

# Russia's Counter-Revolutionary Stance toward the Arab Spring

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## ABSTRACT

*The wave of uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa has not only affected Russia's interests but also opens some new opportunities for strengthening Russian influence. Nevertheless, the prevalent attitude in Moscow towards these dissimilar but inter-connected crises is negative, which is caused primarily by the nature of its own corrupt quasi-democratic regime haunted by the specter of revolution. The stalled NATO intervention in Libya has re-focused the attention of the Russian leadership on the issue of sovereignty, which determines the decision to disallow any UN sanctions against Syria. Russia's position has evolved in synch with the course taken by China, and Moscow is interested in strengthening this counter-revolutionary proto-alliance by building up ties with conservative Arab regimes, including Saudi Arabia, and also by upgrading its strategic partnership with Turkey. Harvesting unexpected dividends from the turmoil in the Arab world, Russia cannot ignore the risks of a sudden explosion of a revolutionary energy – and neither can it effectively hedge against such a risk.*

The key words in mainstream Russian commentary on and analysis of the spectacular changes in Middle East are “destabilization”, “turmoil” and “extremism”, but a term that is practically absent is “Arab spring.” This prevalent negative perspective on the unexpected erosion of the familiar political landscape is not shaped by concerns about Russia's material interests in the region. Indeed, Russia, unlike most other major powers, has no stake in the oil supplies from the Gulf and even benefits from the increase in the oil price in the global market; it also gains in reputation because energy consumers now see it as a very reliable source. Nevertheless, Moscow has taken a firm counter-revolutionary stance and shows no intention of switching to the allegedly winning side. Where US President Barack Obama finds an “historic opportunity” for advancing democratic values, the Russian leadership also looks for an opportunity to prove that revolutions are messy and futile—and to build ties

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Photo: EPA

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with the ruling regimes despotic as they are. This position is an exception to the fusion of pragmatism and opportunism that is characteristic of Russia's traditional foreign policy and so deserves an impartial and unbiased examination.

### **A Rock Against the Wave of Revolutions**

The pronounced dislike of, and active opposition to, revolutions is rooted not in Russia's own painful experience going back to 1917 but in the nature of its current regime, which professes a commitment to democracy but is by its core character authoritarian, perhaps of an “enlightened” kind. The discourse of modernization advanced by President Dmitry Medvedev, for instance in the speech at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in June, implies the opening of greater political competition, but the plan for building a Popular Front by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin proves beyond doubt that in the current election campaign, competition is severely curtailed. The corrupt bureaucratic super-structure of the Putinist regime is extremely rigid and resistant to modernization, which means that Medvedev's arguments fall flat and his chances for staying in the office for a

second term are slim. It also means that the window for painful but peaceful reforms is closing, and as Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the most famous political prisoner in Russia, warns, the anger against corruption could escalate much the same way as in the Middle East, leaving a revolution as the only possible breakthrough from current trajectory of stagnation.<sup>1</sup>

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This looming prospect worries the Russian elite even more than the wave of “color revolutions” in the mid-2000s did, the latest manifestations of which was the December 2010 rally in Minsk that was brutally dispersed by police. Moscow did not utter a word of criticism of President Aleksandr Lukashenko, even if the personal chemistry between him and Putin is far from friendly. This implicit support makes a perfect fit with the sustained effort invested in proving that the Orange Revolution in Ukraine was merely senseless disorder. The election of Viktor Yanukovich as Ukraine’s president in January 2010 was interpreted as the ultimate proof for this proposition, but the self-congratulation was cut short by the shocking revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt.

Medvedev’s first take on these “very complex events” was outright alarmist: “We must face the truth. In the past such a scenario was harbored for us, and now attempts to implement it are even more likely. In any case, this plot will not work.”<sup>2</sup> This conspiracy theory was elaborated in semi-official accusations that social networks such as Facebook were exploited for inciting the unrest and in expert analyses of the involvement of Western secret services that were allegedly keen to stage experiments of the “controlled chaos” strategy. As weeks were growing into months, it became obvious that explaining revolutions away as foreign plots was not very clever, but the idea that authoritarian regimes were organic to the whole Middle East was never abandoned. Describing Qaddafi’s regime as “a warped and ugly monarchy,” Putin nevertheless argued that it “on the whole satisfies the local public mentality and political practice.”<sup>3</sup>

