

## SYRIA IN RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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**Abstract:** The USSR used to be a very important actor in the Middle East. Immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet empire, Russia's involvement in the region was reduced. However, since the mid-1990s Moscow's efforts on strengthen its position in the region became evident.

This article aims to show the determinants and goals of the Russian Federation's foreign policy towards Syria in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It will provide a brief analysis of the reasons and interests for Russia's activity in Syria and support for Bashar al-Assad since the outbreak of the civil war.

**Key words:** Syria, Russia, the Middle East, civil war in Syria, Arab Spring

Syria is not the main priority of Russia's foreign policy, however, it remains the crucial partner in the Middle East, being Moscow's anchor in the region. That was true during the Cold War and remains true today. If we want to locate Syria in a concentric circles scheme of contemporary Russia's foreign policy, we should put it into the third one – the intercontinental circle. This covers not only the Asia and Pacific region but also the Middle East, and so Syria<sup>1</sup>. Syria's importance has increased in recent years for numerous reasons due to the ongoing destabilization of Syria and increased activity of so-called Islamic State (IS).

The aim of this article is to analyze the determinants and goals of Russia's foreign policy towards Syria and attempt to answer the question of the causes and interests that underlie Russia's involvement there on the side of Bashar al-Assad.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Bryc, *Cele polityki zagranicznej Federacji Rosyjskiej*, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2005, p. 10.

## 1. THE MIDDLE EAST AS A REGION OF TRADITIONAL RUSSIAN ACTIVITY

Syria became a crucial partner of the USSR in the 1970s, after the regime change in Egypt and the reorientation of that country's foreign policy. The more pro-Soviet Gamal Nasser was replaced by a more pro-Western Anwar al-Sadat. The Soviet-Syrian Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, signed on October 8, 1980, was one of the results of the rapprochement between Moscow and Damascus at that time. It provided for consultation in case of a threat to peace and for military cooperation. Nine years earlier Moscow had leased port facilities in Tartus.

The year 1991 changed the situation. After the dissolution of the USSR, the Russian Federation (RF) faced numerous external and internal problems. These included the deterioration of the economic, social and political situation, demise of the international position of Russia, and destabilization of the post-Soviet space. Therefore, the RF had to concentrate on internal matters and its neighbourhood, reducing its activity in regions that had been important during Soviet times. Moscow conceded gave an inch to the West in the Middle East and on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process not only because of its weakness, but also due to the prioritization of the Western focus in Russia's foreign policy at the beginning of the 1990s. However, the "honeymoon" in relations between Russia and the West only lasted a few years. Russia grew disappointed with Western policy and attitude towards Russia, that was not, according to Moscow, treated as an equal partner. The enlargement policy of NATO and its involvement in the Balkan wars caused the evolution of Russia's foreign policy. In 1996 after Evgenii Primakov's appointment as the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia became more assertive towards Western countries and more active in the regions of Moscow's traditional activity. These include the Middle East, especially Iran, Iraq and Syria. The rapprochement between Damascus and Moscow was more apparent after the 2003 American intervention in Iraq. Since then, the Kremlin began to play the role the protector of the Shi'a Alawite minority, Assad's protector and diplomatic shield<sup>2</sup>. Bilateral relations strengthened even more after the Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad meeting in Moscow in 2005. The leaders agreed to reduce the Syrian debt (\$13,4 billion) by 73 percent, to \$3,6 billion<sup>3</sup>, an agreement that allowed Syria to purchase large amount of Russian weaponry.

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<sup>2</sup> A. Bryc, *Rosja w XXI wieku. Gracz światowy czy koniec gry?*, WAiP, Warszawa 2008, p. 199.

<sup>3</sup> R.H. Donaldson, J.L. Noguee and V. Nadkarni, *The Foreign Policy of Russia. Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, Routledge, London and New York 2014, p. 329.

## 2. DETERMINANTS OF RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS SYRIA

### 2.1. GEOGRAPHIC PROXIMITY AND THE ISLAMIC FACTOR

The geographic proximity of the turbulent Middle East to the North and South Caucasus and to Central Asia remains one of determinants of Russia's policy towards Syria. It cannot be forgotten that from Damascus to Makhachkala in Dagestan is only about 1,600 kilometres. It is not so far if we take into consideration existing links between jihadists from the Middle East and the Caucasus. Links between the North Caucasus inhabitants and the Arab world are also sustained by the Chechen and Cherkessia diasporas living in Syria and Jordan.

