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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.

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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

in North Africa could negatively affect other regions, including Russia's North Caucasus.

However, after the Arab League called for the imposition of a no-fly zone in Libya to protect the people there from the use of force by Gaddafi, Russia—along with China—abstained from voting on UN Security Council Resolution 1973 (to create a no-fly zone over Libya), thus allowing it to pass. This Russian move showed that despite its extreme discomfort with American-led military interventions aimed at promoting democracy, Moscow valued maintaining good relations with America and the West even more. Almost immediately after it began, though, Moscow (as well as the Arab League) began criticizing how the U.S. and NATO were conducting the intervention.

Then in a bizarre episode on March 21, a statement by Prime Minister Putin criticizing Western military action against Libya as a “crusade” was followed two hours later by President Medvedev saying that it was “unacceptable” to use a term such as “crusade,” and indicated that he did not oppose the UN Security Council Resolution against Libya. Yet while some observers saw this as evidence of a serious breach between Putin and Medvedev, others (especially Russian ones) saw it as a contrived disagreement with Putin's statement aimed at pleasing the Russian domestic audience and Medvedev's aimed at currying favor with the West.

Since then, the Russian position on Libya has moved closer to that of the West. At the G-8 Summit in Deauville on May 27, Medvedev declared that Gaddafi “should leave,” and offered Russian mediation in order to bring this about. In early June, Medvedev sent Mikhail Margelov (chairman of the foreign relations committee of Russia's Federation Council) as his personal representative to Libya for talks both with the Gaddafi government and with the rebels. After at first resisting and then not opposing Western policy toward Libya, Moscow has by now aligned itself with it.

Bahrain

Russia kept a low profile during the tumultuous political protest conducted by the Arab Shi'a majority in Bahrain against the Sunni minority royal family and government. Russia also kept a low profile when this protest was crushed by Bahraini security forces with the help of troops from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In late March, the Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman declared that these protests were “an internal matter” that should be “solved through dialogue,” but did not object when they were resolved (for the time being, at least) through violent means. At the beginning of June 2011, the Bahraini Minister of Culture visited Moscow and signed a cooperation and exchange agree-

ment related to theatre arts—as if nothing at all untoward had transpired. There was no appreciable difference between Russia and the West when it came to Bahrain; neither wanted to see the downfall of a Gulf monarchy that might lead to instability in neighboring Saudi Arabia and the other monarchies of the oil rich Persian Gulf.

Yemen

Similarly, Russia—like the West—kept its distance from the growing opposition to Yemen's long-reigning authoritarian president, Ali Abdullah Saleh. In April, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov was calling for parties inside Yemen to reach a solution. In early June, though, he called for acceptance of the Gulf Cooperation Council's proposal for Saleh and his entourage to step down in exchange for immunity. Also like the West, Moscow was not willing to get directly involved in the escalating violence in Yemen, but was willing to go along with Saudi Arabia's efforts to mediate conflict resolution following Saleh's departure for the Kingdom after being injured in an opposition attack on June 3. Once again: there has been no appreciable difference between Russian and Western approaches regarding Yemen.

Syria

Moscow and the West, though, have been increasingly at odds over how to react to popular opposition to Syrian strongman, Bashar al-Assad. Despite repeated violent crackdowns, widespread opposition to the al-Assad regime has continued. In the West, this has led to growing criticism of Damascus and calls for sanctions against it. Moscow, by contrast, sees al-Assad as an ally. In late May, President Medvedev declared that Russia would not support the imposition of sanctions against Syria by the UN Security Council. In early June, Foreign Minister Lavrov bluntly warned that the international community “should not permit any provocations aimed at securing a regime change.” Indeed, he added, “We think that they need to be suppressed.” Moscow, it appears, has no intention of allowing the Security Council to approve military intervention against Syria as it did against Libya.

