



Russia and the “Arab Spring”

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Moscow’s relations with Arab capitals, from Damascus to Alger, through Tripoli and Cairo, are historical and multifarious, as well of economical kind as of political and cultural nature. In some cases they go together with significant pacts of strategic and military cooperation from which the military-industrial complex and the Russian energy giants are not the last to benefit. In this regard, the case of Khadafi’s Libya, long considered –together with Syria– as Russia’s historical ally in the Arab world, provides a very clear example.

Sure enough, the blows dealt the past few weeks to the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan regimes by popular movements of a hitherto unprecedented scale in this part of the world and the questions they raise as for the global political balance and the power politics do concern in the inner circles of Russian power.

In the eyes of a Western observer, the Arab revolutions seem to be bothering Moscow for fear that they could spread to Russia. Yet, this view, though most certainly deeply rooted in the Kremlin’s mind, is masking a more complex reality. The Arab revolutions are

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questioning a norm that was still widely accepted a few months ago. The emergence of China and Russia had led to the conclusion that liberal democracy and individual freedom were no prerequisite for a society, because economic progress made it possible to do without them. Authoritarian regimes were thus getting their legitimacy from redistribution and growth rather than from representation and individual freedoms. It is true that the roots of the Arab upheavals are numerous and mainly linked to socioeconomic claims, but factors relating to protest against the established order can also be added to this. The sole economic factor cannot account for those events. Lately, countries such as Tunisia or Egypt have been ranking higher in the Human Development Index. Promising data such as life expectancy, education or economic growth led the United Nations to raise their ranking. In terms of improvement in this index, Tunisia and Egypt are outclassing countries or regions as Hong-Kong, Mexico or India. Despite their advances in socioeconomic indicators, those two countries are stagnating as far as political freedoms and corruption are concerned².

This questioning of the relationship of subordination in the Arab world is a call to order for many countries in the world. The tacit social agreement linking authoritarian regimes to populations benefitting from a certain form of socioeconomic redistribution is challenged. This year's revolutionary events show us that any regime that does not respect individual freedoms can be threatened. We will consequently deconstruct the perspectives adopted by the Russian authorities in two parts: the domestic repercussions of those developments as well as the risk of a spread to the post-Soviet area.

Domestic repercussions

The Russian and Arab sociopolitical contexts being very different, the comparison has to be drawn with the greatest caution. The legitimacy of the Russian authorities depends on global hydrocarbon prices and the popularity of one man, Vladimir Putin³. The two pillars of the regime's legitimacy are thus unstable. First, Moscow's control of the global prices of gas and oil is very limited, even if those prices have a major influence on the living standards of Russian citizens. Second, Vladimir Putin's popularity has lately declined as a result of domestic security events. The Russian Prime Minister, who traditionally gets his legitimacy from his ability to restore the country's domestic order, is currently faced with people questioning his policy, among others with regard to his management of the terrorist threat in big cities. The legitimacy of the Russian regime thus largely depends on the domestic economic and security context. Destabilising events such as terrorist attacks or socioeconomic crises can challenge the subordination of the Russian civil society to the ruling political elite. The transposition of the "Arab spring" to the Russian society should nevertheless be put into perspective. Though a lot of Russian citizens bitterly experience every day a denial of democracy and the deprivation of their constitutional rights, including that of freely deciding on the reshuffle of those in power, they are as many, unlike the average Tunisian or Egyptian citizen, who think that their way of living has sensibly improved over the last ten years.

² Dani RODRIK, "The Poverty of Dictatorship", *The Moscow Times*, 16 February 2011.

³ Fiona HILL, "How Russia and China See the Egyptian Revolution", *Foreign Policy*, 15 February 2011.

The structure of the Arab upheaval is also very meaningful for Russia. Whether in Tunis or in Cairo, the protest movements did not form around one figure or a previously organised movement. A young Russian democratic activist, Roman Dobrokhotov, drew a comparison between the Russian and Egyptian situations which enlightens us on the perspective of dissenting movements in Russia: *“The Egyptian scenario destroyed the last myth that you hear from those opposed to change in Russia, that there isn't a strong leader, there isn't an alternative the people would follow. Who would replace Putin? Who would replace Mubarak? These questions need to be asked after the dictator is overthrown [...]”*⁴. Only a few months ago, a revolution process in the Arab world was quite unthinkable. This status quo standard enabled all Western heads of state and government to receive the leaders of authoritarian regimes in the name of *Realpolitik* and of the containment of Islamism. From an outsider's viewpoint, Arab populations could not by nature initiate a protest process on their own. This region of the world had no tradition of popular revolution. That very norm is the key factor explaining why the Western powers were taken aback by those developments. This cognitive process also applies in the West's analysis of Russia. In the global public opinion, this country, despite its established revolutionary history and its developed liberal thinking, does not have the popular networks that would enable the emergence of the upheaval⁵. The reality is altogether different and the Russian leaders are well aware of this.

