

Russia's Middle East policy after the Arab revolutions

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Russia's policy towards the Middle East is instrumental. Its activity in the region has been growing since the middle of the last decade, and its aim is to help Moscow achieve its objectives in other areas, particularly in its policies towards the US and Europe, as well as its energy policy. The establishment of these political influences constitutes a bargaining chip for Russia in its relations with the US. Russia's participation in resolving conflicts is aimed at building up its image as a supra-regional power. Russia's Middle East policy is a key element in its contacts with the Muslim world. At the same time, Russia's policy in the region remains cautious – despite its return to the region, Russia has not decided to 'play' for the Middle East, and its position and role in the region remain limited.

The balance of power in the Middle East has been shifting in the aftermath of the Arab revolutions. However, it does not seem that they have opened up larger opportunities for Russian policy in the region. The Russian elite has been divided in its assessment of the consequences of these events. One part of it has displayed scepticism, treating the revolutions rather as a threat than a chance to strengthen their own position. The revolutions were not seen as democratisation processes, but rather as a destabilisation of the region and as posing an increased danger from radical Islam. For the other part of the elite, the revolutions were the natural consequence of the social changes occurring in the region. This internal dispute made it difficult for Russia to present a cohesive approach to the Arab revolutions, and its stance was reactive.

The defensive position which Moscow adopted showed that Russia did not have the potential to mould the political situation, either in the region as a whole or its individual countries; neither did it display any willingness to do so. What Moscow is doing is positioning itself in such a way so as not to spoil relations with any other actor in the region, and to be able to exploit any possible emerging opportunities in case of further-reaching changes.

The characteristics of Russia's policy as pursued in the Middle East to date

After having retreated from the Middle East following the collapse of the USSR, Russia has begun 'returning' to the region since 2002, striving for a rapprochement with Muslim countries. The main cause of Moscow's involvement at that time was its efforts to cut off

Chechen guerrillas from the Arab world's support. Since the middle of the previous decade (2005-2007), Russia's ambitions and political and economic presence in the Middle East have been growing substantially. The regional dimension of the commitment (the Arab-Israeli peace process and the Iranian nuclear crisis) was accompanied by intensified bilateral relations with practically all the actors, ranging from former Soviet-era allies (Syria), through actors with which Moscow had previously had relations (Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Autonomy, Algeria, Libya), to those countries with which contacts have been established almost from scratch (Saudi Arabia, the smaller Gulf countries). This policy has been complemented by close relations with non-Arab countries, namely Iran and Israel. In 2005 Russia gained observer status in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, and in 2006 established diplomatic relations with Hamas after it had won the parliamentary elections. Russia's activity in the Middle East has been 'auxiliary' compared to its main orientations in foreign policy, and has served above all to pursue its interests outside the region. Moscow sees the establishment of political leverage in the Middle East as a way of limiting American global domination, and was also intended as a bargaining chip in its relations with the US. Closer relations with both anti-American countries and US allies were meant to expand Russia's room for manoeuvre. At the same time, Moscow did not enter into military alliances with any of the countries in the region, and its geopolitical position there remained limited (in contrast to that of the USSR).

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Arms sales have played an important role in building political influences; the main recipients were Iran, Syria, Algeria and Libya. These arms sales have constituted a bargaining chip in relations with the US, as was proven by the several years of bargaining between Russia and the US with regard to the former supplying S-300 anti-

missile systems to Iran. On the other hand, technical and military co-operation with the countries of the region has been an element of Moscow's policy aimed at diversifying its arms exports. Moscow has also put great effort into promoting sales of its arms to the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, but this did not bring results as these markets were already dominated by the US and other Western countries.

Energy is a significant area of Russia's activity in the Middle East due to its strategic and economic importance. By co-operating with the countries of the region, Moscow wanted to ensure a greater impact on the European Union, for which this area is the third largest supplier of natural gas and second largest of oil. Russia has made attempts at coordinating the policies of the largest producers, both from the Gulf (Iran, Qatar) and North Africa (Algeria, Libya), and has used the organisation of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) for this purpose. However, due to Russia's inconsistent policy and the specificity of the gas market, these attempts brought about inconsequential results. In the context of producing and selling oil, relations with OPEC have been important for Moscow, particularly with Saudi Arabia as the main (and most flexible) producer which is able to impact global oil supply. This co-operation was significantly hampered by Russia's lack of willingness to agree the volume of its own production with OPEC. The region's economic importance for Russian energy companies as the place which provides access to resources and enables their extraction remains restricted (despite the fact that Russian companies are present in nearly every country in the region). Russia is also interested in entering the nuclear energy market emerging in the Middle East (Egypt, Jordan).

