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Putin's Blood Trail from Syria to the Ukraine: Western Failures in the Face of Power-Play, Propaganda and Dehumanization

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One of the tragic side-effects of the war in Ukraine is that at long last – and unfortunately only now – the last person in the West may have come to understand what really happened in Syria, especially after Russian intervention.

This does not help those Syrians who have been suffering for more than a decade from heavy shelling of their neighbourhoods and medical facilities, who have starved to death in besieged areas, or who had to flee their home country. But the type of warfare in Syria and the Ukraine may help us to understand the broader picture and draw conclusions for the future.



Photo: Omar Haj Kadour / AFP / NTB

The change of Russian military leadership of the Ukraine campaign in April, as a consequence of military failures, shows that Putin and his entourage consider unscrupulous methods of warfare against civilians a “successful” model to follow. General Aleksandr V. Dvornikov, who led the war of submission in Syria, has now been tasked to pursue the same strategy in the Ukraine arena.

Russian aggression against Ukraine, a war of extinction, dehumanization of the enemy and systematic war crimes against civilians is also challenging the discourse of “normalization”, which Syrian President Bashar al-Asad and his Russian and Iranian allies have tried to impose on the Arab agenda and on the international discourse. Their narrative has been gaining ground in recent years: That theirs was a war against Islamist terrorists and a conspiracy of foreign powers; it is time to do business as usual, to accept Syria’s return to the Arab League, and to invest in Asad’s crony-dominated war economy. No mention is made of a cross-societal, initially peaceful upheaval against his dictatorship in 2011 or of the calls for freedom and dignity that swept across the country during the Arab Spring.

Compare Russian propaganda in the Ukraine context: Russia is fighting a Nazi proxy regime in Kyiv that conspires with the USA against Russia’s interests. Even the fight against Islamist terrorists may emerge in the Russian narrative as soon as mercenaries from destabilized countries of

the Middle East or Afghanistan could gradually be sucked into a Ukrainian guerrilla war as cheap cannon fodder. In the end, Syrians may end up fighting on both sides like in the confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, since Assad readily offered fighters to Putin, and Putin demands a compensation for Russia's war efforts in Syria.

The real enemy is not NATO but aspirations of freedom

What is unfolding in Ukraine gives impressions from Syria new value. "We can live with a variety of scenarios in Syria, except a western-style democracy", a Russian diplomat once told me at the UN in Geneva. And this is what it is really all about: Preventing the spread of liberalism and western-style democracy, denying citizens rule of law, dignity, freedom and fairly-distributed welfare. These ingredients of soft power are seen as threats to Russia's hard-power leaders.

Therefore, NATO expansionism was not the reason for Putin's decision to wage war against Ukraine. NATO decided in 2008 not to offer any form of institutionalized protection to Ukraine, which was the third largest nuclear power in the world after the fall of the Soviet Union and had voluntarily given up that capacity and deterrent in the Budapest Memorandum of 1994. This is another tragic turn in this unfolding plot that will have an effect on calculations and aspirations of other current or potential nuclear powers in the Middle East and elsewhere.

It was not NATO – not a hard-power threat – that Putin was afraid of. It was the freedom-and-democracy movements that had been edging ever closer to his mental and political bastion. Belorussian women and men had taken to the streets in 2020/21, challenging the power of Putin's junior ally Alexander Lukashenko, who almost suffered the same fate as toppled Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in the Maidan Revolution of 2014. Putin ensured Lukashenko's political survival and in turn demanded unconditional support for his future endeavours that we are witnessing today.

But the impact of anti-authoritarian movements struck ever closer. The anti-corruption and tactical election campaigns of Alexei Navalny and his supporters threatened to produce serious repercussions in Russia itself. Put on the defensive by waves of social and political discontent, the Russian leadership had little to offer to its people except shrinking social and political spaces in an outdated economic system, and the export of natural resources that all but benefit oligarchs and the new rich. Navalny's poisoning and, when that failed, his probable life-long imprisonment may be seen as part of the prelude to the war in the Ukraine in the broader context of Putin's historical revisionism against liberalism. The threat was not an expanding NATO towards Russia's borders but that his envisaged neo-Stalinist empire would be eroded even further from within by Arab-Spring-like demands for freedom, dignity and democracy.