It is significant, moreover, that the Caucasus is one of the most unstable regions in post-Soviet space. The currently stable situation in Chechnya is sustained mainly by the "chechenization policy" adopted in 2000/2001<sup>4</sup> and antiterrorist operations conducted before the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi. According to John Russell, "chechenization" is "the indigenization within a Russian vertical of power by picking an authoritarian Chechen leader to nullify the separatist threat"<sup>5</sup>. In other words, it is based on the principle of internal independence and stabilization in exchange for huge and regular financial support from the federal budget. Nevertheless, the propensity for radicalization and Islamic fundamentalism among Muslim nations and ethnic groups inhabiting the North Caucasus is still present<sup>6</sup>. Growing radicalization has been observed among young Muslims, especially from Chechnya and Dagestan, who are recruited by "IS" and other jihadist groups. Russia's Federal Security Service declared last year that the number of Russian citizens fighting with "IS" rose from 1,700 to 2,400 between February September 2015<sup>7</sup>. In October, Vladimir Putin estimated that the number of former Soviet republic citizens who had decided to join "IS" was about 7,000<sup>8</sup>. Sunni Muslims

<sup>4</sup> Policy toward Chechnya conducted by federal authorities. It was adopted in 2001 and it was based on agreement between Ahmad Kadyrov (father of present president of Chechnya) and Vladimir Putin. Policy involved co-opting (buying off) Chechen leaders and ultimately transferring the conflict from Russian to Chechen hands. M. Matejova, "Russian "Chechenization" and the Prospects for a Lasting Peace in Chechnya", *International Journal On World Peace*, June 2013, Vol. XXX, No. 2, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> J. Russell, "Ramzan Kadyrov: The Indigenous Key to Success in Putin's Chechenization Strategy?", *Nationalities Papers*, August 2008, p. 661. See: M. Falkowski, "Ramzanistan. Russian's Chechen Problem", *Point of View*, August 2015, Number 54.

<sup>6</sup> 20–30 millions of Russian citizens are Muslims, which is about 15–20 percent of Russian population. They inhabit southern parts of the Russian Federation – mentioned above Dagestan and Chechnya, but also Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, Stavropolskiy Kray.

<sup>7</sup> K. Hille, "Russia and radicalisation: Homegrown problem", *Financial Times*, 07.12.2015, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/77156ed2-9ab0-11e5-be4f-0abd1978acaa.html#axzz3tjakXmgO> [accessed: 07.12.2015].

<sup>8</sup> R. Oliphant, "Vladimir Putin announces Russia-led Central Asian military force", *The Telegraph*, 16.10.2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11937195/Vladimir-Putin-announces-Russia-led-Central-Asian-military-force.html> [accessed: 14.08.2016]. M.N. Katz,

from Russia and from the other post-Soviet states did not fight in Libya, where both sides were Sunni, but a different situation occurs in Syria.

In November 2014 a short movie with warnings to the Kremlin that Chechnya and Dagestan would be soon liberated appeared on the Internet. A similar but more professional the “IS” propaganda movie appeared on the Internet in November 2015. In that short film, Russia was included in the anti- “IS” coalition and was warned that it was going to be attacked and destroyed. The growing Islamization and revival of radicalization among Chechen, Ingush, Cherkees, and Dagestan peoples were linked to some extent with their engagement in Syria and Iraq on the “IS” side. It certainly poses a serious threat for Russia. Probably this is one of the reasons why Russia decided to intervene in Syria in October 2015. It is definitely safer for Moscow to eliminate North Caucasian fighters outside of Russian territory.

The problem of radicalization in the post-Soviet societies concerns not only the North Caucasus inhabitants, but also Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and Tajiks. Many of them, as it turns out, are radicalised and recruited during their presence in Russia as migrant workers. They are in a new and rather unfriendly environment, far from local communities which make them more secure and give a source of identity. The latter very often is changed abroad to a Muslim one.