The declarations of the Russian authorities and the things left unsaid reveal a malaise with regard to those revolutionary events. The Russian executive's analysis and discourse have its roots in the colour revolutions. Dmitri Medvedev's speech on 22 February 2011 sums up the authorities' point of view on the revolt movements. All have the West in mind, yet without mentioning it explicitly: *“Let's face the truth. They have been preparing such a scenario for us, and now they will try even harder to implement it.”* In this view, Western powers are behind those popular revolutions. For instance, Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin publicly stated that Google was the force hiding behind the Egyptian upheaval⁶. In the Russian argumentation, the West is always the useful enemy for the conservative's arguments. Yet, the initial reaction of the Western countries shows that this logic is far from being obvious. Nevertheless, the Russian executive is using and abusing their historically strained relations with Europeans and Americans to neglect the claims for reforms coming from the civil society. The protest against the authority is still considered in Russia as being impossible without the intervention of outside forces, a view directly in line with the Russian perception of the events between 2003 and 2005 that had led to the wave of changes in leadership in the post-Soviet area.

Spread to the post-Soviet area?

As a matter of fact, in almost all former Soviet republics, the political space remains locked by authoritarian regimes of which the succession system leaves hardly any room for the popular will. In many cases, the government methods of ruling elites strongly

⁴ Victor DAVIDOFF, “Egypt's Lessons for Russia”, *The Moscow Times*, 14 February 2011.

⁵ Anders ASLUND, “What Russia Can Learn From Tunisia and Egypt”, *The Moscow Times*, 24 February 2011.

⁶ Nabi ABDULLAEV, “Kremlin Sees Peril in Arab Unrest”, *The Moscow Times*, 24 February 2011.

resemble that of their Arab counterparts. The stability of its close neighbour being of paramount importance for the Russian foreign policy, there is nothing so surprising about the current malaise of the Russian authorities in the face of the risk that the unrest may spread to countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan). The Russian unease is all the more strong that, in the framework of the “colour revolutions”, some former Soviet republics already underwent changes in leadership that were until then “friends”, of which the effects proved difficult to manage for the Kremlin (cf Five-Day War in Georgia, gas crisis in Ukraine, affair of the military bases in Kirghizia). Under the agreed guise of stability, the hypothesis of an Egyptian-style movement of civil disobedience, prelude to a larger protest, cannot totally be rejected, notably in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where the scenarios of power succession appear to be quite problematic. As a matter of fact, the Arab and Central Asian regimes share many unenviable characteristics: extreme concentration of power in the hands of a few, corrupt bureaucracy, omnipotence of the security services, crackdown on the opposition and argument of the bastion against Islamism are so many common features to the established systems from the Maghreb to the steppes of Central Asia.

At the same time, poverty, unemployment or under-employment are reaching record levels, particularly in the countryside, where many are surviving in often worse conditions than that existing to the south of the Mediterranean. In case they needed a reminder, the “Arab spring” has sent a clear signal to the autocrats of Central Asia who, for years, have been leaning on the supposed apathy of their populations and the spectre of the fundamentalist threat to maintain their stranglehold on power. The Egyptian and Tunisian scenarios show to what extent the apparent docility of populations said to be apathetic can swiftly turn into a revolt. In Astana, Baku, Dushanbe or Tashkent, people are most likely drawing parallels. In fact, those appear to be particularly meaningful. Whatever the public declarations made by the leaders of Central Asia, and the necessity to take into account the historical, social, political and cultural background that makes of the great Central Asian region everything but a simple outgrowth of the Arab world at the southern margin of Russia, they cannot do without wondering about the deep reasons for those events.

Conclusion

The historical lessons that can be drawn from the Arab spring are not known yet. It is still too soon to analyse the global importance that those events will have. From an operational perspective, we can notice that Russia is uneasy with regard to the ongoing changes in that part of the world. As a matter of fact, they disturb the Russian perspective on global balances. Yet, for the time being, Moscow does not consider the Arab revolts as normative shocks likely to question the respect of the sovereignty of the world’s authoritarian regimes. The fact that Russia, after abstaining in the vote on the Security Council’s resolution 1973 that gave the green light to a military intervention in Libya, was very critical of the coalition forces’ operations shows to what extent this country feels attached to the status quo. If the official Russian position of “active neutrality” brings back memories of the Soviet Union’s actions during the first Gulf War, the

operation in Libya also aroused controversies within the Russian government itself and gave rise to a profound disagreement between President Medvedev and Vladimir Putin. While calling for a rapid end of the operations, the Russian President criticised his Prime Minister –without naming him– for having compared the intervention of the coalition forces in Libya to a “*crusade*”, reckoning that it was an “*unacceptable*” term and that “*we all need to be careful in our evaluations* [on the matter]”. It is the first time that such an obvious divergence in views is exposed between Medvedev and Putin and this, before the presidential elections of 2012. According to the Russian media, the military operation in Libya could drag on. Experts are wondering who benefits from the UN resolution.