Aspirations for Universal Values in Shatters

Syria was the operative prelude to Ukraine in many ways. The West has not been innocent, but rather an opportunistic bystander in this unfolding tragedy. Syrians took to the streets for universal values enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, not for “Western values”. But they turned to the West for help despite the fact that they had been raised and deeply influenced in an anti-Western school system and Baathist ideology. Ukrainians have similarly turned to the West with high expectations that are in the process of being readjusted.

The difference is that when Syrians took to the streets in 2011, there were no Russians in Syria yet, and threats of a Third World War were far-fetched. However, when facing barrel bombs thrown at them by the Asad army Syrians in despair asked for a no-fly-zone or MANPADs to defend themselves, they found Western diplomats mulling over a widening confrontation or the possibility that these defensive weapons might end up “in the wrong hands”, i.e. Islamists. The real reason was that no one wanted to get involved in Syria after the poorly-conceived Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the 2011 intervention in Libya, where the overstepping of the mission's mandate led to the killing of Libya's leader Muammar Ghaddafi. Both of these episodes have left a lasting mark on Putin's political memory.

Today, several hundred thousand civilian deaths later, all kinds of weapons are in Islamist hands, the moderate opposition has lost almost all ground, millions of refugees are dwelling abroad (where they have also altered and polarized European domestic politics), Syria is destroyed, divided, and impoverished and is still under the rule of a dynasty who opted for the “Asad-or-we-burn-the-country” approach instead of dialogue when that was still possible.

Negotiate As If There Were No War and Bomb As If There Were No Negotiations

In 2015 Russia decided to take advantage of the vacuum left by Western actors and engaged in Syria on three levels simultaneously: militarily, diplomatically and politically. One of the common features of the wars in Syria and Ukraine is the Russian strategy of negotiating as if there were no war and bombing as if there were no negotiations. On all three levels, Russians have outdone their Western counterparts. Highly capable Russian diplomats have upheld political dialogue and, at the same time, kept the military option open. Both reinforced each other. Sitting at the table opens options in case they are needed. During the talks a peaceful narrative could be fed to the media, reducing international outrage and allowing a regrouping of forces.

When the UN remained rather inactive in the political process, and the US under President Donald Trump had practically gone off air on this issue, Russia snatched the opportunity and

tried to increase their control of the political process by founding the Astana format jointly with Turkey and Iran. Instead of Russia and the US, from 2017 it was Russia and Turkey who turned out to be the main players in Syria and elsewhere in the region. They were opposed on the battlefield, not with the aim of extinguishing each other but in order to cut bilateral deals, divide the cake and sideline others – those others being Western states or even UN mediation efforts. This is ad-hoc bilateralism instead of a comprehensive, sustainable and multilateral peace: It has worked during certain periods in Syria, Libya and in the Caucasus.

Turkey and Russia Dividing the Cake

In the Ukrainian case, Turkey is trying to play a role by providing a useful platform. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's goal is to regain leverage with Russia. This may result in further bilateral deals, potentially also in Syria, where Russia had the upper hand before the Ukraine struggle. Erdogan has made cautiously clear during the Russian-Ukrainian talks that he understands his role as a facilitator only, and not as a mediator, thus keeping an arm's length from possible failure, since he knows the Russian strategy all too well.

In addition, Erdogan does not want to spoil his relationship with Putin. Much is at stake in Syria. The open wound has always been Idlib, where Russia and Turkey have come to a fragile *modus vivendi* after their Memorandum of Understanding in 2018. If anything goes wrong between them, bombardment of Idlib will restart with full force. Cynically, in Idlib Putin can again create millions of refugees whom he knows are much less welcome in Europe than Ukrainians (at least for now).

More Civilian Deaths than Soldiers

The Russian approaches have in common a systematic contempt for international norms, as these are codified in international law, in particular international humanitarian law and human rights law. Norms that were first pinned down since the Geneva Conventions have been tossed aside. Ignoring them on a massive scale entails a danger that formerly consensual norms are losing their general binding force, which will only worsen if the Ukrainian disaster spills over to become a full-fledged institutional crisis of the United Nations. The war in Syria had already caused dents in this function; the Ukrainian war may put the world body into further peril, especially in the long term, if cracks widen in the unity of rule-based multilateralists due to economic dilemmas and national interests.