## 2.2. ECONOMIC AND MILITARY TIES

Economic relations between Russia and Syria are strong. Since 2000 the volume of trade between the two countries has been gradually growing and by 2012 reached \$2 billion<sup>9</sup>. In 2014 Russia was Syria’s tenth largest trade partner (after Iraq, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Iran, Kuwait, Libya, China and the European Union)<sup>10</sup>. The growth in trade correlates, to some degree, with restructuring of Syria’s debt to the USSR (\$13,4 billion) and its partial exchange of new contracts for Russian companies, mostly in energy and infrastructure sector<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless, Middle Eastern countries, are not as important economic partners for Russia as European or the Far Eastern countries. Instability in the Middle East and rather pessimistic prospects are not promising for improving economic cooperation and trade with the region. The situation in the mid-term perspective is unlikely to change.

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“Moscow and the Middle East: repeat performance?”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, July – September 2012, No. 3, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> N. Kozhanov, “Russian-Syrian Dialogue: Myths and Realities”, *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 2014, Vol. 5, Is. 1, p. 3; N.K. Gvosdev, Ch. Marsh, *Russian Foreign Policy. Interests, Vectors, and Sectors*, SAGE, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC 2014, p. 315.

<sup>10</sup> Countries and Regions. Syria, European Commission, Trade, <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/syria/>, [accessed: 28.11.2015].

<sup>11</sup> N. Kozhanov, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

The same is true regarding military contracts. For Damascus, and now especially for Bashar al-Assad, Russia remains a very important partner, providing not only arms and military equipment but also military advisers and technicians. "In 2006 Moscow and Damascus signed a military contract for \$4 billion; by 2010, this sum had allegedly increased to nearly \$20 billion"<sup>12</sup>. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) report, Russia provided 48 percent of Syria's imports during the 2006–2010 period, with air defence systems and anti-ship missiles making up the bulk of the deliveries<sup>13</sup>. Since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011 Russian-Syrian military cooperation has been maintained, however from 2015 it consists mainly of military advisors.

It was September 2015 when news about increasing Russian military heavy equipment supplies to Syria (T-90 tanks, armoured personnel carriers, artillery systems and surface-to-air missiles) and a growing number of Russian military personnel there (between 1,700 and 2,000 individuals) spread around the world. The biggest change was the appearance at the airport in port city of Latakia (in north-western Syria) of around 30 combat aircraft (Su-24, Su-25, Su-30) and about a dozen ground-attack helicopters<sup>14</sup>.

The issue of the warm-water port in Tartus is also often mentioned in the context of Russia's engagement in Syria. It was established in the 1970s for the Soviet Union's 5<sup>th</sup> Mediterranean Squadron. It allows the Russian Black Fleet to deploy in the Mediterranean Sea, especially in its Eastern part. Recently, however, it represents mainly the importance of prestige and the argument for Russia's great power status. According to some authors it can hardly be called a base. The importance of port facilities in Tartus increased after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004).

Summarizing, the economic and the military ties between Syria and Russia do not seem to be vital reasons for Moscow's involvement in the Middle East. It is true that purchases of Russian arms by Syria are impressive, but for Russia Damascus is one of many foreign clients and not the most important one<sup>15</sup>. However, the delivery S-300 missiles seems like preventive action in the case of a western-led intervention in Syria or Israeli unilateral strikes. The presence of Russian S-300 (with a reputed range of 125 miles) raised the stakes and risks of efforts to impose a no-fly zone over Syria<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> P.D. Wezeman, *Arms Transfer to Syria*, in: *SIPRI Yearbook 2013. Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 269.

<sup>14</sup> W. Rodkiewicz, "Russia's game in Syria", *CES Analyses*, 30.09.2015, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2015-09-30/russias-game-syria>, [accessed: 22.11.2015].

<sup>15</sup> See: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database 2000-2014, [http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export\\_values.php](http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php) [accessed 30.11.2015] and [http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export\\_values.php](http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php) [accessed 30.11.2015].

<sup>16</sup> R. Allison, *op. cit.*, p. 806.

### 2.3. RUSSIAN AND ORTHODOX COMMUNITIES IN SYRIA

The numbers of Russians and Orthodox followers in Syria are exaggerated. The estimated number of Russians living in the country ranges from 100,000 to 5,300. In January 2013 Sergei Lavrov claimed that there are several tens of thousands of Russian citizens living in Syria<sup>17</sup>. The great part of them are represented by women who married Syrian men, some of them in Soviet times. During the Cold War there were 6,000 Soviet military advisers, technicians and civilian personnel in Syria. Thousands of Syrians studied at Soviet universities and military academies. Mixed Russian-Syrian marriages are one of the consequences of the latter. Although many of these people do not speak Russian, they have pro-Russian feelings. Nevertheless, only a small number decided to return to Russia. Only 1,000 Russian passport holders have left for Russia since 2011<sup>18</sup>. According to Russian authorities half of these Russians support the opposition.

