Revolutionary Developments in the Arab World and Their Impacts on Russia's Middle East policy

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Abstract

Russia is one of the traditional and key actors in Middle East that almost its role have determined on considerations of national security and international rivalry especially against US. Revolutionary developments in the region are viewed by Russian elites through two different approaches that it demonstrates disagreement about opportunities and challenges originated from these developments. Despite, it seems clear that Russia concerns widening extremism from Middle East to "near abroad" and eventually promoting US influence in these regions. Therefore, the major question that presented in this article is what have revolutionary developments in Arab Worlds impacted on Russia's Middle East Policy? The answer which is explained focuses on intentions and concerns of national security. Hence, the hypothesis is that revolutionary developments in Arab Worlds have caused Russia's Middle East policy intend to building up its image as a supra-regional power balancing US and containing extremism in the region. In the light of the nature of subject studied, appropriated method is descriptive- analytical one that both describe the gathered data and both explained them on basis of theoretical framework.

Key Words: Russia, Middle East, Arab Revolutions, Extremism

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Introduction

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 in some extended depends on considerations of its national security in so-called region "near abroad".

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 elites have 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 democratization processes, but rather as a destabilization of the region and as posing an increased danger from radicalism. For the other part of the elites, 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. Hence, the major preoccupation in this article is that what have revolutionary developments in Arab Worlds impacted on Russia's Middle East Policy? The answer which is explained focuses on intentions and concerns of national security. Hence, the hypothesis is that revolutionary developments in Arab Worlds have caused Russia's Middle East policy intend to building up its image as a supra-regional power

balancing US and containing extremism in the region. In the light of the nature of subject studied, appropriated method is descriptive- analytic one that it both describes the gathered data and both explained them on basis of theoretical framework.

1- Theoretical framework; Balance of Threat Realism

According to Walt's balance of threat theory, states will balance against the one they perceive as most threatening. The key independent variable for this theory, then, is not the balance of power but rather the balance of threat, with "threat" defined as a combination of geography, offensive capabilities, and intentions. One hypothesis that could be drawn from this is that a state's perception of threat should be reflected in official rhetoric (Walt, 1997: 993). An analysis of rhetoric under Primakov and Putin shows that the unipolar power of the US is considered a threat to Russia's interests. To Primakov, the main threat emanated from "those interested in destabilizing the world geopolitical equilibrium." Although he advocated for "an equitable and mutually beneficial partnership" with the US, he believed it was not interested in engaging Russia on equal terms, something that was confirmed by the "a humiliating geopolitical defeat" of NATO expansion (Dannreuther, 2000: 25). Russia's 1997 National Security Concept reflected these views. The top two threats outlined in the document were "attempts by others to diminish the role of Russia as a powerful center," and the stationing of foreign powers' troops in the neighboring regions, showing the degree of Russia's mistrust of Western intentions (Leighton, 2003). This perception of the West as a threat to Russia's interests can be related to Primakov's policy towards China. In order to balance the threat, he advocated the establishment of a multipolar world and promoted closer ties with China as a way to protect Russia's interests Dannreuther, 2000: 27).

Putin's election to presidency did not drastically change the country's official discourse. The National Security and Military Doctrines, signed within the first few months of his presidency, both stated that Russia's position in international politics has become less influential and that certain powers are attempting to weaken it in the "political, economic, military, and other spheres." The National Security Concept identified these attempts to be "the strengthening of regional blocs and alliances" (NATO expansion), the establishment of foreign bases in proximity to Russian borders, and the weakening of the CIS integration processes