With regard to the large and dynamically growing Muslim population in Russia and the importance of the Middle East as the centre of the Muslim world, the policy aimed at the Muslim world has been another sphere of the Kremlin's involvement in the region. Moscow has been trying to ensure a legitimisation of its policy towards the North Caucasus and the Muslim population in general, as well as a restriction on the influx of Islamic radicalism to Russia. In this context, Moscow has succeeded in preventing the situation of Muslims in the Russian Federation from becoming a pan-Islamic issue, and the improvement in relations with Saudi Arabia has brought about the legitimisation which it expected (among other events, Chechnya's President Ramzan Kadyrov was recognised as the legitimate leader of the republic by the Saudi monarchy). Equally, the position on the Palestinian issue – support for Palestinian statehood – constitutes an element of improving Russia's image in the eyes of the Muslim world. As for Islamic radicalism, attention should be paid to the close co-operation between Russian services with their counterparts in Arab countries (but also in Israel), which required political endorsement.

Above all, Russia's policy in the region – acting as an intermediary in resolving crises – serves the purpose of building up its image as a global power (or at least a supra-regional power). Both the Kremlin's involvement in the Iranian crisis and in the Arab-Israeli conflict are intended to achieve this aim. At the same time, however, Moscow has not succeeded in persuading Tehran to accept its idea for settling the crisis, and Russia's initiatives regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict are not being implemented. Russia's *idée fixe* is to organise a peace conference which would extend to all the actors, and serve as a manifestation of Russia's return to the region as an actor on a equal footing with the US.

The balance sheet of the 'return'

So far, the balance sheet of Russia's 'return' to the Middle East has been equivocal. On the one hand, Russia has built up good relations with nearly all the actors, including those which had ignored it earlier. None of the countries sees Russia as an enemy power. Moscow has legitimised its policy towards Muslims in Russia and won a few new customers for its arms sales. On the other hand, Russia's successes remain limited: the rapprochement with Saudi Arabia

Russia's approach to the region remains instrumental; Moscow is not ready to seriously engage politically and economically, therefore the results of its "return" to the Middle East have been rather limited.

has not translated into economic benefits; energy manoeuvres aimed at increasing its ascendancy over Europe have not brought any results; its actions as an intermediary in settling conflicts have been confined to declarations. In the face of American supremacy, Russia has not managed to develop its own sustainable influences, except on Syria, a country which is isolated in the West.

This balance sheet proves that the Middle East orientation has played a secondary role, being used as an 'auxiliary instrument' for realising the objectives of its policy towards the US and Europe (as a sort of a bargaining chip) and for promoting restricted economic interests (support for foreign policy, limited importance for security policy). As a result of this approach and the 'auxiliary' character of the policy in the region – the consequent caution and the willingness to maintain good relations with all the crucial actors – and not committing important political and economic resources, the outcomes of Russia's 'return' have been limited, both in their political and economic dimensions.

Russia and the Arab revolutions – an ambivalent position...

The Russian government's cautious and sceptical reaction to the events in individual Arab countries, which soon came to be called the 'Arab revolution' by the Russian media, showed that Moscow was taken by surprise by the situation in these countries. The positions which the Kremlin formulated revealed important divergences among the Russian elite in their assessment of the nature and consequences of the events in the Middle East, and the dominant trend was scepticism.

