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There are diametrically opposite opinions whether the Russian intervention in Syria was planned in advance or not (Borshchevskaya 2018; Melamedov 2018). Two years prior to Russia's involvement in the Syrian war, the Kremlin officials claimed that the military solution cannot end the conflict (Ministerstvo inostrannyh del Rossijskoj Federacii 2013). However, on September 2015 the Federation Council officially approved a request of the President Putin to use the Armed Forces outside of Russian borders. After a month in an interview for Dmitry Solovyev, Vladimir Putin acknowledged that the intervention was not a spontaneous action; according to the President, the military was seriously preparing for the operation in Syria "persistently and for a long time" (Jekskljuzivnoe interv'ju Putina Solov'evu 2015).

The Russian involvement in Syrian conflict was later referred as an exceptional development in the most recent history of the country (Trenin 2017), keeping in mind that the last time Kremlin directly joined a military intervention so far from its borders, it was still within the Soviet Union.

How did the Russian officials explain the purpose laying behind a such outstanding event? There is no short answer to this question. This paper is going to accumulate *arguments given by Kremlin officials* to support the Syrian intervention over the period between 2015-2018.

SAVE THE LEGITIMATE POWER

Kremlin emphasized legality of its intervention in the conflict many times,

meaning that the Russian military came to Syria accepting the invitation of the "legitimate power", Assad's regime. In contrast, the West and its allies in the Middle East recognized the anti-Assad opposition as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people, reportedly providing the rebels with financing (Schaller 2016).

The head of state made it clear that one of the goals of Russia in Syria is a stabilization of the legitimate regime (Ofitsial'nye setevye resursy Prezidenta Rossii 2017a). Putin said that only the Syrian people can decide who is going to rule the country, and this decision should be made on the basis of a constitutional reform through the early elections of president and parliament (Braterskij 2016). Later in July, Lavrov approved this official position, saying that Moscow do not support the President Assad, but it supports UN Resolutions which says that "only Syrian people can decide over the fate of Syria" (Ministerstvo inostrannyh del Rossijskoj Federacii 2017).

PRESERVATION OF TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY

According to the Russian officials, another goal is a preservation of territorial unity of the Syrian state (Hardtalk 2015). The Russian side has made it clear that all stakeholders must work on this direction, however, Putin expressed his concerns over the fact, that not all sides involved in the conflict share the same view on this topic. He added that the aim is not to interfere into the internal politics of Syria, but rather to "ensure that there is *no outside interference* when addressing the key issue of preserving the territorial integrity of the

country" (Ofitsial'nye setevye resursy Prezidenta Rossii 2017a).

FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM

Within a month after the intervention, Putin reported on the first positive results of coordinated actions of the Russian Air Forces with the Syrian army. He then blamed the US-led coalition for failing to achieve any results on the battlefield after a year-and-a-half long operation, stating that the terrorists have expanded their territories within this time (Ofitsial'nye setevye resursy Prezidenta Rossii 2015a).

In February 2017, Putin announced that there are approximately four thousand Russian citizens who fight on the side of terrorists in Syria (Ofitsial'nye setevye resursy Prezidenta Rossii 2017a). "We made a decision on Syria not because we enjoy sabre-rattling or to show how cool we are. No, we just proceeded with the real data, which was a cause for concern, to say the least of it. What is this data? Two thousand people from the territory of the Russian Federation, 2,500 fighters were a part of ISIS, Jabhat-An-Nusra. 4,5 thousand people coming from the Central Asian region, with which we do not have no border, no visa regime. They could get to our territory," Putin said in his latest interview for the documentary. "The collapse of statehood in Syria was fraught with creation of a large-scale terrorist hotbed for decades ahead," he added (Miroporjadok 2018).

In October 2017, another Kremlin official told to RIA Novosti that the operation in Syria is not only aimed at destroying ISIS, but also at "preventing the possibility of terrorists to return to their home countries" (Kosachev 2017). In March 2016, the Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reported that the Russian troops had destroyed more than two thousand militants with the

Russian citizenship which were fighting on the side of terrorists in Syria (Ministerstvo oborony Rossijskoj Federatsii 2016).