The plain fact that educated urban classes are deeply dissatisfied with corrupt presidents-for-life is removed from Russian official rhetoric, which emphasizes the risk of power capture by extremists. Experts in Moscow are as surprised as those in Washington that the Muslim Brotherhood was practically absent from the determined crowds in Tahrir Square and that Al Qaeda in Libya receives air support from NATO instead of being on the receiving end of the intervention. It is not,

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lost fear of the corrupt repressive apparatus. This “extremism” is particularly dangerous because, unlike in most “classical” revolutionary situations, it now does not need charismatic leaders or party organizations and has the capacity for fast mobilization by the means of virtual networks. In Russia, the strategy for the regime’s self-preservation has been based on denying the opposition a legitimate political space and pushing it underground, but this—as the “Arab spring” has shown—creates a hidden explosive potential that can detonate from an absurdly insignificant spark, like a riot of football fans or a flash-mob by students against conscription. Putin puts himself forward as the leader determined to crash such “extremism”, but there is no guarantee that the military demoralized by painful reforms would follow a shoot-to-kill order.

### **Sovereignty above “Humanitarian Interventionism”**

There was never an option for outside intervention in the popular uprising in Egypt, but the spread of revolution towards Bahrain, Libya and Syria made it necessary for concerned neighbors and the international community at large to contemplate the hard question of intervention—and three different answers have been in fact supplied. In Bahrain, the swift intervention from Saudi Arabia helped the royal family suppress the revolt; in Syria, in spite of massive and sustained use of force against the rebels, no international action is undertaken, but the EU and the US have imposed unilateral sanctions; in Libya, the limited NATO intervention mandated by the UN has brought the civil war to a deadlock. Russia has no problem with the first case, is firmly against any intervention in the second one, and has been of two minds about the Libyan calamity.

At the initial stage of the conflict, the uprising in Libya appeared not that different from other revolutions, and the use of force against the motley crowds was seen as desperate measures of the doomed regime. The motives for launching an

however, about extremists of this sort that the Russian leadership is concerned as it has never had much doubt about maintaining contacts with Hamas or about engaging in a high-level dialogue with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The real concern is about students and the educated urban classes who detest the self-serving bureaucracy, cannot be fooled by cheap populism and have

intervention were varied and far from solid, but it was clear that the personality of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was a major factor, since the common good in removing from power this not-entirely sane leader was obvious for just about every interested party. Russia was not altogether comfortable with the draft resolution presented at the UN Security Council by France and the UK, but let it pass, perhaps because Medvedev did not want to act as a spoiler in the gambit initiated by his particular “friend” (to the degree such terms are applicable in high-level intrigues), President Nicholas Sarkozy. Putin immediately lambasted Resolution 1973 as “flawed and inadequate”, but Medvedev reprimanded him publicly for using loaded terms like “crusade”, and only two month later expressed chagrin about the resolution being “trampled by actions committed by certain countries.”<sup>4</sup>

This might seem to be petty bickering between co-rulers drifting apart but in fact the issue here is the difference of opinions in the Russian elite about the incentives for and the limits of cooperation with the West. Putin dismissed the protection of civilians as mere “pretext” for the real thing—a military intervention against a sovereign state, and Medvedev, who initially followed the interests of elite groups that saw the benefits from cooperation with the West as far more important than the safety of some exotic despot, gradually drifted to the same position. Putin’s mindset was shaped, or perhaps traumatized, by the Kosovo crisis at the very start of his phantasmagoric rise to power when NATO launched a military intervention against Russia’s strongest objections. Fundamentally, however, this obsession with sovereignty originates in the very nature of a quasi-democratic regime, the leaders of which know that at certain points they will have to protect their supremacy with violent repression whatever the outcry from the West. Medvedev might fancy himself as a reformist in the ruling team but he dares not to deviate too far from the group-think on the sovereign right to crush any opposition.

In this context, granting NATO a legitimate opportunity to intervene against a counter-revolutionary offensive amounted to a dangerous precedent, which is only partly neutralized by the discord in the Atlantic alliance and its demonstrated inability to enforce the desired outcome. Gaddafi’s dogged resistance provided Medvedev a chance to lament about the abuse of the no-fly-zone mandate (the real meaning of which was crystal clear to all voters and abstainers in the UN

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(Security Council), and to assert that the precedent would not be reproduced in Syria, no matter what repressions are unleashed against the malcontents. One of the few affirmative statements he made at the May 18 press conference was “I will not support such a resolution, even if my friends and acquaintances were to ask me about it.”

