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Russia and the Arab Spring

Foreign and Domestic Policy Challenges

Margarete Klein

The “Arab Spring” presents Russia with a dual challenge. On the one hand, while North Africa and the Middle East are undergoing a phase of upheaval, Moscow is looking to protect its interests in the region as well as its quest for great power status. Russia’s failure in this sense in Libya caused it to defend its claims in Syria all the more vehemently. Conflicting views between Russia and Western states regarding the violent uprisings and conflicts in Libya and Syria are therefore both the cause and the consequence of the deteriorating relations between Russia and the West. On the other hand, the Arab Spring also serves as a domestic test of the “Putin System”. Its crisis of legitimacy had become apparent with the outbreak of mass demonstrations in December 2011.

The “Arab Spring” was just as unexpected for Russia’s foreign policy as for the West. For precisely this reason, it serves as a good test of whether Moscow can realize the aspirations it has voiced since the turn of the 21st century of once again playing a stronger role in the Middle East and North Africa. It is apparent that Russia’s level of influence varies from country to country and from situation to situation, depending on which instruments are available to it for exerting influence. The most important of these continues to be its permanent seat on the UN Security Council; in comparison, the role of bilateral levers of influence is rather limited. Furthermore, Russia’s behaviour during the Arab Spring has revealed its lack of a coherent, long-term strategy for its “return” to the region.

Instead, a policy has dominated that is guided *ad hoc* by the specific constellations of interests in each respective case.

Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain: Russia as Spectator

At the outset of the Arab Spring – during the upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt, but also during the protests in Bahrain and Yemen – Russia largely remained a passive spectator. For one thing, this was because there were neither important economic ties nor special political connections with the leaders of the affected countries and thus nothing to defend. In addition, Russia’s most important instrument for exerting influence, the UN Security Council, played only a minor role in these cases.

Libya: Russia Muddles Through

During the Libya crisis, however, Moscow had a much more visible presence. First of all, Russia has tangible economic interests in Libya. In April 2008, Russia cancelled Tripoli's USD 4.5 billion debt, which had originated during the Soviet era. As a result, Russian companies received lucrative contracts. Prior to the outbreak of the civil war, experts assessed the value of these contracts at approximately USD 10 billion: Moscow was active in the oil sector, in the construction of a high-speed rail line from Benghazi to Sirt, and in the armaments sector. Alongside Algeria and Syria, Libya had grown to be the region's most important importer of Russian weapons. Secondly, the Libya crisis also raised questions over principles of international order, namely the right to intervene for humanitarian reasons as well as the role of the UN and NATO. Both of these issues are of essential importance for Russia's ambitions as a great power.

Russia's role changed over the course of the crisis in Libya. Moscow began by attempting to present itself as a responsible stakeholder in international politics. In this sense, it was also prepared to make sacrifices. Accordingly, Russia approved a weapons embargo against Libya on 26 February (UN Security Council Resolution 1970). Rosoboronexport, the state's monopolist for the export of defence-related products calculated the potential financial loss to the domestic armaments industry at USD 4 billion. When a vote was held on 17 March 2011 on UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which imposed a no-fly zone over Libya and empowered member states to resort to "all necessary measures" to protect the civilian population, Moscow abstained from voting. It thereby enabled the military operation by Western states, which from late March 2011 on took place under NATO leadership. It is quite remarkable that Russia did not veto this, because in the past it had, for the most part, blocked any resolutions, which provided for intervention into the internal affairs

of a sovereign state based on humanitarian grounds. Despite abstaining from voting, Moscow did not fundamentally break with its past policy and continued to keep all its options open. It eased Russia's decision that Gaddafi was increasingly isolated in the Arab world and the Arab League had called for a no-fly zone. Unlike in the case of Syria's President Assad, Gaddafi was never a political partner of Moscow's for whom it would have risked isolating itself within the Arab world. Moreover, Russia killed two birds with one stone by abstaining from voting: it avoided any pressure being placed on the foreign policy reset with the USA, but was subsequently able to criticise the military actions of the Western states.