RUSSIAN ARMY TRAINING ON A REAL BATTLEFIELD

Moscow referred to the Syrian operation as a ground training on a battlefield for the Russian army. In his regular annual conference, the Russian president told that the involvement of the Russian troops in the Syrian conflict is perceived more like a regular training for the Russian side and it is partly sponsored by means which are regularly spent from budget for military trainings. "You cannot image any better training," said Putin (Ofitsial'nye setevye resursy Prezidenta Rossii 2015b).

Earlier in December 2017, General Valery Gerasimov, the current Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, in his interview for Komsomolskaya Pravda said that one of the goals of Syrian operation was training of as many military personnel as possible: "Not just servicemen - the most important thing is testing commanders, officers. Commander of the military districts - they all have been there, and they stayed there for a long time. Everyone was in command of the group. All the chiefs of staff" (Baranets 2017). He reported that more than 48 thousand military personnel went through the campaign, the Russian troops in Syria were headed by several different commanders, which helped the staff to gain a real combat experience. He also told that more than 200 types of modern military equipment have been tested on the ground (Baranets 2017).

Recently, the head of Russian state positively evaluated trial of a high precision long-distance air and sea-based weapons in battlefield. "More than 1.2 thousand representatives from 57 enterprises of the defense industry complex and scientific

organizations visited the airbase Khmeimim and the port of Tartus over the whole time of operations" Putin said (Ofitsial'nye setevye resursy Prezidenta Rossii 2018).

PRESENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

- Under the plea of protection of Russian national interests

In December 2017, during his visit to the Russian air base located in Syria, the President Putin ordered to begin the withdrawal of the Russian troops from Syria, leaving the naval facility in Tartus and air base in Hmeimim. The President said that the remaining military bases are going to help to ensure a "protection of national interests in the Middle East" (Ofitsial'nye setevye resursy Prezidenta Rossii 2017b).

- Under the plea of humanitarian help

In February 2016, the talk center was established on the Russian airbase headquartered in Khmeimim. The Russian center for reconciliation of the warring parties aims to "control the regime of ceasefire, mediate in peace process between the Syrian authorities and rebels and deliver humanitarian help" (Kolotilo 2016).

What is next?

After the withdrawal of the Russian troops in December 2017, the Moscow began to undercover its future goals in Syria. The State Duma member Sergei Zheleznyak said in his statement, that the future goals are "the implementation of humanitarian projects and the restoration of social and economic life in Syria, in which all interested forces must participate, both within the country and in the world". He said that the ruling party the "United Russia" will continue its cooperation with the Assad's The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party

for realization of these tasks in the future (Frakcija «Edinaja Rossija» v Gosudarstvennoj Dume Federal'nogo Sobranija Rossijskoj Federacii 2017).

In his meeting with a Syrian opposition leader Ahmad Jarba, head of the Syria's Tomorrow Movement, Lavrov said that the main objective is the defeat of Al-Nusra Front. He also reminded that the aim of Moscow is "to create the most representative base for launching the constitutional reform, the conditions that must be agreed upon by the Syrians themselves, and in this sense to comply with the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 2254" (TASS 2017).

Conclusion

In summary, the Russian officials gave multiple reasons for joining the war, emphasizing certain goals at different periods of time. In the course of the first months of Russian involvement in the conflict, preserving the territorial integrity of the Syrian state under the rule of Assad's regime was expressed quite often as a major aim. Despite the fact that Russians declared that they achieved their goals, the reality shows us a divided Syria where the Syrian government do not hold a power over the whole territory.

In addition, Moscow and Washington are struggling to decide which side "won" the war. At the end of 2017, Trump declared that the US achieved a victory in Syria the day after Putin announced the Russian victory in Khmeimim Air Base. While the major actors are struggling to decide who was the winner of the game, the Syrian state remains divided into several territories ruled by different forces. Despite the global vote for a ceasefire, the fight in Syria is still going on.

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