

Thumbnail Image:



Nov 04, 2016 by [Molly Krasnodebska](#)

Putin's Address to the American Public: What It Means Beyond the Syria Crisis ^[1]

Russia's diplomatic intervention in the Syria crisis has received much praise from politicians and media outlets around the world. In a sense, the praise is deserved: by finally pushing the Assad regime into negotiations, Russia has halted – at least for the time being – a universally undesired military action.

Although previously Russia had blocked all UNSC resolutions which sought to impose sanctions on Syria (while simultaneously providing heavy weapons to the Assad regime), there are many reasons why the U.S. decided to accept the Russian-led plan. Withering domestic support for military intervention and the possibility of an expanded conflict were significant concerns. In conventional diplomacy, pragmatism is not a bad fallback position, and at times it is an essential strategy for making the best of a bad situation.

In the Russian media, Putin's diplomatic initiative was presented as a moral triumph over America, as if it was due to his tactful diplomacy that the superpower backed off its guns. From the American perspective, however, an agreement with Russia was not about ideology but about forging the best possible deal given the circumstances. As Obama's statement that "this is not the Cold War, this is not a contest between the United States and Russia" indicates, the President wanted to keep the Syria crisis apart from a debate on U.S./Russia relations.

However, Putin's op-ed, which appeared in *The New York Times* on September 11, 2013, showed that from Russia's perspective it is a contest after all. By directly addressing the American people in this, a piece of carefully drafted public diplomacy, Putin attempted to alter

the way his diplomatic victory is perceived in America. Whereas in conventional diplomacy, decisions can be based on pragmatism, the very nature of public diplomacy does not allow pragmatism. Engagement with foreign publics through creation of dialogue and appeal to common values and emotions always entails a normative component. With the op-ed, Putin has begun an ideological battle – one that, as I will argue, has little to do with the issue of Syria itself, but concerns Russia and the United States.

Putin's article in *The New York Times* seemed to both attract and repel his audience. At one point he chastised American policy and American exceptionalism, at another he drew on shared values to promote the importance of improved communications and partnership between the two nations. There is no doubt that American readers found Putin's op-ed a little bizarre. Since when do foreign leaders take the time to lecture the American population in *The New York Times*? Moreover, American readers had difficulty reconciling the professorial tenor and language of the article with images of a shirtless, corrupt, authoritarian leader. Nevertheless, the discussion in the media and re-posts on Facebook and Twitter show that the op-ed received significant attention among the American public.

Both the careful choices of timing (publication on 9/11/2013) and target audience reveal that this was a carefully planned message intended to have maximum emotional impact. Putin appealed to the strong sentiment of opposition to another U.S war prevalent among the American public. Putin's argument addressed the wide critique of U.S. interventionism among Americans, and the domestic crisis of American exceptionalism resulting from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The prolonged nature and international unpopularity of these wars have led especially the younger generation of Americans to view America's armed involvement in foreign countries critically.

In fact, it was the very culture of political criticism which Putin exploited. Freedom of opinion and the importance of limiting government are two of America's core values. Putin's article, which appeared on a national day of self-reflection, stated a number of viewpoints already popular among the American public. Most importantly, the article appeared at a moment when the public was expressing frustration with their government when faced with the prospect of yet another war. Putin's ideas were so sensible and appealing that for many readers the author became secondary.

Indeed, reading Putin's arguments about the need for international peace, one could easily forget that it was under his leadership that Russia has been directly involved in – and in most cases instigated - every armed conflict in Eurasia in the last two decades (Georgia, Kosovo, Chechnya, and Nagorno-Karabakh). After all, these events are not common knowledge in the United States. It is also easy to overlook how Russia exerts economic and political pressure on countries like the Ukraine and Georgia to prevent them from moving closer to the West. Or that Putin has *de facto* extinguished any political opposition in his country. Further, one may not realize that while the free press allowed Putin to insert his public diplomacy initiative into one of America's top newspapers, under his rule in Russia journalists who criticize the government tend to die under suspicious circumstances (e.g. Anna Politkovskaya).

The wide public engagement with the article shows the effectiveness of Putin's method. By appealing to the "hearts and minds" of the American public, Putin showed that Russia's diplomatic achievement was not only pragmatically but also ideologically superior to the path proposed by Obama. In this particular instance, public diplomacy is much easier for Putin than for Obama. Russia does not bear the same responsibility in the case of Syria as America,

which faces criticism by the international public no matter what response it takes to the use of chemical weapons.

By no means does this imply that all American readers were convinced by Putin and were not critical of his comments. However, the public's interest in the article and concessions by readers stating that it "made good points" show that this public diplomacy campaign was success. The fact that the American public is willing to engage in a discussion on their country's international policies with a foreign leader, a former KGB agent, a known authoritarian ruler and a human rights violator in his own country, is a tremendous achievement on Putin's part.

Why did Putin bother to seek an ideological victory when he already got his way on Syria? I argue that the true reason lies far beyond Syria. As he says in his piece, it is "alarming that military intervention in internal conflicts in foreign countries has become commonplace for the United States" and this kind of foreign policy should not be "America's long-term interest." Indeed, if America wanted to flight every dictator who violates human rights or straighten any international injustice, Putin himself would be next on the list. Of course, with Russia's energy supplies and nuclear arsenal, Putin's position is far too secure for that to happen. Nonetheless, America is currently the only power keeping Russia in check. Due to the EU's dependence on Russian gas, only the U.S. can exert enough pressure on Russia in the event of a conflict with a neighboring country, be it of an economic, political, or military nature – providing, of course, that the U.S. has the willingness to do so.

With Putin, already in power for nearly 13 years, tightening his grip both over his own country and those nearby, it is likely that we will see another case like Georgia in 2008, i.e. a country in conflict with Russia asking the West for help. By creating in American readers' minds the image of a peace-loving Putin who prevented a war with Syria, the Russian President hopes that the American public will be more reluctant to call for action in such a situation.

The "Syria analogy" which Putin tried to create in his article aims to undermine more than America's right of military intervention. His arguments targeted the broader – already very much shaken -- concept of American exceptionalism: the idea that because of the values it represents, America has a right, or even a duty, to interfere in the affairs of other countries. Showing his readers that this time it was not America but Russia who resolved a crisis and prevented a war, Putin intended to undermine the perception of American moral superiority over Russia and establish the two nations as ideologically equal partners. This might not be the Cold War, but the Russian leader's use of emotional words to paint America black, while presenting Russia as a peaceful nation, certainly brings back memories of Soviet propaganda speeches.