Christians (not only Orthodox) were quite numerous in Syria (Armenians, Assyrians and Chaldean Churches). After the outbreak of the civil war and the growing activity of “IS,” the situation of Christians became very hard. Russia as well as the Russian Orthodox Church stand up for Christians in Syria and the whole region. The argument for protection of Christians in Syria was one of Russia’s official reasons for its intervention. It allows Moscow to present itself as a protector of Christians and their traditions which, according to Russia’s authorities and the Russian Orthodox Church, seem to be abandoned by secularized Western European states.

### 3. DISTRUST BETWEEN PUTIN AND ASSAD

Vladimir Putin is the main creator of Russia’s foreign policy, including Moscow’s involvement in Syria. He plays the “Syrian game” on the Assad’s side so far, nevertheless it seems he does not trust him. This is linked not only to the anarchic nature of international relations but also to earlier experiences of relations between Syria and Russia. Let’s point out two things. Firstly, when Vladimir Putin became the president of the Russian Federation in 2000, Assad was trying to improve cooperation with the European Union and not necessarily with Russia. Only after Assad’s European policy failed, did he decide to strengthen links with Moscow. It seemed for Putin as if Russia was only an alternative partner for Syria – not the best and not the most important one. Secondly, Putin did not forget Assad’s indolence regarding the Chechen rebels looking for shelter in Syria during both Chechen wars. It seems, therefore, that the Russian president supports Bashar al-Assad, not because of himself or because of loyalty to him. The late October

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 804.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

2015 Assad visit in Moscow proceeded in a very frosty atmosphere. The crucial thing for Russia is not Assad, himself, but the Ba'ath regime, its institutions and armed forces. Right now this means Assad, and as for now he is still able to guarantee Russian interests in Syria. Depending on the cards at the negotiating table, Putin may sacrifice Assad for Russia's winnings.

The question that should be asked is: "What does Putin want to win in Syria, by supporting Assad?" It seems that he needs to reach the solution that will not compromise Russia's national interests and the opportunity to influence on the Syrian situation, which means stabilize the country and Syrian influence in the Middle East. For Moscow right now Assad remains a crucial factor in Syrian stabilization, because his removal may trigger the expansion of jihad and along with it destabilization into Russia and especially its Caucasian regions.

#### 4. THE MIDDLE EAST AS A PLAYGROUND FOR RUSSIAN-AMERICAN RIVALRY

Russian disappointment with the West resulted in its growing assertiveness and renewal of its position in neglected regions, including the Middle East. The evolution of Russia's foreign policy in the mid-1990s should be linked with the above-mentioned Evgenii Primakov, who in 1996 became the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The so-called Primakov doctrine assumed the need for restoration of Russia's great power status. It should become one of the centres of "multipolar world". This aim, according to Primakov, might be implemented by restoring Russia's presence in regions where Moscow had been active. In this context Syria and Iran became important partners not only in the construction of "multipolar" international order but also in balancing the United States in both the Middle East and global levels.

It might be assumed that good relations with Damascus would improve Russia's role in the Arab-Israeli peace process. If the relations between Israel and Syria became peaceful thanks to Russian mediation, its prestige and position in the Middle East would strengthen. It would, but this did not happen. The U.S. position in the region is still strong, just like Washington's attempt in export democracy into the region. The Western efforts at regime change, which overthrows old leaders and provides instability, are perceived by Russia as unilateral rashness leading to destabilization of the Middle East, and further reduction of Russia's political and economic influence in those countries.

It seems that by taking part in the civil war in Syria, Russia wants to teach the Americans several lessons.

