

RUSSIA'S ARAB SPRING POLICY

Rusya'nın Arap Baharı Politikası

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Abstract:

One of the regions where Russia's interests are constant and historic is the Middle East, which has been being shaken by revolutions and insurgencies since January 2011. Being hesitant between supporting the desire of protestors to overthrow their long-ruling leaders and aligning with the stable authoritarian regimes of the Middle East, Russia has so far failed to adopt a consistent policy. Moreover, by following a low profile policy, Moscow seems indifferent to using the regimes changes as an opportunity to penetrate the region and revive its wading influence in the Middle East. Russia's inflexible foreign policy mentality, secondary importance of the Middle East in Russian foreign policy, perception of Arab Spring as a tool of outside powers, and the unrest it could arouse in motherland (as well as near abroad) could account for Moscow's reluctance to adopt a proactive role in reorganization of the Middle East.

Keywords: *Russia, Foreign Policy, Arab Spring, Middle East*

Özet:

2011 yılının Ocak ayından bu yana devrimler ve isyanlarla sarsılan Ortadoğu, Rus çıkarlarının süreklilik arz ettiği ve tarihi köklere sahip olduğu bir bölge olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Uzun yıllar kendilerini tek adam rejimi ile yöneten idarecilerini devirmeye çalışan protestocular ile otoriter ama istikrarlı rejimleri desteklemek arasında kalan Rusya'nın, şimdiye kadar tutarlı bir politika izlediğini iddia etmek güçtür. Arap devrimleri esnasında düşük bir dış politika profili izleyen Moskova, rejim değişikliklerini bölgeye nüfuz etme ve bölgede azalan etkisini artırma fırsatı olarak da değerlendirememektedir. Rusya'nın esneklikten yoksun dış politikası, Ortadoğu'nun Rus dış politikasındaki ikincil derecedeki önemi, Arap isyanlarının dış güçlerin bir oyunu olduğu algısı ve bu isyanların Rusya içinde ve yakın çevresinde yaratabileceği kaos ve

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istikrarsızlık endişesi, Rusya'nın Ortadoğu'nun yeniden yapılandırılmasında pasif bir rol takınmasının nedenlerini oluşturmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Rusya, Rus dış politikası, Arap baharı, Ortadoğu*

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the Second World War, two great powers, which would dominate worldwide international relations, emerged: the USA and USSR. Nearly all countries were within the area of influence of either of these states, resulting in a bipolar world system. The Great War had just ended. However, the balance of power of these two states turned many regions into a battlefield of interests of these states. One of the most important battlegrounds of this new era, namely marked during the Cold War, was the Middle East, which was at the center of attention not only due to its rich oil resources but also owing to its strategic location at the crossroads of Afro-Eurasia and in the heart of Rimland theory. Both states took any chance to penetrate the region and make long-lasting strategic allies not only to defend their own interests but also to do the utmost harm to the interest of the other side. The balance in the region was unsteady, which resulted in swiftly-changing positions of Middle East states as seen in the best examples of Iran and Egypt. However, the tension between the super powers over the Middle East started to calm towards the demise of USSR. The region has once again been climbing onto the agendas of big powers and taking its place in the spotlights of the media. The Arab Spring, which broke out after a young Tunisian street vendor immolated himself after being harassed by a municipality officer, has been shaking the region immensely and has marked the end of three dictators while also undermining the authority and legitimacy of various others.

The greater power of the Cold War era,¹ namely the US, has been closely watching the process and openly supporting the revolutionary movements, which shall provide an intense American penetration into the

¹ R. Khalidi, *Sowing Crises*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 36.

region against European and Russian interests. However, being the natural heir of the USSR, the Russian Federation looks like it is holding a strict policy of keeping itself out of the remaking of the Middle East, which could be speculatively dated back to the Greater Middle East project of the US.

This article looks at Russian foreign policy in the Middle East during the Arab Spring and it seeks answers as to whether Russia has a Middle East policy during the Arab Spring. It also tries to uncover the reasons why Russia opts for silence over the revolutions in the region, why it is shy about openly supporting its longest-lasting ally in the region (Syria), why it does not take active participation in the remaking of the Middle East, and why it ignores American penetration into the region.

The argument is that Russia has been concentrating its interest and energy on Central Asia rather than the Middle East, where competition is tougher than in the former. Russia is no longer the super power to seek out her interests in all corners of the world as it was during the Soviet era. Even though Russia does not withdraw from such an strategic geopolitical and geo-economical region, it follows a 'low profile' policy on the region for the sake of consolidating her power and focus of interest in Central Asia on the contrary to the Middle East, where it does not have the same strong ties and loyal allies with a common history as it does in Central Asia.

