



Policy Paper

No 8

24 March 2012

THE “RUSSIAN BEAR” IN THE MIDDLE EAST IN AN ERA OF TURMOIL

Efpraxia Nerantzaki*

The revolutions and the uprisings in the Middle East changed the balances in the region and, consequently, Russia's perspective on it. Russia had to face the risk of losing relatively new gains, as well as dilemmas on which side to favour, especially in the case of Libya and Syria. It can be said that Moscow generally remained a “royal realist,” standing on the side of its interest and trying to adapt its policies to the ad hoc developments. The way Russian policy will develop and the extent to which the already made choices have been successful or not are both still “under process.”

*Researcher of the Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies of the University of Peloponnese

As a general comment on Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East it can be said that it did not seem to have a coherent strategy of response to the developments; its policies were rather reactive and mostly dictated by ad hoc considerations of its interests, within the framework of a struggle to retain its influence in the rapidly changing Arab landscape.

With the election of Vladimir Putin as President in 2000, the diplomatic passivism that characterised the first years after the establishment of the Russian Federation came to a gradual end since Russia sought to regain its Soviet prestige as a world power. Putin placed the need of developing relations with Middle Eastern countries among the priorities of the Russian foreign policy aiming at making Russia a major regional, if not international power, and reducing the post-Cold War American dominance in the region.¹ Thus the Russian Federation tried to cultivate and sustain good relations with Israel, cooperated with Egypt at the economic and security level, re-established political ties with Soviet allies, such as Syria, sought to gain access to the Mediterranean through Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, claimed a more constructive role in the Arab-Israeli peace process through its participation in the Quartet and the acquirement of an observer status membership at the Organisation of Islamic Conference, maintained a thriving, although complex relationship with Iran, promoted trade and cooperation with oil and natural gas producers, from Algeria and Libya to the Gulf States,² had good military and economic ties with Iraq (especially before the 2003 US-led invasion), and finally sought to minimize Middle Eastern aid to Chechen and other Islamist insurgents in the North Caucasus region.³

At the beginning of the so-called "Arab Spring" one could not foresee that it would unfold in the way it unfolded, sweeping most of the Middle Eastern countries and catching everyone in surprise. Medvedev seemed to welcome the Tunisian revolution by stating after its outbreak in Davos that "what happened in Tunisia should serve as a lesson to any government" and that "authorities need to develop along with their societies."⁴ However, the feeling that actually dominated the Russian political circles was distrust. The Arab revolutions and upheavals came to "disturb the Russian perspectives on global balances"⁵ and challenge Russia's economic and military interests in the region, with Syria and Libya at the first two places of importance. The Kremlin was also worried that this domino effect could reach Russia, either by provoking protests against the Russian government or by an export of Islamic radicalism in the North Caucasus.⁶ As a general comment on Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East it can be said that it did not seem to have a coherent strategy of response to the developments; its policies were rather reactive and mostly dictated by ad hoc considerations of its interests, within the framework of a struggle to retain its influence in the rapidly changing Arab landscape. And it goes without saying that Russia's increased presence in the Middle East increased (and increases) its dilemmas as to which path to

follow.

As far as protests in Bahrain are concerned there were no big Russian economic interests neither political connections at stake and thus Russia adopted a more distanced and discreet official stance, due to its de facto lack of leverage and to the fact that the monarchy was closer to the US sphere of influence. In March the Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman described the uprisings in Bahrain as “an internal matter of the country.”⁷ The above statement could be viewed as congruous with the general Russian foreign policy principle of non-intervention, a principle that basically constitutes the basis of the argument for non-intervention in Syria, as it will be analysed later.

In Egypt the way things evolved determined the way Russia positioned itself towards the revolution. When the revolution started and before Hosni Mubarak’s resignation, Russia adopted a supportive stance towards the Egyptian leader, with its political statements to place greater emphasis on “stability” and “the resolution of the crisis through legal means.”⁸ This stance can be explained on the basis of the two countries’ existing economic ties and strategic partnership against Islamist insurgents in North Caucasus. The course of the events changed Russia’s position as it became apparent by President Dmitry Medvedev’s, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s, and Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich’s wishes for a peaceful resolution in Cairo⁹ and Kremlin’s willingness to work with the new leadership and participate in the “international efforts to facilitate the democratisation process.”¹⁰