It is characteristic that Russia’s position on this problem has evolved in sync with China’s, which has traditionally put sovereignty first. This meeting of minds is perfectly captured by a KAL cartoon depicting Putin and Hu Jintao condemning foreign intervention in Libya “because you never know when the occasional heinous crime and despicable act might come in handy.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Resonance in the Caucasus and Central Asia**

Revolutions are known to have the tendency to spread in waves but there is no way of knowing whether this particular wave would stop on the borders of Iran or spread further north towards the Caucasus and Central Asia. Quite a few states in these troubled regions have characteristics distinctly similar to Arab autocracies and are certain to experience turbulent regime change—but not necessarily in the immediate future. The urban classes in these still newly created states may or may not be stirred up by the demonstration effect of the Tahrir triumph but the presidents-for-life are already experiencing a change in attitude towards their previous amicable partnership. This is perhaps most unpleasant for Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Aliyev, who used to be treated in Washington and Brussels as a guest of honor and now is seen as just another oil despot whose term might expire any week.

The Russian leaders are not at all concerned about developments in Azerbaijan expecting that the cold shoulder from the West would push Aliyev closer to the more sympathetic northern neighbor; they are, however, rightly worried about the instability in the northern Caucasus. In fact, the high point of the Egyptian revolution coincided with the peak of rebel attacks in Kabardino-Balkaria, where the tourist season was disrupted, and in Dagestan, from where several suicide bombers arrived to Moscow and organized the explosion in the Domodedovo airport. There was certainly no causal connection between the two trends as the escalation of violence in the north Caucasus started in the spring of 2009, but the psychological overlap of the images of helpless tanks in Tahrir Square and

angry Muscovites on Manezhnaya Square brought the Kremlin close to panic. By summer, however, that acute fear had evaporated thanks to several effective counter-terrorist operations that wiped out a number of prominent leaders and cells and the extermination of Osama bin Laden by a US special forces raid into Pakistan also had an indirect impact on the rebel activity in the north Caucasus. The escalation of instability has been interrupted, but the duration of the pause is highly uncertain.

The country that appears most ripe for an Arab-type revolution is Uzbekistan, which has no oil revenues to buy compliance of the “have-nots” and is ruled by an ageing despot who is resented by the urban middle classes

The situation in Central Asia has shown no visible signs of deterioration but the resonance from Egypt interplays here with the gradual accumulation of explosive material, first of all in the Fergana Valley. Moscow was caught unprepared by the violent unrest in southern Kyrgyzstan in the spring and summer of 2010, and has had to reckon with the plain fact that it had no military muscle for enforcing order in this hot spot—or for projecting power in any forthcoming contingencies. Tajikistan is seen as prone to an implosion of the same type that Kyrgyzstan is struggling to get out of, because the state structures in both are deeply corroded by the narcotics traffic originating in Afghanistan. Moscow is now aware that the Russian military base in Tajikistan would not be able to reproduce the intervention that was crucial to terminating the civil war of 1992-1995. The country that appears most ripe for an Arab-type revolution is Uzbekistan, which has no oil revenues to buy compliance of the “have-nots” and is ruled by an ageing despot who is resented by the urban middle classes.

Russia's indifference to the brewing troubles in Central Asia is to a large extent a consequence of the much diminished engagement of the EU and the US with this region, so that the proposition of a geopolitical competition driven by appetites for energy resources is increasingly irrelevant. The risk of merger of various local disturbances with the war zone in Afghanistan is certainly present, but Moscow is inclined to see it as a greater problem for Washington.

### **Resisting Change is Not the Same as Backing Losers**

Revolutionary situations evolve in entirely unpredictable ways, but as of mid-2011, Russia has reasons for a “not-too-bad” net assessment. It may expect to gain some influence in the wider Middle East by default rather than by pro-active

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engagement primarily because the pro-democracy uprisings have delivered, paradoxical as it may seem, a series of setbacks for the West. The Obama Administration was unable to help President Mubarak, who used to be a staunch US ally, while Medvedev had perfectly friendly telephone conversations with President Assad on April 6 and May 24.<sup>6</sup>

It is extremely difficult for Washington

to combine steps in sustaining the strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia with condemnation of the suppression of the revolution in Bahrain, and Russia has no problems of this sort. NATO has undermined its credibility by launching an ill-prepared intervention in Libya and demonstrating its inability to bring it swiftly to a successful conclusion, while Russia has distanced itself from this fiasco and from Colonel Gaddafi as well, and so is in the position to play the role of a mediator, even if chances for a compromise are slim.