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Russia has had long lasting ties with the Middle East since the 18th century, just 100 years after its emergence as an imperial power. In the beginning, imperial Russia was in touch with the Middle East through its ties with the Ottoman Empire and Iran. As Russia escalated its power, it turned its face towards Ottoman and Iranian lands, as they were relatively easier preys to Russian expansionism to reach warm waters (as opposed to Europe, which was blocked by strong and centralized states by that time as seen in the examples of Prussia, France and Britain). With the

treaty of Kuchuk Kaynarca, Russia was able to obtain a covered privilege over the protection of Orthodox Christian rights in the Ottoman land, which would later be transformed into assisting the revolutionary and anti-imperialist movements in Middle Eastern colonies of great powers and would provide Russia with the ground for pursuing its interests in the Middle East.

Until the October Revolution, Russian interest in the Middle East was inspired by the expansionist policy of the Russian Empire as well as the drive to break the landlocked geography of the Russian Empire by reaching the Mediterranean. Russia would be further inspired by the emergence of oil in the Middle East and ideological factors imposed by the socialist revolutions in Russia. The inspiration would facilitate Russian penetration into the region as a result of the installment of colonial regimes over the Arab states, which led to immense frustration of Arabs in the wake of First World War. The Fourth Congress of the Communist International in 1922 accepted “that in certain circumstances, transitory alliances were acceptable to include the feudal aristocracy and the pan-Islamic movement.”² This briefly expresses developing Russian interest in Middle East caused by a new impetus: anti-imperialism. However, this did not last long, as the existing balance of power did not allow Bolshevik Russia to penetrate into the Middle East. After the Second World War, being either of the superpowers, Soviets supported the founding of a new Israeli state with the hope of breaking British influence in the Middle East. The Soviet influence reached its peak in 1950s and 1960s, which was followed by a decline after a June war and the dismissal of Soviet advisors from Egypt (even though Russia sustained its ties with Syria, Libya, Iraq and FLO).

Following the introduction of *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies of former USSR head of state Mikhail Gorbachev, Russian influence in Middle East started to wane dramatically. Both the first Gulf War (when Moscow supported the coalition forces formed against Iraq) and the

² A. Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* (Connecticut: Praeger, 2007), 2.

absence of a Russian initiative in the Middle East peace process (starting in the 1991 Madrid peace conference) were the signals that Russia's active role in the Middle East came to an end, with Russia implicitly consenting to American dominance in the region.³

In the 1990s, Russia suffered from decreasing authority of the central government, civil war, further disintegration of motherland followed by a heavy financial crisis. All of these culminated in lessening Russian interest beyond its boundaries, including the Middle East. However, starting with the process of the shift from liberal Westernism policies of Andrey Kozyrev to instead Yevgeny Primakov's great power balancing policy in the second half of the 1990s, Russia's interest in the region became invigorated.⁴ This interest was further intensified under Vladimir Putin, who came to power in 2000 and continued the policy of restoring Russian power. Having brought the Chechen civil war to an end, taken full advantage of increasing oil prices, stabilizing the economy of the country, and consolidating the power of the central government, Putin started to reinforce the relationship between Russia and Middle Eastern countries. Writing off the Syrian debts, establishing diplomatic relations with Hamas, and helping Iran with its nuclear program were all aimed at increasing Russian penetration in the region. However, Moscow was caught off guard⁵ by the Arab rebellions and revolutions which started in January 2011 and thus destabilized the region, which forced nearly every country to revise its policy over the region. The countries (including Russia) will either choose to support the old authoritarian regimes with which they have stable relationships or they will risk backing the revolutionaries, who may or may not rise to power. Under these circumstances of uncertainty and destabilization, it is extremely difficult for any country to follow a consistent and unfailing foreign policy towards the Middle East, and Russia is no exception to that backdrop.

³ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe*, 2.

⁴ For detailed information see A. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy* (Plymouth: Rowman&Littlefield, 2010), 55-129.

⁵ M. Katz, "Russia and the Arab Spring," *Russian Analytical Digest* 98 (2011), 4.

2. FRAMEWORK OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Russian foreign policy in the Middle East during the Arab Spring could be characterized by two main features. The first characteristic of Russia's Middle East policy is that it is pragmatic and realist.⁶ Russia has always viewed the Middle East as an area where Russian penetration will impede the interests of rival states, decrease the power of the enemy governments, and improve the disadvantageous position of Russian territories in the heartland. During the Russian Empire, the Middle East was a key strategic point to reach the warm waters, and consolidate Russian power as well as pose a threat to rival states by weakening their ties with their colonies. With the discovery of oil in the region, the Russian volume of Russian interest doubled. Strategic and geopolitical aspirations were reinforced by geo-economic interests. Even though Russia's Middle East policy was inspired by ideological elements during the Soviet Union, it would be too naïve to claim that Russia followed an ideological foreign policy towards the region. The Middle East was an area where two superpowers confronted each other due to the 'containment policy' that the USA pursued. Therefore, the key policy priority for the Soviets was to minimize American influence in the region.⁷ Thus, it was a pragmatic alliance more than ideological. Although the end of Cold War was a major blow to Russian interest in the region, Russia was quick to restore its power as a leading figure in the world politics and resumed its penetration into the region in the second half of the 1990's with Primakov's foreign policies (which would later be sustained by Putin). This time, Russia did not challenge the only superpower directly but instead followed its interest through military and commercial agreements. Aware of the economic superiority of the Euro-Atlantic axis won them during the Cold War, Russia pursued economic interests in the region to strengthen its economy through arms sales and oil agreements. For example, a \$10 billion agreement that Russia signed

