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# **Russia and the Arab Spring: Supporting the Counter-Revolution**

**Roland Dannreuther**

Russia's response to the Arab Spring ranged from apprehension to deep anxiety and diverged significantly from US and EU responses. While initially welcoming the popular demands for political reform in the Middle East, the Russian reaction rapidly became more critical as developments in the region resulted in Western military intervention and there was increased concern over the spread of Islamist extremism. It was these twin fears which prompted the Russian leadership to adopt a strong and uncompromising stance towards Syria, seeking to ensure that, unlike in Libya, there would be no Western intervention in support of the overthrow of the existing regime and a secular state would be preserved. While geopolitical factors certainly played a role in the adoption of this strategic stance, domestic political factors were more significant, particularly since the Arab Spring coincided with unprecedented levels of domestic Russian contestation during the 2011-12 parliamentary and presidential elections. As the Russian leadership felt internally threatened by the growing opposition within the country, the civil war in Syria and the increased levels of instability in much of the rest of the Middle East became an exemplification of the perceived flaws of the external imposition of Western liberal democracy and the virtues of Russian's own distinctive model of state-managed political order. There was, as such, a significant ideational and ideological dimension to the Russian response to the Arab Spring, challenging the very legitimacy and efficacy of Western promotion of liberal democracy.

**Key words:** Russia, Arab Spring, Syrian conflict, intervention, democracy

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One of the unforeseen outcomes of the tumultuous developments of the Arab Spring is that Russia has emerged as a significantly more influential and powerful strategic presence in the Middle East, reminiscent to some degree of the Soviet role during the Cold War period. In relation to Syria, in particular, Russia was willing to countenance a degree of diplomatic confrontation with the West which is unparalleled since the end of the Cold War. Russia was also willing to provide significant support to a Syrian regime which is treated as an illegitimate pariah by most other regional and international actors. However, in the end, this diplomatic and political strategy proved to be astute and to reap dividends. In September 2013, when the US and its allies were on the brink of military intervention into Syria, a Russian diplomatic initiative to secure the dismantlement of Syria's chemical weapons averted the threat of military strikes. It also led to a significant US-Russian *rapprochement* which led to the convening of the Geneva Conference in January 2014 and was the first time that all the major participants to the conflict, including the Syrian regime itself, were present. The need for such a comprehensive meeting as a pre-condition to forge a peace has been a constant demand of Russia and bringing all the parties together in Geneva was perceived in Moscow as a vindication of its earlier diplomatic stance.

The principal aim of this article is to identify and evaluate the evolution of Russia's approach towards the Arab Spring. The first part of the article assesses the initial Russian response to the developments of the Arab Spring. This was, at the start, relatively low-key, reflecting the limited economic and political ties with Egypt and Tunisia. But there was undoubtedly apprehension over these developments even at this time, which contrasted with the more positive assessments from the US, the EU and Turkey, as highlighted in other contributions to this volume. Russian anxieties did though intensify with the conflict in Libya which resulted in Muammar Gaddafi's removal from power in October 2011 supported by Western military intervention. This crisis led to an unprecedented internal debate within Russia where the more hardline viewpoint of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin gained ascendancy, and where Western intervention into Libya was viewed as representing a fundamental challenge to core Russian national interests. Increasingly, the Russian government and Russian analysts saw the Arab Spring as strengthening and consolidating Islamist extremism which was viewed as undermining stability not just in the Middle East but also potentially within Russia itself.

This sceptical and negative perceptions of the Arab Spring, rejecting the idea that this was a positive process of democratization, was mirrored in the approach taken by Israel, as set out by Magen in this volume. However, unlike Israel, Russia had significantly greater capacities to promote its preferences for managing and resolving the conflict. The second part of this article assesses the policies and instruments that Russia used to promote its strategic interventions into the region, most notably in Syria. In the main, these were diplomatic in nature, though there was also the cultivation of the perception that Russia could, if it so wished, escalate the crisis through arms sales or more direct support for the Syrian regime. In reality, Russia did provide substantive diplomatic, economic and political support to the Syrian regime, which led to a severe cooling of relations between Russia and the West as well as with many moderate Arab states. However, Russian strategy was always carefully calibrated and there was no desire irretrievably to damage its long-term

relations with the US and other Western and Arab states. Thus, when the opportunity came for the US and Russia to work together, such as over the dismantlement of Syria's chemical weapons, Russia was keen to rebuild and improve relations and not to continue to emphasise the differences in their political positions over Syria. There was also a conscious exercise of self-restraint in Russia to limit their satisfaction and sense of *schadenfreude* that the West had come to adopt the longer-term Russian anxiety about how the Arab Spring had intensified Islamist extremism in the Middle East.

