



Arab revolutions – a view from the Kremlin

The Arab revolutions were as great a surprise for Russia as they were for other major countries. But Russia has a different evaluation of the consequences of the crisis from the western powers, and it is intent on imposing its own solutions. Moscow examines the situation in the region almost entirely through the prism of strengthening the country's own international position. Within the elite there is a conflict of ideas about the future direction of the Russia's development and its position on the international scene. These divisions hamper the possibility of the country's pursuing a common line of action with the West.

In the current issue of the “Pulaski Policy Papers” our Research Fellow Robert Cheda analyses the significance of the Arab revolutions for Russia. “When looking with Russia's eyes at the Arab revolutions it is difficult to resist a paradoxical impression. Medvedev criticizes Putin for his remarks over a new crusade against Libya and dismisses the ambassador in this country, while at the same time warning against any attempts at humanitarian intervention in Russia. Putin encourages Serbia to participate in the South Stream gas project, increasing Russia's energy superpower status. The conservatives condemn the NATO operation but are glad at the impasse that results, forgetting about the problem of African refugees in Europe which might have a negative impact on Russian attempts to cancel visas to the EU states. All these differences seem to disappear before the G-8 summit where Russia speaks unanimously and gains American support for its accession into the WTO.”

We encourage you to read the new issue of the “Pulaski Policy Papers”!

Editorial Staff of the “Pulaski Policy Papers”

Author

Robert Cheda

Translated by:

Justyna Pado

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is an independent, non-partisan think tank with a mission to promote freedom, equality and democracy, as well as to support actions of strengthening civil society. The foundation carries out such activities as conducting scientific research, preparing publications and analyses, organizing seminars and conferences, providing education and support for leaders in Poland and abroad. The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is one of only two Polish institutions that have a partnership status with the Council of Europe and is a member of the Group Abroad – an umbrella organization of top 40 Polish NGOs working outside of Poland.

Robert Cheda

Robert Cheda

Research Fellow at the Casimir Pulaski Foundation. He cooperates with the weekly “Polityka” and Rambler publishing house. A former officer at the Foreign Intelligence Agency.

The Arab revolutions were as great a surprise for Russia as they were for other major countries. But Russia has a different evaluation of the consequences of the crisis from the western powers, and it is intent on imposing its own solutions. Moscow examines the situation in the region almost entirely through the prism of strengthening the country's own international position. Within the elite there is a conflict of ideas about the future direction of the Russia's development and its position on the international scene. These divisions hamper the possibility of the country's pursuing a common line of action with the West.

Mahmoud Jibril, Prime Minister of the temporary government in Libya, said that the Arab revolutions were a result of globalization, which opened up the region to a new cultural paradigm. Judging by the slogans of protests which spread from Tunis to Sana'a, the advocates of changes consider the paradigm as the right to freedom from corrupt authoritarianism and the desire to participate in the mainstream of civilization – global integration. The mood of the Arab street can be compared to perestroika when the USSR citizens dared to declare openly, “One cannot go on like this.” Therefore, a well-known Russian expert on Arabic countries Georgy Mirsky summed up the goals of the revolutions as being equivalent to saying, “We've had enough. We do not believe. We are not afraid.” Somewhat surprised, Western politicians interpret these events as a triumph of democratic values, with Washington launching another Marshall Plan. For Moscow liberals this is another window of opportunity for joint cooperation with the U.S. and the EU, and of moving Russia closer to westernization, i.e., modernization. However, for Moscow's conservatives these revolutionary changes are like a ghost haunting Russia; hence, the term “Arab virus”, which they use to describe these events, and the protest against the humanitarian operation in Libya. Officially Moscow undermines the western interpretation of events, doubting the ability of Arab societies to create democracies. It exaggerates the possibility of a growing radicalization of mood, with the worsening economic situation in the background acting as fuel for Islamic fundamentalists. This will in turn, they argue, lead to a conflict of civilizations, a global terrorist threat, and, in a regional dimension, will contribute to further destabilization of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and “Somalization” of Libya. The conflicts of Maghreb and the Middle East may also affect the sensitive balance in both the Middle East and even in post-Soviet Central Asia. Therefore, Russia thinks the only solution to this situation is a political process which would include the right of every state to a sovereign choice of its political system taking into account its interests with neighbouring states. Therefore, a key role will be played by multilateral mechanism such as the Middle East Quartet (including Russia) and regional organizations. Despite the fact that Russia did not veto the 1973 Resolution of the Security Council, its main centres of power do criticize the operation in Libya. Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Ryabkov called the western operation “straight from a second-hand shop where a mediocre tailor fits all cloths to one size.” The temperature of the international and internal discussion in Russia is so high that a well-known expert Alexei Makarkin could allow himself to tell a joke in which he renamed politology Egyptology.