⁶ Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 129-201.; Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* 68.; L. Margot, "In Search of an Identity: Russian Foreign Policy and The End Of Ideology," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* (19:3 2003), 48.

⁷ Z. Dağı, "Russia Back to the Middle East," *Perceptions* (12, 2007), 124.

in July 2002 in order to provide Iran with six nuclear reactors over the next decade, as well as oil agreements with Gaddafi's Libya and Saddam's Iraq, would both help those countries against American pressure. Therefore, this was meant to decrease American influence in the region and boom Russian economy.⁸

The second prominent characteristic of Russia's Middle East policy is its constancy. When Russian foreign policy over the Middle East is scrutinized carefully, the constancy of this policy is evident. With the exception of two terms, specifically immediately after revolution and during the Cold War, Russia has always followed a policy of penetrating the region whenever it consolidates its power. One could say that the Middle East has always been one of the major areas of Russian interests.

The only difference between post-Soviet foreign policy and that of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union is what was essentially a *zero-sum* relationship during the latter ones has now turned into a *positive sum* relationship between Russia and its rivals. Whereas the Cold War mentality required the absolute division of interest zones and precluded the penetration of the other side, the post-Soviet period has laid the grounds for parts to pursue their interests in the same country.

3. RUSSIA'S REACTION TO THE ARAB SPRING

Before the Arab Spring, Russia started to restore its traditional power and influence in the Middle East by trying to infuse to the region through commercial relations, in particular through selling arms as well as clearing some of its Soviet era debts and political support (as seen in the example of establishing diplomatic ties with Hamas). Having been supported by the regional antipathy towards American policy, these all culminated into a power consolidation process which was about to bear its fruits. However, the Arab Spring caught Moscow off-guard. While Russian influence and popularity was on the rise in the region, Moscow

⁸ I. Bourttman, "Putin and Russia's Middle Eastern Policy," *MERIA* (10, 2006), 2.

would undoubtedly have preferred that the Arab Spring not have happened at all, and that the stable authoritarian governments which Moscow had been working with remain in power.⁹ The underlying reasons for this preference lie in that these regimes were authoritarian, posing no threat to Russian posture, were reasonably stable, oppressed radical Islamic elements, and that they were also good business partners.¹⁰ Therefore, not eager to be deprived of the comfort of working with these regimes but also not willing to risk siding with the losing entity, the foreign policy Russia follows toward each revolution and rebellion has turned out to be hesitant, unstable, and volatile. The Russian stance toward the Arab Spring and the characteristic of the policy it follows could be better understood by examining Moscow's reaction to revolts within each country.

3.1. Russia's Reaction to Tunisian Revolution

Many countries were taken by surprise when the protests in Tunis forced then president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to all of a sudden flee the country, and Russia was no exception to that. In this very early phase of the contagious revolts, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev was wary of the situation and indirectly backed what happened in that country. In 2011, during the Davos World Economic Forum, the president uttered:

*“What happened in Tunisia, I think, is quite a substantial lesson to learn for any authorities. The authorities must not simply sit in their convenient chairs but develop themselves together with the society. When the authorities don't catch up with the development of the society, and don't meet the aspiration of the people, the outcome is very sad.”*¹¹

⁹ Katz, “Russia and the Arab Spring,” 6.

¹⁰ Z. Magen, “Russia in the New Middle East,” *INSS Insight* (2011), 252.

¹¹ C. Freeland, “In Egypt and Tunisia, Lessons for Autocrats Everywhere,” *New York Times* (February 3, 2011)

The 'fait accompli' type surprise in Tunis was so unexpected for many world leaders that they could only show their reaction to the revolution after protests cost Ben Ali his presidency. From a realist point of view, it would be reasonable to show the green light to the protesters who would soon take over the government. Therefore, so did Moscow, and she sided herself with the revolutionists who ousted their president. Taken into consideration that Tunisia lacks long-lasting, as well as established, political relationships with Russia and trade volume between two countries is rather limited, Moscow would risk nothing by aligning herself with the victorious revolutionists.

