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Russia's political winter leaves Syria's spring on ice

While the peoples of the Middle East rebelled after many decades of oppressive authoritarian rule, Vladimir Putin seemingly took his country against the tide of history. Russia's parliamentary and presidential elections that returned Putin and his party to power are widely believed to have been rigged; the rule of law was replaced by arbitrary court decisions favoring the powerful and wealthy; opposition figures were harassed and imprisoned, and corruption in the state became so deep and extensive that very little could be accomplished in Russia without a bribe. All this was accompanied by the developing cult of personality created by propagandists working for Putin. If the recent popular transformative uprisings in the Middle East were characterized as an Arab Spring, then Russian political life resembled a dark and cold winter.

A growing number of Russians, including academics, journalists and political opponents of the Kremlin began warning against this authoritarian trend during Putin's second term but Western specialists largely belittled this perspective, preferring instead terms such as "managed democracy". Similar justifications were also found for Russian foreign policy actions including the shutting down of gas pipelines to punish Ukraine and the invasion of Georgia. Until recently, despite Russia's reluctance to end its support for the Syrian regime, many Western observers remained optimistic that this would change once Putin re-established himself as Russia's re-elected President in spring 2012. There was a lingering belief that Russia's support for the regime in Damascus was tactical and that Moscow would inevitably adjust to supporting the popular revolution on the basis that Putin was a rational leader who understood the worthlessness of tying his fate to a crumbling and, in the eyes of many, murderous dictator.

Yet the first 100 days of Putin's third term as Russian President have shattered such illusions. Whatever the lingering doubts, it became obvious by late summer 2012 that Russian foreign policy had made a strategic decision to preserve and defend the

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Abstract

Vladimir Putin's third term as president is being marked by tightening authoritarianism and a combative posture on the international stage. This stance is not new and has been steadily evolving for over a decade. Russia has been at best neglectful of the massive humanitarian crisis in Syria and at worst further facilitating the bloodshed for narrow political ends.

Putin's support for Syria's Assad, despite half-hearted denials, suggest some emerging commonalities including a cynical view of democratic reform as well as an almost paranoid suspicion that the West is conspiring against them. Another similarity is the reliance on security organs as a reliable tool of governance. While political life in the two countries is overall incomparable Moscow's response to the Syrian crisis could be a forewarning that Russia could yet emerge as a dangerous and irritational actor on the world stage.

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The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

rule of Syria's President Bashar Al-Assad. The smug face of Russia's UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin, who doggedly defended his country's vetoes (three times thus far) blocking meaningful action on Syria, brought back memories of the Cold War era. The flawed formula in both the Soviet Union and under Putin is that playing the role of a great power on the international stage ensures domestic unity and cohesion. The Kremlin leadership's edgy insecurity about the fragility of its state structures was connected to Russia's status in the world. The unfolding of the Syrian revolution was indicative of Moscow's determination in projecting its world status as a confident new Russia under Putin.

Embarrassments and setbacks

Russia's staunch defense of the Syrian regime following a series of horrific massacres, most recently in Daraya near Damascus where hundreds of bodies were discovered, has caused substantial embarrassment for Moscow. Moreover, the Syrian regime has openly used Russian-made attack helicopters and MiG fighters to bombard civilian populations. In August 2012 there was concern that Damascus was considering using chemical weapons, leading to a rare but direct warning by US President Barack Obama which was backed up by French President François Holland citing direct military intervention.

The head of the failed UN monitor mission in Syria, General Robert Mood, confirmed that regime forces used helicopters and tanks to attack civilian populations in Tremseh, the site of another massacre. The UN findings were damaging in the light of Russia's continued delivery of attack helicopters as well as air defense equipment to Syria. The massacres in Syria by regime forces followed a pattern, including at Houla and other Syrian cities, in which regular troops subdued an area with heavy weapons before pro-government militias entered to liquidate any remaining survivors, sometimes in a brutal fashion. With a death toll reaching over 25,000 in 18 months of fighting, there was an increasing risk of Moscow being seen as a party to the cycle of bloodshed and violence.

Beyond the events on the ground in Syria with daily reports of war crimes, spiraling violence, massacres and bloodshed, Russia also faced political setbacks. Moscow's endorsement of the preservation of UN observer forces in Syria was seen as a cynical ploy to utilize the presence of UN personnel in Syria as a guarantee against military intervention. The widely recognized utter failure of the UN mission in Syria was underlined by the resignation of the UN envoy to Syria, Kofi Annan. It was particularly odd, therefore, for Russia to vehemently insist on extending the Security Council mandate for the UN team in Syria, that was obviously unable to function in a climate of extreme violence.

