

## Russia's "Libya Debate"

### POLITICAL MEANINGS AND REPERCUSSIONS

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Russia's reaction to the recent uprisings in the Middle East and Libya, in particular, was striking for two reasons. First, it unmasked multiple trends in the Kremlin's foreign policy machinery. Second, the deep perceptual gaps between Russian and European discourses on Libya revived the oft-discussed question of the role of Russia in today's evolving international society.

#### **Mixed Messages**

Russia's response to the Libya crisis illustrated a host of uneven foreign policy mechanisms in the country today. The Russian ambassador to Tripoli was removed because of his alleged disapproval of presidential policy condemning Muammar Gaddafi. The Foreign Ministry criticized United Nations Resolution 1973 imposing a no-fly zone over Libya as "hasty," even though Russia had not vetoed it.

This lack of uniformity was seen most evidently in the policy tug-of-war between Russia's president and prime minister. While Vladimir Putin compared the military operation against Gaddafi to a colonial military invasion, Dmitry Medvedev, at the May 2011 G8 summit in Deauville, France not only shared the Western policy view toward Libya but publicly indicated that Gaddafi had de-legitimized himself by brutally oppressing his own people. Medvedev made clear that the Arab revolutions were caused by authoritarian rule and mismanagement, and were not provoked from outside. He authorized a travel ban on Gaddafi and his family and decreased Russian business operations in Libya.

Other members of the government toed the presidential line. In March 2011, Konstantin Kosachev, the head of the Russian parliament's International Affairs Committee, explicitly supported military action against Gaddafi, accepting both the notion that sovereignty entails a responsibility to protect and demonstrating political support for Libyan opposition forces. Later, Russian senator Mikhail Margelov, who

was appointed presidential envoy to Libya, openly expressed solidarity with those eager to see Gaddafi face a Hague tribunal and claimed that Russia was ready to open a representative mission in Benghazi, based upon Moscow's earlier acceptance of the opposition as a legitimate interlocutor.

To many, such a policy line suggested that Medvedev really saw the crisis in Libya as an opportunity to foster Russia's Euroatlantic agenda. Yet even such pro-Western signals were not entirely what they seemed. First, Medvedev's sympathies for the anti-Gaddafi coalition were not much more than a pragmatic move aimed at developing a more cooperative platform with major Western institutions, including NATO and the European Union.

Second, the importance of engagement with the West on Libya was more symbolic for Medvedev than substantive. The key to securing Medvedev's pro-Western narrative on Libya was, allegedly, a petition from Western leaders asking Russia to mediate between Gaddafi and the opposition, thereby confirming Russia's indispensability as a key global security actor. This would explain why it was not until after the Deauville summit that Medvedev dispatched Margelov, special envoy to Africa since March, to Tripoli. Demonstrating the public relations purpose of the mission, Margelov quickly declared a "breakthrough" in negotiations between Gaddafi and his opponents. He later admitted it would be more correct to speak of "contacts" between the two sides than "negotiations."

Third, Medvedev's good intentions do not reflect a well thought-out strategy but are instead a byproduct of the growing imbalances in the Russian policy-making system. Some of the president's pronouncements were implicitly rebuffed by anti-Western utterances from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, as well as by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Vice Prime Minister Sergey Ivanov. The sudden visit in June 2011 to Tripoli by Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, former president of Kalmykia (and head of the International Chess Federation), further contributed to an impression of disharmony among Russia's ruling elites. According to Ilyumzhinov, the visit was made at the behest of Russian authorities, who had requested that he convince Gaddafi to leave power. However, he instead turned his visit into a gesture of overt support for the Libyan dictator. At the same time, he confusingly compared Gaddafi with Dzhokhar Dudaev, the former Chechen leader who was killed by a Russian missile.

In general, this was the first time in more than a decade that the "presidential standpoint" was not the hegemonic policy platform in Russia. What has lain behind these conflicting outlooks, however, are more than pre-election "conflicts of interest" between Medvedev and Putin or discordant actions by politically marginal figures. The Arab crises have created tiers of tense domestic debate thanks to their prospective implications for Russia itself. In other words, the Libyan debates were not about Libya but about Russia and its (re)positioning vis-à-vis the West. In this sense, the debate has further polarized the Russian political scene, with its widening gap between those who wish Russia to be part of the West and those who portray the West as "dangerous losers." While some see the wave of North African revolts as incarnations of a growing sense of civil activism in the non-Western world, other see developments "inspired" by

external forces. Gaddafi is portrayed as either a tyrant or an example of principled resistance to the U.S.-led world order.