Especially considering how difficult the NATO military operation against Libya has remained and the ongoing U.S. and Coalition military efforts in Afghanistan as well as Iraq, it does not seem likely that the U.S. and NATO will seek to intervene militarily in Syria anyway. On the other hand, as events in Tunisia, Egypt, and now Yemen have shown, hitherto invulnerable leaders who have been highly successful in suppressing their opponents for years or even decades can also succumb to them quite suddenly and surprisingly. Just as the West is unlikely to intervene in Syria to overthrow al-Assad, it is not going to intervene there to protect him either.

Despite the support that it has expressed for al-Assad, Moscow is also not likely to be willing or able to intervene on his behalf either.

Conclusion

Moscow undoubtedly would have preferred that the Arab Spring not have occurred at all, and that stable authoritarian governments—whether pro-American or anti-American—that Moscow has been working with remain in power indefinitely. Moscow is also highly nervous about American and Western support for democratic change in some (though not all) Arab countries. This concern is partly due to the Kremlin's fear that American and Western influence might displace what is left of Russian influence in countries where the beleaguered governments in question have been more Moscow's partners than Washington's. But Moscow is even more concerned about what it sees as American and European over-optimism about how supporting the downfall of unpopular authoritarian regimes in the Arab world will lead both to democratization and friendly ties with the West. Instead, Moscow fears, the downfall of these regimes could not only lead to their replacement by hostile Islamic radical regimes, but also

to revolutionary contagion that could spread to the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union and perhaps even to Russia's North Caucasus.

America and the West, of course, also fear that the Arab Spring might result in the rise of Islamic radical regimes, and not democracies. When an uprising reaches a certain critical mass, though, there is little that any outside power is able to do to halt it. And if they see that an authoritarian Arab government is about to fall, the only realistic option that America, Europe, and Russia may have is to try to establish friendly ties with the group coming to power. Thus, although Moscow opposes Security Council resolutions (and certainly Security Council-approved intervention) against the al-Assad regime in Syria, the absence of such resolutions may not serve to keep the existing regime in power. And if al-Assad—or any other authoritarian regime—appears about to fall, Moscow can be expected to do exactly what the West will do in this situation: try to establish good relations with the opposition. Of course, whether such American, European, and Russian efforts succeed in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, or anywhere else there is regime change in the Arab world remains to be seen.

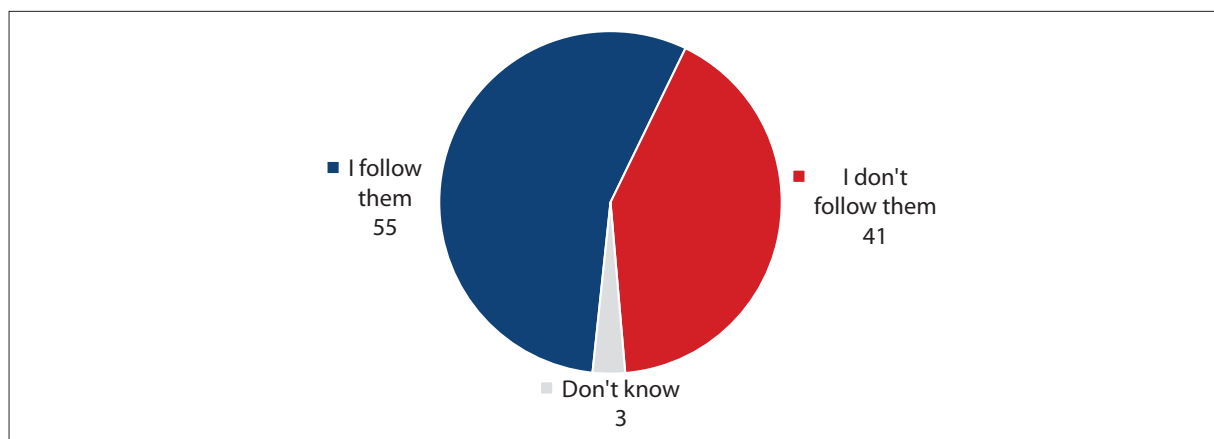
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OPINION POLL

