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Russia and the Winter of Revolutions in the Arab World

LSE Ideas

By Dmitri Trenin

The Winter of Revolutions in the Arab world has been big news in Russia. There are several reasons for that. To begin with, Tunisia and especially Egypt – over 1 million Russian visitors a year – are among their favourite holiday destinations. Russians were amazed to see revolts in countries which they had become accustomed to see as a tourists' paradise. Next to this, there are lingering memories, among the older generation, of some of these countries, such as Libya, as Moscow's Cold War allies against Washington. Finally, and more importantly, some of the social grievances that brought Arab protestors to Cairo's Tahrir Square and its equivalents elsewhere are not unfamiliar to Russians: unaccountable authorities, rampant corruption, and official arrogance and contempt for the ordinary people. In mid-February 2011, 34% of those polled by Moscow's respected [Levada Centre](#) said, "It can happen here, too."



It probably won't. Russians are unlikely to take their cue from Arabs whom they consider belonging to a wholly different culture. The Orange Revolution in Ukraine several years ago struck so much closer to home. Also, the youth bulge that provoked the burst of energy in Arab countries is not evident in Russia, except in the North Caucasus, where it leads to very different consequences, including terrorism. And finally, there is a sense of a *déjà vu*. Didn't the Russian people, only 20 years ago, topple their own Communist dictatorship, hoping for democracy, which many understood as freedom and instant abundance of affordable goods? Since then, many Russians have grown both a bit more affluent and a bit more wary of public revolts which often usher in chaos. The government evidently understood this and did not attempt to play down reporting on the Arab Revolt on Russian TV, a prime means of political control. The emphasis, however, has been on the mess that the popular revolts create.

This does not mean in the least that Russia is safe from domestic outbursts of public anger. Writing in his blog, [Konstantin Kosachev](#), chair of the Duma's foreign affairs committee, named two lessons that the authorities need to draw from uprisings in the Arab world. One is the end to the effective single-party rule and two is making sure that government policies lead to a real improvement in people's lives. It remains to be seen whether Kosachev's colleagues in the Duma, the government, and the Kremlin will heed his words. If they do not, and also fail to rein in corruption, diversify the economy and ease ethnic tensions, the country will continue to move toward a major socio-political crisis in the medium term. The problem is that in order to do so, the Russian authorities would need to essentially dismantle the present system of patronage which they have built and profited from, and install an accountable government based on elite and public consensus on the national interests and goals: a very tall order. This is the real choice for Russia, not the superficial and essentially fake one between Putin and Medvedev.

But back to MENA. Unlike the United States, the European Union or China, Russia has rather limited interests in the region. There are a few projects that Gazprom and the Russian Railways have been implementing in Libya, and some arms trade with Syria and Algeria. Much of the rest, from Marrakech to Dubai, is tourism. Russia, of course, closely watches the evolution of the oil price, which has now gone back to its September 2008 values. Yet, there are no illusions in Moscow that a price hike can be sustained or that it will mean financial salvation and an instant return to pre-crisis prosperity. Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin has expressly warned against such expectations and called for bold decisions to end Russia's addiction to the oil money. Prime Minister Putin later added that the effect of the global economic slowdown resulting from a spike in the oil price will massively outweigh any short-term gains for the Russian budget. Putin, speaking in Brussels, did not miss an opportunity, however, to use the background of turmoil in Libya to portray Russia as a stable energy supplier to Europe, and to promote his pet projects, the North and South Streams.

In the Middle East itself, the Russian Federation, unlike the Soviet Union, has no geopolitical designs. Moscow has long acquiesced in the United States leading the Israeli-Palestinian process, and has been generally supportive of Washington within the Middle Eastern Quartet. Unlike the U.S., however, Russia has no clients in the region to push out, in the name of democracy, or bail out, in the name of strategic interests. Unlike the EU, Russia has promoted no special partnerships with the North African countries in the hope that they become "more like us", so that their "huddled masses" could stay home. Unlike China, Russia does not need Middle Eastern oil per se: it is only the price that it pays attention to. And, of course, unlike Turkey, Russia has no model to offer to the newly-free countries of the region.

Which does not mean that Russia is looking at the region with equanimity. It will mean a lot to Russia whether Egypt and the others will emerge as moderate Muslim countries or whether they will fall for some militant brand of political Islam. The latter carries two risks: that of a wider and richer support base for the jihadis in the North Caucasus and Central Asia; and that of nuclear and missile proliferation in the region. For all the talk of a “new 1989”, the Russians have their own experience with a revolution in February – 1917. Those who toppled the Tsar then failed to give structure to freedom, and had to succumb, within six months, to the populist Bolsheviks. Putin publicly sneered at those in the West who cheered the fall of the Shah: they got the ayatollahs; or insisted on democratic procedures in Gaza: they got Hamas. Today, the jury on the import of the Arab winter of discontent is still out.

Those Russians who watch the global balance can take some solace that, come what may, the geopolitical positions and the moral authority of the United States in the Middle East have been seriously damaged. The new regimes are likely to be less Western-leaning, and more “indigenous”, deeper-rooted, with much more Muslim flavor, and some new links with China. In a word, kudos for multipolarity. Looking well ahead of the curve, some may see a future demise of the kingpin to the entire post-1945 U.S. construct in the region: the Saudi monarchy. Indeed, the Arab awakening, when it comes into full swing, will give a big jolt to the global order.

For now, Saudi is probably a bridge too far. So is Iran, where the protests continue despite the government’s crackdown. The Russians are not at all beholden to the likes of Ahmadinejad and Hamenei, but neither do they place their bets on Moussavi and his Green movement: they prefer the pragmatists of the Rafsanjani ilk. Yet, they do not see Iran primarily in terms of democracy vs. autocracy. They have known the Persians long enough to regard them as a geopolitical player par excellence, bent on regional primacy. Seen through that prism, revolutions look like a garb-changing exercise.

Where the Russians need to focus their attention – apart from their own glaring problems at home – is Central Asia. In the last 20 years, Moscow has had to deal with a bloody civil war in Tajikistan, two “tulip revolutions” in Kyrgyzstan, and an abrupt change of a despot in Turkmenistan, but those were all local developments, with limited implications for the wider region or for Russia. What is looming on the horizon could be much bigger and more important.

It has become abundantly clear that neither Uzbekistan’s Karimov, 73, nor Kazakhstan’s Nazarbayev, 71, both in power since the end of the Soviet Union, are able or willing to arrange an orderly transfer of power while they are still around and can guarantee the transition. This does not bode well for stability in the region. If a sudden departure of a patriarch president is followed by a power struggle at the top and a split within the elite, and the security services, this could open the floodgates to serious trouble: there is a lot of combustible material in both countries. Fergana valley is certainly a place to watch.

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