Similarities can be found with the Russian policy in Libya, with the difference that Russia had much bigger interests at stake in the country than it had in Egypt. Moscow hesitated to take sides at the first place and instead followed a “wait and see” policy. In February 2011 it joined a unanimous UN Security Council resolution (No.1970) calling for sanctions, which included an arms embargo on Tripoli, but later abstained from the UN Security Council resolution (No.1973) for the imposition of a no-fly zone over Libya, giving that way its implicit consent for it, and consequently for a prospective NATO military operation. After the NATO intervention in Libya Putin reacted harshly to the operation characterising it as a “crusade” and provoking the immediate response of President Medvedev, who criticised the use of such a terminology for a US/NATO action as unacceptable. Russia’s foreign policy proved not well coordinated in this case, either due to a different perception of the West by the two politicians or due to the Russian leadership’s attempt to appeal both to the West, as well as to the domestic constituencies.

The course of the events changed Russia’s position as it became apparent by President Dmitry Medvedev’s, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s, and Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich’s wishes for a peaceful resolution in Cairo and Kremlin’s willingness to work with the new leadership and participate in the “international efforts to facilitate the democratisation process.”

The fact that the Arab League, a key organisation with which Russia would want to coordinate its actions, also supported both the sanctions and the no-fly zone, and that the Western countries pledged Russia some benefits in return are additional reasons that prompted the Kremlin to make the turn.

In the end, Russia's position was harmonised with the Western one, with Medvedev himself urging Gaddafi to resign at the G-8 Deauville summit in May.¹¹ Moscow probably reconsidered its position, after seeing that Gaddafi would not be able to maintain his power for long and it recognised the necessity of establishing good relations with whatever power would replace the falling leader, so as to limit the damage on the existing economic and industrial deals and investments.¹² After all, as Margarete Klein, researcher at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) comments, Gaddafi was never "a political partner of Moscow's for whom the latter would have risked to isolate itself within the Arab world."¹³

The fact that the Arab League, a key organisation with which Russia would want to coordinate its actions, also supported both the sanctions and the no-fly zone, and that the Western countries pledged Russia some benefits in return¹⁴ are additional reasons that prompted the Kremlin to make the turn. At the same time Russia saw the unstable situation as an opportunity to present itself as a mediator in the conflict. Moscow offered to mediate a deal for the conditions of the Libyan leader's departure.¹⁵ However, Moscow probably overestimated its authority in Libya and attempts by Mikhail Margelov, Medvedev's special envoy for Africa, to have talks both with the Gaddafi government and with the rebels bore little fruits, forcing Russia to recognise (in September) the National Transitional Council as the sole legitimate representative of the Libyan people.¹⁶

In the cases of Yemen and Syria, parallels can be drawn regarding Russia's stance, although conditions differ and the upheavals reached a different level in each country. In both cases, however, Russia adopted a decisive position and offered unequivocal political support for both Ali Abdullah Saleh and Bashar al-Assad. In April it blocked a UN resolution on violence against protesters in Yemen,¹⁷ on the ground of friendly relations between the Russian and the Yemeni governments, while it has been being involved in a diplomatic row at the UN Security Council over Syria.

Russia has been repeatedly issuing veto on UN Security Council draft resolutions which foresee sanctions upon Assad's regime, asserting that "the sanctions would not serve anything, but to cause a civil war in the country."¹⁸ The refusal to support the UN resolutions has been accompanied by accusations towards Western powers about their taking an "immoral" stance on Syria by pressuring solely the Arab strongman without condemning violence by the armed opposition.¹⁹ According to Moscow, West's plan is to use the UN in order to force regime change in Syria, undermining the

possibility of a peaceful settlement. Russia's straightforward support for the old ally becomes also apparent by the dispatching of Russian warships to the Tartus naval base in the beginning of 2012, followed by 60 tonnes of munitions transferred to Syria²⁰ and the selling of 36 fighter jets Jak-130 ignoring the "unilaterally imposed embargo" by the West.²¹

Moscow, following the tenet of non-intervention, opposes staunchly an international military operation and an outside-induced regime change, worrying about a repetition of the Libyan scenario and the loss of another Arab ally. At the same time, though, it cannot ignore the international pressure; Moscow's urging Damascus to proceed to the implementation of the promised reforms indicates that Russia's support, although strong, cannot be unconditional. In December 2011 Russia, possibly in an effort to reduce criticism for its stance, introduced its own draft resolution which on the one hand accused the Syrian government of using disproportionate force but on the other hand excluded the possibility of imposing sanctions to Syria.²² As Ezzedine Choukri Fishere, professor of political science at the American University in Cairo, suggests, it is possible that Russia look for "a third way solution that would put pressure on Assad but not reach the level of intervention,"²³ a way that would allow it to retain some of its interests and influence in the country, -especially if it manages to obtain the role of the broker between the West and Syria- and that would probably stipulate the safe exit of Assad.