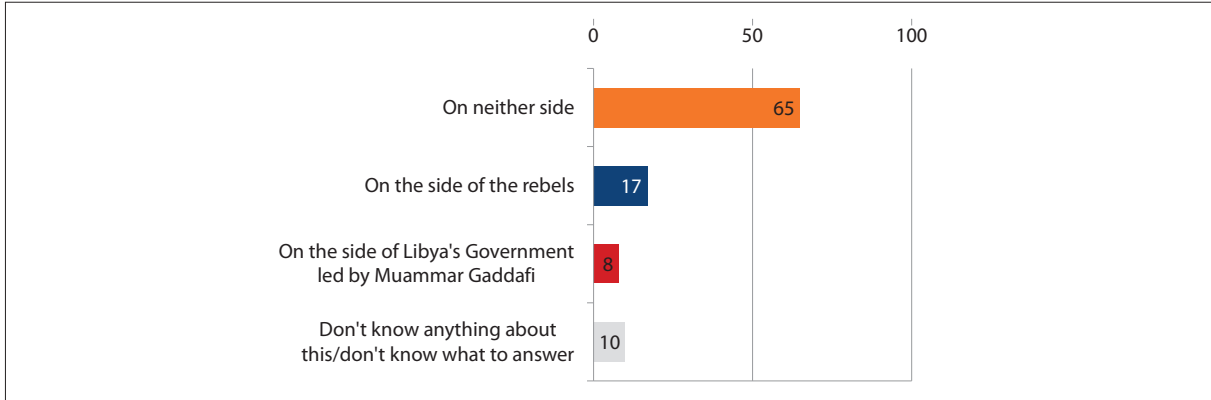
Russian Public Opinion on the War in Libya

Figure 1: Do you follow the events in Libya? (FOM poll) (%)



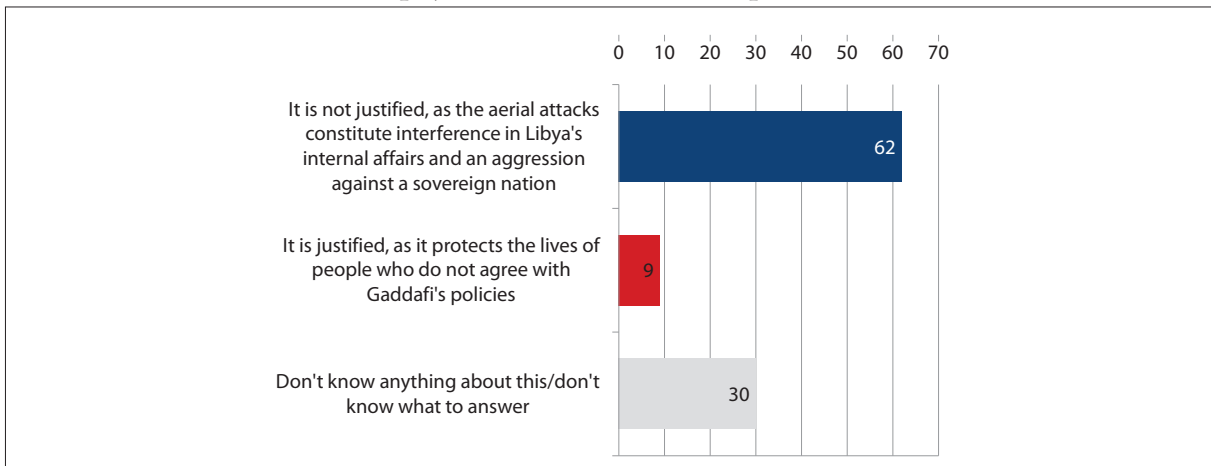
Source: representative opinion poll by FOM (*Fond obshchestvennogo mneniya*), 10 April 2011, <http://bd.fom.ru/pdf/d15svl11.pdf>

