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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 Lukashевич 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.

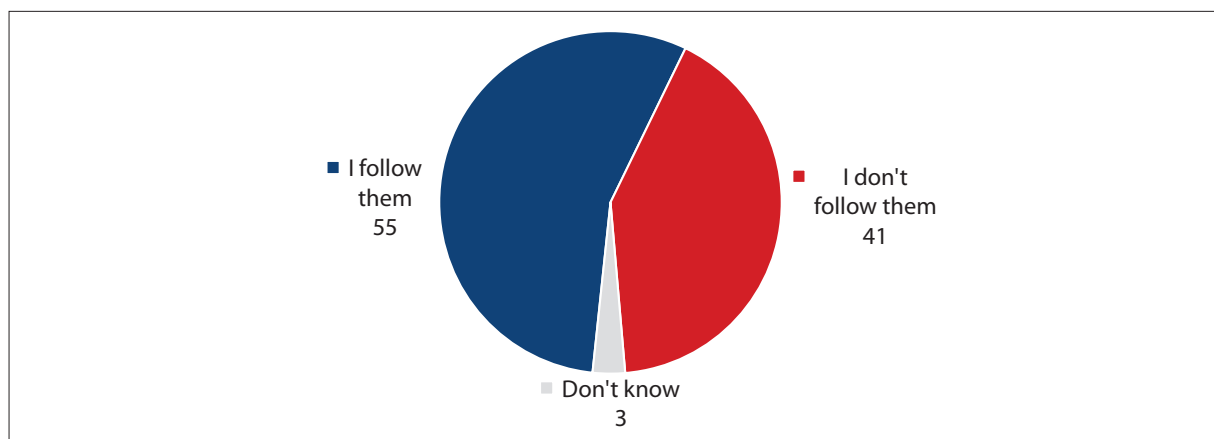
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OPINION POLL

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>