(Staar, 2000: 23-39). What these documents show is that Russia's perception of US policies as a threat to its national interests did not change under Putin. What is surprising then is that Primakov actively sought to balance the Western threat by engaging China while Putin has attempted to engage the West and has diminished his cooperation with China. If the American measure of global power has not decreased, Russia's perception of it as a threat should not have diminished, and Putin should have continued the policies of Primakov. One counterargument balance-of-threat theorists could present is that Putin could perceive China as more threatening than the US and is thus cooperating with the US to balance China. This could definitely be true, but it goes beyond Walt's predictions when specifically to this case. If Russia's perception of "threat" is determined by geography, military capabilities, and intentions (Walt, 1997: 933), one of these aspects had to change for China in order for Putin to perceive it as a greater threat. Leaving geography aside, an analysis of China's military capabilities and intentions shows that no significant change has occurred. China has been modernizing its military, partially through large arms purchases from Russia, but this is a process that started under Primakov, and, by the admissions of Russian officials themselves, the arms sold to China lag behind Russian technology by as much as fifteen years and do not pose a direct threat (Garnett, 2001: 45). Chinese intentions towards Russia have also not become more hostile, as confirmed by the strong diplomatic relations between the two states and the signing of the Friendship Treaty. Based on this, it could be said that what accounts for the difference between Primakov and Putin are the two leaders' *personal* perceptions of China, something not expressly included in Walt's theory. Primakov's personal perception of China as a good ally led him to push for closer cooperation, while Putin's ambivalence towards Russia's neighbor prompted him to balance the relationship with other ties. Thus, while the balance of power theory does bring in the concept of perceptions, it does not give enough attention to the causal link between the leaders' personal perceptions and the difference in foreign policy outcomes (Radivilova, 2003).

2- The features and objectives of Russia's policy in the Middle East

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 Organization 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) (Kaczmarski, 2011).

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 Persian 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 Persian Gulf (Iran, Qatar) and North Africa (Algeria, Libya), and has used the organization 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 cooperation 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) (Kaczmarski, 2011).

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 legitimization 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 legitimization which it expected (among other events, Chechnya's President Ramzan Kadyrov was recognized 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 radicalism, attention should be paid to the close cooperation between Russian services with their counterparts in Arab countries (but also in Israel), which required political endorsement.

To recap, Moscow's general objective in the Middle East is to establish Russia's status and role as a major outside power in one of the world's most volatile regions. Other key objectives include:

- Containing and diminishing Islamist extremism and radicalism that might otherwise expand into Russia and its immediate post-Soviet neighborhood, and greatly enhance the potential for Muslim extremism there;
- Supporting friendly regimes and forces in the region, and building lasting geopolitical alliances with them;
- Establishing a modicum of Russian military presence in and around the region;
- Expanding Russian presence in the region's arms, nuclear, oil and gas, food, and other markets;
- Attracting investments into Russia, particularly from the richer countries of the Persian Gulf;
- Supporting energy prices by coordinating policies with the principal oil and gas producers in the Gulf (Ternin, 2016).

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 dispute 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 dispute, and Russia's initiatives regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict are not being implemented. Russia's *idée fixe*is to organize 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 (Kaczmarski, 2011).

Therefore, the principal drivers of the Kremlin's policies in the Middle East are geopolitical. Moscow's concern for domestic stability is also important. The Russian Federation includes several predominantly Muslim republics, from Chechnya and Dagestan in the North Caucasus to Tatarstan and Bashkortostan in the Volga River basin. The country's overall population is 12 percent Muslim. Immigrants from Muslim

countries in Central Asia and Azerbaijan number in the millions, with many of them in Russia illegally. Traditionally non-Muslim Russian areas, from the Urals to the Far East, are "greening" with the number of Muslims there rising due to the arrival of migrants from the Caucasus and guest workers from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Extremist militants still active in the North Caucasus have pledged allegiance to the self-proclaimed Islamic State. Radical ideology is spreading across Russia; and since the 1990s, terrorism is a constant threat all over the country, particularly in the major cities.

3- The balance sheet of the 'return'

Present-day Russian activism in the Middle East builds upon historical experience. For over two centuries, Russian foreign policy was focused on displacing the Ottoman Empire from the Black Sea region and the Balkans. Persia was de facto divided between Russia and Britain into respective zones of influence. St. Petersburg's designs on Constantinople and the Turkish Straits were a main reason Russia joined World War I. The Soviet Union's active involvement in the Middle East began in the mid-1950s, and soon resulted in an intense rivalry with the United States. A number of Arab countries, including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, South Yemen, and Syria, were, for a period of time, Soviet clients and quasi-allies in the Cold War. The Soviet Union helped establish the Israel, but later became disappointed with it and backed Israel's Arab foes and the Palestine Liberation Organization (Ternin, 2016).