Figure 2: Whose side are you on in the Libyan civil war? (Levada poll) (%)



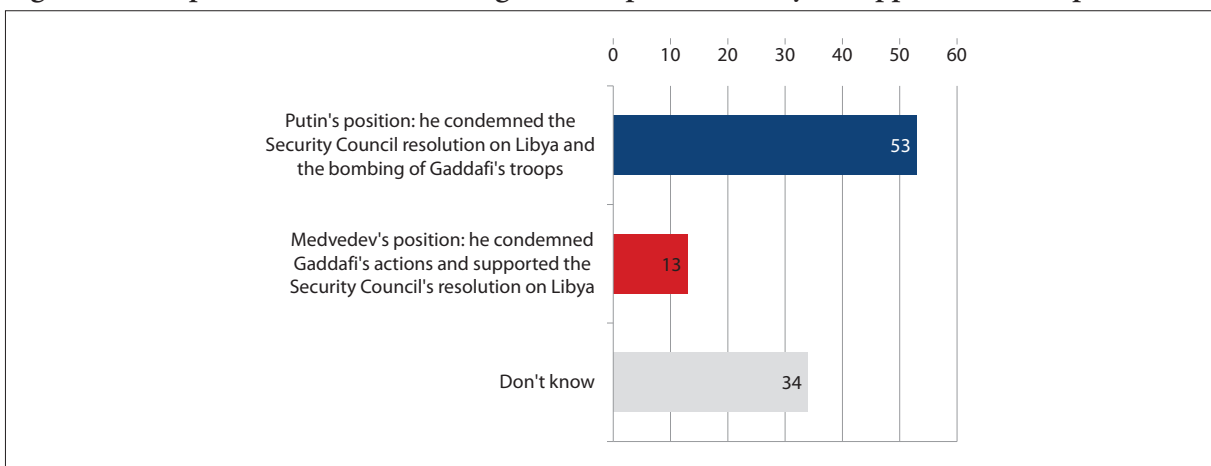
Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 15–18 April 2011, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2011051800.html>

Figure 3: Is the resolution of the UN Security Council authorizing bombing of military targets and of Gaddafi's troops justified or not? (Levada poll) (%)



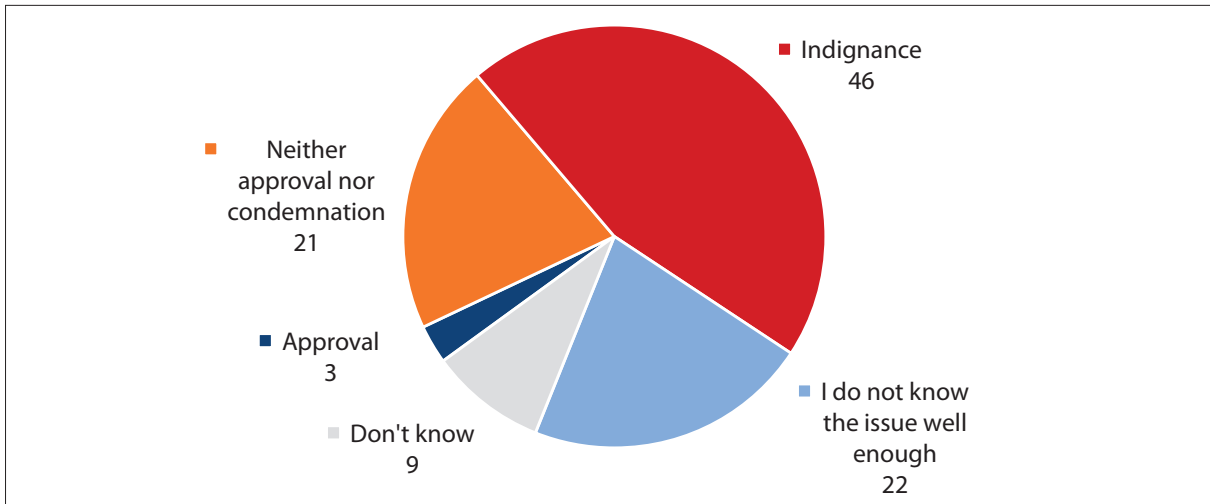
Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 15–18 April 2011, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2011051800.html>