On the one hand, the Russian government did not hide its distrust of the Arab revolutions. They were not regarded as processes of democratisation, but rather as a destabilisation of the region. Comparisons to the revolutions of 1989 were dismissed. The causes of the upheaval were attributed to external factors. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin hinted that it was the North African branch of al-Qaida that stood behind the events in Libya. The Russian representative at NATO Dmitri Rogozin pointed to the West's ill intentions and the lack of understanding of the situation in Libya itself, thus hinting that Western countries were deliberately painting a picture of a civil war. Deputy Prime Minister Igor Siechin accused Google of instigating the revolution in Egypt¹. As the situation in Libya deteriorated, the references to external factors intensified. The consequences of the revolution were seen as very negative. At the first stage of the revolution in Egypt in February 2011, representatives of the Russian government believed that if President Hosni Mubarak stepped down too soon, it would lead to radicalisation, divisions and destabilisation, and that similar scenarios could be reproduced in Tunisia, Jordan, Syria and Algeria. It was thought that the revolutions could pave the way for extremists, and result in the repetition of the collapse of the state, as happened in Somalia². In this context the revolutionary situation in the Arab countries was linked to a potential threat to the Russian state, above all from radical Islam. Soon after endorsing the changes in Egypt, President

Moscow was taken by surprise by the situation in these countries. The positions which the Kremlin formulated revealed important divergences among the Russian elite in their assessment of the nature and consequences of the events in the Middle East, and the dominant trend was scepticism.

Dmitri Medvedev contended that the revolutions might cause fanatics to come to power, escalate extremism and provoke the disintegration of the Arab countries, which could also be dangerous for Russia. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov indicated that together with the destabilisation of the region, the risk was rising for Central Asia and the Russian South Caucasus, as even during the period of stability this region was being infiltrated from the Middle East, and if the state structures collapsed, this infiltration would be even stronger³.

At the same time, another trend has appeared in the Russian government's approach to the Arab revolutions which did not regard them as a threat. The revolutions' causes were seen in internal social and economic processes and in the situation of the individual countries. This stance was probably an attempt at adjusting to the new political situation. The statements made by President Medvedev and Minister Lavrov should be interpreted in this way as, contrary to their earlier critical comments, they both emphasised their support for the events in Egypt, for instance; they acknowledged that a strong democratic Egypt was important for the peace process, and that Russia would endorse related international efforts. Another example of a positive assessment of the shifts in the region was President Medvedev's statement in which he considered the transformations to be paving the way for reforms, and compared them to the implications of the fall of the Berlin Wall in Eastern Europe⁴. At the same time, it is impossible to determine how sustainable this correction of the negative approach to the Arab revolutions is.

¹ See Stuart Williams, *Medvedev Warns Arab Unrest May Empower Fanatics*, AFP, 22.02.2011; Pavel Baev, 'The Kremlin Spins Conspiracy Theories Explaining Revolutions Away', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 28.02.2011; *Western countries advocating intervention as pretext for oil grab – Russian envoy*, Russia Today, 14.03.2011;

² See *Senior Russian MP Warns Against Egyptian President's Resignation*, Interfax, 3.02.2011; Simone Baribeau and Henry Meyer, 'Libya May Risk Somalia-Like Chaos, Russian Deputy Premier Says', Bloomberg, *Johnson's Russia List*, -#63, 8.04.2011.

³ See 'Arab power crisis will echo in Russia – Lavrov', *Johnson's Russia List*, -#39, 3.03.2011.

⁴ 'Middle East, North Africa events reminiscent of fall of Berlin Wall' – Medvedev, *Johnson's Russia List*, #126, 15.07.2011.

... and inconsistent actions

The divergences in the Russian elite's evaluation of the Arab revolutions has given rise to inconsistency in the political measures taken by Russia.

At the initial stage (the upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt) Moscow distanced itself from the Arab revolutions, only issuing warnings against external intervention (although it did not take any action which could have prevented such a step). Russia also cautioned Western states against putting pressure on the Arab countries, or 'enticing' them to mount further revolutions and pro-democratic movements, deeming it counterproductive. Russia also evaded taking any unequivocal position, awaiting a relative 'clarification' of the situation (for example, Minister Lavrov went to Cairo only in March 2011, after President Mubarak had resigned from power).