The final section of this article addresses the main factors which explain why Russia adopted the approach that it did to the Arab Spring and to the conflict in Syria. The main argument here is that, while geopolitical factors undoubtedly played a significant role in promoting Russia's distinctive stance, there were also significant domestic political factors as well as an ideological and ideational dimension. Indeed, in this case, the domestic and ideational factors have a stronger explanatory force. Domestic factors were important as the events of the Arab Spring occurred at a time of significant electoral tension within Russia during the 2011-12 parliamentary and presidential elections. The ideational factors include the development in Russia, particularly by official government-supporting analysts and thinkers, of a specific conceptualisation of democracy which is essentially illiberal and anti-Western in its orientation, and which places much greater weight on the need for gradual stability-prioritising and state-led change rather than the more pluralist role played by civil society inherent in the liberal democratic model. Whether or not the Russian concept of 'sovereign democracy' is really a democratic model or just a variant of authoritarianism, the sense that this model was more appropriate for promoting change in the Middle East rather than Western-supported regime change was a factor behind the stance taken by Russia. Indeed, the Russian perception is that their overarching prognosis has tended to be supported by political developments in the majority of the states affected by the Arab Spring in the period from 2012-14.

### **Russian Assessment of the Arab Spring**

It was, though, certainly not evident at the start of the Arab Spring that such a negative and pessimistic outcome of the Arab was inevitable or pre-ordained. Most Western and popular Arab sentiment was generally optimistic that a new era was dawning and that this presaged a decisive shift towards democracy. The Russian leadership was also keen not to be seen as a reactionary force, denying the legitimate democratic aspirations of the Arab world. Putin himself regularly affirmed that the social dynamics resulting in the Arab Spring were both positive and necessary and the 'sympathies of Russians were on the side of those struggling for democratic reforms' (Putin 2013). The initial developments in Tunisia and Egypt also initially appeared to present no significant threat or disruption to Russian interests, given the relatively limited economic and political ties between Russia and these two countries.

There was nevertheless an unavoidable parallel between the expression of the democratic impulses of the Arab peoples in Cairo and Tunis and Russians who were beginning to demonstrate in their thousands in Moscow and other Russian cities. The onset of the Arab Spring occurred at particularly sensitive moment in Russia's political cycle with the run-up to the 2011 parliamentary elections and the 2012 presidential elections. The central question of these elections was the future political role of Putin who, in the previous elections, had swapped jobs with Dmitry Medvedev and became Prime Minister while Medvedev moved to the Presidency. The big political issue which dominated Russian speculation ever since that re-shuffling in 2008 was Putin's future and whether a new leadership would emerge for the next elections. This was resolved in an abrupt, and to many Russians, highly cynical manner in the Spring of 2011 when it was peremptorily announced that Putin and Medvedev would again swap jobs and Putin would have a third term as President. The cynical stage management of this, the evidence of electoral vote rigging, and a general dissatisfaction with the corrupt and authoritarian nature of Russian politics, led to unprecedented opposition rallies during 2011 and 2012.

The linkage between the pro-democracy developments in the Middle East and those in Russia was picked up as a theme by Russian commentators and opposition forces (see Sokolov 2011). However, Russian analysis also highlighted the different political situation in the Middle East how what was happening there was more akin to the revolution in 1989 in East Central Europe rather than with the 'coloured' revolutions of the 2000s. In addition, emphasis was accorded to the differing political culture in Europe compared to the Middle East, where Islam plays such a strong role in mitigating against a democratic culture. There was, as a result, a much greater scepticism and ambivalence about the democratic potential of the Arab Spring revolutions than found in most Western analyses.

This pessimism did not entail an unconditional support for the ruling secular Arab authoritarian regimes. Among Russian analysts, there was a recognition that these regimes had been in power too long, had become too corrupt, and had failed to reflect the changing nature of their societies (see Ivanov, 2013, pp. 8-32). However, the critical divergence from Western analysis was that the Arab Spring was rarely if ever viewed as part of an inexorable process towards democracy. The dominant narrative among Russian analysts was that the Arab Spring was much more a return to the traditional values of Middle Eastern societies, incorporating a more Islamic identity, than a shift to Western-style democracy. The narrative was thus couched primarily in terms of Islamization than of democratization. This again is explicitly expressed in Putin's own reflections on developments in the Middle East when, in an interview in August 2013, he argued that Russia is not, as many in the West argue, against the need for radical reform in Syria and that Russia is not just unreservedly supporting Assad but that a simplistic understanding of democracy, supported and promoted by the West, was a major factor in the violence in the region;

In my opinion, this is happening because some people from outside believe that if the region were to be brought into compliance with a certain idea – an idea that some call democracy – then peace and stability would ensue. That's not how it works. You can't ignore the region's history, traditions and religious beliefs, and you can't just interfere (Putin 2013).

There was, therefore, a recognition that an inevitable transformation was taking place in the Arab world and that there was a historical logic and inevitability about it, but that this change is not to be viewed through the prism of western-style democracy but in terms of a broad-based societal yearning for a more authentic and traditional Islamic identity. This passing of an old order is viewed with some wistfulness and nostalgia by Russian analysts, even while accepting its inevitability. As one senior Russian diplomat notes, what is happening is a shift of power from the Soviet-educated secular leftist Arab generation to a younger Islamist generation that has less affection and more limited historical ties with post-Soviet Russia (Lukmanov, 2013, p. 104).