Moscow's pro-regime policy also damaged relations with many Arab and Muslim countries whose populations were sympathetic to the plight of the Syrian people. A powerful indication of this was the speech by newly elected Egyptian President Mohammad Morsi at the Tehran gathering of nations at the end of August 2012, intended to offer alternative, non-Western-centric solutions to the Syrian tragedy. Morsi's speech firmly asserted that Assad's stay in office was an obstacle to any solution to the situation in Syria, deflating Russian and Iranian suggestions that Assad could remain in power as part of an on-going and open-ended dialogue process.

Putin's unambiguous association with an international position that offered a lifeline to the Syrian regime was a reflection of a significant transformation in Russian politics. Russian ambitions today differ markedly from immediately after the demise of the Soviet Union, when Moscow sought a strategic partnership with the West. In 2012 Russia is apparently more powerful and wealthier, yet there are emerging signs that Putin is masking a fragile system characterized by prevalent authoritarianism and corruption, accompanied by the frantic efforts of Kremlin propagandists to build an image of Putin as a strong leader.

Nevertheless, the Russian strongman's image is being eroded. A stark image of the state of Putin's Russia is that of Pussy Riot, a punk rock group that dared to challenge the establishment and ended up being tried and imprisoned for largely trumped-up charges of hooliganism and causing religious offence. Three young and ordinary 'girl-next-door' looking women from the band defied Putin and his political system during the trial, which by many accounts backfired on the Russian leader by creating sympathy for the women and a global voice for Putin's opponents. The symbolism of the Pussy Riot episode arguably revealed yet another facet of the political system that supported the Assad regime in Syria on the basis of the same fears and insecurities.

Putin spared little effort to assert his authority on assuming his third term of presidency in 2012, including with laws that heavily fined protestors in a country where income is low. The Kremlin's political machine also mobilized parliament for a law that would class all non-Russian funded NGOs as "foreign agents". Such legal measures were aimed at making the work of the security forces more efficient and less controversial in a climate of arbitrary arrests and dubious judicial processes. Such measures emerged in a climate in which anti-Putin protests steadily increased and, for the first time in a decade, opinion polls showed negative public perceptions. A summer 2012 poll evidenced that over half of Russians want Putin to step down at the end of his current term, reflecting a widespread rejection of lifetime rule reminiscent of the decadent Brezhnev era from the Soviet past.

For most ordinary Russians it was pervasive corruption, as was the case under Brezhnev, that came to characterize the era of Putin. Transparency International ranked Russia 143rd out of 183 countries in the year Putin was re-elected for his third term, placing Russia at the bottom end of the corruption scale. The rise of ostentatious wealth among Putin loyalists was highlighted by oppositionists including Boris Nemtsov, an influential reform figure and Kremlin insider who served as deputy prime minister in the Yeltsin era. At the end of August 2012, the Moscow Times and other media available to Russians reported Nemtsov's documented records of the opulent lifestyle Putin was living as President, enjoying plush palaces and yachts costing Russian tax payers \$2.5 billion a year. This is significant when considering that Putin's soaring support a decade earlier was in part due to his empathy with the popular rejection of the all-powerful oligarchs that emerged in the Yeltsin era.

Putin's failure to deliver on his promises to defend the dignity of ordinary Russians by safeguarding basic social and political freedoms and to fight bureaucratic corruption partially explains Russia's foreign policy shift, that placed emphasis on Russian pride by asserting its great world power status by way of compensation.

Putin's evolution and Syria

Putin's transformation from a fairly Western friendly statesman from 2000 to 2002 to one with an outright hostile posture, particularly from 2005, was also driven by developments on the international stage and specifically in neighboring former Soviet countries and the Middle East. The pro-democracy uprisings or so-called colored revolutions from 2003 to 2005 in Georgia, Ukraine, Tajikistan and Lebanon dovetailed into the 2003 US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq and the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime. There were already suspicions from the Russian side following the bombing of Serbia and support of Kosovo, as well as a plan to extend a US defense shield system over Poland and the Czech Republic. More recently, US-Russian tensions were heightened last year when Moscow accused NATO of violating the March 2011 UN mandate to protect civilians by riding roughshod over Russian concerns and diverting the humanitarian justification for military action to force regime change in Libya. These developments collectively sharpened the knives of anti-Western forces in Russia and enabled them to craft policy with Putin's blessing on the Syrian crisis.