### **Russia's Role in International Society – Again**

The revolutions and upheavals across the Arab world have strengthened the global salience of normative issues like civil rights, accountability, and public participation, while fueling discussions on the limitations of authoritarian stability. In the EU, the Arab Spring has become an argument for reversing previously tolerant attitudes toward tyrants and autocrats and promoting democracy in neighboring states. The political and historical parallels that inform the dominant European discourse are normatively loaded, including comparisons with the revolutions of 1989 and even 1848, as well as an analogy between Benghazi and Srebrenica as symbols of brutal government-orchestrated repression.

References to the breakdown of Communist regimes in 1989 have been part of Russian discourse as well, but in a way that reinforces a deep attitudinal gap between Russia and Europe. If in the West parallels with previous waves of anti-authoritarian movements appear to strengthen global prospects for democracy, in Russia this comparison takes on an alarmist hue. Most recent revolutionary changes, from the anti-Communist revolts of 1989 to the Eurasian “color revolutions,” have been widely perceived as a challenge or threat to Russia, rather than as an opportunity opening up prospective avenues for the country's integration with international structures. In not a single case (with the possible exception of the overthrow of the Bakiev regime in Kyrgyzstan) have popular protests been seen to be in line with Russian interests.

Ultimately, therefore, the Arab Spring has strengthened sovereignty-based, anti-liberal thinking in Moscow. One Russian commentator derogatorily equated Mohamed ElBaradei with Mikhail Gorbachev and Andrey Sakharov, two symbols of slavishness to the West in the eyes of those nostalgic about the Soviet Union. Another positively invoked past Soviet stands against the West in Africa: in 1956, when the Soviet Union was on the side of Egypt against Great Britain and France, and 1986, when Moscow allegedly prevented the United States from bombarding Libya. Others compared Medvedev to Gorbachev in their policies of making concessions to the West. One former Russian diplomat even fantasized about the Libyan crisis eventually leading to a “new Crimean war” of the West against Russia. Within this explicitly anti-Western frame, the anti-corruption crusade of individuals like popular blogger Navalny is said to undermine the stability of Russia in the same way anti-corruption invectives have proven to be capable weapons in the arsenal of opposition forces across North Africa and the Middle East.

Other parallels have been invoked to substantiate the aggressive nature of U.S. policies (Serbia = Afghanistan = Iraq = Libya) and its pursuit of regime change (Georgia = Ukraine = Egypt = Libya). This in turn is said to spell trouble for Russia in its turbulent North Caucasus, via the latter's putative links with the Middle East.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, this discourse of external intervention is inconsistent. It claims that the West lacks strategic thinking and strong leaders, while insisting that the “debilitated” West must be resisted at all costs. Those in Russia who blame the United States and its European allies for “sponsoring” the Arab revolutions also paradoxically depict the West’s military operations in Libya as ineffective and lacking in direction.

The very fact that Russian debate is strongly influenced by those who believe in “American conspiracies” reveals Russia’s provincialism in international society. Rather than worry about Russian influence in the Arab world, Russian observers exhibit passive and self-defeating concerns: Will a “domino effect” damage Russia? Who, exactly, will benefit from the Arab regime changes – the West, Islamists, or China? Such concerns have been sustained even by Putin, who has assumed that Russia has no special interest in Syria. Lavrov too assumed Russia would not play a key mediating role in Libya, encouraging the African Union to take on this responsibility instead.

Such thinking uncovers Russia’s lack of global leadership resources. Unsurprisingly, Russia did not make any attempt to start a political dialogue with Germany when abstaining from supporting the UN “no-fly-zone” resolution. Despite expressing full sympathy for the sovereignty of Libya and indignation against those violating it, Lavrov did not exclude the possibility that Russia would participate in land operations if sanctioned by the UN Security Council. In the end, Russia adopted the mostly symbolic role of “critical bystander,” with no real potential to influence the situation on the ground.

The Arab revolutions of 2011 might lead one to conclude that the worldview espoused by proponents of “radical democracy” – the growing segmentation of the global social milieu and the rise of unestablished social groups capable of challenging regimes outside existing institutional mechanisms – is not all that far off from reality. Against this backdrop, it is understandable why the responses of some states are ambiguous and ambivalent, and not always institutionally coherent. This, however, only underlines what does remain far from reality – an international society that is an established global structure rather than a metaphorical idea.