Russian analyses also tend to converge on this perception that the old secular Arab nationalist model is out-moded and that the struggle is now between moderate political Islam, such as with sections of the Muslim Brotherhood, and radical Islamist extremism, represented by al-Qaeda and its affiliates. This conceptualization of a bifurcated internal civil war between moderate and extremist Islam is deeply embedded in Russian thinking and has its sources in Russia's own experiences of dealing with the Muslim world (Dannreuther, 2010). From the Russian perspective, the Soviet/Russian state has been engaged in an almost continuous struggle against Islamist extremism from the late 1970s onwards. This extends from the Soviet experience in Afghanistan, to the Islamist civil war in Tajikistan, and to the insurgency in Chechnya in the North Caucasus, which notably shifted in the late 1990s from being a mainly nationalist secessionist to a more radical Islamist struggle. In the mid-2000s, the Islamization of the Chechen insurgency mutated further into a more generalized Islamist insurgency in the whole of the North Caucasus that continues to threaten the stability of the North Caucasus region.

In the ideological world-view of Putin and his advisers, the root cause of this serious internal threat was the 'false promise' of Western-style democracy promoted in the 1990s. Democracy became critically identified with the loss of the sovereign power of the centre through devolution and federalization, as most famously expressed by former President Yeltsin's call for the Russian regions 'to grab as much sovereignty as possible'. For Putin, it was precisely this loss of power of the central state, and the devolution of power to the periphery, which resulted in a vacuum that, in the North Caucasus, led to chaos, civil war and the rise of a radical anti-Russian Islamist extremist challenge.

There was, therefore, a deeply held conviction, drawn from Putin's direct experience, that viewed the Western export of liberal democracy as a recipe for internal conflict, state disintegration, and chaos. This significantly informed and added to the apprehension and anxiety over developments in relation to the Arab Spring. A deep suspicion and distrust of Western intervention has also been a constant theme in post-Soviet Russian strategic thinking, where Western interventions, justified on humanitarian grounds, into Bosnia in 1995 and Kosovo in 1999 were generally perceived in Russia to be a smokescreen for a deliberate strategy of NATO expansion (Dannreuther, 1999-2000). There was always, therefore, a potential threat in Russian eyes that the Arab Spring might provide the West with a further opportunity to engage in regime change through the justification of 'humanitarian intervention'. Ensuring against such Western intervention was, therefore, a key goal of Russian policymaking.

## **Russian Policies towards the Conflicts in Libya and Syria**

These concerns and anxieties became increasingly acute with the evolution of events in Libya. In contrast to Tunisia and Egypt, the Libyan regime did not swiftly capitulate to the demands of the opposition, but rather threatened brutally to crush that opposition. The dilemma for Russia was whether it should support a Western-sponsored resolution at the UN Security Council which aimed to provide protection for Libyan civilians under threat from Gaddafi's forces. Medvedev was inclined to support the Western initiative, believing it was critical to preserve the 'reset' agenda, including Russian entry into the WTO and the new START treaty, and that it was not worth jeopardizing this for an isolated Arab leader with almost no support in the wider Arab world (Suslov, 2012). However, the Russian Foreign Ministry recommended vetoing the resolution. Vitaly Churkin, the Russian permanent representative to the UN, explicitly warned about the 'inclusion of provisions in the document that potentially open the door for large-scale military intervention' (Grigoriev, 2011). The eventual compromise was that Russia abstained from Resolution 1973. Once the resolution was passed, NATO initiated air strikes and provided military support to the opposition which contributed to the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime.

This decision not to veto this resolution was, though, challenged by Putin (then Prime Minister) who noted that the resolution was 'deficient and flawed' and that it 'allows anyone to do anything they want – to take any actions against a sovereign state. Basically, all that this reminds me of is a medieval appeal for a crusade' (Ivanov and Kuzlov, 2011). Medvedev immediately responded saying it 'was absolutely inexcusable to use expressions that, in effect, lead to a clash of civilisations – such as "crusades" and so forth' (Demchenko 2012). At the time, it appeared that this unprecedented clash between the two figures at the heart of the leadership duopoly might be just another example of the stage management of differences of opinion, with a message carefully calculated to meet the differing expectations of a foreign as against a domestic audience (Samarina 2011). However, in retrospect, this internal dispute can be seen as a critical turning point when Medvedev's ambition for a second presidential term was significantly weakened. The NATO air strikes in support of the Libyan opposition and thus in support, from a Russian perspective, of 'regime change' was a significant embarrassment for Medvedev and shifted elite support and public popularity towards Putin (Suslov 2012).