3.2. Russia's Reaction to Egyptian Revolution

Having lost the alliance with Egypt long ago, Moscow seemed indifferent to protests aimed at ousting Egypt's 30-year ruling president Hosni Mubarek. Russia followed a wait-and-see policy during the intense Tahrir protests and abstained from displaying open support to neither of the sides. When loose political relations and a low trade volume of \$2 billion¹² are considered together, Russia could see the ousting of Mubarak as a chance to obtain a new foothold in the region, which would be in parallel with Putin's Middle East policy of strengthening Russian influence in the region. However, Russia started to be suspicious of the true nature of the revolutions. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin accused internet heavyweight Google of initiating the revolts in Egypt, which highlights that he perceived the revolutionary situation in the Arab countries as a potential threat manipulated by outside powers.¹³ Nevertheless, Moscow refrained from siding with either of the parts and admitted a passive role abstaining from influencing the process to neither advantage nor disadvantage of Mubarek.

¹² A. Kotb, "Old Friends, New Partners." *Al-Ahram Weekly* (980 January 7-13, 2011).

¹³ M. Kaczmarek, "Russia's Middle East policy after the Arab revolutions," *OSW Commentary* (2011), 59.

3.3 Russia's Reaction to Libyan Revolution

The Libyan revolts had a different nature when compared with the previous ones in that the demonstrators reached their goal not through peaceful means but as a result of a civil war which they were about to lose. The Libyan opposition owe their revolution to the help of outside powers, namely NATO, as without assistance, the revolt would likely have been bloodily suppressed in a short time. Initiated by France, when United Nations approved the resolution No. 1973 so as to lay the grounds for a military intervention in Libya, Moscow could not produce a consistent reaction but only a 'zig-zag policy.'¹⁴ Putin harshly criticized resolution by defining it as a call to "crusade." Soon afterwards however, Medvedev reacted to Putin's remarks: "It is absolutely inexcusable to use expressions that, in effect, lead to a clash of civilizations such as 'crusades,' and so on. That is unacceptable."¹⁵ These two different remarks look contradictory with each other, but in reality, it is coherent in that Russia indirectly implied she did not have a well-established policy towards the Libyan case. Abstention of Russia meant she would align her policy with the Western policy towards Libya.¹⁶ Russia held a passive role in shaping the future of Libya by submitting to Western policy. However, the so-called disagreement between president and the prime minister could be assessed, as Russia was disturbed by the interventionist policy the West follows, yet however, she did not want to risk harming the relationship by vetoing the resolutions either. Different from its policy towards the Tunisia and Egypt revolutions, Moscow voiced her displeasure but did not take an assertive position to prevent NATO action in the country.

¹⁴ R. O. Freedman, "Russia and The "Arab Spring": A Preliminary Appraisal," Accessed July 19, 2011 <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/russia-wayne-merry-russian-reaction-arab-spring-249.cfm>

¹⁵ "Putin and Medvedev Spar over Libya," *CNN*, March 21, 2011

¹⁶ Magen, "Russia in the New Middle East," 2.

3.4. Russia's Reaction to Yemen Revolts

Similarly to revolts in Egypt and Tunis, Moscow preferred to hold a passive position towards Yemen and refrained from choosing a side, avoiding to voice her preferences relating to the future of the country by aligning herself neither with the president Ali Abdallah Saleh nor the protestors. In that sense, there is a powerful similarity between the Western and Russian approaches to incidences in Yemen.¹⁷

3.5. Russia's Reaction to Bahrain Revolts

The demonstrations in Bahrain differed from the previous ones in that it was a Shia-oriented movement towards the Sunni minority administration. Russia similarly preferred a low profile and did not react to the troops sent by Saudi Arabia to keep the regime alive in Bahrain. Assessing the turmoil in the country as an internal matter that should be solved through dialogue,¹⁸ Russia could be said to have no objections to military measures the government used against protestors.

3.6. Russia's Reaction to Syrian Revolts

Syria plays a key role in Russian foreign policy towards the Middle East not only because it is the longest lasting Russia ally in the region and harbors a Russian naval base in Tartus, but also because it is the only foothold Russia keeps in the Middle East. Considering that the only Russian military base beyond the borders of Soviet Union is located in Tartus, the importance of a loyal Syrian government to Russia could be better understood. Possession of a base to penetrate in the region provides Moscow the bargaining chip with US over Russian hinterland: the Commonwealth of Independent States, where attempts to undermine Russian influence were seen through a number of color revolutions. Additionally, Russia regards Syria as an important ally, which is reflected

¹⁷ Katz, "Russia and the Arab Spring," 5.

¹⁸ Katz, "Russia and the Arab Spring," 6.

in Putin's 2005 remarks: "Syria is a country with which the Soviet Union had, and today's Russia has, special [and] very warm relations."¹⁹ In the same year, Moscow forgave 73% of the \$13.4 billion debt owed by Damascus, which also indicates how highly Russia appreciates friendship with Syria.²⁰ Thanks to arm sales, Russia both keeps solid economic ties with Syria and increases her influence in the region. In the 2006 war in Israel, the Russian arms in Syria are said to have been transferred to Hezbollah, which managed to successfully stop the Israeli attacks.²¹ This shows that close relations with Damascus provides Moscow with the ground to penetrate into region and play an indirect crucial role in the balance of power in the Arab-Israeli conflict. All these considered together, Moscow's reaction to uprising in Syria would differ from other Middle Eastern countries and it has indeed differed.