The decision to abstain from voting, however, was not without controversy in Russia's foreign policy establishment. According to press reports, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs considered vetoing the resolution because it feared setting a precedent for violent regime change as well as an increase in Western power, and it had concerns in regards to the lucrative Russian business dealings in Libya. The vote over UN Resolution 1973 also set off an intense public exchange of blows between President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin, who denounced the UN Resolution, comparing it to "medieval calls for crusades". In response, Medvedev accused Putin of contributing to a "clash of civilizations" with his statements. There was much speculation within the press over whether this disagreement played out in public for all to see was based on substantive differences or whether it was a carefully orchestrated performance in which both individuals were just speaking to different audiences in the sense of a division of labour between the two. The rather brusque tone compared with earlier disagreements speaks to the first interpretation, while the second interpretation is supported, among other things, by the location where Putin decided to formulate his criticisms, namely while speaking to workers at a ballistic missile factory in Votkinsk. He was thereby appealing to

the conservative nationalistic camp, while the President's words were primarily directed at a Western audience and were meant to present Russia as a reliable partner taking on international responsibility. Regardless of whether the fight between Medvedev and Putin was real or rehearsed, it demonstrates that the decision to abstain from voting on the resolution was not based on a broad consensus. Therefore it is highly unlikely that there will be repeated Russian abstentions in the Security Council, for example in regard to Syria.

If the abstention from UN Resolution 1973 was shaped to a considerable degree by the desire not to threaten the improved relations with the USA following the low point of the Georgian War in August 2008, it resulted in precisely these relations becoming strained, because for Russian tastes the Western states participating in the military operation interpreted the resolution far too broadly. Consequently, this fuelled deep-seated fears among the people as well as portions of the Russian elite about a deceitful West, which failed to honour conciliatory gestures and used humanitarian motives simply as a cover for an expansion of political and economic power. All military actions that extended in any way beyond enforcing the no-fly zone were criticised by the Russian leadership, which had once again formed a united front. Divergent opinions on the military operation in Libya, however, were not only the cause of a worsening in Russian-American relations, but also simultaneously the consequence of a cooling in relations that had already been apparent. As soon as the low-hanging fruit of the reset policy has been harvested, namely the New START disarmament treaty and improved cooperation in addressing the Afghanistan problem, the reset had drifted to a standstill by spring 2011. Since then harsher tones have been evident, which can, to some extent, be explained by the logic of the primary campaign season in the USA as well as the electoral cycle in Russia.

When the military action began, Moscow's political weight was considerably reduced in terms of the Libya crisis. Worried that it was now in danger of ceding the reins entirely to the Western coalition, the Russian leadership launched a mediation initiative in June 2011 that was meant to motivate Gaddafi to resign. Russia's hopes of enhancing its position in the region through a successful initiative, however, were not answered. Its perceptions of its own authority in the country were revealed to be vastly overestimated, as neither side shifted during the talks. Following this failure, Russia limited its Libya policy largely to efforts to contain economic damages. The primary objective was now to ensure the existing treaties with Russian companies or those that were currently under negotiation. It proved to be counter-productive that Moscow had hesitated so long to take a clear stance *vis-à-vis* the civil war. It wasn't until 1 September 2011 – the day on which a meeting of the "Friends of Libya" was held in Paris – that Russia became the 73rd state to recognise the National Transitional Council as the sole legitimate representative of the Libyan people. Moscow's position in the new Libya has been correspondingly weakened. Libya's new leader, Prime Minister al-Keeb, promised that his country would respect all international agreements, including those with Russia. But there must of course be inspections of whether there were "cases of fraud or corruption" in the initiation and conclusion of these agreements. Moscow will therefore probably have to accept some drastic cuts, first and foremost in its arms dealings, but also in the energy sector. This applies all the more since Russia already let its greatest economic asset slip through its fingers in 2008, namely Libya's debts from the Soviet era.

It is therefore little wonder that there is a preponderance of criticism in the debate going on within Russia over its Libya policy. Moscow did not act strategically like a major power. Instead, aside from a few exceptions, it simply reacted and muddled through.

By signalling its neutrality, Russia was trying to square the circle. Up until the very end, it wanted to keep all its options open during the Libyan civil war: raise its international profile by acting as an honest broker, but at the same time protect its economic interests; do nothing to risk the reset with the USA, but at the same time stop an increase in Western power. By following this course, however, Russia ended up falling between two stools. This is precisely why it failed to achieve its objectives and it undermined its economic and political position in Libya and North Africa – at least over the short to medium-term.

Syria: Russia as Protector

Unlike during the Libya conflict, Russia has taken an unequivocal stance since the outset of the protests in Syria in March 2011, positioning itself as a protector of the ruling regime. It is thereby accepting open conflict with the USA and European states.