Despite the clear support for Assad Russia has also made an opening to the opposition groups, in an attempt to show a more flexible attitude and reserve itself a place among Syria's partners in case of a regime change. This intention can be epitomised in Lavrov's statement that "Leaders come and go, politicians come and go, social systems come and go, but for Russia there remains a single reliable and trusted friend: the Syrian people."²⁴ Since summer 2011, Russia has hosted the Syrian opposition three times in Moscow, most recently in November, and has shown a more lenient stance supporting UN humanitarian initiatives. There is no doubt that Russia has been under strong international pressure but since its political choices have been dictated by the respective importance of its interests, it will not easily sacrifice its "last foothold in the Middle East, particularly one along the frontlines of the Arab-Israeli conflict."²⁵ It does not want to see a regime change in Syria, and even worse, a pro-Western government that would deprive Moscow of its "extension" in the Middle East and the ability to use its only naval base in the region, located at the Syrian port of Tartus.²⁶ There are also huge contracts at risk, as Syria has been a major mar-

There is no doubt that Russia has been under strong international pressure but since its political choices have been dictated by the respective importance of its interests, it will not easily sacrifice its "last foothold in the Middle East, particularly one along the frontlines of the Arab-Israeli conflict."

ket for Russian arms, with contracts worth over \$3 billion, including anti-ship cruise missiles, fighter jets and short-range air-defence systems,²⁷ as well as a \$370 million contract for a gas pipeline, engaged in a preliminary multi-billion dollar contract to build a petrochemical complex and an oil refinery in Syria.²⁸

Until the time of writing developments in the Arab countries have not turned out favourably for Moscow. Nevertheless, things are still evolving, the new balances have not been determined and in most of the countries the transition has not been completed yet. How will Russia come to grips with the implications of the Arab Spring at the economic and strategic level? Will it reverse its policies and reconsider its regional alliances or will it try to regain its lost leverages? Will there be any changes after Putin's return to the country's presidency, probably on a more anti-American track? Will Moscow make a more clear turn to Latin America, India and China? -all the above questions still remain to be addressed in the near future.

Will it reverse its policies and reconsider its regional alliances or will it try to regain its lost leverages?

NOTES

All links accessed on 08/03/2012

1. Magen, Zvi and Olena Bagno-Moldavsky, "New Directions in Russia's Foreign Policy: Implications for the Middle East," Strategic Assessment, Vol.13, No.4 (2011)
[http://www.inss.org.il/upload/\(FILE\)1295870646.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/upload/(FILE)1295870646.pdf)
2. Trenin, Dimitri, "Russia's Policy in the Middle East: Prospects for Consensus and Conflict with the United States," The Century Foundation, 2010
http://carnegieendowment.org/files/trenin_middle_east.pdf
3. Freedman, Robert, "Russia and the 'Arab Spring': a preliminary appraisal," Johnson's Russia List, (19/7/2011) <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/russia-wayne-merry-russian-reaction-arab-spring-249.cfm>
4. Zikibayeva, Aigerim, "What does the Arab Spring mean for Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus?" Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2011, p.8
http://csis.org/files/publication/110912_Zikibayeva_ArabSpring_Web.pdf
5. Freedman, Robert, "Russia and the 'Arab Spring': a preliminary appraisal," Johnson's Russia List, (19/7/2011) <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/russia-wayne-merry-russian-reaction-arab-spring-249.cfm>
6. "With regard to conflicts in the North Caucasus such as Chechnya, countries like Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Libya have favoured Russia.
7. Zikibayeva, Aigerim, "What does the Arab Spring mean for Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus?" Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2011, p.9
http://csis.org/files/publication/110912_Zikibayeva_ArabSpring_Web.pdf
8. Katz, Mark N., "Russia and the Arab Uprisings of 2011," Middle East Policy Council, (15/2/2011)
<http://mepc.org/articles-commentary/commentary/russia-and-arab-uprisings-2011>
9. Prime Minister Putin, per contra, does not appear to be commenting on this matter.
10. Washington, Tom, "Russia hopes for democracy in Egypt," The Moscow News, (14/02/2011)
<http://themoscownews.com/politics/20110214/188415147.html>
11. Zikibayeva, Aigerim, "What does the Arab Spring mean for Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus?" Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2011
http://csis.org/files/publication/110912_Zikibayeva_ArabSpring_Web.pdf
12. In 2008 Russia cancelled Libya's \$4.5 billion Soviet debt in exchange for lucrative contracts for the Russian companies in the oil, in the armaments, and the construction sector. Apart from the losses in the defense industry because of the arms embargo, the future of the existing and the under negotiation contracts are at stake, since some of the agreements were signed personally by Gaddafi, see "Russian companies to be thrown out of Libya," (24/8/2011) http://english.pravda.ru/russia/economics/24-08-2011/118850-russian_companies_libya-0/
13. Klein, Margarete, "Russia and the Arab Spring: Foreign and Domestic Policy Challenges," SWP Comments, No.3, (2012), p.2 http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2012C03_kle.pdf
14. Western countries promised to facilitate Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization by the end of 2011, while before the summit, France and Russia reached a deal under which Paris would sell