Taking a much more forceful and uncompromising posture towards developments in Libya was not just driven by electoral factors. There was also a strong conviction in Putin's distinctive world-view that the Arab Spring was now going badly wrong. Thus, despite his earlier support for the uprisings, Putin noted that 'it became quickly clear that events in many of these countries were not turning out according to a civilized scenario. Instead of the affirmation of democracy, instead of defending the rights of the minority, there was increasingly the expulsion of the enemy, coup d'états, where the domination of one side becomes an ever greater aggressive domination of the other' (Putin, 2012). The West, if not the sole cause of this deterioration, was, according to Putin exacerbating the situation as these negative developments 'were made worse by intervention from outside in support of one side of the internal conflict and the forceful character of that intervention. It led to a

number of governments under the cover of humanitarian slogans and with the aid of air power dividing the Libyan regime. And the apotheosis of this was not even a medieval but simply a brutal elimination of Muammar Gaddafi'. The firm conclusion that Putin draws from this is that 'we must not allow the "Libyan scenario" to be attempted to be reproduced in Syria' (ibid.).

It is this broader context of a resolute opposition to Western military intervention to support opposition forces to existing regimes which provides an explanation for why, after Libya, the Russian stance towards Syria was so uncompromising. Sergei Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, argued that 'the way the Syrian crisis is resolved will largely determine the model for the international community's response to internal conflicts in the future' (Chernenko and Yusin, 2012). The Syrian crisis became, as such, a litmus test for confronting the whole issue of humanitarian intervention in the similar way that the Russian intervention into Georgia in 2008 was primarily driven by the perceived need to set 'red lines' against NATO enlargement into the post-Soviet space.

The principal instruments that Russia utilised in pursuit of its objectives in Syria were primarily diplomatic rather than military or economic in nature. This included the exercise of its power of veto in the UN Security Council to block the imposition of sanctions or authorise military action against the Syrian regime. Russia managed to block votes against Syria at three critical junctures in the UN during 2011 and 2012. In ensuring the inaction of the UN, Russia was willing to be diplomatically isolated to an unprecedented degree, such as with the second major UN Resolution in February 2012 when its sole ally in not voting for the resolution was China. Russia was also willing to take the considerable risk of providing support for Asad even at times when the Syrian regime appeared close to collapse. This diplomatic strategy did, though, mean that Russia did not have to use other more confrontational and escalatory instrument. The absence of a arms sanctions regime against Syria meant that Russia could continue to supply 'defensive weapons' to the Syrian regime. Russia also justified its support for Asad on the grounds that, to do otherwise, would be to pre-judge the political process in Syria and that any settlement would have to include direct talks and negotiations between the regime and the opposition.

There was certainly a politico-military as well as a diplomatic dimension to Russian policy towards the Syrian conflict. Russian warships patrolled, from time to time, waters close to Syria and used the port of Tartus, which is one of the few foreign naval bases available to the Russian navy. Russian military advisers provided support and advice to their counterparts in the Syrian army. There was also the intermittent diplomatic threat that Russia could, if pressed too far, provide weapons to Syria, such as the S-300 anti-missile system, which would significantly shift the strategic balance in the region. There was also the inevitable reality that Western policy-makers could not exclude in their military contingency planning a Russian military reaction if the West did militarily intervene in Syria.

But the Russian leadership and analysts also calculated that the actual risk of this leading to a significant military escalation with the West was limited. There was based on an underlying assessment that the West was in reality deeply hesitant about a military intervention into Syria. There was a calculation that the formal Western stance of supporting the opposition goals of overthrowing the Asad regime was never



likely to succeed without substantial Western military support for these forces and that Western publics lacked the appetite for this. The likely result was therefore a continuing military stalemate which would provide opportunities for Russian diplomacy to support a political resolution given its privileged access to the Syrian government. As such, the Russian diplomatic success in 2013 over the chemical weapons issue, which expressly averted a Western intervention, followed a logic which exposed the doubts and anxieties lying below the surface of much elite and popular thinking in Europe and the US.

This diplomatic success did come with some significant costs. In the Middle East, one of the legacies of Russia's Middle East policy during the 2000s was its success in courting both moderate and radical forces in the region and to advance mutually beneficial economic relations with countries which formerly had poor relations with Russia, such as Turkey, Israel and the Gulf states (Dannreuther 2012; Katz 2012). But these mutually beneficial relations, most notably with the Gulf states, were strongly threatened by Russia's position on Syria. For example, there was a serious deterioration of relations with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the two countries providing the strongest support to the opposition to the Assad regime. In July 2012, the Russian ambassador to Qatar was beaten up at the airport in Doha and lucrative economic deals were cancelled with both countries. Although the amount of economic trade between Russia and the Gulf region is actually quite limited, the deterioration in political relations followed a significant *rapprochement* which included Putin's official visit to the region in 2007, the first such visit by a Russian or a Soviet leader. The strategic objective for Russia had been to forge closer diplomatic ties so that common interests over international oil and gas markets could be promoted more effectively. These tentative initial steps to forging closer relations in the Gulf region were undoubtedly affected by the confrontation over Syria.