Russia holds a different position towards riots in Syria where she follows a high-profile policy and voices strong support for the Assad government. At the expense of having conflict with the EU and the US, Moscow (aligned with China) vetoed sanctions on Syria²² by declaring that Syria needed dialogue and not sanctions.²³ Fueling the conflict, Moscow decided to send warships to its base in Tartus, which signals Russian insistence on keeping Assad in power despite risking relations with the US and the rest of the West. However, Moscow refrains from further escalating this confrontation and avoids damaging the relations to an irreparable level. This is best exemplified in Medvedev's following statement: "Assad should reform or quit over a Syria uprising."²⁴ It displays Russian concern over a future with Assad in power. The fact that Moscow hosted the Syrian opposition²⁵ in Moscow shows Russia is

¹⁹ Bourtnan, "Putin And Russia's Middle Eastern Policy," 2.

²⁰ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* 29.

²¹ R. Freedman, "The Russian Resurgence in the Middle East," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 5 (2007), 20.

²² "Russia, China veto U.N. resolution condemning Syria," *Reuters*, October 4, 2011

²³ "Russia says Syria needs dialogue, not sanctions," *Reuters*, November 25, 2011

²⁴ "Assad should reform or quit over Syria uprising, says Dmitry Medvedev," *Guardian*, October 7, 2011

²⁵ "Syrian opposition delegation visits Moscow," *Guardian*, June 28, 2011

unlikely to consent to military intervention in Syria in order to overthrow Assad, but it is additionally not going to intervene to protect him there either.²⁶ Consequently, Russia is reluctantly ready to recognize opposition in Syria if they happen to rise to power even though Russia will stand firm to keep Assad in place and avoid assessing this as a zero-sum game. Remarks of Mikhail Margelov, the Kremlin's envoy to the Middle East, also refers to this reality: "Leaders come and go, politicians come and go, social systems come and go, but for Russia, there remains a single reliable and trusted friend: the Syrian people."²⁷

When Russian reactions to various revolts in Arab countries are considered and examined together, it could be concluded that Russia does not follow a consistent policy regarding the Arab Spring. Its stance fluctuates from total indifference to what goes on in a particular country, to full support of a regime in another.

The Russian stance towards Arab uprisings has some particular characteristics, the first of which being that Russia prefers serving governments and regimes rather than having a Pandora box to open. In that sense, the primary property of Russian policy is that it is static. However, this policy does not ignore the possibility of the failures of the incumbent governments and it always keeps the doors open for the newcomers (as in the example seen by hosting the Syrian opposition in Moscow). Another characteristic is this policy has a tendency to be aligned with that of West with only one exception: Syria. In Syria, a possibility of strong confrontation does not look likely as Russia implicitly agrees for a regime change without foreign intervention. The fourth characteristic is the policy refrains from playing a proactive role in the reshaping of the Middle East but, on the contrary, holds a submissive stance.

Russian foreign policy does not have a comprehensive approach as to what goes on in the region but instead varies according to the perceived

²⁶ Katz, "Russia and the Arab Spring," 5.

²⁷ "Syrian opposition delegation visits Moscow," *Guardian*, June 28, 2011

importance of each regime to the interests of Moscow. This perception of importance could be only limited to Syria, the only foothold Russia has in the region, and might not be generalized to any other Arab country. While one can foresee how the US would react to a revolt in Oman after a while, it is quite unlikely to make a guess about a possible Russian stance. However, the specific case of Syria gives the impression that Russia will do its best to support some regimes and object to military interventions at the expense of deteriorating relations with transatlantic axis. On the other hand, it will neither embed itself militarily to defend the regimes nor will she refuse to recognize the new governments. However, it is highly likely that even without military interventions, the regimes in the Middle East are doomed to be overthrown. The process could just be slower or even bloodier. Russia's reaction to the revolutions indicates a lack of willingness to shape the political situation by adopting a reactive policy. This could be because Moscow rather sees threat and risk than prospects for a new opening-up and growth of its influences.²⁸ All considered, one cannot say Russia has not decided over its Middle East policy. On the contrary, Russia opted for a foreign policy of distancing itself from the destabilizing atmosphere of the Middle East and it is ready to transfer to other competitors its prospect of penetrating into the region though a Western, in particular American, image on a decline in the region; this provides Russia with the perfect ground to regain at least some of its lost grip in the Middle East.

Moscow views the revolutions and revolts in the Middle East as source of threat and destabilization, but not as a new ground to expand its influence and a chance for a strong come-back to the region. That is why Russian reaction to the revolutions indicates a lack of willingness to shape the political situation by adopting a reactive policy.²⁹ In this section, the reasons for this particular policy of reluctance to play role in the remaking of the Middle East will take focus.

