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What's in a Name? Russia Replaces 'Islamic State' With 'Daesh'

By Anna Dolgov

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A fighter of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) holds an ISIL flag and a weapon on a street in the city of Mosul, Syria.

The Kremlin administration appears to be retiring the term "Islamic State" when referring to the terror group, and replacing the militants' preferred title with the derogatory Arabic moniker — "Daesh."

Just a week ago, Russian President Vladimir Putin repeatedly used "Islamic State" and "ISIL" during a Kremlin news conference following the Nov. 26 meeting with his French counterpart Francois Hollande. The French president called the terror group "Daesh," but the Kremlin's official translations of his remarks into English and Russian rendered the term as "ISIL."

But during Putin's state of the nation address on Thursday, he no longer spoke about "Islamic State" or "ISIL." Nor did he use the name "Daesh" — a term unfamiliar to the majority of Russians — but talked only about "terrorists."

“We know, for instance, who are stuffing their pockets in Turkey and letting terrorists make money from the sale of oil they stole in Syria,” Putin said. “It's those revenues that bandits are using to recruit mercenaries, buy weapons and plan inhuman terrorist attacks against our citizens and against the citizens of France, Lebanon, Mali and other states.”

A search of the online archives of the state-run RIA Novosti news agency on Friday showed that the wire service had used the term “Daesh” in nearly 390 reports during the past week alone — accounting for the vast majority of a total of 435 reports that mentioned “Daesh” during the past 12 months. Before this week, RIA Novosti occasionally used the term “Daesh” in direct quotes.

At the end of November, employees of the state-owned Rossiya Segodnya media company, which absorbed RIA Novosti last year, reportedly received memos instructing them to use “Daesh” — “Daish,” in a Russian transcription — instead of “ISIL.”

Russian journalist Alexei Kovalyov wrote of the instruction on Facebook post.

After initially disputing Kovalyov's claim, RIA Novosti journalist David Burghardt confirmed it on Monday. “Yes, we received [the memo] today,” Burghardt said on Facebook. “But this applies to all Russian media.”

The linguistic shift has profound political significance.

“Daesh” is an acronym derived from the Arabic phrase “al-Dowla al-Islaamiyya fii-il-Iraq wa-ash-Shaam” — or the “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant,” ISIL. At first glance, the change may appear to simply replace an English-language acronym with an Arabic one.

However, being called “Daesh” infuriates the terror group. Part of the reason is that “Daesh,” a nonsensical non-word in Arabic, is only one letter off the Arabic word “daes” — meaning something that crushes or tramples, according to linguistic experts.

“The creation and use of a title that stands out as a nonsense neologism for an organization like this one is inherently funny, disrespectful, and ultimately threatening of the organization’s status,” Alice Guthrie, an English-Arabic translator and researcher, wrote in a blog post.

“So the insult picked up on by Daesh is not just that the name makes them sound little, silly, and powerless, but that it implies they are monsters, and that they are made-up,” she wrote.

Several residents in the Iraqi city of Mosul, who wished to remain anonymous out of fear for their safety, have told The Associated Press that terrorists threatened to cut the tongue of anyone who publicly used the term “Daesh” instead of the group's full name — saying the acronym shows defiance and disrespect.

“And yes, ISIS really hates it when Arabs call them 'Daesh,'” Iyad El-Baghdadi, an Arab spring activist who now lives in Oslo, Norway, said via Twitter on Wednesday.

The disrespectful moniker is popular in many Arab countries and among their neighbors — Turkish President Recep Erdogan, for one, has been using it often lately, and it has been spreading in the West.

British Prime Minister David Cameron announced this week that from now on, the United Kingdom government would be referring to Islamic State as "Daesh," because "this evil death cult is neither a true representation of Islam nor is it a state," the BBC reported.

In doing so, Cameron followed scores of other Western leaders who have switched to using "Daesh." These include U.S. President Barack Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry, Australia's Tony Abbott — who spoke on the subject early this year, when he was prime minister — and Hollande.

"Daesh hates being referred to by this term, and what they don't like has an instinctive appeal to me,'' Abbott was quoted as saying in January by Australia's Herald Sun. "I absolutely refuse to refer to it by the title that it claims for itself [Islamic State], because I think this is a perversion of religion and a travesty of governance."

For Russian news agencies, such as RIA Novosti, calling the terror group "Daesh" may also bring a degree of simplicity — at least after their readers become acquainted with the term.

The country's media watchdog, Roscomnadzor, demands that any Russian news reports that mention Islamic State must make explicit that it is a terrorist organization banned in Russia.

So far, the linguistic transition has forced Russian media to add additionally unwieldy phrasing to their reports, as they try to familiarize their Russian audience with the "Daesh" moniker. Russian news reports explain that Daesh is an Arabic term for Islamic State — followed by the the obligatory — "a terrorist organization banned in Russia."

Russia's Muslim leaders have also advocated for the linguistic change. Council of Muftis chairman Ravil Gainutdin told parliament last week that the country should stop using the acronym "ISIL," arguing that terror had nothing to do with Islam, nor with statehood.

Dmitry Kiselyov, the head of Rossiya Segodnya and host of a staunchly pro-Kremlin television talk-show, said in a Sunday night program that Russian media should phase out "ISIL" in favor of "Daesh."

"It is time to wrap things up with ISIL not only militarily, but also linguistically," Kiselyov told the daily Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper in an interview published Sunday. "This way, we will show respect for our Muslims."

The term "Daesh" and those who use it, have drawn criticism from some conservatives in the West. Rod Liddle, an associate editor of the British conservative magazine The Spectator, said in a column Wednesday that anybody who uses the acronym is "terminally deluded."

"The term is now used exclusively by those who wish to kid themselves that the Islamic State is a rogue singularity, entirely outside the normal Islamic mindset, whatever that might be," Liddle wrote.

The Russian president is scheduled to hold his major annual news conference on Dec. 17. Terrorism is sure to be a major topic during what traditionally has been an hours-long marathon of a presentation — whether Putin will use to refer to the terrorist group as "Islamic State" or "Daesh" is to be determined.

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