Firstly, the unilateral and irresponsible policy of regime change and democracy promotion creates dangers and the destabilization of international relations. Secondly, breaking the international norms of non-interference in states' internal affairs and outside military intervention in the name (theoretically) of human



rights brings more harm than good. The situation of Iraqi, Syrian and Libyan citizens, despite the many weaknesses of those countries, was better than now. Thirdly, the protesters' desire for foreign help to overthrow an undemocratic leader may trigger many civil wars. And fourthly, Russia can be a serious trouble maker, if its opinion is not taken into consideration<sup>19</sup>. The points suggested by Russia to the United States are:

- think twice before trying to change stable foreign regimes;
- undemocratic but stable regimes are sometimes in the interest of the West;
- successful regime change to democracy in countries where democracy has never been present takes a very long time (effective enforcing democracy is rather rare);
- the U.S. should always take Russia into consideration.

The Middle East is like a lens in which we can better see the differences in American and Russian perceptions of international relations and its core principles of state sovereignty, which seems sometimes crucial for Moscow, and human rights, which are sometimes more important for the U.S. and the West. The author of the article would like to stress that the principles that are argued by both always depend on their national interests. Thus, for Russia state sovereignty is not always a fundamental principle as we can see in 2008 in Georgia or in 2014 in Crimea. Similarly, the human rights principle is not fundamental for the U.S. in its relations with Saudi Arabia or China. On the other hand, the human rights argument was used instrumentally by Russia many times in its policy in the post-Soviet space.

Russia differs as well from the West in terms of its perception of the Arab Spring, which according to Moscow was not a “new 1989”. The Arab Spring protests were not spontaneous, but controlled from outside just like the “colour revolutions” in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004). They were engineered by the United States and western NGOs (just like protests in Russia in 2011 and in Ukraine during the Euromaidan in 2014. According to Moscow, the main goals of social movements in Georgia, Ukraine and in the Middle Eastern countries and for Western support of them, were not democracy and human rights. There were two main goals – first – a chance for regime change to more pro-Western ones and second, in the Middle East – to weaken the Shiite camp and especially its pillar – Iran (in Syria), and in the post-Soviet space – Russia's influence.

According to Moscow, the argument for human protection looks very dangerous and instrumentalized by the West. It is used to implement its own political, economic and military interest and not necessarily the interests of citizens or states where the revolutions occurred. It is well known that president Vladimir Putin is very sensitive about the regime change. He is afraid that one day it may induce a Russian Spring.

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<sup>19</sup> N. Kozhanov, *op. cit.*, p. 16. See: I Krastev, “Is Vladimir Putin Trying to Teach the West a lesson in Syria?”, *The New York Times*, 07.10.2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/08/opinion/ivan-krastev-is-putin-trying-to-teach-us-a-lesson.html?ref=opinion&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/08/opinion/ivan-krastev-is-putin-trying-to-teach-us-a-lesson.html?ref=opinion&_r=1) [accessed: 07.12.2015].



## 5. GOALS OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS SYRIA AFTER THE "ARAB SPRING"

After an official invitation from Syrian authorities, Russia sent warplanes to Syria and launched military operations on September 30, 2015. Unwilling to repeat the mistakes of the USSR in Afghanistan and the U.S. in Iraq, Russia is interested in a low-risk and low-budget operation<sup>20</sup> that provides benefits that can be used in its internal and foreign policies. The Syrian campaign meets both requirements. According to the *Moscow Times*, Russian air strikes in Syria cost Moscow up to \$4 million per day and \$1,5 billion per year. This seems quite cheap, especially if we compare it with the U.S. spending in Iraq (\$1,4 trillion)<sup>21</sup>. Theoretically, Russia decided to intervene in Syria after the invitation from president Assad, so it was based on international law. Besides, according to official statements, Moscow is fighting jihadi terrorism, what puts the RF in a good light. However, Russian bombers targeted predominantly anti-Assad groups, rather than the "Islamic State" or other terrorist groups.

Taking all the above into consideration we may identify several goals of Russia's policy in Syria. The most important include:

- support its sole ally in the Arab World,
- limit American superpower status and restore Russia as the world power,
- stabilize the situation in the Middle East to help to maintain stability in the North Caucasus,
- break out of the international isolation caused by Russia's aggression against Ukraine and improve relations with the United States and the European Union,
- make the Russians proud of their country again.

Victory by the pro-Assad camp is preferred by Russia for political and economic reasons. It certainly will strengthen the Shi'a Crescent (Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon) and thereby Russia's influence in the Middle East. Remembering about fifty percent of the world's oil reserves are located in this region, Russia is also trying to become an actor that cannot be ignored in potential future energy projects. The energy issues are truly important for Moscow, because more than sixty percent of its budget incomes originates from natural gas and oil exports. Because the Syrian war has already lasted for five years, the previously planned gas pipelines from Qatar or Iran via Syria to Europe is impossible. For Russia such a situation is beneficial, because it eliminates Middle Eastern competitors and maintains Russia's domination in European energy supplies.