More generally in the Middle East, the image of Russia was negatively affected by the events in Syria. In Egypt, a key indicator of grassroots Arab sentiments, the share of positive opinion of Russia dropped from 50% in 2007 to 16% in 2012; in Jordan the approval rate was just 25% and in Turkey it was 16%. Highly influential Islamic thinkers adopted an increasingly critical stance towards Russia, with the internationally renowned theologian, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, calling on *Al-Jazeera* for Muslims to boycott Russia which, he claimed, 'was supporting the criminal Syrian regime with weapons supplies' (al-Qaradawi, 2012). As a senior Russian diplomat expresses it, 'at the grassroots level Moscow is consistently presented as one of the forces checking the "democratic" impulses of the region's peoples; it is assumed that Russia is getting rich on weapon deliveries to the region torn apart by conflicts and on the fuel prices which went up because of the continued bloodshed in fuel-producing countries' (Lukmanov, 2013, p. 102). Some Russian analysts also unfavourably contrasted Russia with the European Union over the period of the Arab Spring, where Russia was viewed as 'arming the dictators' while the EU promotes its 'soft power' image and distances itself from the United States. (Ivanov 2013b).

The seeming one-sided support for Syria and the leadership of Bashar Asad also affected Russia's relations with the West and contributed to a significant cooling in relations. One Russian analyst suggested that by early 2013 the 'wave of anti-US fervour has reached heights perhaps not seen since the reign of Joseph

Stalin' (Kiselov, 2013). Although this was undoubtedly exaggerated, the potential damage to Russia's relations with the West have been a matter of concern for Russian diplomats. While there has been a clear shift towards a more confrontational anti-Western stance with Putin's return to the Presidency in 2012, and the Syrian crisis has been a litmus test of this, Russian diplomats have consistently tried to present Russia as an external power which seeks to promote a constructive resolution of the conflict in Syria so long as Russia's core strategic interests are protected. In March 2012, Russia accepted a UN Presidential statement which urged Syria to accept the peace plan put forward by the UN special envoy, Kofi Annan. This plan detailed an 'inclusive political process', a ceasefire, and a withdrawal of forces by both sides. Russia also voted for UN Security Council Resolution 2042 which established a short-lived monitoring mission. Similarly, Russia did cooperate with the UN-supported 'Action Group' on Syria and supported the proposals for a Syrian-led transition as set out in the Geneva Communiqué of June 2012. In May 2013, Russia and the United States agreed to promote an international conference based on this June 2012 Communiqué, which was eventually convened in February 2014.

There were, therefore, precedents for a more constructive and cooperative Russian-US stance. This provided the basis for the passing of UN Security Council Resolution 2118 in September 2013 which obligated the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles. Russia's forceful diplomatic action to support and promote this resolution came with some significant political risks, as Russia's reputation and credibility inevitably became hostage to the Syrian government's willingness and commitment to such a process. In this regard, although the resolution did not explicitly endorse an automatic punitive response to violations of the agreement, there was nevertheless reference to a chapter seven provision which recognised that such coercive actions would be forthcoming if there were such verified violations. The fact that there was a reference to chapter seven in the wording of the resolution did represent a significant compromise for Russia.

In the aftermath of the vote, Putin was also careful not to boast of a Russian victory and to highlight it as a collective and mutually advantageous result which potentially heralded a more constructive and cooperative relationship between Russia and the West. There was clearly a sense in Moscow that the crisis in Syria had led to a dangerous deterioration in relations with the West and that this needed to be actively changed. Thus, the chemical weapons agreement was used to bolster US-Russian ties rather than, as could easily have been the case, to further embarrass Obama's weakness and strategic vacillation. The desire for Putin to have a good Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014 also concentrated minds in seeking to ameliorate Russia's external image, which resulted in the freeing of Mikhail Khodorkovskii and the Pussy Riot protestors. In this context, the Russian diplomatic effort was focused on seeking to put the conflicts and tensions over Syria into the past and to concentrate on multilateral cooperation to seek a positive settlement of the Syrian civil war.

### **Understanding Russia's Approach to the Arab Spring**

Periods of significant conflict and tension between Russia and the West inevitably highlight Russia's geopolitical approach to international relations, which is undeniably a core aspect of the Russian strategic mentality. However, this needs to be qualified by certain factors, particularly when examining Russia's role towards the

Arab Spring and the crises in Libya and Syria. The first is that, as identified in much of the preceding analysis, domestic political factors were critical in the nature and development of Russia's diplomatic stance. The tense political situation within Russia, with the need for Putin to consolidate his position against an unprecedented degree of internal opposition, was critical in understanding why a resolute and uncompromising stance in relation to the Syrian crisis was seen as politically necessary for the consolidation of Putin's domestic support. The second factor is that the Russian leadership were also conscious that there were potential costs in adopting an excessively geopolitical approach. And the third factor is that the Russian stance cannot be understood without recognising that Russia under Putin has developed a distinctive 'Russian idea' of the sources of political order in international relations and the role that democracy, civil society and the state should play in ensuring progressive change. There is, as such, an important ideational and socially constructed element in Russian strategic thinking which needs to be incorporated.