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 legitimized 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 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 ((Kaczmarski, 2011).

From the Kremlin's viewpoint, U.S. policies in the Middle East, beginning with the administration of former president George W. Bush, have been fundamentally misguided and resulted in utter and colossal failure. "Do you realize now what you've done?" Putin asked rhetorically in his September 2015 speech at the UN General Assembly. Russian officials and their advisers generally blame Americans in the Middle East for being naive and inconsistent (encouraging swift transition to democracy at the time of the Arab Spring, and then flirting with the so-called moderate Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood); treacherous (sticking with Egypt's then president Hosni Mubarak, a loyal ally, for almost thirty years and then abruptly withdrawing their support for him as uprisings began in Tahrir Square); and cynical (leaving a mess for others to clear up and denying U.S. responsibility after botched interventions in Iraq and Libya) (Ternin, 2016).

Proudly nonideological, the Russians themselves are conservative in the sense that they basically support the existing states and borders in the region, no matter how artificial and arbitrary those may be; they prefer ruling authoritarians to revolutionary chaos, not to speak of Islamist radicals; and they reject regime change, particularly induced from abroad, and favor a gradual opening of political systems. Russia has no design and no model for the Middle East. It is frankly pursuing its national interests there: security, geopolitical, and economic.

Contrary to widespread U.S. impressions, the Russians do not see President Barack Obama's hesitancy to use force in Syria as a weakness to be exploited, but rather as prudence of someone who realizes—better perhaps than many of his compatriots—the limits of American power in the region. In return, they managed to get Damascus to agree to chemical disarmament, which Moscow jointly implemented with Washington amid the Syrian civil war in 2013–2014. The Kremlin has also appreciated the Obama administration's constructive approach to relations with Iran, and, despite the Ukraine crisis, continued to cooperate with Washington to reach the nuclear agreement with Tehran in 2015.

Today, Moscow sees its co-sponsorship with Washington of the Syrian peace process as a major positive development, both in terms of what it means for pacifying Syria and the region, and for elevating Russia's global status. One major objective of the Russian policy is to involve the U.S. military, not just the State Department, into close day-to-day cooperation with Moscow on Syria. Finally, the Kremlin presents its

fight against the Islamic State as a latter-day analogy of the anti-Hitler coalition, and would want to see the United States as a co-equal ally—though not the leader—in a grand antiterrorist front (Ternin, 2016).

Generally, Russians see the United States as being largely focused on maintaining its global dominance as it is being increasingly challenged by others. At the same time, they note that Americans are becoming more aware of the need to tend to their domestic problems. This creates a major dilemma for U.S. policymakers, which demands difficult tradeoffs. Russia is of course competing with the United States for a measure of influence and presence in the Middle East, as well as for the opportunities to be used there, but it does not seek to replace the United States, for example, as an ally to Israel or the Gulf states, both for paucity of resources and the lack of superpower ambitions (Trenin, 2016).

Therefore, this balance sheet proves that the Middle East orientation has played a secondary role, being used as an 'auxiliary instrument' for realizing 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.

After revolutionary developments in the Arab Worlds has emerged a new factor in Russia's national security. These events concern Russian officials that following extending the extremist groups like Al-qaeda in Arab World, this phenomenon also would enter to nearby regions of Russia (Caucasus and Central Asia). However, this imagined reality by Russian elites demonstrates the concerns that they believe extending Islamic extremism in these regions and subsequently promoting US presence will sweep aside Russia. Therefore, the country seeks to contain this phenomenon through active policy toward Middle East.

4- Russia's position on Arab revolutions

Developments in the Middle East over the past years—the Arab revolutions and its failure; the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State; civil wars in Syria and Yemen and state failure in Libya; and the rupture with Turkey—have opened new opportunities but also created a number

of challenges for Moscow's foreign policy. The Kremlin has responded with a much more active approach to the region than since before the end of the Cold War (Trenin, 2016). At first, the response of Moscow was quite calm to the tumultuous upheavals in the Arab world, as well as to events in North Africa and the Middle East. The Russian leadership refused to use its veto in the UN Security Council in order to save the regime of Muammar Gaddafi, a Libyan dictator, from the imposition of a no-fly zone in Libya during an anti-government uprising in that country. Subsequently, Moscow recognized the results of the elections to legitimize the new authorities in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Later, though, the Russian position on Libya moved closer to that of the West. At the G-8 Summit in Deauville on May 27, Medvedev declared that Qadhafi "should leave," and offered Russian mediation in order to bring this about (The Washington Post, May 2011). The response of the Russian government to these events ha often been confused and inconsistent (Katz, 2012).

