

Russia and the Arab Revolutions

By Roland Dannreuther, London

From the perspective of the Kremlin, the revolutionary developments in the Middle East, which have seen longstanding leaders depart from power in Tunisia and Egypt and severely threatened other Arab regimes, has been far from a cause for celebration. Given the premium that the current Russian political leadership has given to ensuring stability and order after the instabilities and disorders of the 1990s, this is not perhaps surprising. In the current configuration of international relations, Russia is a profoundly conservative power, upholding traditional understandings of sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention along with its allies from other emerging powers, such as China and India.

The revolutionary upheavals in the Middle East raise numerous fears and anxious memories for the Russian leadership. There is a concern that these represent a further manifestation of the 'coloured revolutions' in the former Soviet space where political change was aided and abetted by Western democracy promotion and the shadowy activities of Western intelligence agencies. There is also a fear that the uprisings provide a justification for Western-led 'humanitarian' interventions and an opportunity for NATO to expand into the virgin territories of North Africa and the Middle East after its attempts to penetrate Ukraine and Georgia have been, at least temporarily, thwarted. There is also pessimism, engendered in part from the growing Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus, that the revolutions in the Middle East will inevitably result in the victory of Islamists and that, as Medvedev himself stated in February, 'it is quite probable that these difficult events [in the Arab world] may bring fanatics to power'. Chaos in the Middle East would inevitably, given the physical proximity of this region to the Caucasus and Central Asia, have negative knock-on effects, threatening to destabilise the authoritarian regimes and leaders upon whom much of Russia's policies towards its southern regions is predicated.

This traditional conservative and reflexive anti-Westernism found its most authoritative expression in the emotional statement of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin after the vote in favour of UN Security Resolution 1973 which sanctioned military intervention into Libya. He condemned the resolution as 'deficient and flawed' and argued that 'this [resolution] allows anyone to do anything they want—to take actions against a sovereign state. Basically, all of this reminds me of a medieval appeal for a crusade, in which somebody calls upon somebody else to go to a certain place and to liberate it'. Putin was not just speaking on his own behalf, but was reflecting the broad consensus of the Russian foreign policy establishment, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which had reportedly recommended Russia vetoing (rather than abstaining from) the UN resolution.

This outburst from Putin resulted in the most public clash yet with President Medvedev. The President responded almost instantaneously to argue that 'it is absolutely inexcusable to use expressions that, in effect, lead to a clash of civilisations—such as "crusades" and so forth. That is unacceptable'. This assertion of Presidential prerogative over foreign policy, and Medvedev's strong defence of the decision to abstain over the Security Council resolution, gained the speedy acquiescence of Putin. Among Russian commentators, there were divisions about whether this vocal and public disagreement reflected a genuine political and ideological divide between the two leaders or was rather just another manifestation of a carefully orchestrated division of labour where Medvedev was speaking on behalf of the West and the international community and Putin on behalf of the domestic Russian electorate. Given the opaqueness and narrowness of the political system in Russia, it is impossible to know for sure which of these interpretations is correct.

Nevertheless, what this incident demonstrated is that Russian policy towards the Middle East is mediated through two key external non-Middle Eastern prisms. The first is the all-consuming political manoeuvring over the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011 and 2012 and the determination of the political establishment to see an orderly transition which resolves the contending claims of Medvedev and Putin for the presidency. However manipulated and managed the Putin–Medvedev political dispute over Libya might be, there was undoubtedly a certain setting out of their respective electoral stalls with Medvedev promoting his modernising and pro-Western agenda as opposed to the more authoritarian and instinctively anti-Western posture adopted by Putin.

Interpretations in the Russian media of the potential significance of the Arab revolutions for Russia reflected this electorally-driven agenda. Alexei Kudrin, the liberal Finance Minister, used the opportunity of the events in the Middle East to argue that only free and fair elections can give Russia the opportunity to carry out economic reforms and that this must involve 'all of the leading

forces of society'. Dmitry Furman, a respected analyst from the Institute of Europe, stated more forcefully that if Russia 'continues to suppress all legal opportunities to express protest or alternative political opinions, then some sort of Russian variant of what is happening in the countries of the Arab world, is not only possible but inevitable'. In contrast to this, the more frequent media condemnations of the NATO intervention into Libya, and the expansion of its mission to include regime change, reflected the more sceptical, anti-Western orientation.

The second external prism defining the Russian response to the Middle East crisis is the broader context of US-Russian relations, particularly the 'reset' agenda pursued by the Obama administration. In practice, the political compromises that Russia has brought to the 'reset' table are drawn predominantly from the Middle East. There is first the willingness to be more involved and supportive of the US and NATO engagement in Afghanistan. Second, and more critically, there is a shift towards a more assertive and confrontational posture towards Iran and its nuclear programme, supporting stronger UN-mandated sanctions and agreeing to the cancellation of the sale of S-300 missile systems to Tehran. The Libyan crisis provided a third major Middle Eastern test for the reset agenda. The Obama administration's decision to bring the issue of military intervention into Libya to the UN Security Council, as a deliberate signalling of the US resolve to follow international law and repudiate the Bush era unilateralism, provided a strategic dilemma for Russia. To have vetoed the resolution would have resulted in a considerable loss of public face for the US. It was the strategic calculation to avoid this scenario, and the damage that this would have done to the improvement in US-Russian relations, which was a significant factor in the Russian decision to abstain rather than veto the resolution.

The fact that Libya is peripheral to Russian core strategic interests in the region was another factor which made this decision easier. The reality that Gaddafi was almost universally unloved in the Arab world was another facilitating factor. Abstention also had strategic advantages, placing Russia in a position to benefit from whatever political outcome, either (the now increasingly unlikely) continuation of Gaddafi's rule or some new political constellation.