This is the kind of warfare that produces more civilian deaths than military ones. Civilians today become victims not only as collateral damage. We are witnessing deliberate targeting of civilian areas, bakeries, medical facilities, systematic torture, mistreatment and killing of doctors, local

authorities, and – the list could be continued. The cruel pictures of civilian corpses in the streets of the Ukrainian city of Bucha, west of Kyiv, and elsewhere in the country show that war crimes are an unconcealed part of this warfare. These include a medieval tactic of starving neighbourhoods and cities so that even now, in the 21st century, people die after having eaten all the birds, cats and grass around them. This happened in Syria, and is now repeating itself in parts of Ukraine.

Barring humanitarian access includes manipulating deliveries and harassing actors on the ground, turning their activities to military advantage. Humanitarian actors have made avoidable mistakes of their own, thus becoming easy prey for brutal and unscrupulous regimes that use all resources available in an “integrative warfare”, including international humanitarian presence on the ground, as I have elaborated on in my recent book “Syria and the Neutrality Trap”.

Compartmentalization of the Conflict

Another possible parallel is the compartmentalization of the conflict. In Ukraine this is being applied after the evident failure of Russia’s maximalist war aim of toppling the Ukrainian government and establishing a pro-Russian puppet regime. Compartmentalization means dividing territory into smaller units that can be “worked on” one by one. This has the advantage that international attention dwindles as local fighting ceases to provoke global headlines. Conquest is achieved zone by zone, and submission is touted as “reconciliation”. In Syria, the Astana process produced so-called de-escalation zones, a euphemism considering the fact that fighting in all zones escalated to the point where they do not exist anymore but have turned into government territory, with the exception of Idlib.

In some of the “de-escalation zones”, chemical weapons were used, which in the Russian narrative is attributed to rebel groups. UN findings to the contrary have been labelled as “biased” and “unprofessional”. Another parallel to Ukraine is that in Syria, Russia announced more than once that the opposing side was preparing a chemical attack, and a few days later such an attack really happened. Allegations of chemical labs being run in Ukraine to prepare such attacks sound very familiar.

Testing the Red Lines of the West

In Syria, Putin tested the red lines of the West, and found none. He even registered that there was no response after multiple chemical weapons attacks by Syrian allied forces. US-President Barak Obama shied away from retaliation, pursuing a compromise with Russia in 2013. As a result, *Syria* agreed to hand over most of its chemical war capacities – which it failed to do exhaustively – and even pro-forma joined the *Chemical Weapons Convention* (something as meaningless

as its signing of the International Anti-Torture Convention in 2004). But it was not Obama alone who gave in. The UK Prime Minister David Cameron let the House of Commons vote on supporting the US in a possible strike against Asad. The House voted against, leaving Obama standing in the rain. Other Europeans were not interested in the first place.

Russia's cunning diplomatic move to save Asad's skin at the last minute provided a welcome escape for Western decision-makers shying away from engagement. In this context it may be worth mentioning that not only Asad's army took cover during the days when a US attack looked imminent, but so did the emerging Islamic State militias who at the time would have suffered a severe beating by US forces, too.

Putin noted this experience on his long list of Western weaknesses. In a *déjà-vu*, Western leaders have now threatened that the use of chemical weapons in Ukraine would have “dramatic consequences”. Fortunately, they have not been tested yet. Against this background, many Syrians asked – and many Ukrainians may ask today – why it seemed to be tolerable in the first place to attack civilians at large scale with conventional weapons, including cluster and phosphorous bombs, and that only chemical weapons cause significant political escalation and hit a red line (that may turn pink).

From Grozny to Aleppo: Framing a “Reconciliation” Narrative

With its very committed three-level intervention in Syria, Russia was able to frame and reframe the narrative and put labels on key actions and concepts. The story of a sectarian war fuelled by external actors in Syria even turned out to become a self-fulfilling prophecy and gained more the more momentum with the confrontation between the Asad regime and the population turning violent and militarized. “Negotiations” only ended when the opponent had accepted the maximalist Russian position. “Reconciliation agreements” have been hammered out region by region; a “Reconciliation Conference” was convened in the Russian resort of Sochi in 2018, in the middle of a war, with mostly Asad claqueurs in attendance. Refugees in Europe have to sign a “reconciliation agreement” in Syrian embassies if they want a new passport.