However, at all times, Russia was very critical of the overall strategy of the united West, led by the United States. In the Middle East, it said, "attempts to transplant onto the soil of other countries own models of state structure and development, ignoring the traditions and values of others... will not bring success."

After the Cold War ended, very few countries in the Arab world remained more or less under the influence of Russian foreign policy. However, the whirlwind of "Arab revolutions" brought a clear threat, and increased this influence. However, there are exceptions. For example, after coming to power in Egypt, the generals led by Abdel al-Sisi greatly intensified political and economic ties between Moscow and Cairo, and Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly stressed the "remarkable personal courage" of the new Egyptian leader in his fight against terrorism (Kostyuk, 2016).

The events of the Arab world have revived Moscow's fears of Saudi Arabia that were prevalent from the mid-1990s until the Saudi-Russian rapprochement of 2003. Before 2003, Moscow saw the Kingdom as attempting to spread radical Sunni Islamism to Chechnya, the North Caucasus, and elsewhere in the former USSR (Katz, 2001: 615). Relations improved in 2003 (Putin himself visited Saudi Arabia and Qatar in 2007), especially since Riyadh made clear that it supported Moscow's solution for Chechnya (Katz, 2008). Now, though, Moscow

sees Saudi Arabia as attempting to make use of the Arab developments for its own geopolitical interests by supporting Salafists in Egypt and Libya, suppressing Shi'as in Bahrain, and replacing the pro-Iranian Alawite government in Syria with a pro-Saudi Sunni regime. Nor is it clear to Moscow what the limits of Riyadh's ambitions are. What Moscow does see, though, is that Washington is not alert to this danger (Englund,2012).

Essentially, Moscow seeks to present itself to countries in the region as a pragmatic, non-ideological, reliable, savvy, no-nonsense player with a capacity to weigh in on regional matters by both diplomatic and military means. As a major outside power, Russia offers itself as a credible partner to those seeking to diversify their foreign policy. Right up to the conflict with Turkey over the downed warplane, Russia prided itself as a country that was in close touch with everyone in the region: Iran and Saudi Arabia; Israel and Hezbollah; Turkey and Syria. Even today, this is still largely true—with the exception of Ankara, relations with which remain broken.

Russia's military operation in Syria has raised its regional profile greatly. Its use of force came in response to the challenge of a likely overthrow of the Assad and eventual takeover of Damascus by the Islamic State. Such a triumph for Islamic extremists would have encouraged their sympathizers across the Muslim world, including Central Asia and Muslim communities in Russia. Moscow genuinely believes that Washington and its European allies misunderstand what is going on in Syria. Instead of the downfall of the Asad leading to a democratic government as the West believes, Moscow fears that it could give rise to a radical Sunni regime that is not only anti-Western, but also anti-Russian (Alhomayed, 2012). However, Turkey found itself exposed to new security risks when Russian aircraft deliberately violated its airspace, so President Erdogan initiated a joint statement with Qatar and Saudi Arabia (as well as Western coalition partners) condemning Russian airstrikes on Syrian opposition forces. Instead, In Moscow's view, American-led interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya have left all three of these countries in a mess. Moscow fears that U.S. intervention in Syria will lead to the same result, and that Russian interests will be negatively affected long after what Moscow sees as an inevitable American withdrawal.

Today Moscow has avoided the Afghanistan-style quagmire that many predicted, and has refused to be drawn into the Shia camp against the Sunnis. It strengthened ties to the Kurds, continued to court Egypt, and managed to remain on speaking terms with the Saudis and the Qataris. The only geopolitical accident that has resulted from Syria was the collision with Turkey. True, Russia lost an airliner with 224 passengers two weeks into the Syria campaign, but Russia was not spared terrorist attacks even when it was not waging war outside or even inside its own territory. Within Russia itself, several plots by Islamic State–friendly groups have been prevented.