- four Mistral-class helicopter carriers to Moscow, see "Bhadrakumar, M.K., Russia's Libya Role irks China, Asia Times, (4/6/2011) <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/MF04Ad02.html>
15. "Russia offers to mediate ex-ally Gadhafi's exit," Today's Zaman, (27/5/2011) <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-245380-russia-offers-to-mediate-ex-ally-gadhafis-exit.html>
 16. Klein, Margarete, "Russia and the Arab Spring: Foreign and Domestic Policy Challenges," SWP Comments, No.3, (2012), http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2012C03_kle.pdf
 17. "Russia, China block UN resolution on Yemen," Financial Times (20/4/2011) <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/44ecdeee-6b59-11e0-9be1-00144feab49a.html#axzz1o4CfET83>
 18. Kamalov, Ilyas, "The Perspective of Russia towards the developments in the Middle East," ORSAM, (4/8/2011) <http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/showArticle.aspx?ID=730>
 19. "Russian FM: Western stance on Syria "immoral," Hürriyet Daily News, (13/12/2011) <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/russian-fm-western-stance-on-syria-immoral.aspx?pageID=238&nID=9057&NewsCatID=353>
 20. "Russland beliefert Assad mit Munition" (Russia supplies Assad with munitions), Focus, (12/1/2012) http://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/krise-in-der-arabischen-welt/syrien/syrien-konflikt-russland-beliefert-assad-mit-munition_aid_702155.html
 21. "Russland verkauft Kampffjets an Syrien" (Russia sells fighter jets to Syria), Focus, (23/1/2012) http://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/krise-in-der-arabischen-welt/syrien/trotz-sanktionen-gegen-assad-regime-russland-verkauft-kampffjets-an-syrien_aid_705830.html
 22. Klein, Margarete, "Russia and the Arab Spring: Foreign and Domestic Policy Challenges," SWP Comments, No.3, (2012), http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2012C03_kle.pdf
 23. "Inside Story: Moscow's shift on Syria," Al Jazeera, (18/12/2011), videorecording <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2011/12/2011121794848611717.html>
 24. Nowak, David, "Syrian opposition delegation visits Moscow," The Guardian, (28/6/2011) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/9716915>
 25. Charbel, Ghassan, "Lavrov's Briefcase," Dar Al Hayat (6/2/2012) <http://www.daralhayat.com/print/359341>
 26. Khorrami Assl, Nima, "Russia's Middle East ambitions," Al Jazeera, (3/9/2011) <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/08/2011828943035319.html>
 27. Kampfner, John, "John Kampfner: For Russia and China, the Arab Spring only offers a warning," The Independent, (6/2/2012) <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/john-kampfner-for-russia-and-china-the-arab-spring-only-offers-a-warning-6579542.html>
 28. Lazareva, Inna, "Putin, Medvedev and the Arab Spring: will Russia's foreign policy end up the wrong side," Open democracy, (22/12/2011) <http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/inna-lazareva/putin-medvedev-and-arab-spring-will-russias-foreign-policy-end-up-on-wrong-s>