Russia's line in nearly every revolutionary conflict in the wider Middle East goes across the course taken by the US and the EU, uncertain as these courses often are, but it is remarkably compatible with the line drawn by China. Moscow would be interested in strengthening this counter-revolutionary proto-alliance by building up ties with conservative Arab regimes, including Saudi Arabia, and also by upgrading its strategic partnership with Turkey. For that matter, Medvedev called Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on June 14 to congratulate him on the success of the Justice and Development Party in the Turkish elections, and Putin has sent him a telegram expressing willingness "to cooperate closely with you to further promote mutually beneficial partnership."<sup>7</sup> A crucial step in this direction could be the Moscow-initiated proposal for Turkey to join the BRICS organization, which is seeking to increase its profile as the forum for the "emerging" powers.

Harvesting unexpected dividends from the turmoil in the Arab world, Russia cannot ignore the risks of a sudden explosion of revolutionary energy—and neither can it effectively hedge against such a risk. As of mid-2011, the most probable epicenter is in Belarus, where street protests after the crudely manipulated elections in December 2010 were swiftly suppressed, but the financial crisis and currency devaluation in May 2011 vastly increased the potential of discontent. In Russia itself, the relative stabilization in the north Caucasus (albeit on a dangerously high level of violence) makes it possible for the election campaign to pro-

ceed orderly and to deliver the result desired by the leadership. This outcome, nevertheless, could turn out to be a commencement for disintegration of the political order, which is based on corruption on a higher level than the stagnant economy could sustain. The north Caucasus might supply detonators and catalysts for such an implosion, and a better option in this scenario is not a new escalation of terrorist attacks but a rise in public protests against corrupt ruling clans and police brutality—not that dissimilar from what started as a minor disturbance in the poor quarters of Tunis.

### Endnotes

1) “Khodorkovsky unabridged”, *Wall Street Journal*, June 15, 2011; my reflections are in Pavel Baev, “Medvedev speaks against Putinism and fails to disprove Khodorkovsky”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, June 20, 2011.

2) Official translation of the remarks at the meeting of the National Anti-Terrorist Committee, February 22, 2011, retrieved from <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/1804>.

3) Official translation of the remarks at the press conference in Denmark, April 26, 2011, retrieved from <http://premier.gov.ru/eng/visits/world/14991/events/14996>.

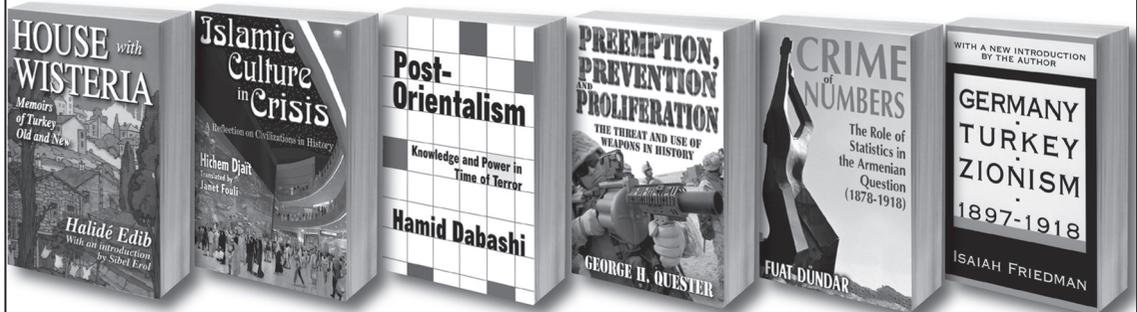
4) Putin's remarks at the meeting with workers of Votkinsk plant on March 21, 2011 can be found at <http://premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/14542>; official translation of Medvedev's press-conference on May 18, 2011 is available at <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/2223>.

5) *Economist*, February 24, 2011.

6) According to the official records, Assad expressed his commitment to reforms and ensuring “the peaceful free expression of Syrian citizens' will”; see <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/2264>.

7) The text is accessible at <http://premier.gov.ru/eng/events/messages/15560>.

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