²⁸ Kaczmariski, "Russia's Middle East policy after the Arab revolutions," 6.

²⁹ Kaczmariski, "Russia's Middle East policy after the Arab revolutions," 6.

4. RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY MENTALITY

One of the main characteristics of Russian foreign policy is that it escapes risks and fluctuations. These require Moscow to be very adaptive to changing conditions. However, Russia is a conservative power, maintaining traditional understanding of sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention.³⁰ This mentality forces Moscow to adopt a wait-and-see policy for many changes in international stage, which makes Russian foreign policy responsive rather than revolutionary. Instead of shaping the events and using them for her benefits, for which a very flexible foreign policy is a requirement, Russia opts for reacting to event after they start to shape.

Another important characteristic of Russian foreign policy since the demise of the Soviet Union is that it refrains from direct confrontation with the West. Even though Western and Russian interests could differ in various situations, Moscow does not escalate the conflict to the level of direct confrontation. The tendency to align Russian foreign policy with Western approach is the general nature of the relationship.

These two important factors in Russian foreign policy prevents Moscow from following a revisionist and pioneer policy in the Arab Spring and experiencing serious conflicts with the West over the future regimes in the Middle East. Moscow is aware that alignment with Western policy shall provide a positive-sum game in the Middle East, unlike Cold War times when losing the influence in one country meant a total defeat and retreat.

5. RUSSIA'S PERCEPTION OF THE ARAB SPRING

There is no clear consensus among the Russian élite regarding the assessment of the Arab Spring. While some consider it to be a natural social evolution which opens the door for Russian penetration, others

³⁰ R. Dannreuther, "Russia and the Arab Spring," *Russian Analytical Digest* 98 (2011), 2; N. El-Sheikh, "Russian Position on the Arab Revolutions," Accessed May 23, 2011. http://www.aljazeera.net/mritems/streams/2011/5/23/1_1063343_1_51.pdf

view it as a process of destabilization, and as a result, could lead to a situation in which radical Islamists would rise to power.³¹ However, one could conclude that the governmental bodies tend to assess the revolt harmful and detrimental to Russian interests, which is voiced by Putin: “Indeed, as you said, those arrogant world powers supported the old regimes in North Africa but, curiously, they also supported the revolutions that toppled those regimes.”³² These remarks show that Moscow sees a possibility of Color Revolutions, manipulated or initiated by the US, recurring. Likewise, Russia follows the policy of avoiding to openly support the serving regimes to its full strength. Considering “those arrogant world powers” are behind the revolts, Russia is aware there is no point in resisting the process of change through direct confrontation with that “arrogant” power, namely the US. Instead of that, Moscow shall opt for extending the fight for its interests over time, which is what happened in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan as well.

6. IMPORTANCE OF THE MIDDLE EAST FOR RUSSIAN PRIMARY INTERESTS

The place and importance of the Middle East for Russian primary interests is also another incentive for a passive and reactionary Russia in the shaping of the Middle East throughout the Arab Spring. Russia lacks the well-defined, long-term strategy necessary to be considered a “real great power.”³³ Instead, aware of this, Russia tries to carve a decent place for itself among the great powers without directly confronting the only super power in a unipolar world. Considering that the political demise of Soviet Union was preceded by its economic demise, under Putin’s rule, Russian concentration has focused on domestic stability and economic growth, mainly sustained by increasing oil and gas revenues.³⁴ Russia owes her current power to political and economic stability, facilitated

³¹ Kaczmarek, “Russia’s Middle East policy after the Arab revolutions,” 4.

³² “Russian PM Supports Iran’s Views on Regional Revolutions,” *Farsnews*, November 8, 2011

³³ Bourttman, “Putin And Russia’s Middle Eastern Policy,” 2.

³⁴ Freire, M. R. (2009), *Russian Policy In Central Asia: Supporting, Balancing, Coercing, Or Imposing?*. *Asian Perspective*, 33, 2, 128.

mainly by high oil prices. When compared with Soviet times, the Middle East owes its significance in Russian foreign policy not to geopolitics, but more to geo-economics. Thus, what a struggle of arm wrestling with the US in reorganization of the Middle East could offer for Russian economy could instead be more easily provided by the continuation and consolidation of Russian influence in Central Asia. As Russian policymakers also recognize, the Middle East is not a primary area of concern for Russian foreign policy.³⁵ Its importance to Russia stems from that it could provide a bargaining chip over Russian hinterland, namely ex-Soviet countries (particularly in Central Asia, which lays the grounds for a Russian energy empire). Therefore, rather than sparing her energy and wealth on efforts to exert its power and influence in the Middle East at the expense of a confrontation with the US, Russia opts for following an integration and power consolidation policy toward the near abroad, namely CIS countries.