Before the bloody re-conquest of eastern Aleppo during Christmas time in 2016 and the subsequent establishment of the “de-escalation zones”, another Russian diplomat in Geneva enlightened me about the experience of the Chechen capital of Grozny that Russian forces basically erased in 1999; the UN called it the most devastated city on earth in 2003. “We can do reconciliation also in Syria”, she explained in all seriousness. “Look, it also worked in Grozny. This was a great success because, in the end, the people *had* to reconcile.”

With this logic, Russians started “reconciliations” in Syria and will soon do it in Mariupol and other areas of Ukraine. Capitulations or submissions wrapped in PR language go hand in hand with establishing regime-friendly local or regional bodies, as has been done in Syrian towns as well as in Donbas and other Russian-conquered areas in Ukraine after the kidnapping or killing of elected mayors. The next step is that those entities declare a wish to accede to the Russian Federation. This may indeed reduce the violence for some time but at the expense of a sustainable peace, an end of political and economic isolation and, of course, genuine reconciliation.

Syria as the Military Training Ground for Eastern Europe

With full Russian self-confidence reflecting the absence of western challenges, Syria has developed into a training ground for the Russian military before it has been unleashed in Eastern Europe. Russia got rid of its old weapons, used the arena as a showroom for new ones, trained its air force and let others, mainly Asad’s troops and Iranian militias, do the dirty work on the ground. It is fascinating to see what precisely has *not* worked in Ukraine: Russian ground forces had no chance to practice in Syria and have miserably failed in Ukraine.

There has been another miscalculation by Putin: From the Syria playbook he assumed that massive expulsion of Ukrainians would drive a wedge into European societies and leaderships as the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015 did after Russia’s intervention. So far, he has been wrong, and Europe has closed ranks in a remarkable way. A positive collateral effect has been that the European Union has gained attractiveness not only as a transactional bargaining hub for national agendas but also as a community of solidarity and values. Another one has been the renewed *raison d’être* for NATO.

The Role of State, Leadership and National Identity

A further difference is that Ukrainians have a strong, historically rooted, national consciousness that has been sustained in the past decades and centuries by the struggle for self-determination and democracy, sandwiched between major territorial projects. Syrians had little to refer to in this regard when they challenged the Asad dynasty that has been ruling – and ruining – the country since the 1970s. The last constitution that may have been worth fighting for there was the one of 1950, which contained progressive elements. This was promulgated during a democratic intermezzo between colonization and autocracy, when even the first ever Christian Arab Prime Minister was a Syrian, Faris al-Khoury (1944-45 and 1954-55), to which many Syrians, regardless of faith, point with pride even today.

Ukrainians possess a democratic state that they established taking high risks, and they are a nation with primordial elements such as language, customs and religion. Even the Orthodox

Church became a national one after splitting from Russia's in 2014. In contrast, today's Syrians were born into a predatory state with a multitude of religious and confessional groups and a suffocated civil society. The pan-Arab Baathist ideology of the 1960s, although reconfigured to serve as a reservoir of Syrian cross-sectarian identity, has remained a weak source of identity and has come to be discredited by the dynasty's bad governance.

No society of the Arab Spring countries has produced a strong political leader. The old leadership either held on to power, as in Syria, or re-emerged as protagonists of ruthless restoration, as in Egypt. By contrast, the freely elected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has been able to rally Ukrainians behind the flag through his bravery and credibility. He has kept himself and most of the country alive not only with arms but with creative use of soft power, strategic communication, partly in Russian, and tireless well-tailored speeches to international parliaments against an aggressor that uses hard-power only and looks antiquated, even on the battlefield. Syrian opposition groups, by contrast, have been fragmented, highly ideologized, and have in the end become dependent on foreign sponsors. Given Western abstention, the armed opposition groups on the ground were financed by different ad-hoc donors in the Arab world or Turkey competing with each other regionally, rather than forging a common strategy, let alone a common identity.

