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Weekly Wrap: Wars, Bus Stops and Praying Fish

By Unfair Observer

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So it happened: Russia joined the war in Syria. The Duma gave it a North Korea-style 162-0 vote of approval on Wednesday, and Russian jets began their bombings.

President Vladimir Putin repeatedly pledged that there will be no boots on the ground, only air strikes against the collective Antichrist that is the Islamic State, so hopefully the rapture is just a few surgical strikes away.

The first strikes, embarrassingly, appear to be aimed at everyone but the Islamic State. You'd think they could have bothered to at least hit their official target once before pounding Assad's real enemies (he and the Islamic State rarely attack each other, but hey, it's not like there's an Islamic State payroll against which you can compare the names of dead civilians.)

Also, Putin said at the United Nations that the Islamic State cannot be defeated by air strikes alone, so maybe he knows something we don't. Even air attacks are not as safe as the Russian parliament thinks — remember that Jordanian pilot who was captured and made to star

on the Islamic State's "Burning at the Stake" reality show?

By a miraculous coincidence, an undertaker in Moscow just launched a coffin rental service — you rent a cool coffin for the funeral, and then they switch it at the last minute and bury you in a cheap one.

The undertaker said it's an idea that came from the economic crisis, but the project might come in handy for more than just civilian use.

But, seriously — for once — I hope the Russian Defense Ministry won't need a bulk discount.

Underwater Bus Stops

You would think there's no need for other news when there's a war on, but everything that's happening in Russia is connected to it. Don't believe it? Just watch.

The Kremlin's favorite bikers, the Night Wolves, began construction of an underwater Orthodox church in Crimea. It will be set 20 meters deep and is expected to become a tourist attraction. No word yet on whether it will be able to attract an actual priest and flock, or whether it will just be the wolves preaching to the fishes.

And in the northern Komi republic on the other side of the country, a bus stop was unveiled with much gusto. But as photos of the ribbon-cutting ceremony show, the "stop" is just two slabs of concrete on the ground. The officials had to hold the ribbon in their hands because there was nothing to tie it to.

So it's like this — there's the money for underwater temples and overseas wars, but not bus stops, or, say, salaries.

Anything to stop the Antichrist.

Fox in the Henhouse

Meanwhile in the State Duma, Communist lawmaker Vadim Solovyov proposed criminalizing "slander against the state." The main target for the new bill, according to Solovyov, is vile "myths" about a Russian military presence in Ukraine, though any other bad things you say qualify too.

The poor Russian state is, of course, utterly defenseless against those who criticize it. But noble as the Communist's desire to help the helpless is, I'm sure you also see a small problem with it.

Last year, Russia staunchly denied allegations by reporters and politicians that it was deploying forces to Crimea. But then President Vladimir Putin came out and said that it was actually true and Russia did have troops there. After that, the denials of Russian military presence elsewhere in Ukraine ring a little hollow — fool me once.

Or more urgently, Russia said it is fighting the Islamic State in Syria, but began by attacking anyone but the aforementioned banned terrorist group. So is it slander if we report that the Russian government is saying one thing and doing another?

You have three guesses.

Whitewashing Obama

But it's not all bad news: In the Samara region, a water heater company was fined for a racist street ad featuring Obama. The poster, which made a play on a Russian nursery rhyme, accused the 44th U.S. president — and the first black one — of being dirty and unwashed.

Surely Obama is heaving sighs of relief right now, happy that the Russians won't imply anymore that he is a "dirty N-word." But that's until he thinks about the thousands of Russian cars with bumper stickers saying bad words about him; or those T-shirts from souvenir stores where Putin is kicking him in the face; or that tweet by a senior Russian lawmaker that depicted him and his first lady eyeing a banana hungrily.

The owner of the water heater company refused to back down and pledged to appeal — to defend his right not to call Obama unwashed, but to expose him as the enemy of Russia he so obviously is.

If you've read any statements by Russian officials lately, you know they're saying about the same thing.

But don't worry, Barack. We're still friends, united by our combat against the Antichrist. At least until some domestic expediency, such as falling presidential ratings or an unpopular overseas campaign, demand that you get a propaganda kick in the face again. Definitely coming soon to T-shirts and street billboards nationwide.

Unfair Observer is the pen name of a Russian journalist that The Moscow Times has invited to observe the most brain-dead weekly developments in Russia.

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