In relation to the recognition of the tension between the undoubted attractions of a geopolitical approach as against its potential negative consequences, this is a key feature in Russia's response to the Arab Spring. It was well understood by more pragmatic elements in the Russian leadership that there is a fine line between the 'principled' opposition to certain elements of Western strategy, such as 'regime change' or Western-promoted humanitarian intervention, and the promotion of a more generalized geopolitical struggle against the West, and its regional allies, which places Russia in a countervailing camp aligned with Syria, Iran and other rejectionist forces in the region. It is a fine line, however, which Russian leaders and policy analysts instinctively and regularly found themselves crossing, given the strengths of a deeper Soviet and Russian tradition of geopolitical and realist thought. For example, Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, noted in one interview that;

Asad has been turned into a bogeyman. But, in reality all of these groundless charges – that he is to blame for everything – are a cover for a big geopolitical game. The geopolitical map of the Middle East is once again being reformatted as different players seek to secure their own geopolitical positions. Many are concerned more about Iran than Syria. They are saying bluntly that Iran should be deprived of its closest ally, which they consider Asad to be' (Vorobyov, 2012).

The depiction of a broader geopolitical struggle also played well to a domestic audience, with one Russian commentator noting that criticism of domestic politics cannot easily be controlled by those in power but that 'where Syria is concerned, geopolitics trumps objectivity...geopolitical nationalism has deep roots. Putin himself is a product of that culture, and not just an active media manipulator' (Nekrasov, 2012).

However, Russian diplomats remained sensitive to the limits of geopolitics, particularly in promoting the core goal of modernization and strengthening of the domestic economy. Russia is not, in this sense, the same country as the Soviet Union which was willing to sacrifice its economic interests for ideological and geopolitical commitments. Sergei Ivanov, a key political ally of Putin, presented this more pragmatic picture of post-Soviet Russia by stating that 'we don't export ideology anymore—we only export goods and capital' (Ivanov 2008). When the Middle East is viewed from this more pragmatic economic perspective, the geopolitical interest of Russia in support of Syria appears strategically relatively much less significant.

Although much is made of the importance of the Tartus naval facility on the Syrian coast, the only naval base outside of the former Soviet Union, this is actually run-down and of little military significance, only permitting temporary mooring (Allinson, 2013). Its importance is more one rooted in nostalgia than the actual needs and demands of Russian naval power. Similarly, Syria is an important importer of Russian arms, representing 72% of its arms imports from 2007-11, but this accounts for only 5% of Russia's total arms deliveries abroad.

More generally, from the economic perspective, it is actually with Middle Eastern countries who have strongly supported the opposition against the Asad regime that Russia has the strongest and most significant economic relations. The most important in this regard is Turkey. Turkey has always been trading and economic partner in the Middle East with trade rising from about \$4 billion in the 1990s to \$15 billion in 2005 and \$34 billion in 2012. Russia for 63% of Turkish natural gas imports thanks to a dedicated gas export line between the two countries—Blue Stream—which started supplying gas in 2003. In Russia, Turkish construction companies, as well as consumer goods companies, are very active, and Turkish investments in Russia are estimated to total \$5 billion (Akhmedkhanov 2008).. However, the Syrian crisis undoubtedly threatened to put at risk these Russian economic interests. In September 2012, Prime Minister Recep Tayipp Erdogan, the leader of the ruling Justice and Development Party, explicitly included Russia among those countries that 'history will not forgive for assisting the bloody Syrian regime'. A few weeks after that speech, the Turkish air force grounded a Russian passenger plane on a Moscow-Damascus journey (Glazova, 2012).

In fact, what one can draw from this is that a Soviet-style reflexive geopolitical approach no longer correlates with the actual post-Soviet 'national interests' of Russia. As such, a realist or geopolitical analysis is insufficient for understanding why Russia acted the way it did and was willing to take such potential political and economic risks. To understand this requires recognition of the role that ideational and ideological factors played.

Critical to this was the fact that the Arab Spring and developments in Libya and Syria coincided with a shift in ideological orientation of the Russian political system and its sources of political legitimation. During Medvedev's presidency, the key overarching political agenda was defined in terms of modernization, involving the need for the Russian economy to diversify away from its dependence on raw materials and towards a more technologically advanced manufacturing and services economy. This agenda incorporated a generally favourable attitude towards both the West and the more liberal, modernizing sections of Russian society. However, with that liberalizing domestic constituency becoming increasingly vocal in its criticisms and opposition to the ruling regime during the course of 2011-12, the electoral logic for securing Putin's re-election required involved focusing attention on consolidating the support of the more traditional and conservative majority of Russian society found in the rural and Soviet legacy industrial heartlands (Trenin, Lipmann, and Malashenko, 2013). This meant not only a shift to a more openly confrontational posture towards the West but also a stronger and more forceful critique of the Western ideas perceived to be driving the opposition forces within Russian society.