The fact that Russia would focus her influence and interests on near abroad (in particular Central Asia) rather than the Middle East could be dated back to the emergence of the America's Greater Middle East project. As a clear symptom of this policy, the US has long-term plans vis-à-vis the Middle East not only geopolitically but also geo-economically. The Greater Middle East project triggered the Russian tendency to follow a policy of concentration, inspired by Gorchakov,³⁶ within the boundaries of CIS and in particular Central Asia. Regaining Uzbekistan to her side after the closure of the US air base in Karshi-Khanabad, the invasion of Georgia, recognizing the sovereignty of Abkhazia as well as southern Ossetia, consolidation of power in Ukraine by securing Yanukovich's presidency, and the proposal of forming a Eurasian Union could be interpreted as Russia's response to US's Greater Middle East project. By this project, Russia aims at securing a safe haven for Russian interests which are embodied in controlling energy sources and roads. The above mentioned regions have organic ties with Russia,

³⁵ Bourtman, "Putin And Russia's Middle Eastern Policy," 2.

³⁶ Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 98.

under Soviet influence, and falls within the primary area of Russian interests. Therefore, Russia has got the upper hand vis-à-vis the US in exerting its influence on those countries thanks to huge Russian minorities, historical ties, and autocratic regimes to which Russia does not pose any threat and would be happy to continue cooperating with in the future.

Instead of confronting the US over the reorganization of the Middle East, where Russia plays the underdog and which does not fall within the primary area of concern, Moscow, having no plan regarding the Middle East to challenge the US and incentives to drive the Arab countries to its side, has its own corresponding plan in Central Asia. Russia wants to keep clear of American penetration and where it has the key elements to achieve this goal. Therefore, Russia's reluctant foreign policy during the Arab Spring could be viewed as Russia keeping out of the Middle East in return for the US keeping out of the Caucasus and Central Asia.³⁷ Considering the pragmatic aspect of Putin's foreign policy understanding, this seems like a rather reasonable bargain so as to sustain the Russian influence in international relations by maintaining being an energy empire; for which controlling Central Asia is more essential than a risky game of influence in the reshaping of the Middle East.

7. RUSSIA'S CONCERN FOR INTERNAL UNREST

Russia adopts a passive stance toward reorganization of the Middle East for another important reason, which is the unrest that the Arab Spring could arouse within the boundaries of Russia and her neighboring countries.³⁸ With a population of approximately 20 million Muslim citizens, as well as the overwhelming Muslim population of central Asian countries, where Russian influence is vital to maintain Russian energy empire, Russia has to be quite careful with its every step in the Arab Spring. Considering that Russia suffered greatly from the insurgency in North Caucasus, in particular during the Chechen uprisings, Russia would

³⁷ Bourttman, "Putin and Russia's Middle Eastern Policy," 2.

³⁸ Magen, "Russia in the New Middle East," 1.

not prefer radical Islamic movements, or “fanatics” in Medvedev’s words,³⁹ to rise to power which could inspire similar movements not only within her borders but also in Central Asian countries. Nevertheless, Moscow would also not like to give the impression that it sides with oppressive, corrupt, and anti-democratic regimes, which could also ignite the flames of uprisings and cause destabilization around its borders.

When compared with the regimes that people overthrow or try to overthrow in the Middle East, many similarities, as well as many excuses, to start a revolution exist. In both regions, presidents hold the power not a result of fair and free elections; it is quite highly likely that they would lose their post if the existence of elections were the case. The state system is often characterized by autocracy, oppression of speech freedom, as well as lack of a free media and nepotism, which hinders the social mobilization of young generation in governmental positions held by narrow elite. Also, in Central Asian countries, governments adopt a secular stance limiting the influence of Islam in public sphere and in everyday life. An extreme case can be found in Tajikistan, where people under 18 years old are banned from worshipping in mosques and churches.⁴⁰ Additionally, regimes in both regions are notorious for their corruption. All considered, the underlying conditions show a similarity to give rise to unrest, if not successful revolutions, in the backyard of Russia. This possibility forces Russia to concentrate on consolidating its power in Central Asia, where a possible cessation of Russian influence as a result of insurgencies or revolutions will cost Russia dearly.