The differences in the evaluation of the Arab revolutions had the strongest impact on Russia's position on Libya. Moscow vacillated between supporting the actions undertaken by the international community, headed by the Western countries, and criticism of the intervention in Libya's civil war. The first approach resulted in the condemnation of the actions taken by the regime of Muammar Gaddafi⁵, voting for UNSC Resolution 1970 (which introduced the arms embargo, froze assets and submitted Libya's case to the International Criminal Court), and abstaining from voting for UNSC Resolution 1973, which introduced a no-fly zone. In the latter case, an important role was played by the Arab League which backed the idea of a no-fly zone. Furthermore, while supporting the approach of the Western countries, President Medvedev recognised that Gaddafi had lost all legitimacy to rule. At the same time, Russia severely criticised the actions undertaken by the West in Libya. Most critical was Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who regarded Resolution 1973 as a call to a crusade, which led to a public polemic with President Medvedev. Nevertheless, both politicians quite unanimously denounced the way in which the no-fly zone was implemented, and consistently blamed the Western countries for abusing the UN resolution. Moscow thus took on the very comfortable position of a critic. Probable differences in how to further

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address the Libya issue prevented Russia from playing an active role in creating policy. Russia was not a member of the contact group which took decisions about Libya, but despite its traditional ambition to participate in all decision-making circles regarding international matters, it did not

display any aspirations to become a member. While deeming the Libyan rebels a legitimate party in negotiations, and calling on the Libyan leader to step down, Moscow did not break off relations with the Gaddafi regime. Declarations of its readiness for mediation were accompanied by limited diplomatic activity which did not produce any measurable results.

Russia adopted a more decisive position on the revolutions in Syria and Yemen. At the UN, Moscow was consistent in preventing a debate at the Security Council over the situation in the two countries and blocking any sanctions which could be imposed on them. Representatives of the Russian government, together with President Medvedev, pledged political support for the leaders of both countries. At the same time, Russia tried to keep some room for manoeuvre in case the Syrian opposition won; contacts were established with representatives of the Syrian opposition in immigration⁶.

⁵ See President Medvedev's declaration about the situation in Libya of 21 March 2011, <http://kremlin.ru/news/10701>

⁶ The President's special North Africa and Middle East envoy Mikhail Margelov met them in Moscow in June 2011.

The consequences for Russia's Middle East policy

The Arab revolutions have been shifting the balance of power in the Middle East, both between the actors in the region and the position and importance of particular external actors. Due to internal disparities, Moscow has lacked a strategy in the face of the revolution, and its reaction has been defensive and adaptive. Most of its actions were taken in response to the evolution of the political situation in the region. This approach was reflected in Moscow's open position towards the opposition forces, even if it nominally supported a particular regime. Among its main achievements, then, Russia can therefore count the fact that it managed not to pit against itself any of the political forces in the region, especially in situations where further changes were possible. On the other hand, the policy Moscow has pursued to date shows that it does not have the potential to shape the political situation either in the region as a whole or in its individual states. Its policy remains reactive despite several bold diplomatic and political moves, such as the recognition of Hamas. Its reaction to the revolutions indicates a lack of willingness to shape the political situation. Moscow seems not to expect any geopolitical benefits as a result of the revolutions and the resulting weakening of the US' position, but fears their detrimental implications above all.

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Russia's offer for the countries of the region has not been expanded (even in the categories of soft power, as Moscow does not have an attractive model of development, like Turkey does, for example). Moscow rather sees threat and risk than prospects for a new opening-up and growth of its influences. In the long term, such an approach may lead to Russia's marginalisation in the region.

At the same time, the long-term consequences of the revolutions for the Arab world remain undetermined. The main unknown is the share of influences between key political actors in the region and the role of political Islam, and thus the character of the governments which will be formed. As a result of further-reaching transformations, the context for Russia to realise its interests in the Middle East will change. Russia's capacities for further exploitation of the region in order to attain the supra-regional objectives of its foreign policy will to a great extent depend on the nature of the regimes which replace the current dictatorships. So far, the revolutions have not been anti-Western in nature, although a higher degree of autonomy for Egypt and other Arab countries will alone weaken American domination in the region. This could open up greater opportunities for Russian activity, although other countries such as China and Turkey will provide competition for Russia in this area.

Russia's approach to the region could significantly change if radical Islamist regimes take power. Moscow would thus be forced to adopt a more clear-cut position. The first option would be co-operation with Western countries and pro-Western states in the Middle East in isolating such regimes. This would likely contribute to an improvement in relations with Western countries in general. According to a second scenario, a rapprochement between Russia and such regimes could be expected, both in order to sap the domination and position of the West, and prevent to Russia from itself becoming a target for Islamist radicalism.



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