Moscow has staked out such a clear position because its interests in Syria are more pronounced and closely tied with the survival of the country's current regime than was the case in Libya. According to the *Moscow Times*, Russian investment in Syria totalled USD 19.4 billion in 2009. Earlier, Damascus had also benefitted from seeing its debt cancelled. In January 2005, Moscow cancelled 73 percent of Syria's debt, which totalled USD 13.4 billion. These debts were likewise a carryover from the Soviet era and, as in Libya, Russian arms and energy companies were now under consideration for profitable contracts. *Stroitan*sgaz, for example, is building a gas processing facility near Homs, and *Tatneft* has been funding oil production in Syria since April 2010 through a joint venture. After India (41%) and Algeria (12%), Syria represented Russia's third most important arms market (7%); according to press reports, current contracts total between USD 4 and 6 billion. Following the possible loss of the Libyan market, a weapons embargo against Syria would be a painful blow to Russia's arms

industry. In light of the presidential election to be held in Russia in March 2012, an embargo would not be politically feasible since the 1.5 million people employed by the arms industry constitute a considerable electoral group.

Unlike Libya, Syria is also of military importance to Moscow. After all, Tartus houses Russia's only naval basis left over from the Soviet era that exists outside the post-Soviet region. It has been undergoing upgrades since 2008 and should be ready to serve as a supply and repair base for large ships starting in 2012. Since Moscow cannot resort to other bases in the region, it absolutely needs the base in Tartus in order to militarily reinforce its return to the Middle East and North Africa. Russia also relies on this base for its participation in missions against terrorists and pirates in the Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa.

The decisive difference with Libya, however, is that Syria holds strategic importance for Moscow from a (geo)political viewpoint. Of its allies from the Soviet era, now only Damascus remains close to Russia. Accordingly, the Syrian government provided political support to Russia during the wars in Chechnya and Georgia. The close relations with Syria are, in turn, an important foundation on which it can build its aspirations of taking on a mediator role in the Middle East conflict. Moreover, Moscow values Damascus (along with Tehran) as a counterweight to American dominance in the region. The Syrian government is therefore a key element in Moscow's Middle Eastern policy and its preferred partner for establishing the larger role that it wishes for itself in the region. A collapse of the Syrian regime would therefore not only carry economic costs for Russia, but would also result in massive (geo)political losses. In this case, it can be assumed that Iran would become more important for Russia's Middle Eastern policy, although it has become an increasingly difficult partner lately. At the same time, this would thwart Moscow's attempts to build up its political and, above all, eco-

conomic relations with the monarchies in the Gulf states. Further stress would also be placed on relations between Russia and the West.

Based solely on its diverse interests in Syria, Moscow would use its veto power in the UN Security Council in order to prevent military intervention or a weapons embargo against the Assad regime. This is further exacerbated by the lessons from the Libya crisis, where from Moscow's viewpoint, a resolution for establishing a no-fly zone was "misused" as a mandate for violent regime change. For this reason, Moscow has so far blocked all draft resolutions in the UN Security Council that could possibly be interpreted as justification for a "Libyan solution" or which could even put pressure on the Assad government, whether through unilateral condemnation or sanctions. Thus Moscow issued a veto on 5 October 2011 against a resolution drafted by France, Great Britain, Germany and Portugal, which would have provided for "targeted measures" against the Syrian leadership. In the draft resolution introduced by Russia itself on 15 December 2011, the Syrian government was accused for the first time of using force "disproportionately", but Russia continued to refuse to threaten Syria with sanctions. Russia's draft therefore served less to increase pressure on Assad in any noticeable way, and more to stamp out criticism of Russia for its blocking attitude.

Moscow is also providing support to the Syrian regime by picking up on its justification strategy. Accordingly, the Russian government claims that the Syrian opposition bears just as much blame as the government for the escalation in violence. Moreover, the opposition has been infiltrated by "terrorists" and "extremists" and is receiving arms from external forces. Moscow's proposed path to conflict resolution is also very accommodating of the Syrian government's ideas: a "national dialogue" between the government and the opposition as well as the implementation of political reforms announced by President

Assad. This course of action would deter external involvement and considerably raise the chances of the regime's survival. The continued delivery of weapons to Syria as well as invitations to representatives of the Syrian Ministry of Defence to participate as observers in a September 2011 military exercise can be seen as signs of political and military support. Of particular interest to Syrian observers was likely the fact that the military exercise dealt with defending against enemy air strikes – i.e. the "Libyan scenario" – using Russian air defence systems; Syria's armed forces possess several such systems.