The success of the Arab Spring in overthrowing the long-ruling autocratic regimes in the Middle East has put a direct pressure on Russia, as well. There is a tendency among Russian leaders to perceive the Arab Spring spirit as a threat to their country, which makes them wary of the outcomes of the revolts and a great deal busy with internal power consolidation instead of following an assertive and proactive Middle East

³⁹ Globalpost. February 22, 2011

⁴⁰ “Tajikistan bans Muslim youths from praying in mosques,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, August 4, 2011.

policy. By blaming the outside forces, Medvedev claims that they are trying to put a similar scenario into practice for Russia as well.⁴¹ It is also clear that the successful uprisings of the ordinary people have started to stir the domestic policy of Russia. As early as February 2011, the prospect of Arab Spring effect on Russia and its natural area of influence were stated by Sergey Abeltsev, a Duma parliamentarian: “This infection will spread to Central Asia in the spring and will reach Russia in the summer.”⁴²

Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader, uttered that there were many lessons to be learned from the Arab Spring,⁴³ implying that Russia needs a change as well. Additionally, Garry Kasparov, one of the prominent figures of Russian opposition, expressed his optimism about a future change in Russian leadership following the Arab Spring.⁴⁴ However, the concrete impact of the Arab Spring could be seen after the Duma elections. Inspired by the Arab Spring, tens of thousands Russia poured into streets in a number of cities to protest the elections and demanded an end to Putin’s rule.⁴⁵ Even though these remarks and protests will not result in a revolution or a power change in Russia, possible Russian interest in the reshaping of the Middle East is diverted to internal problems. This distraction is furthered as Hillary Clinton, with an attempt to meddle in Russia’s internal affairs, criticized the Duma elections, which Putin believes are fueling the anti-governmental protests.⁴⁶

Considering the hardship Russia encounters in domestic policy after the Arab Spring, the possible spillover of the revolutions into vulnerable Central Asian countries, and the foreign pressure Russia has had to face regarding the elections, one can conclude that Russia is forced to focus its

⁴¹ “No Middle East-style scenario for Russia,” *Russia Today*, February 22, 2011.

⁴² “No Middle East-style scenario for Russia,” *Russia Today*, February 22, 2011.

⁴³ “Mikhail Gorbachev interview excerpts,” *Washington Post*, November 22, 2011

⁴⁴ “Chess Champ Garry Kasparov Hopes Arab Spring Spreads to Russia,” *Heritage.org*, November 4, 2011.

⁴⁵ Reuters, December 10, 2011.

⁴⁶ “Putin accuses Clinton of encouraging protesters.” Accessed December 8, 2011
<http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2011-12-08/Clinton-Putin-Russia/51729210/1>

energy inside her borders and its traditional areas of influence rather than following a proactive and revisionist policy in the Middle East.

CONCLUSION

Once on one pole in former bipolar world politics atmosphere, Moscow has adapted to its new role as one of the several great powers in a monopolar world system where Russia tries to maintain balance of power through arm sales, business contracts, and efforts to monopolize energy sources as well as roads. All of these means are a reflection of the modern Russian foreign policy understanding; consolidating her power by means of a strong economy without directly confronting the status of the US. Free from the ideological barriers of the Soviet era and aware of its political power in the post-Cold War world order, Moscow follows a realist foreign policy, which drives her to hold a passive stance toward the reorganization of world politics, submit to changes, avoid estrangement with new regimes, find herself a safe place after all are settled and try to get share from the markets. This was the case in Color revolutions, the invasions of Afghanistan (as well as Iraq), and establishment of Kosovo Republic. Russia does not follow a revolutionary, proactive foreign policy trying to shape her own world but she reacts to projects -or maps- drawn by "outside powers," and voices criticism. But in the end, Russia adapts to changes and refrains from placing herself in opposite fronts to the transatlantic axis. Even though neighboring countries, which fall within Moscow's *lebensraum* as crystallized in Georgia-Russia war, are an exception to that dimension, Russia's Middle East policy is framed by this stance.

From the beginning of the Arab Spring, Moscow has sustained her tendency to follow a wait-and-see policy even in Syria, where Russia shall not intervene to protect the incumbent regime while it is likely the Arab Spring will sweep another regime into the dustbin of history. Instead of drawing its own map of a renewed Middle East, Moscow opts for distancing herself from actively participating in the reorganization of the Middle East. The reasons for such a submissive policy could be stated

as inflexible Russian foreign policy which avoids taking risks, Russia's perception that "outside powers" are behind the scene, relative insignificance of the Middle East vis-à-vis Central Asian countries in Russia's foreign policy, and, last but not least, Russian internal unrest fueled by the Arab Spring that could destabilize Russia and Central Asian countries (which fall within Russian primary concern to maintain Russian power). Therefore, Russia seeks to consolidate her power within her borders and near abroad regions rather than looking to the Arab Spring as a new opening-up to increase Russian penetration in the region.

When the Russian position throughout the Arab Spring is considered as a whole, one could conclude that Russia shall refrain from voicing clear statements about the future of any regime in the Middle East and shall adapt to possible new formations as well as regime changes by sustaining her policy of pragmatism. Russia shall try to get its share of the Arab markets and maintain pursuing its interests in economic agreements and business contracts, rather than playing a zero-sum game at the expense of direct confrontation with the US. However, the consistency of Russia's Middle East policy throughout centuries tells us that Russia shall look to increase her influence in the Middle East as soon as she restores her power at home and nearest foreign regions if Russia wins the "great game" over Central Asia, but this time, against the US and China.

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