In the mid-2000s, much of the ideological spadework for this anti-Western and anti-liberal critique had been completed with the development of the concept of 'sovereign democracy'. Vladislav Surkov, the key intellectual figure behind this concept, argued that the form of democracy appropriate to Russian society, and by extension to other modernizing and industrializing societies, is one where the state has the primary role in managing the transition to democracy, ensuring that the resulting societal transformation does not lead to disorder and conflict but preserves social stability and economic development (Surkov, 2006). As such, the intellectual core of the concept of 'sovereign democracy' is a rejection of liberal pluralist conceptions of democracy which require the division of society into competing factional groups. For Surkov and other Russian elites, the danger is that, in the Russian context, this pluralistic conception would only lead to internal disorder, societal conflict and the loss of the 'sovereign' integrity of the state. Such a liberal pluralist concept of the state might be appropriate for advanced post-industrial Western societies, where the underlying political culture is sufficiently consensual to permit such open dissension without undermining the integrity of the state. However, the 'sovereign democracy' concept articulated the view that this was not appropriate for those states, including Russia, which have a different inherited historical and political culture, and where any attempt to implement this would lead to the loss of sovereignty or 'de-sovereignization' (Averre, 2009, p. 1697).

There was also an inter-confessional and inter-ethnic dimension to this conservative statist conception of the appropriate forms of political order in complex internally divided societies, which draws from Russia's post-Soviet development. In developing Russia's strategy to deal with Islamist extremism, Putin developed a religio-political as well as a coercive military dimension. This involved a pro-active policy of supporting, both politically and financially, Muslim religious representation through a tightly regulated and hierarchically configured sphere of moderate Russian-rooted Islam. This shift towards a more differentiated conception of the secular nature of the Russian state, which accords a greater role to the religious identities in Russia, was carefully articulated so as to extend beyond the Russian Orthodox church to include the other 'traditional religions', most notably Islam. Tatar Muslims were recognised as the indigenous population of Russia and should be considered 'co-constructors of the Russian state' (Naumkin, 2006). The Russian leadership has generally been careful in articulating the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional nature of the Russian state, the importance of asserting a civic (Rossiiski) rather than an ethnic (Russkii) Russian identity, and how Russia does not subscribe to the 'clash of civilizations' thesis.

This sense that Russia is distinctive in its tolerance of religious, ethnic and confessional difference is not just an elite phenomenon but has a broader popular base, as indicated in a survey which asked Russians to identify the core values of the European Union as against Russia (figure 1). While the values of the EU were identified to be those classically aligned with liberal democracy, such as the market economy, human rights, the rule of law and democracy, the core values of Russia were defined in terms of respect of different cultures and religions, of toleration and of preservation of cultural heritage. This survey is suggestive that there might be broad societal support for the Russian claim that, though European values of liberal democracy are something to aspire towards, they do potentially represent a threat to traditional values of toleration and respect for minority rights, particularly if promoted

through external coercive intervention. The Russian model is one that is seen therefore as a potentially attractive export to the non-Western world. As one influential Russian report argues, Russia's advantage in the Middle East is that it 'comes across as a civilisationally close state, in a significant measure belonging to both Europe and Asia, the Christian and Islamic worlds, and not expressing to the world European "hyper-secularism" which is not welcome to Middle Eastern societies, particularly in the post-Spring period' (Ivanov, 2013b, p. 24.)

There is, therefore, little that was apologetic or defensive in the Russian approach to the Arab Spring. From Moscow's perspective, the Russian experience, forged through a long association and engagement with the Muslim world, is that social stability and multi-ethnic and multi-confessional toleration in Muslim societies are fragile social commodities which can rapidly be broken apart in periods of radical social change. This contributed to the immediate and instinctive support for the Asad regime not just because it is a longstanding ally of Russia but also because it is seen to defend the interests of the minorities in Syria and seeks to preserve the traditions of multi-confessional toleration, despite the authoritarian nature of the regime. As such, the most effective way to resolve the Syrian crisis is not the unconditional demand for Asad's overthrow but an externally-supported process of negotiations between all the parties to the conflict. For Russia, the Western interpretation of support for democracy as meaning support for the Syrian opposition, whose principal constituency is the Sunni majority population, unintentionally but inevitably strengthens radical and extremist elements that are intolerant of all difference, seek to eliminate their opponents and unashamedly use the instruments of fear and terrorism. It is for this reason that Putin has regularly cited the rise of the terrorist group, Jabhat al-Nusri, among the opposition and has highlighted the atrocities that the group have committed. For Putin, the rise of such extremist forces in the Syrian conflict, and how this has intensified the brutality of the conflict more generally, is the result of a misguided and fundamentally misconceived Western policy.

## **Conclusion**

This article has sought to identify the key factors explaining the evolution of Russia's stance towards the Arab Spring and the conflicts that developed in Libya and Syria. While recognizing that geopolitical factors were undoubtedly important for understanding the distinctive position adopted by Russia, which was both sceptical of the democratic potential of the Arab Spring and strongly opposed to any external military intervention, the article has highlighted the critical roles that domestic political and ideational factors played in the articulation of Russia's strategic posture.