Figure 4: The position of which leading Russian politician do you support? (Levada poll) (%)



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 15–18 April 2011, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2011051800.html>

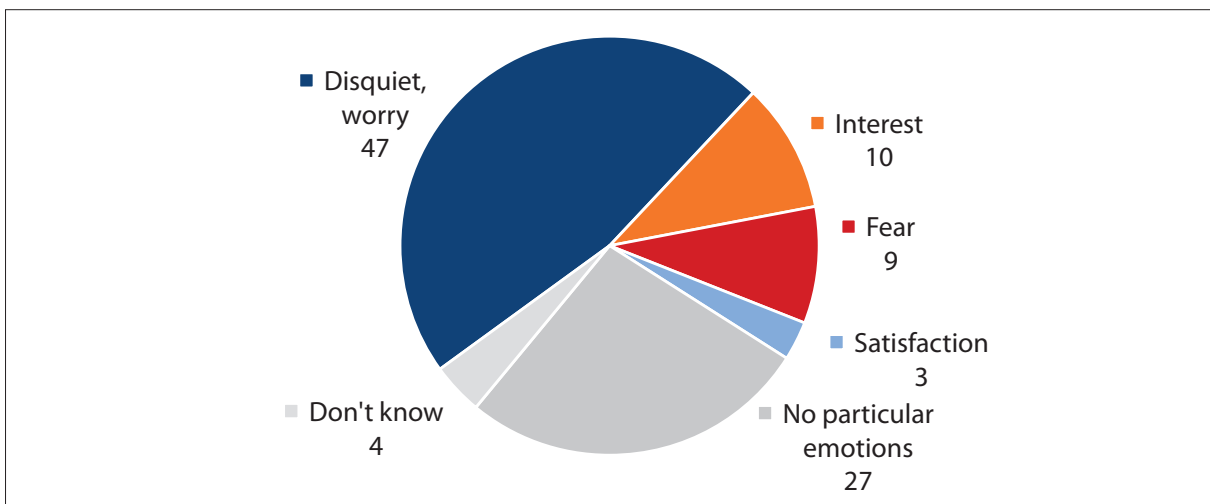
Figure 5: What are your feelings concerning NATO air attacks on military targets and Gaddafi's troops in Libya? (Levada poll) (%)



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 15–18 April 2011, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2011051800.html>