Russia will not vote for a military intervention or a weapons embargo against Syria, as a matter of principle (no additional precedents for violent regime change), but also due to geopolitical and economic considerations as well as the experience gained during the Libya crisis. Moreover, Moscow's hard-line position also has domestic motivations. Considering the presidential election in March 2012 as well as Putin's falling popularity rating, he will try to combine anti-Western rhetoric with a self-assertive foreign policy. Support for the Syrian regime does, however, have its limits. It is therefore not to be expected that Moscow would side with Syria and take direct military action in the case of Western intervention. The military and political costs entailed by this sort of confrontation would be too high for Russia. Therefore, it should be viewed more as a symbolic demonstration of solidarity and of Russia's world power ambitions than a shift in the local military balance that the Russian aircraft carrier "Admiral Kuznetsov" has been crossing the Mediterranean since December 2011 with other ships and also briefly stopped in Tartus. In a political sense, the limits on support are set by Moscow's fear of being sucked in together with the Assad regime as it becomes increasingly isolated in the region. Ever since the noticeable distancing of Syria's key neighbours and the Arab League from Assad, and their added pressure on his regime, Russia's

tightrope act has become increasingly difficult: ensuring the survival of its most important political partner in the region without endangering its own position there. This touches directly on Russia's attempt to build up good relations with all the players in the region and to foster an image of itself as an honest broker. The threat of Syria's isolation within the Middle East can therefore be expected to have a greater effect on Russia than pressure from the West. This was apparent when the Arab League banned Syria from its membership on 12 November 2011 and imposed sanctions on the country. While Russia criticised these steps, at the same time it raised pressure on Damascus, albeit gently: on 23 November 2011, Moscow no longer voted against a resolution in the UN Human Rights Council that would condemn the suppression of protests in Syria, but rather abstained. At the same time, a delegation from the Syrian opposition had a high level meeting with Russian officials in Moscow. Furthermore, on 15 December 2011, Russia reprimanded the Syrian government for the first time in its own UN Security Council draft resolution due to "inappropriate use of force". Moscow's appeals have not gone unheard. According to Syrian Foreign Minister al-Muallim, it was due to a Russian "recommendation" that Syria signed the Arab League's peace plan protocol on 19 December 2011.

In order to motivate Moscow to place more pressure on Assad, Western states have to closely cooperate with countries and organisations in the region, above all the Arab League. This is the only way to clearly show Russia that it is running the risk of isolating itself. At the same time, Western states should try to avoid this type of self-isolation by recommending a solution to Russia that allows it to save face. Otherwise there is a risk of further deterioration in relations between Russia and the West, which could also have a negative impact on chances of cooperation, for example in dealing with the Iran issue.

The Arab states – particularly Egypt and the Gulf state monarchies – could offer talks on expanding political and economic relations in return for Russia taking a harder stance towards Assad. This could help to cushion the blow of the political and economic losses Russia could be expected to suffer if there were a change in power in Syria. For a long time, Russia has been keenly interested in strengthened relations, as evidenced by the "strategic dialogue" initiated by Moscow and the Gulf Cooperation Council in November 2001. It would still be helpful if the Syrian opposition could give Russia a plausible guarantee that existing agreements with Russian firms would be honoured even after a change in power. This could disperse Russian fears that there would be a repeat of the Libyan experience.

Lessons for the Post-Soviet Region: Strengthening the CSTO

The Arab Spring, however, does not just represent a foreign policy challenge for Moscow. Within the country's leadership circles, it is being discussed at least as intensively from a domestic and security policy perspective. From the beginning, concern spread that the "Arabellion" could destabilise Russia and the post-Soviet region either by serving as a blueprint for protest movements in Russia and other post-Soviet states, or by spreading Islamism and terrorism in regions like the North Caucasus or portions of Central Asia, which are already unstable and home to majority Muslim populations. For this reason, the Arab Spring carries a rather negative connotation for Russia's leaders, who see it as primarily being linked with chaos, unrest and extremism.

In their critical stance towards the Arab Spring, Moscow's leaders are in agreement with their allies from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), a military alliance that includes Russia as well as Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. At the CSTO's

informal summit in Astana in mid-August 2011, there was debate over which lessons could be learned from the “Arabellions”. The focus was predominantly on defending against a Facebook revolution and a preventive strategy on cyber and information security was drafted up until the summit on 20 December 2011 in Moscow. During this summit it was also decided that the operating range of the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces of the CSTO should be expanded. Originally these forces served as protection against a military attack by an outside state in addition to combating international terrorism, organised crime and drug trafficking. Now these forces can also be used to protect constitutional order within a member state if the leader of the affected state requests this assistance. Behind this decision rests not only experience with the “Arabellions”, but also the fear that terrorism and Islamism could spill over into Central Asia from Afghanistan following the withdrawal of ISAF. The CSTO has therefore developed from a classic defensive alliance into an instrument that is also meant to protect the regimes of the member states from internal dangers.