Russia's Soft Power Failure

In the Syrian theatre Russia wasted a unique chance to establish itself as a peacemaker or Ordnungsmacht of some kind in Syria and the region. Russian diplomats were eager to nurture such a narrative. Sponsoring political talks at the UN in 2016, establishing the Astana format in 2017, staging the "Reconciliation Conference" in Sochi in 2018, urging the UN to pursue constitutional discussions in Geneva, pressing the West to deliver on reconstruction and pursue normalization: these were all strong political messages and efforts designed to present Russia not only as a military power and party to the war. And it had good reasons to do so. It wanted to lower the cost of its engagement in Syria by political means. However, there was one major flaw in this strategy: Russia's massive violation of international humanitarian and human rights law by allying itself not only to Asad's regime, but also by adopting his *methods* of warfare, turned itself into an unacceptable political player. In light of how Russia's military is behaving in Ukraine, this has become even more obvious.

In Syria Russia fought a brutal war as if no negotiations were taking place and yet pushed for negotiations as if it were not actively engaged in the war. Russia wanted to enhance its power by contributing to a Syrian settlement, but on its own terms. Therefore it engaged on all playing fields in leading roles. Thanks to the deteriorating political and diplomatic role of the United States, the Syrian conflict(s) allowed Russia – after its stigmatization resulting from the Ukraine

crisis in 2014 – to get back on eye-level with the US. The long-term gain in geopolitical leverage as well as regaining national pride were essential outcomes for the Russian side. However, it was precisely the blatant violation of international legal principles and the creation of immense human suffering that prevented the long-term success of Russia's global political aspirations beyond the Syrian conflict.

Had Russia restrained itself and the Assad regime militarily, had it not vetoed measures related to international humanitarian and human rights principles, had it not questioned UN findings on the regime's use of chemical weapons, it would still have won the war in Syria with its military might and commitment. Moreover, Moscow would have gained the opportunity to smoothly mutate from a party to the war to a perceived peace maker in the later phase of the conflict.

Even many in the Syrian opposition preferred a Russian role in Syria to an Iranian one. But Russia missed its chance to consolidate its soft power in Syria and internationally through the forms of its engagement. Had it done so, in very practical terms Russia would have alleviated its own burden in Syria, as it would have made international stabilization and reconstruction support possible. Russia could have played a stabilizing role that would have been appreciated even by a paralysed and reluctant West.

Gulf between Russian Military and Diplomatic Establishments

One reason for Russia's behaviour may have been the gulf between Russian military and diplomatic establishments and traditions. Rivalry between the Defence and Foreign Ministries has been obvious throughout the Syrian conflict, and may play out even more visibly during the Ukrainian war. The first signs have already emerged. Since Syria and Ukraine are war zones, they are in the realm of the military and its logic, and not in the hands of diplomats in the first place. During the Syrian engagement President Putin, representing the sole pole of the tent, has handled both approaches simultaneously and, when push comes to shove, experience shows that he tends to fall back on hard power rather than on soft power.

Putin's behaviour mirrors the general tendency that hard power is enshrined in the Kremlin's political culture today and that diplomats have little say. The victims of this approach are Syrian and Ukrainian civilians and the hard-earned principles of international humanitarian and human rights law. Another victim is also the Russian people that will have to struggle for decades to overcome economic isolation and the stigma of fresh war crimes committed in the Ukrainian war, which is turning them from the victims and liberators of the 1940s into perpetrators in the 2020s. Russia's potential to act not only as a party to war, but also as an internationally credible peace-maker and *Ordnungsmacht*, be it in Syria or elsewhere, has shrunk to zero, at least for the

foreseeable future.

Paradoxically, in trying to prevent at any cost an international environment featuring progressive humanitarian interventions or the principle of Responsibility to Protect – a principle that has been buried under the Syrian and Ukrainian rubble, Putin's neo-Stalinist imperialist approach has made protection even more essential from both humanitarian and legal perspectives. This is not only important ethically but also to preserve the relevance and functionality of the United Nations, its peace-making capacities, and the credibility of its – and mankind's – universal values and a rule-based coexistence of states and peoples in freedom and dignity.

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