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Russia Using Syria to Overshadow Ukraine, Analysts Say

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The recent flood of media reports claiming that Russia is boosting its military presence in Syria has detracted international attention from the Ukraine conflict in what analysts say is likely a deliberate ploy on Moscow's part.

This month, for the first time since 2013, the topic of Russia-Syria has firmly overshadowed that of Russia-Ukraine both on Google Trends and Twitter activity graphs.

Since Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014 after mass protests led to a change of government in Kiev, Russia-West relations have been dominated by the ongoing political crisis in Ukraine and the armed conflict in its east.

Western countries have imposed sanctions against Russia and accused it of supporting separatists fighting government troops in eastern Ukraine. Russia insists a peace process in Ukraine can only be achieved if the Kiev government engages with representatives of the self-proclaimed people's republics in the war-torn east.

But as a sweeping refugee crisis has hit Europe, followed by reports that Russia has been establishing a forward operating base in the Syrian Alawite stronghold of Latakia, the Ukraine crisis has faded into the background.

“Syria is a bigger problem for the West, so Russia can use the uproar about it to camouflage what is happening in Ukraine,” said Dmitry Oreshkin, an independent political analyst.

“It is clear that for the Kremlin, there isn't a good exit strategy from the conflict [in Ukraine's east]. Syria is a good way to distract attention while the Ukraine situation is frozen,” Oreshkin said in a phone interview.

Changing Trends

On Monday, 16,627 tweets were posted on the topic of Russia and Syria, while only 1,074 tweets mentioned Russia's role in the Ukraine crisis. In previous months, that picture was drastically different, with Ukraine well above Syria in Twitter coverage. The data was acquired via the Topsy Twitter search and analysis service on Tuesday.

Google Trends, a tool that measures the level of public interest in a topic by analyzing search requests, shows a similar picture: So far this month, interest in Russia-Syria has far surpassed interest in Russia-Ukraine.

Looking at media coverage, the same trend becomes evident. While there were 102,000 news stories on the topic of Russia and Ukraine in the past month, 690,000 stories were devoted to the subject of Russia and Syria in the same period, according to data from the Google News search engine.

Russia's pro-Kremlin media has also been shifting its attention away from Ukraine and focusing on Syria, the BBC reported last week.

Two prominent war reporters who were posted in eastern Ukraine have been transferred to Syria: Semyon Pegov, who works for LifeNews, a private TV station widely believed to have links to the security services, and Yevgeny Poddubny, who works for the state-run VGTRK radio and television company, the BBC reported.

“The Kremlin does not want to talk about the issues that the West is worried about, such as Ukraine. So it is looking for something that could change the agenda,” said Vasily Gatov, a visiting fellow at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership and Policy.

“So there is an attempt to divert public attention away from Ukraine — Syria is just one of the options,” he said in written comments.

Developments on the Ground

Military activity in the rebel-controlled regions of eastern Ukraine has been substantially downscaled in direct correlation to public interest and media coverage this month.

“We know where Russians and their proxies are still hiding weapons, their tanks and their artillery. For now the order has been given to cease fire, but for how long?” Ukraine's

President Petro Poroshenko told The Independent newspaper in an interview published Sunday.

Speaking to a number of Ukrainian television stations on Sunday, Poroshenko said that not a single breach of the cease-fire had been recorded in the past two days.

“Ukraine has not had this for 18 long months,” said Poroshenko in the interview, broadcast by 112 Ukraine TV.

On Monday, Poroshenko ordered the postponement of a new wave of army mobilization after the cease-fire in the country's east continued to hold, TASS news agency reported.

Uncertainty Mounts in Syria

Regarding Syria, on the other hand, a slew of reports continue to allege an increased Russian military presence. Two unidentified U.S. officials told Reuters on Monday that Russia has positioned about half a dozen tanks at an airfield in Syria.

“We have seen movement of people and things that would indicate that they plan to use that base there, south of Latakia, as a forward air operating base,” Pentagon spokesman Captain Jeff Davis told journalists at a news briefing, as quoted by Reuters.

Russia has insisted that nothing has changed in its military assistance to Syria, which it says is vital to the fight against the Islamic State and other extremist groups in the country. Speaking in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe on Tuesday, President Vladimir Putin reiterated that stance.

"We are supporting the government of Syria in the fight against terrorist aggression, [we] are offering and will continue to offer it necessary military-technical assistance," Putin said in a speech at a meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

"Without the active participation of the Syrian authorities and the military, it would be impossible to expel the terrorists from that country and the region as a whole, and to protect the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional Syrian people from destruction," he said, according to a transcript on the Kremlin's website.

Earlier this month, Putin said that Russia was “looking at various options,” when asked if there was any chance of Russian troops participating in a military operation in Syria as part of a coalition.

Russia is revamping the Latakia airfield in order to make sure it can receive flights from Russia carrying weapons bought by Syria and humanitarian aid, an unidentified representative of the Defense Ministry was cited as telling the Vedomosti business daily Monday.

Syria has already served as an avenue for cooperation between Russia and the West. In 2013, Putin brokered a deal for the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons that prevented U.S. military involvement in the conflict.

The effort was short-lived, however, as it was followed by the Ukraine crisis that erupted just

a few months later.

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