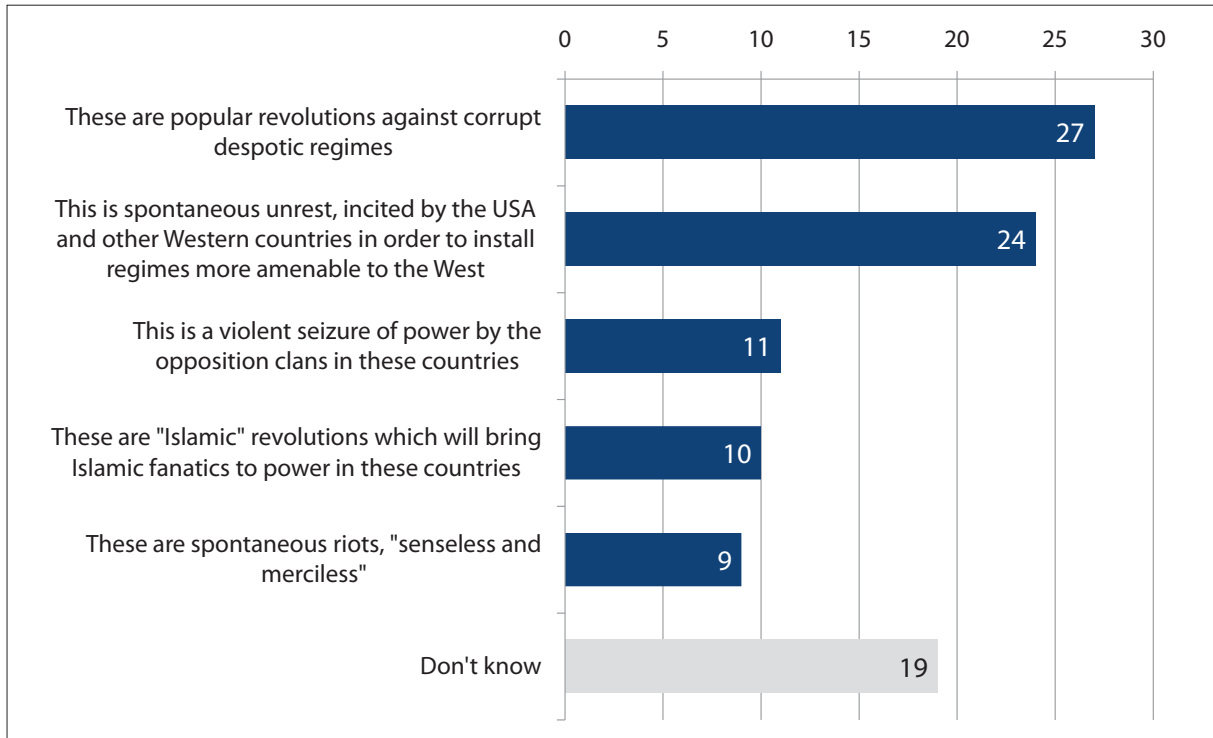
Russian Public Opinion on Unrest in the Arab World

Figure 6: What emotions do you experience concerning the events in the countries of North Africa and the Near East (Egypt, Libya, Bahrain)? (Levada poll) (%)



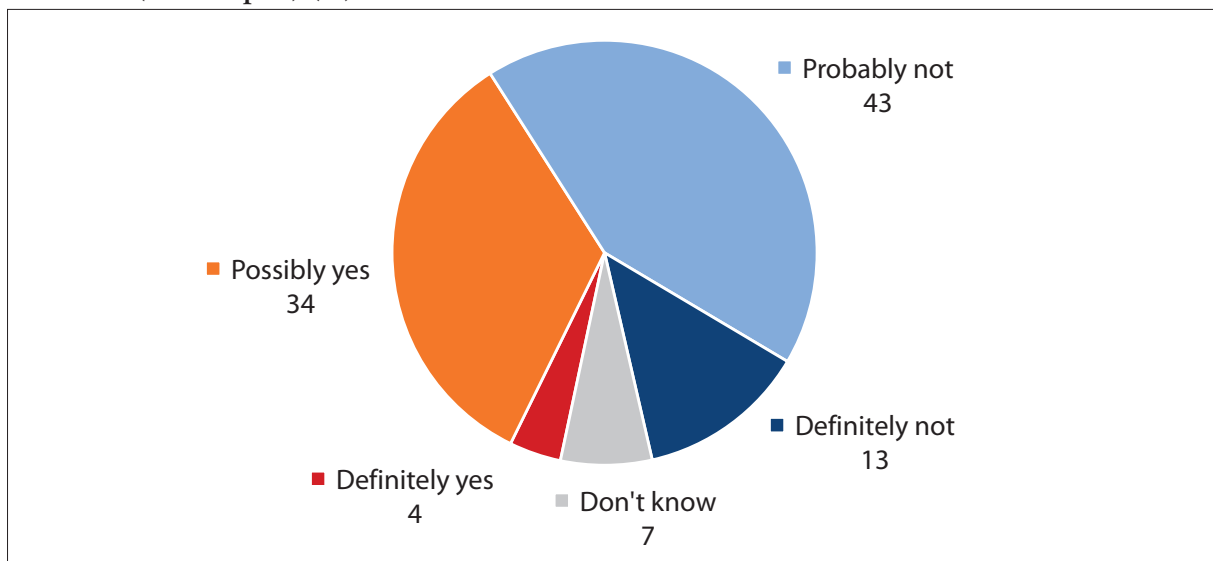
Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 18–21 March 2011, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2011032509.html>