When ordering the Syria intervention, President Putin made his position clear. Russia would not be left alone by Islamist extremists even if it chose to stay away from the fighting in Syria and Iraq. "When a fight is inevitable, you have to hit first," Putin said—and he acted accordingly. He elected the risks of action over those of passivity. Whether this approach will pay off depends on Moscow's warcraft, statecraft, and resources.

By intervening militarily in Syria the Russian leadership has abandoned its policy of cautious opportunistic manoeuvring in the Middle East and engaged in a risky gamble with a short-term horizon. Arab leaders (as well as Israel) are increasingly inclined to agree with U.S. conclusions on the lack of strategy in President Putin's enterprise (Schleifer & Scott, 2015) and recognise that he is far more interested in scoring geopolitical points than in solving the Syrian problem and has a propensity to covering one mistake with another blunder. Whatever the fate of this Russian intervention, however, it has succeeded in increasing the pressure on western stakeholders to stop temporising and produce a feasible plan for rebuilding Syria (Pavel, 2015). Therefore, Russia has become a party to the Syrian calamity, but hardly a contributor to a solution. Russia's hard-gained rapport with Arab leaders has been lost as a result of their feeling misled by Putin and upset by his disregard for their opinions. They are dismayed by Russia's choice of closer cooperation with Iran in Syria and tend to agree with U.S. president Barack Obama that the intervention is a "recipe for disaster" (Bloomberg, 2015).

Therefore, 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 skepticism (Kaczmarski, 2011).

On the one hand, the Russian government did not hide its distrust of the Arab revolutions. They were not regarded as processes of democratization, but rather as a destabilization 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 Egypt (Williams, 2011). 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 radicalization, divisions and destabilization, 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 Somalia (Baribeau, 2011). In this context the revolutionary situation in the Arab countries was linked to a potential threat to the Russian state, above all from radicalism. Soon after endorsing the changes in Egypt, President 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 destabilization 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 stronger (Johnson's Russia List, 04.2011).

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 Europe (Johnson's Russia List, 07.2011). At the same time, it is impossible to determine how sustainable this correction of the negative approach to the Arab revolutions is.

The divergences in the Russian elite's evaluation of the Arab revolutions have 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 Gaddafi (See President Medvedev's declaration about the situation in Libya of 21 March 2011), 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 recognized that Gaddafi had lost all legitimacy to rule. At the same time, Russia severely criticized 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 lead 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 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 (Kaczmarski, 2011).

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 immigration.

5- The consequences of Arab developments for Russia's Middle Eastern policy

Before the outbreak of the Arab spring in 2011, Putin sought to protect and advance Russia’s geopolitical interests in the region by pursuing good relations with all governments and certain key political movements in the MENA. Putin not only rebuilt Russian relations with longstanding friends (including the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, the

Assad regime in Syria, the Gaddafi regime in Libya, the military regime in Algeria, and the Islamic regime in Iran), he also sought to improve relations with America's friends there (including Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Cooperation Council states, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and even the post-Saddam government in Baghdad as well as the Kurdish Regional Government). Especially noteworthy were Putin's efforts to improve relations with Saudi Arabia, with which Moscow had tense relations not only during the Cold War when Riyadh was aiding the Afghan Mujahedeen, but also in the 1990s when Moscow believed the Saudis were assisting Chechen rebels. Putin also sought improved relations with Israel –that Moscow had long been at odds with. Russia – which, along with the US, the European Union (EU), and the United Nations (UN) is a member of the Quartet seeking an Israeli-Palestinian peace – has also had good relations with both Palestinian Fatah and rival Hamas and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Before the Arab spring, in short, Putin pursued good relations with all the major actors in the MENA (except al-Qaeda and its affiliates) (Katz, 2015).

In addition, 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. 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 marginalization in the region (Kaczmarski, 2011).