The maintenance of friendly Syrian regime has political goals as well. If Assad's regime remains, it will help Moscow to become an important interna-

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<sup>20</sup> P. Hobson, "Calculating the Cost of Russia's War in Syria", *The Moscow Times*, 20.10.2015, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/calculating-the-cost-of-russias-war-in-syria-50382> [accessed: 10.08.2016].

<sup>21</sup> M.J. Totten, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

tional actor again, one which is able to be active not only in the post-Soviet space but also in the Middle East. The eventual regime change in Syria may in turn result in someone who will not be as pro-Russian as Assad and the Ba'ath regime. This might result in the forced closure of Russia's military bases at Tartus and Khmeimim (Latakia province). It could also result in cancelling the ongoing projects like "the construction and export of two diesel-electric submarines, the modernization of the S-125 Neva anti-air-craft systems, the supply of fifty MiG-29 fighters and seventy-five IAK-30 training airplanes"<sup>22</sup>. Weakening the regime could also undermine Russia's position in Syria and strengthen that of other states. If the Sunni opposition, which is backed by the U.S., France, Great Britain and by some Sunni Islamic states wins, those countries would strengthen their influence in Syria.

As was mentioned above, being active in Syria is the a to strengthen Russia's global status by rebuilding its influence in traditional regions of activity. Such a policy is also a part of balancing American influence in the Middle East, undermining Washington's image as "good international policeman" and weakening its domination in international relations. Moscow is trying to present the West and especially the U.S. as a main culprit of the present destabilization in Syria and the Middle East. Simultaneously, it builds the positive image of Russia as an upholder of international law that opposes external interventions in the internal affairs of third countries and the main "cleaner of the mess" made by Washington. This was heard, for example, during Vladimir Putin's speech at the UN General Assembly. Russian decision-makers try to present as well American weakness, inconsequence and inefficiency in its Middle Eastern policy. For example, in May 2016 Sergei Lavrov again accused the Obama administration of supporting Al Qaeda in Syria. In addition, it seems that Russia learned some lesson from Libya (2011) and it does not want to repeat such a situation again. In 2011 Russia decided to abstain from voting on UN Security Council Resolutions 1971 and 1973, which allowed them to be adopted. Both resolutions condemned Muammar Qaddafi and imposed a no-fly zone over the country in order to protect civilians from regime forces. Although the aim of the resolutions was to protect the Libyan people from government forces, it turned into a military operation of regime change conducted by NATO. The alliance that had been appointed by the Security Council to protect Libyan civilians, illegally changed the provisions by itself, hereby NATO activity in Libya exceeded the mandate given by the UN. For Russia's establishment, this evoked past NATO activity in Kosovo and again put Moscow in a where it was not treated as an equal partner of the West. This resentment influenced the Syrian case to a certain degree and Russia's blocking any future UN resolution proposing military action against Assad.

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<sup>22</sup> E. Barry, "As Nations Line Up Against Syrian Government, Russia Sides Firmly With", *The New York Times*, 27.01.2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/28/world/europe/russia-sides-firmly-with-assad-government-in-syria.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/28/world/europe/russia-sides-firmly-with-assad-government-in-syria.html?_r=0) [accessed: 14.08.2016].

It may be stated that Russia is for stabilization in Syria, which means support for the Ba'ath regime and its present leader, Bashar al-Assad. For Russia, Assad's regime is the only political force that is currently able to fight against jihadi terrorism in Syria. If reminded that many of the foreign fighters in the ranks of "IS" come from Russia and the post-Soviet states, then Moscow's involvement may be perceived as a preventive action to pin down and kill them before they come home<sup>23</sup>. On the other hand, it seems that Russia, similar to the Georgian and Ukrainian cases, does not really care about a full resolution of the Syrian conflict. Better for Moscow is to freeze the conflict and maintain the status quo. This will help protect Russia's strategic position in a divided Syria together with rejecting any enduring resolution and avoiding a long-lasting military engagement.

