security Council, represented the first time that Turkey and Russia have spearheaded such a joint initiative, and has thus laid the "foundation of a new format of conflict resolution, dominated by Russia and Turkey".¹⁶ However, the plan's intention to avoid direct confrontation among the belligerent parties whilst enhancing the political dialogue between regional players "in order to marginalise the role of the West (mainly the US) in the Syrian conflict" proved unsustainable; the fighting resumed. The reasons for the limitations of this peace deal affect also the Astana deal and are arguably two-fold. Firstly, the ceasefire excluded Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and "overlooked the issue of Kurdish forces". Secondly, according to Krzysztof Strachota from the Centre for Eastern Studies in Warsaw, "the truce not taking effect has been probably factored in from the very beginning in the Russian-Turkish Agreement. Its importance stems rather from the political calculations of both parties which regard the joint ceasefire plan as a way of asserting their political domination in Syria". Strachota argued that Russia's intention was to control the Syrian government, whilst Turkey is interested in "controlling" the opposition to President Assad, IS, and the Syrian Kurds.

The EU's exclusion from this attempted peace agreement regarding Syria raises questions about the EU's role as a contributor to both peace-and state-building in Syria. The increasing dominance of other political actors, such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran, challenge the EU's intentions regarding the Syrian war as they were mentioned in the EU's Global Strategy. Simultaneously, the EU's seemingly vanishing influence in Syria raises doubts about the sufficiency of some of the policy tools which the EU has at its disposal within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), a policy framework shaping the EU's relations with its sixteen neighbouring states in the East and in the South.¹⁷

Conclusion

In recent years, Russia's political and military involvement in the Mediterranean has increased considerably. At its Western borders, in the

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¹⁶ K. Strachota, *Russia and Turkey: leading towards a concert of powers in Syria*, Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), January 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2017-01-04/russia-and-turkey-leading-towards-a-concert-powers-syria>.

¹⁷ European Union External Action, *European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)*, December 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/330/european-neighbourhood-policy-enp_en.

Eastern Mediterranean, and in the Black Sea region, Russia has applied an A2/AD strategy, both indicating Russia's strategic investment in its medium- to long-term involvement in the Syrian conflict and preventing its opponent from establishing air superiority. In addition, the Kremlin's increasing engagement with Libya and Egypt demonstrates Russia's extending web of influence in the Mediterranean, a phenomenon even more starkly exemplified by its increasing role in Syria. The question remains as to whether these military deployments are backed up by a sustainable political strategy developed by Russia for its role in the Syria conflict.

Less than a month after the deal of Astana regarding the peace resolution for the Syrian crisis was struck between Russia, Turkey and Iran, it is premature to allude to the potential outcomes of this agreement and to attempt to predict Russia's role in the medium- to long-term. The resolution of the Syrian crisis depends on multiple factors. First and foremost, it depends on the willingness of rebels to maintain the cease-fire. Second, a sustained resolution of the Syrian war is also conditional upon the sustenance of a cordial dialogue between Russia, Turkey, and Iran, with mutually acceptable objectives regarding Syria. In case these aforementioned conditions are fulfilled, one needs to acknowledge that the policy initiatives that the EU can deploy in Syria within the ENP have been sidelined.

Multiple actors competing with one another are likely to play crucial roles in the Mediterranean. As a consequence, a balance of power among these actors, on the one hand, and their divergent interests, on the other, are at this stage impossible to discern. However, it should be noted that the balance of power in the Mediterranean region is radically changing as a result of several conflicts, of different geopolitical interests, and of new actors. In this new landscape Russia is undoubtedly playing a key role in terms of diplomacy, since Astana has not only strengthened the trilateral alliance with Turkey and Iran, but it has also enhanced the Russian regional influence as a result of the trilateral alliance, the strong and presumably permanent Russian presence in Syria, and its increasing relationship with other countries in the Mediterranean, such as Libya and Egypt. However the role of Russia is also military since Russia is enhancing its military asset in Syria, where it has found in Hezbollah a well-trained military ally, and is intent on supporting Haftar in Libya.

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