Russian policy in the region can so far be described as limited solely to energy and military-technical cooperation. The situation has changed a little from the time of the Iraq intervention, which worsened relations with the Arab world. At the same time Russia, reliving a renaissance of its role as an energy superpower, broke away from pro-western integration for a policy of acting as an independent centre of power in a multilateral environment. It actively searched for allies in this asymmetrical game of discontent at

American superpower status. In the opinion of Alexey Malashenko from the Moscow Carnegie Centre, Russia has for a few years now been attempting to intensify its contacts with Maghreb and its participation in the Middle East settlements. It perceives its role as a mediator between Muslim and Transatlantic civilizations, and also between Islamic radicals and moderate ones. Still, it is playing a game of anti-terrorism with the West and cooperates selectively in the sphere of security and non-proliferation regime, as, according to Russia, the so-called southern bowstring of instability stretches right through the Muslim world, from Maghreb to Indonesia. Such a policy has not brought about the expected results due to the international community's incoherent stance towards the main threats and the infinite prolongation of all negotiation processes, something in part due to Russian mediation.

What changes have then been brought about by the Arab spring, from Russia's point of view? Ostensibly very few. Russia has offered mediation in the Libyan conflict. It has acknowledged the necessity of Gaddafi's departure, but blocked a resolution condemning Syria, with the aim of wooing Iran and the Palestinians. Russia has displayed its lack of interest in participating in a Contact Group on Libya, and, despite the missions of Vice President Biden and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, has rejected proposals to speak in one voice on this issue. Still, when looking closer at the analyses of Russian think tanks, it is clearly visible that the way Russia perceives the Arab revolution might serve as a window of opportunity in Russia's relations with America and Europe. Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of the respected magazine "Russia in Global Affairs", calls for close cooperation of world powers at a regional level, pointing to the lost chance of preventing the presence of al-Qaida in Afghanistan. Sergey Karaganov, director of the influential Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, points to the possibility of continuing Russian-American *perezagruzka* in the Middle East. This was further facilitated by the recapitulation of the U.S. leadership policy carried out by President Obama in London, and the positive bilateral results of the Russian-American 'reset'. If we add to this the growing understanding of Europe towards Russian security initiatives, Karaganov believes that the idea of a Union of Europe based on the partnership of 'old' Europe and Russia is quite real. This is certainly a very Russian kind of integration (a concert of powers, or rather triangles): U.S.-Russia-EU and U.S.-Russia-China, stabilizing Africa and the Middle East. It is relatively easy to notice that Russia is the main U.S. partner in both of these constellations. Still, this is more a reminiscent of geopolitics as Mikhail Margelov, a special presidential representative for African issues (he will also serve as a Russian negotiator in Libya), does not hide his hopes for rebuilding Russia's position in the region. Margelov warns openly that if Russia does not join the geopolitical rivalry for African resources, it will lose out to its world competitors. Another important fact is that Libya and Syria owe a substantial amount to Russia, running into the billions, whereas Maghreb and the Middle East are key receivers of Russian arms. What is more, the interest displayed by Russian energy companies in Libyan oil fields is quite apparent.

Even such a curious integration approach meets an unfavourable conservative faction in Moscow. Its representatives, numerous among the power and business elites, take advantage of the Arab revolution to raise the alarm about the dangers to Russian sovereignty. They are the main heirs to the imperial tradition and creators of today's "Egyptology", much like in the period of the colour revolutions they were the ones who spoke of "Ukraine-ology". They oppose the legal-international validation of humanitarian intervention. The ruling party United Russia prepared a parliamentary resolution severely condemning NATO actions. All the nationalistic steams evaluated the intervention negatively. The voice of theological criticism could be also heard from the headquarters of Moscow's patriarchate. Also expressed were sincere wishes that NATO would get bogged down in Libyan sand, which would speed up the economic downfall of the West (according

to the wwv scenarios), and Russian civilization would return to its due position in the world.