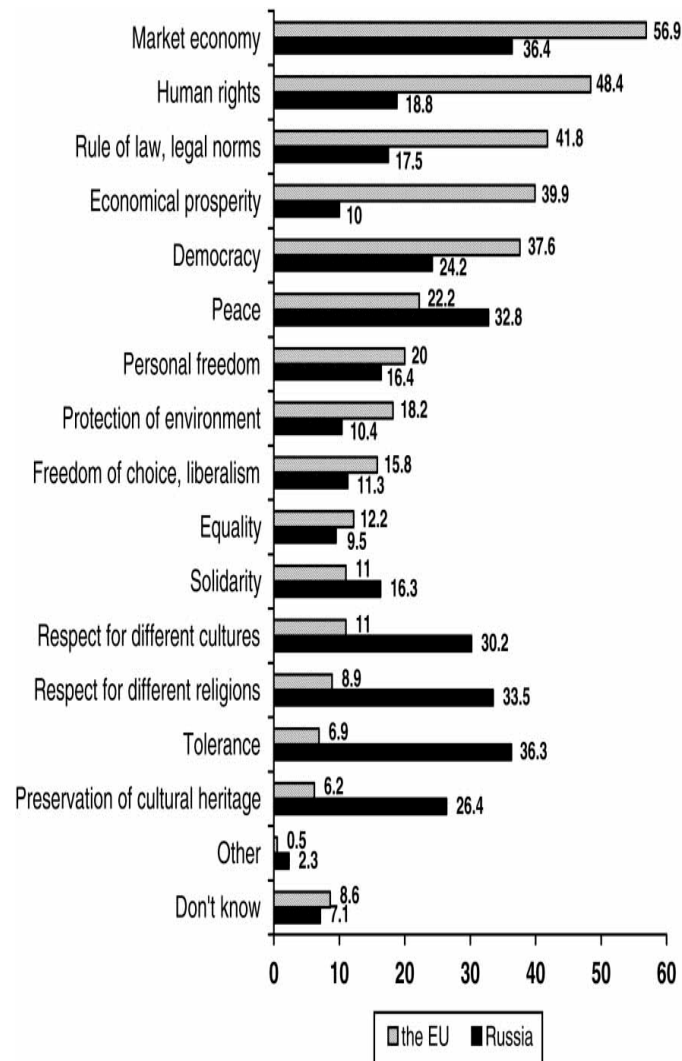
The larger and more critical message that Russia sought to present and defend in its response to the Arab Spring was a distinctive 'Russian idea' over the nature of political order which explicitly critiques and challenges the idea of Western-promoted liberal democracy. The essence of this 'Russian idea' is that democracy needs to be thought as something which strengthens rather than fragments social stability, that preserves rather than destroys local traditions and religious cultures, and that consolidates rather than breaks apart sovereign states. From this Russian perspective, the West utilizes liberal democracy as an instrument militarily to enforce their preferred 'democratic' partners through intervention on putatively humanitarian grounds. In contrast to this, Russia presents a model which is conservative in its

support of the overriding need of the state to defend its sovereign rights of state and to respond to the societal demands for reform. For this Russian perspective, such change can only come from within and cannot be imposed from outside. Compared to the 1990s or even early 2000s, Russia now feels much more confident about promoting this essentially authoritarian Russian model of state power since it is supported by China and by a number of other emerging powers.

The Middle East is not, however, the most important site for this Russian attempt to promote its own model of the state. The struggle to articulate a convincing alternative to the Western and, in particular, the European normative idea of democracy is being much more forcefully waged in the so-called 'shared neighbourhood' in East and Central Europe and in the Caucasus. In Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russia is seeking to counter the 'soft power' projection of the European Union with the alternative of a Eurasian process of integration into a more statist, hierarchically constituted, but stable and 'traditional' set of structures. The Russian intervention into Georgia in 2008 has similarities to the Russian action towards Syria in that the overriding aim was to limit Western intervention and the move into the Western sphere of democracy. However, the longer-term struggle between the EU/West and Russia for the 'hearts and minds' of the peoples of the former Soviet Union, as with the peoples of the Middle East, is far from resolved and will continue to be seriously challenged by the natural human impulses towards freedom and autonomy.

FIGURE 1

VALUES CHARACTERISTIC OF THE EU AND RUSSIA IN PUBLIC OPINION (PER CENT)



Notes: The wording of the question was as follows: ‘Which of the following values are most attributable to the EU (five answers maximum)?’ and ‘Which of these values are more attributable to your country?’ The question offered the opportunity to choose several positions, so the sum of the indicators may exceed 100 per cent.

Source: Nation-wide survey, conducted in November 2008 by the Centre for Sociological Research ‘Opinio’, Moscow State University, under the ESRC-funded project (RES-061-25-0001).



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