Another important factor is that Russian involvement in the Syrian war gives it the opportunity to divert attention and resources away from the war in Ukraine and break its international isolation. It also provides a chance to sustain the wave of patriotic mobilization among Russians after the seizure of Crimea. Moreover, the increased political and economic costs of intervention in Ukraine result in growing dissatisfaction of Russian society and elites<sup>24</sup>. Consequently, changing the international discourse about Russia thanks to its intervention in Syria helps to some extent to make the Russians proud of their country and its leader. "Putin cannot rise Russian living standards to Western levels, but he can revive some of the motherland's former glory"<sup>25</sup>. He not only retook Crimea, but also thanks to him Russia is important factor of international game in the Middle East again.

It should be noticed that 68 percent of Russians support the Kremlin's military campaign in Syria<sup>26</sup>. According to Alexey Levinson of the Levada Center, this support "comes not from political discourse about the future of Syria, but from Russians' personal support for Putin. Even when the President withdrew Russian troops and aviation from Syria, 81 percent supported him, while only 7 percent said "no", which indicates that everything Putin does is right, according to the population"<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> D. Trenin, *Putin's Syria Gambit Aims at Something Bigger Than Syria*, Op-Ed, Carnegie Moscow Center, October 13, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/10/13/putin-s-syria-gambit-aims-at-something-bigger-than-syria/ikv3> [accessed: 14.08.2015].

<sup>24</sup> P. Stronski, *Russia's Fight in Syria Reflects the Kremlin's Fears at Home*, Op-Ed, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 29, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/09/29/russia-s-fight-in-syria-reflects-kremlin-s-fears-at-home/iibd> [accessed: 02.12.2015].

<sup>25</sup> M.J. Totten, "Moscow on the Tigris. Russia Joins the Terror Nexus", *World Affairs*, Winter 2016, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> Russian Participation in the Syrian Military Conflict, Levada-Center, 06.11.2015, <http://www.levada.ru/eng/russian-participation-syrian-military-conflict>, [accessed: 10.12.2015].

<sup>27</sup> P. Koshkin, "Why Russians approved Vladimir Putin's gambit in Syria", *Russia Direct*, 11.05.2016, <http://www.russia-direct.org/qa/why-russians-approved-vladimir-putins-gambit-syria> [accessed: 08.08.2016].



Figure 1. Russian public opinion on the Syrian conflict

Source: P. Koshkin, *op. cit.*

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

On March 14, 2016 Russia started the partial withdrawal of its military contingent from Syrian territory. Despite the withdrawal, the bases in Tartus and Khmeymim will continue operating, meaning that Moscow will be ready at any time to send additional bombers and attack aircraft to Syria.

Russia's presence helped to strengthen Bashar al-Assad and its role in the ongoing Syrian peace process. It helps as well to strengthen Russia in the region. However, the „Islamic State” may be still a source of danger for Russia, even after jihadist's failure. Terrorists coming from Russia and the other post-Soviet countries will probably return home someday, and Russia may be pulled into a religious war and one of the targets of terrorist attacks.

Of the benefits of Russia's activities in Syria, we may include its return to the Middle East as an important and influential player. The maintenance of Assad's regime advanced the rapprochement with Iran, an even more important and valuable partner for Moscow. Both countries declare common interests and cooperation in Syria and can reach also other areas of collaboration. On the other hand, Russia's Syrian campaign worsened relations with Turkey after it shot down a Russian SU-25 warplane in November 2015. After an apology from president Recep Erdogan in August of this year, Russian-Turkish relations are improving.

What about refugees? We cannot deny that Russia's air strikes resulted in a growing number of refugees flowing to Europe and especially to EU member countries. To some extent, such a situation had positive consequences for Moscow. First of all, it weakened solidarity among EU member countries and increased the popularity of Russian-backed European far-right parties like the National Front in France. Reduction in the intensity of activities in Syria in turn creates an impression of Russia's neutrality in the conflict and interest in stabilization. Besides, it helps to avoid the accusation of fuelling the immigration wave to Europe. Russia's reduction of military involvement is intended to approach the West before a planned second round of the Syrian peace process and weaken EU sanctions on Russia after the aggression against Ukraine.

And the last thing, thanks to Russian military involvement in Syria, the effectiveness of ongoing reform and modernization of the Russian army has been checked out, as have new weaponry and command systems in the battlefield area.

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