

RUSSIA COMPLICATES THE HUMANITARIAN AND DIPLOMATIC PICTURE



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By intervening in Syria since late September, Moscow has managed to place itself, once again, at the heart of European debates. Situation that has been reinforced after the terrorists attacks in Paris on November 13th and the offer made by Russia to France for establishing a coalition to face the “common threat” embodied by the Islamic State (ISIS). A scenario that was already complicated for the EU is now even more so. Brussels and the member states must now evaluate carefully the dilemmas and potential costs posed by Russia’s proposal.

At the moment, the Russian deployment is limited, but has already completely altered the landscape of the war and the scenarios for its eventual resolution. The Kremlin has decided to ensure the survival of Bashar al-Assad, at least until a hypothetical negotiation table is formed. Russia is providing aerial cover to the regime’s land forces, which are strengthened, according to some information, by Iranian units and members of the Lebanese group, Hezbollah. The Syrian regime is, according to the international organisations and humanitarian actors, the main culprit in the suffering of the civilian population and their aerial attacks on densely populated areas are the fundamental key to the refugee crisis. The Russian intervention on the side of the regime therefore aggravates the humanitarian crisis and, according to the United Nations, in the first four weeks of intense Russian bombardment, another 120,000 Syrians were forced to abandon their homes. If this pattern is maintained, the Russian intervention will produce more refugees not fewer.

The initial plans considered by some EU member states to establish a no-fly zone as a way of protecting the displaced civilian population are already ruled out. The risks of direct collisions with Russian fighter planes (or anti-aircraft systems) or of contributing to the consolidation of a proxy war with regional scope are high. Formally, the EU has stayed firm and united in its response to the Russian intervention. Point 10 of the conclusions about Syria made at the European Council meeting of October 12th indicated that the Russian bombardments that “go beyond Dae’sh and other UN-designated terrorist groups...are of deep concern, and must cease immediately. So too must the Russian violations of the sovereign airspace of neighbouring countries” (read: Turkey).

However, the attacks in Paris have shifted the terms of the debates. Until then, the role of Bashar al-Assad in a scenario of national transition was one of the axes of the discussions taking place at the heart of the EU. Now, as Minister García-Margallo has stated, Assad might be (again) considered as the lesser evil. And none of the current alternatives to the Assad regime generate sufficient confidence to galvanise decisive and meaningful European support. The fear of potential chaos and a power vacuum or, still worse, the consolidation of an extremist Sunni regime and/or extension of Islamic State plays a decisive influence in such calculations.

Putin's chances of profiting from his intervention in Syria are strengthened as much by the United States' lack of strategic clarity as by the division and lack of will of the Europeans. The result of both factors is the wavering and strategic disorientation of an EU that acts by reactive impulses to emergencies or large terror attacks with little consistency. So, for example, in the case of Syria the EU has gone from almost totally ignoring the war to taking a huge gamble on it (conflict resolution, reconstruction of the country) to address the refugee crisis or, more precisely, its impact on European soil. To avoid misunderstandings: the criticism is not of the approach, but the lack of real commitment and political will behind it.

And, despite what some expect, the Russian invasion in Syria will not only not reduce the burden on the EU, it will raise its costs. Not only because it runs the serious risk of other regional powers deciding, in turn, to up their intervention in the war, but because Russia's objectives go way beyond Syria. Above all, Moscow wants a bargaining chip with which to force its reaccommodation with the West – with the sanctions a priority issue – and, in growing harmony with China, challenge the post-cold war international order. The Kremlin, in fact, spares no efforts when sending messages meant to be instructive to the West. Moscow's insistence, for example, on the supposed legality of its intervention in Syria carries an explicit criticism of previous Western interventions. Without doubt, the Iraq war of 2003 was a profound strategic error whose dire consequences will in all probability continue to unfold for decades. But that does not automatically legitimate the actions of Russia either in Syria, Ukraine or in any other setting.

This stance by Moscow implicitly shows its desire to delegitimise and finish with the principle of "responsibility to protect". When approaching the case of Syria, the Kremlin insists on using Libya and the wrong done there as a precedent when, abusing the Security Council's mandate, France and the United Kingdom went much further than the establishment of a no-fly zone and contributed decisively to the fall of the Gaddafi regime. But, the principle of "responsibility to protect" is meant for cases of serious violations of human rights within a state (think of the genocide in Rwanda or the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans), the international community is not blocked by the primacy of non-intervention and it is possible to act for humanitarian reasons. The underlying idea is that national sovereignty is not absolute, it has limits and comes with responsibilities. For Russia, as well as for China and many other countries, it is a sort of "right to arbitrary interference" used surreptitiously by the Western powers who profess to oppose it. Again, to avoid misunderstandings: it is legitimate to criticise the use of the principle

(Libyan precedent), but the idea of “responsibility to protect” is at an incipient stage and the EU should not facilitate its elimination, but seek formulas for producing broader consensus within the international community.

One last aspect that should not be lost from sight is that the Kremlin’s diplomatic strategy is articulated on what it perceives as two EU weak points. And thus, the emergencies in the refugee crisis present a favourable landscape for the Kremlin. That is why it is unwise to expect great concern from Russia for the humanitarian dimension of the conflict. But Moscow does not have much time either. Brussels, trapped in its complex (and on occasions painful) decision-making process – which exacerbates its tendency for self-flagellation – normally buys into the image of a strong, invulnerable Putin. But it is weakness, caused by falling oil prices, the effect of the sanctions and the uncertainties of the Chinese economy, rather than strength that is behind Moscow’s risky gamble in Syria, whose success, by the way, is far from assured.