A Russian Winter Following the Arab Spring?

Following the manipulated parliamentary elections on 4 December 2011, the largest mass demonstrations since the Soviet era took place in Russia. According to official sources, 25,000 people protested in Moscow, while the opposition estimated the figure at 150,000 protestors. For this reason, the media soon speculated as to whether a spark had shot out from the Arab Spring and kindled a “Russian winter”. A comparison between the events in Russia and those of the Arab Spring, however, becomes difficult as the uprisings did not share a common pattern, but instead exhibited specific causes and characteristics depending on the country. Some commonalities, however, can be found between the events in the Arab states and

the demonstrations in Russia. As in Tunisia and Egypt – but unlike the “coloured revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine – the Russian demonstrators were mobilised less by political parties and their leaders. A more decisive role was instead played by “new” actors, for example from the blogger and artist scene. According to a survey conducted by the Levada Centre among participants in the demonstrations on 24 December 2011, respondents had the greatest trust in the journalist Leonid Parfyonov (41%), the blogger Alexei Navalny (36%) and the author Boris Akunin (35%). Only then came liberal politician Vladimir Ryzhkov with 18%. New media and social networks like Facebook and the Russian equivalent V Kontakte played a significant role in mobilising discontented people. According to official statistics, the number of internet users in Russia hit the 70 million mark in 2011, which corresponds to roughly half of the population. Television, which is still largely under state control, continues to be the people’s main source of information. Until now, the internet’s role has been underestimated by the state, but it has caught up significantly over the past years and has developed into the most important platform for political discussions, aside from the critical print media. There were likely hacker attacks on websites critical of the regime during the time around the elections, but no systematic monitoring or censorship took place.

There are, however, also considerable differences with the Arab Spring. While the demonstrations in Moscow at Bolotna Square on 10 December and Prospekt Sakharova on 24 December 2011 were the largest of the post-Soviet era, smaller protest marches were also held in 140 Russian cities. These protests were not yet, however, a long-lasting mass phenomenon like in Tunisia and Egypt. This is also connected to the fact that, unlike in the Arab Spring, Russia’s social grounds for protest have not yet combined with the political grounds for protest. The core of the Moscow demonstrations is composed of members of the liberal

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wing of the growing urban, educated middle class, which had withdrawn from Putin's social contract, namely trading economic gains for political passivity. These individuals are not focused on improving their socio-economic situation. Instead, they are expressing their frustration about the political incapacitation and cynical manipulation of power. Social grounds for protest also exist in Russia as shown in recent years by the demonstrations of retirees or the protests against raising import duties on cars. This did not, however, manifest itself in the December 2011 demonstrations. In addition, Russia is not home to masses of young people, who are either unemployed or have a dismal view of their future economic prospects. These were precisely the individuals who played such a decisive role in the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. The demographic situation in Russia, which has to fight against depopulation, is entirely different than in the Arab states.

The degree of success enjoyed by the protestors depends, on the one hand, on whether they can agree on leaders and a common agenda. Due to their heterogeneity, this is not likely to be a simple task. The old liberal opposition has other ideas about how to proceed than the leaders from the blogger and artist scene, who insist on maintaining independence from political parties. Furthermore, it was not just members of the liberal middle class who took to the streets in December 2011, but also nationalistic and leftist elements. The conglomerate of red-brown allies is Russia's counterpart to the extremist elements within the "Arabellions", the Islamists.

On the other hand, the protestors' success depends on how the political leadership reacts to the new challenge. It seems to have learned from the mistakes of the toppled Arab leaders. Following a hard-line reaction in the first days, during which around 1200 demonstrators were arrested, Russia's political leadership ordered the security forces to hold back in order to avoid a further escalation and solidarity

effects. Over the short-term, the government has attempted to stir up the differences within the heterogeneous opposition. In addition, it has announced political reforms, for example of the electoral and party laws in order to take the wind out of their opponents' sails. Furthermore, it seeks to ensure Putin's re-election in the first round of voting by providing generous election presents. Over the medium-term, the Putin System is faced with a difficult balancing act. In order to re-integrate the alienated middle class, a convincing liberalisation strategy is needed. In addition to political reforms, such a strategy would also have to include serious efforts to fight corruption and strengthen rule of law. This can, in turn, be expected to endanger the elite's current hold on power.