Moscow vociferously defended the inviolability of national sovereignty in international law and politics as the basis of its Syrian position. A brief glance back at Russia's record, however, reveals disingenuousness in Moscow's position. Moscow did not hesitate to interfere politically and militarily in the affairs of its neighbors, with Ukraine and Georgia being two obvious examples. Putin also did not raise such a storm on the basis of this principle when the United States led a coalition against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, when he calculated a Russian interest in the objectives of the war. Russia's criticisms of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 were noticeably less severe than those of France and Germany, when Putin was focused on fixing relations with the United States. Russia, like the United States, holds a capricious view of sovereignty depending on national interests and security objectives.

A more sober reflection would indicate that during the early months of the Syrian uprising, Putin and the Russian leadership expected the regime to crush the uprising and continued to do so for at least the first half of 2012. But perhaps the most decisive factor determining Moscow's reaction to the Syrian crisis was the Russian leadership's perception that US President Barack Obama did not have the heart nor the will to become embroiled in a military conflict in the run-up to his presidential campaign for re-election, so safely assumed that international action would be lethargic.

The United States and particularly Obama showed a strikingly cool response to the massacres and unrest in Syria. Obama's critics were not only disconcerted from a moral perspective but also expressed deep concern about the regional and strategic consequences of continued destabilization. Obama had shyly waited several months before calling on Assad to step down leading segments of the Syrian opposition and Arab sympathizers, suggesting that Washington was secretly hoping the Assad regime would contain the uprising by allowing it to buy more time. While such allegations may be questionable, the half-baked proposals and unwillingness to commit to any form of intervention including the establishment of safe-havens led to a sense of disappointment and resentment at Washington's meek response, which allowed the Damascus leadership to entrench its forces and retaliate against its opponents with vengeful vigor. The wavering and timid administration in Washington thus gave Putin the confidence to act out his role of strongman defending Russian interests abroad.

Supporting the regime in Damascus in the face of international action was thus an easy choice, with benefits that included the safeguarding of Russia's only Mediterranean naval facility in Tartus. Syria was a reliable arms buyer, although the financial volume of this relationship was small. In the Russian political elite's mindset, the survival of Syria's regime prevented a domino effect that would leave Iran vulnerable to attack from either Israel or the United States. Another feature of relations that influenced the Russian response to the Syrian crisis was the risk of interrupting the historic intelligence-security relationship between Moscow and Damascus. In Soviet times the KGB, alongside the Romanian equivalent at the time, trained and equipped the dreaded Syrian Mukhabarat or secret police. The Russian and Syrian secret services revived their cooperation at the end of the Yeltsin era and following a brief lull in the early 1990s became particularly active in the build up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Allegations persist to this day that Russian intelligence oversaw the illicit transportation of evidence from Iraq to Syria before the downfall of Saddam Hussein, to cover up Moscow's role in developing the Iraqi dictator's Weapons of Mass Destruction program. More recently, when Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was dispatched on a peace mission to Damascus in February, intriguingly he was accompanied by the current head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Mikhail Fradkov.

Putin has staked his political future with the powerful security elite, and on electoral support based on anti-Western paranoia that rejects internal liberal reforms. This will impact on foreign policy, that could leave the Syrian crisis to fester for many years to come. One highly possible scenario is Russia's tacitly supporting the division of Syria with the aim of creating an Alawite state in the northern mountains and on the Mediterranean coast. This would leave Russia's naval facilities secured and also preserve its political foothold in the region by shielding loyal and grateful allies in

the form of the Al-Assad clan. Syria's disintegration has already allowed the Kurds to assume control in the northeast after the tactical withdrawal of pro-Assad forces. Moscow can count on meaningful support from some Kurdish elements, particularly those groups sympathetic with the militant PKK. If these hypothetical scenarios materialize, Putin will have been successful in not only changing the character of Russia but also the balance of the international system. Mainstream Western analyses tended to believe Russian claims that it was in Moscow's vital interest to promote stability near its southern rim. It will not be the first time that such generous readings of Putin's Russia have been erroneous, and it may be worth considering that Moscow is ambitiously contemplating tempting global opportunities by shaking up the status quo in the Middle East.

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