In reality, the economic aspect of the Arab spring is very significant for Moscow. The latest sharp rise in the price of oil on the world markets was the result of political instability in the region. This has significantly repaired Russia's budget, overstretched by the world crisis, and will be an important factor in deciding on the country's social and political stability. The contract between the power and the citizens is based on the political passivity of the latter in return for the existential stability paid for straight from the state's coffer. This seems to be unusually important during the period of elections; a time which can be characterized, as it can with the revolting Arab states, by increasing civic activity of a social basis. Both in the Arab states and Russia the real reasons are corruption and a lack of competition, and also the lack of structural reforms of the economy. In the short term, it is Russia which is perceived as a stable provider of resources. Russian economists, taught by the experience of a recent bursting of the resource bubble, warn that in the long run the instability of Maghreb and the Middle East is not in Russia's interests. It may contribute to a second wave of recession in the states receiving Russian gas and oil, which might further influence another price breakdown and the size of deliveries. At present these incredible inflows to the Russian budget have caused a rebirth of petrostate syndrome, determining the negative thinking of elites and state authorities with the purpose of social-political modernization and economic reshaping.

When looking with Russia's eyes at the Arab revolutions it is difficult to resist a paradoxical impression. Medvedev criticizes Putin for his remarks over a new crusade against Libya and dismisses the ambassador in this country, while at the same time warning against any attempts at humanitarian intervention in Russia. Putin encourages Serbia to participate in the South Stream gas project, increasing Russia's energy superpower status. The conservatives condemn the NATO operation but are glad at the impasse that results, forgetting about the problem of African refugees in Europe which might have a negative impact on Russian attempts to cancel visas to the EU states. All these differences seem to disappear before the G-8 summit where Russia speaks unanimously and gains American support for its accession into the WTO. The visible hybridization of Russian foreign policy can be characterized by its strong internal conditions, one of them being the unwillingness of the majority of elite to perform a civilization-modernization leap into global integration, as the illusive chaos of decision-making begins to form itself into a well-thought-out line of defence of the existing status quo.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation

is an independent think tank which specializes in foreign policy, with a mission to promote freedom, equality and democracy, as well as to support actions of strengthening civil society. The foundation carries out activities both in Poland and abroad, among others in Central and Eastern Europe and in North America.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation was founded due to political changes that took place in Poland after 1989. The principal values of Casimir Pulaski (freedom, justice and democracy) are an inspiration for every initiative undertaken by the Foundation. A few of the Foundations activities include: conducting scientific research, preparing publications and analyses, organizing seminars and conferences, providing education and support for leaders (www.instytutprzywodztwa.pl).

The Foundation is the main organizer of the Warsaw Regional NGOs Congress (www.warsawcongress.pl), the co-organizer of the Academy of Young Diplomats (www.diplomats.pl) and publisher of the Communication Platform for Non-Governmental Organizations (www.non-gov.org).

The Foundation also awards the Casimir Pulaski Prize “The Knight of Freedom” to outstanding people who have made a significant contribution in promoting democracy. So far the prizewinners were: Professor **Władysław Bartoszewski**, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland, historian Professor **Norman Davies**, **Alaksandar Milinkiewicz**, leader of democratic opposition in Belarus, **Lech Wałęsa** and **Aleksander Kwaśniewski**, former Presidents of Poland as well as **Javier Solana**, former High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, and **Valdas Adamkus**, former President of Lithuania.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is one of only two Polish institutions that have a partnership status with the Council of Europe. More about Foundation at: www.pulaski.pl.

Pulaski Policy Papers

are the analyses of foreign policy, international economy and domestic politics issues, essential for Poland. The papers are published both in Polish and English. Researchers willing to publish their articles in the Pulaski Policy Papers are asked to contact the editorial office (office@pulaski.pl). If you would like to receive new issues of PPP please add your e-mail at www.pulaski.pl.