Many in Moscow saw Western (and their MENA allies') support for the Arab awakening as the first step in a plan to stimulate the rise of similar forces in the Muslim regions – or all – of Russia. In February 2011, then President Medvedev suggested that 'foreign elements' were fomenting these uprisings, and that their ultimate intention was to bring political change to Russia. Then Prime Minister Putin warned that 'external interference' could lead to the rise of Islamists, and that their rise in North Africa could negatively affect other regions, including Russia's North Caucasus. In addition, the collapse of world petroleum prices in late 2014, as a result of increasing American shale production as well as Saudi refusal to reign in its oil production, was seen in Moscow as a deliberate Saudi-American effort to weaken Russia economically. Russian strategy for dealing with the MENA region since the outbreak of the developments, especially since the downfall of Gaddafi, has involved several elements. First, blocking all Western/Arab-backed efforts against Syria's Assad at the UN Security Council (Putin has indicated that then-President Medvedev's decision to abstain on the 2011 UN Security Council resolution, calling for the imposition of a no-fly zone in Libya, was the lever which certain Western and Arab governments used to engineer Gaddafi's downfall). Second, providing arms to the Assad to prevent its downfall. Third, collaborating with MENA actors that oppose the downfall of the Assad. Fourth, Russia has been cooperating with American and European anti-Weapons-of-Mass-Destruction efforts so that they perceive Russia as a partner in the MENA despite their differences over Ukraine. Finally, Moscow's MENA strategy has involved attempting to isolate Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Arab allies from the West in particular by trying to raise Western fears that they actually support Sunni jihadist forces such as Daesh (also called the Islamic State, IS) (Katz, 2015).

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 realize 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.

Conclusion

In the broader universe of Moscow's foreign policy, the Middle East generally ranks after the United States, Europe, and China and Asia. The Kremlin again sees Russia as a great power on a global scale, and as such it cannot ignore a region so close geographically, so rich in hydrocarbons, and so unstable socially and politically as the Middle East. Moscow's withdrawal from the Middle East under then president Mikhail Gorbachev at the start of the first Persian Gulf War marked the decline of the Soviet Union's superpower status. Russia's reappearance as a player in the Middle East under President Vladimir Putin has the aim of restoring the country's position as a great power outside of the former USSR. With the start of the military intervention in Syria in 2015, and the U.S.-Russian diplomatic effort that accompanied it, the Middle East has become a key testing ground for Russia's attempt to return to the global stage.

Moscow has several geopolitical interests in the MENA. One of these is, as in other regions (most notably Europe), to prevent what it sees as American and European efforts to deprive Moscow of its allies. In turn, Moscow seeks to take advantage of MENA governments' unhappiness with American and European policy in the region. Competition with the West, though, is not Moscow's only geopolitical interest in the MENA. Another is to prevent the rise of radical Sunni forces which Moscow fears will, if they grow strong enough, not only engulf the MENA and reduce Russian influence, but also spread into the Muslim regions of Russia. A third Russian geopolitical interest in the MENA derives from Moscow's strong dependence on oil and gas export revenue – not only to fund the government's budget but also to pay off

key interest groups on whom Putin's rule depends and to support the Russian economy more generally. Since the Middle East is a key supplier of petroleum resources to the rest of the world, Moscow has a strong interest in seeking to prevent or reverse developments there that result in lower worldwide petroleum prices or European countries switching their reliance on Russia to MENA countries for gas supplies. A fourth Russian geopolitical interest in the MENA relates to Moscow's efforts to expand its exports of arms, nuclear reactors, and other goods produced by enterprises closely linked to the Kremlin, and exports to wealthy MENA countries help bolster these industries. But what makes this an important geopolitical (and not just commercial) interest for Russia is that these industries support key elites and interest groups that back Putin. These Russian geopolitical interests in the MENA, it must be noted, are not always mutually compatible. Specifically, the goal of limiting the further expansion of Western influence especially US in the region can be at odds with the aim of preventing the spread of radical Sunni forces. America and Europe, after all, share this latter goal with Russia, and a strong Western presence in the MENA can serve this aim – provided that the US and Europe focus on this goal. Similarly, while Moscow seeks to sell arms, nuclear reactors and other products to the petroleum rich MENA countries, Russia is often in competition with these same countries to export oil and gas to Western and other countries (Katz, 2015).

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