

Russia and the uprisings in the Middle East

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The ongoing wave of popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa has provoked alarm within the Kremlin, which fears the destabilizing impact of these events on Russia's national interests in the region, the world economy and mass consciousness throughout the former Soviet sphere.

Over the past several weeks, Moscow has opposed the overthrow of Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak, cautioned against the use of military force against Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, and sought to deny that a mass opposition movement could take hold in Russia. The Kremlin's response is driven by its awareness that it sits astride a society riven with social and class tensions.

Facing the imminent collapse of the Gaddafi regime, Russia is currently seeking a way to contain the situation without endorsing a NATO-backed intervention in the country, which it views as a threat to its interests. On Wednesday, a Kremlin source described Gaddafi as a "living political corpse who has no place in the modern civilized world" to the press and called for him to step down.

These unofficial remarks, however, followed comments by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin last week warning against outside military action in Libya. His position was reiterated in a Tuesday statement by Russian NATO Ambassador Dmitri Rogozin, who spoke in opposition to the establishment of a no-fly zone over the country.

"A ban on the national air force or civil aviation to fly over their own territory is still a serious interference into the domestic affairs of another country," he said.

Russia, which holds \$4 billion worth of weapons contracts with Libya, initially opposed sanctions against the Gaddafi regime, only reversing course on Tuesday. Along with the potential loss of stakes in Libyan oil companies and \$1.8 billion worth of aircraft contracts, Moscow could see the end of highly lucrative arms sales with the ascension of a new government, particularly one under the thumb of Washington and Brussels.

There is genuine sympathy for the besieged Gaddafi and his methods of repression within sections of the Russian ruling elite. This found expression in recent comments made to *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* by Boris Iakimenko, a top

representative of the Kremlin's youth group, Nashi. "The leader of Libya, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, has shown the world how to deal with provocateurs who attempt coups, destabilization and civil war. He has begun to destroy them," he said.

Given the growing isolation of the Gaddafi regime, however, and Moscow's fear that backing the dictator would mean it could be cut out of the post-Gaddafi scramble for influence in Libya, the Kremlin line is now openly rebuking the dictator. Speaking earlier this week, President Dmitri Medvedev condemned "the use of force against civilians" by the Libyan government.

Russia's ruling elite views the uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa with alarm for a number of reasons. Speaking in Brussels last Thursday, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin warned that rising oil prices "threaten world economic growth." In making this remark, he implied that the dangers this poses for Russia—whose "recovery" from the 2008 financial crisis is extremely tenuous—far outweigh the benefits the country will experience from being able to make more money off its leading export.

Of particular concern in Russia is the impact of the rising cost of oil on commodity prices, which have been growing by leaps and bounds over the course of the past year, fueling popular discontent. In remarks posted on the Kremlin's English-language news site Russia Today on February 25, Nikolai Svandize, a leading political commentator with close ties to the government, noted:

"[A] destabilized Arab world makes Russia as jittery as the EU. Europe should not think that we are going to benefit much from soaring oil prices sparked by mounting unrest. After all, energy prices should remain within certain limits, and were they to break past a given boundary, this would hurt Russia's economy as well. Such a windfall of money is incredibly pleasing, of course, and though we are seeing 'pennies from heaven', Putin understands only too well how badly this might end up."

Intersecting with these economic concerns are the Russian ruling elite's fears that the popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa will resonate with the working masses of Russia and the former Soviet Union, who face conditions

of life—joblessness, poverty, lack of opportunities for youth, rising prices, oppressive and impervious governments—that are fundamentally similar to those of the Arab masses.

Speaking to the *Wall Street Journal* last week, Sergei Markov, a legislator from the ruling United Russia Party observed, “We in Russia have seen revolutions, and they often start out like the February [that brought down the Tsarist regime] one and end like the one in October [that brought the Bolsheviks to power].”

According to the State Statistics Service, since just December 2010 real wages in Russia have fallen 23.8 percent. This process has been largely driven by the increasing cost of food, utilities, and other basic necessities. A recent AFP article captured the essence of the situation in the country when it described cabbage and potatoes, staples of the Russian diet, as the “new luxury goods.” In January, official joblessness in Russia hit an eight-month high, rising to 7.6 percent from 7.2 percent the previous month. In the North Caucasus, the restive Muslim-majority region in Russia’s southwest, the figure stands at 48.8 percent.

The political and economic system in Russia is characterized by high levels of corruption and nepotism. A February 22 article in *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, for example, points out that the proposed lists of candidates for the upcoming 2011 Duma elections are dominated by the “children, wives, friends and sponsors” of current officeholders. In a piece published two days later, the *Moscow News* notes that since September 2008, 500,000 people have applied at local offices of United Russia, the ruling party, set up to address citizens’ grievances over the unresponsive, ineffectual, and indifferent treatment from myriad government programs.

According to a February poll by the Public Opinion Foundation (POF), 49 percent of the Russian population is “dissatisfied and ready to participate in protests.” This represents a 17 percent increase over December. The POF also reports that the number of people who saw their savings shrink and their future financial prospects worsen increased. According to VTsIOM, a leading research agency, 80 percent of Russians regard inflation as high, with increasing utility costs identified as the number one factor driving the situation.

Over the course of the past two years, workers’ protests have broken out in industrial towns hit by factory closures and miners have engaged into pitched battles with security forces in demonstrations over deadly accidents at coal facilities. Widespread dissatisfaction remains after preventable forest fires left residents of Russia’s capital city choking on smog for weeks last summer, and winter storms crippled Moscow’s dilapidated infrastructure.

The Kremlin has sought to derail the development of mass

opposition through the promotion of nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment directed against ethnic minorities, in particular Muslim migrants from Central Asia and the North Caucasus. At the end of last year, right-wing forces, encouraged by this atmosphere, stirred up ethnic riots in Moscow and St. Petersburg. While put down by the government (only after the deaths of numerous non-Slavic looking people), Prime Minister Putin openly solidarized himself with far-right political forces by visiting the grave of an ethnic Russian allegedly killed by men from the Caucasus.

The fact that the revolution in Egypt and the protests in other countries have not been led by Islamic fundamentalists, runs counter to the Russian government’s continuous effort to divide the populations of the region along ethnic lines by promoting anti-Islamic sentiment in Russia. It explodes one of the ideological props that has been used to suppress class tensions since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Medvedev, who has insisted that there is no possibility of a mass uprising in Russia, warned last week that the government would not tolerate any social unrest. Attributing, ahead of time, future protests to the work of outsiders “who have been preparing such a scenario and now will try even harder to implement it,” the Russian president promised that “this scenario will not work.” “We are required to impose order, and we will impose order,” he said.

Sergei Abeltsev, parliamentary representative from the far-right Liberal Democratic Party, told fellow legislators last week, “Obviously, this infection will spread to Central Asia in the spring and will reach Russia in the summer.” Abeltsev said the government would resort to military force, if necessary.



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