None of these conditions apply to Syria. Syria is one of the closest allies of Russia, reflecting a continuation of the long and deep ties of the Soviet period when Syria was the favoured Arab strategic ally after the defection of Egypt to the West in the 1970s. The overwhelming consensus amongst Russian analysts is that any change of regime in Syria would result in severe inter-ethnic and inter-confessional conflict which would lead to a Leba-

non-style civil war and regional chaos. This in turn could have significant potential implications for stability in the North Caucasus and Central Asia. There is, therefore, a clear resolve within the Russian government to seek to support the Assad regime and to limit the engagement of the UN Security Council. There is also a strategic calculation that this obduracy will ultimately not materially damage Russia's engagement with the West. This reflects the recognition that the West is in reality deeply hesitant about substantial engagement in Syria and that Russian (and Chinese) insistence on non-intervention is a potentially useful cover for an underlying strategic preference for caution and inaction.

In general, the Russian leadership can be reasonably satisfied that its diplomatic engagement and stance towards the Arab revolutionary movements have so far limited the potential damage to Russian strategic interests. By sitting on the fence over Libya, it has preserved relations with the West while giving it the flexibility to respond to whatever political outcome should emerge. The economic losses that have been sustained through support for economic sanctions on Libya, estimated to be around \$2 billion worth of Russian contracts, have been amply compensated by the rise of oil prices. Aleksei Kudrin has now estimated that the budget deficit, which escalated during the period of the economic crash, could now be paid off by 2014 with the increased oil and gas revenues. The self-confidence of Russia as an 'energy superpower', last promoted in the mid-2000s, has now re-emerged. The danger of the spread of revolution from the Middle East to the Caucasus, Central Asia and to Russia itself has also been avoided. An attempt to promote an Arab Spring in Azerbaijan in March fizzled out ignominiously. As Russian commentators have argued, the Arab revolutions follow the pattern of the revolutions of the early 1990s more than the coloured revolutions of the 2000s.

But Russian historical memory of the 1917 revolutions is that democratic revolutions which occur in Spring are only a precursor to a counter-revolutionary or a more radical anti-democratic revolutionary wave in Autumn. Russian anxieties and fears remain strong and the mood of pessimism about the future evolution of the Middle East region has far from receded. There is also recognition that the stability of Russia and its neighbouring regions, where there are clear parallels in terms of political stagnation, electoral apathy and popular disenchantment, is far from secure. Events in the Middle East, which is, it should be remembered, a region close to Russia's borders and its most unstable region, the North Caucasus, could still have unpredictable and indeterminate repercussions.

Please see overleaf for information about the author.

About the Author:

Roland Dannreuther is Professor of International Relations and Head of the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Westminster. His recent publications include *Russia and Islam: State Society and Radicalism* (Routledge, 2010) (co-edited with Luke March) and 'Islamic Radicalisation in Russia: An Assessment', *International Affairs*, 86:1, 2010.

ANALYSIS

Russia and the Arab Spring

By Mark N. Katz, Fairfax, Va.

The Russian government—like its counterparts in the West, the Middle East, and elsewhere—was caught off guard by the outburst of Arab uprisings beginning in January 2011 which swept away long-ruling authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and have threatened to topple those in Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria. The response of the Russian government to these events has—like that of Western governments—often been confused and inconsistent. Just as Western governments have done, Moscow has sought to protect its interests in the region. But while Russian and Western interests have been similar (or perhaps more accurately: while Moscow has aligned itself with the Western approach) in some cases, Russian and Western policies have differed sharply in others.

This article examines Moscow's reaction to each of the Arab uprisings and the extent to which its policies have been similar or different from those of the West. It concludes with a discussion of the larger significance of the Arab spring for Russian interests as well as for Russia's relations with the West.

Tunisia

While surprised (like everyone else) by the events leading to the flight of President Ben Ali on January 14, 2011, Moscow took the fall of his regime in stride. Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 26, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev noted, "In my opinion, what happened in Tunisia serves as a serious lesson to any government. The authorities should not rest on their laurels, sitting in comfortable armchairs, but they need to develop along with their society whether it be Europe, Africa or Latin America." Here, Medvedev seemed to be aligning Moscow with the West in accepting democratic change in Tunisia.

Egypt

Although many Russian commentators were by now describing the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt as American-sponsored "color revolutions," the Russian government reacted circumspectly to the dramatic events in Cairo. President Medvedev, Foreign Minister Sergei Lav-

rov, and Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Luka-shevich all emphasized the need for a peaceful resolution to the situation. Although more supportive of Mubarak before his downfall, Moscow quickly emphasized the importance of a "strong, democratic" Egypt (as Medvedev put it) afterward, thus signaling Moscow's willingness to work with the new government. Here again, Russia aligned itself with the West in accepting political change in Egypt.

Libya

Moscow, though, reacted differently to the uprising against Libya's Gaddafi. Whereas regime change in both Tunisia and Egypt occurred largely through peaceful means without outside intervention, Gaddafi forcefully resisted his opponents and appeared on the verge of defeating them. Discussion arose in the West about the possibility of military intervention against Gaddafi. All this was apparently too much for the top Russian leadership. Medvedev warned about the rise to power of "fanatics" in the Middle East, and warned about "fires for decades and the spread of extremism" there. He even suggested that the West was fomenting these uprisings, and that its ultimate intention was to bring political change to Russia. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin warned that Western attempts to "impose democracy" could lead to the rise of Islamists, and that their rise