Figure 7: What is happening in these countries? (Levada poll) (%)



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 18–21 March 2011, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2011032509.html>

Figure 8: Could mass unrest similar to the unrest now taking place in Egypt occur in Russia? (Levada poll) (%)



Source: representative opinion poll by Levada Center, 11–14 February 2011, <http://www.levada.ru/press/2011022101.html>

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen (www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich), the Resource Security Institute, the Institute of History at the University of Basel (<http://histsem.unibas.ch/seminar/>) and the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University. It is supported by the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language *Russland-Analysen* (www.laender-analysen.de/russland), the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia (www.res.ethz.ch), and the Russian Regional Report. The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen

Founded in 1982, the Research Centre for East European Studies (Forschungsstelle Osteuropa) at the University of Bremen is dedicated to socialist and post-socialist cultural and societal developments in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

In the area of post-socialist societies, extensive research projects have been conducted in recent years with emphasis on political decision-making processes, economic culture and the integration of post-socialist countries into EU governance. One of the core missions of the institute is the dissemination of academic knowledge to the interested public. This includes regular email services with nearly 20,000 subscribers in politics, economics and the media.

With a collection of publications on Eastern Europe unique in Germany, the Research Centre is also a contact point for researchers as well as the interested public. The Research Centre has approximately 300 periodicals from Russia alone, which are available in the institute's library. News reports as well as academic literature is systematically processed and analyzed in data bases.

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich is a Swiss academic center of competence that specializes in research, teaching, and information services in the fields of international and Swiss security studies. The CSS also acts as a consultant to various political bodies and the general public. The CSS is engaged in research projects with a number of Swiss and international partners. The Center's research focus is on new risks, European and transatlantic security, strategy and doctrine, area studies, state failure and state building, and Swiss foreign and security policy.

In its teaching capacity, the CSS contributes to the ETH Zurich-based Bachelor of Arts (BA) in public policy degree course for prospective professional military officers in the Swiss army and the ETH and University of Zurich-based MA program in Comparative and International Studies (MACIS); offers and develops specialized courses and study programs to all ETH Zurich and University of Zurich students; and has the lead in the Executive Masters degree program in Security Policy and Crisis Management (MAS ETH SPCM), which is offered by ETH Zurich. The program is tailored to the needs of experienced senior executives and managers from the private and public sectors, the policy community, and the armed forces.

The CSS runs the International Relations and Security Network (ISN), and in cooperation with partner institutes manages the Crisis and Risk Network (CRN), the Parallel History Project on Cooperative Security (PHP), the Swiss Foreign and Security Policy Network (SSN), and the Russian and Eurasian Security (RES) Network.

The Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, The Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University

The Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies is home to a Master's program in European and Eurasian Studies, faculty members from political science, history, economics, sociology, anthropology, language and literature, and other fields, visiting scholars from around the world, research associates, graduate student fellows, and a rich assortment of brown bag lunches, seminars, public lectures, and conferences.

The Institute of History at the University of Basel

The Institute of History at the University of Basel was founded in 1887. It now consists of ten professors and employs some 80 researchers, teaching assistants and administrative staff. Research and teaching relate to the period from late antiquity to contemporary history. The Institute offers its 800 students a Bachelor's and Master's Degree in general history and various specialized subjects, including a comprehensive Master's Program in Eastern European History (<http://histsem.unibas.ch/bereiche/osteuropaeische-geschichte/>).

Resource Security Institute

The Resource Security Institute (RSI) is a non-profit organization devoted to improving understanding about global energy security, particularly as it relates to Eurasia. We do this through collaborating on the publication of electronic newsletters, articles, books and public presentations.

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