

# THE ROLE OF RUSSIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: STRATEGY OR OPPORTUNISM?

Milan, 12 October 2018

report

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Dialogue Workshop “The Role of Russia in the Middle East and North Africa: Strategy or Opportunity?” was held on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018 in Milan as part of the EuroMeSCo ENI Project, co-funded by the European Union and IEMed. It was organised by EuroMeSCo, in collaboration with IEMed and ISPI, which hosted the event.

A total of 31 participants, including EuroMeSCo researchers involved in the project and other experts and scholars attended the workshop. This dialogue workshop aimed at discussing the initial research results of the Joint Policy Study and engaging the participants in analyzing and sharing their perspectives on whether the Russian moment in the MENA region corresponds to



opportunism, a new strategy or it falls in between these options. Additionally, this workshop aimed at shedding light on the role Russia is currently playing, how this can influence the balance of power as well as how regional players look at Russia.

In the first session, Mira Milosevic, Senior Analyst at the Elcano Royal Institute, focused on the figure of Putin and his interests in the MENA region and on whether there was a grand plan towards the region or rather only a general idea of seizing opportunities as Russia did by entering the Syrian conflict.

In the second session, Ziad Akl, Senior Researcher at the Al Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, analysed the relations between regimes, especially and primarily between military elites and Russia, and how these play out for Russian interests in the region.

The third session saw Chiara Lovotti and Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, Researchers of the Italian Institute for International Political Studies, explaining the perception that the EU institutions have of Russian role in the region within the economic, security and diplomatic spheres.

In the last and forth session, Christopher Hartwell Associate Professor from Bournemouth University, gave insights on the economic aspects of Russian engagement in the MENA and how it still results limited compared to its potential.

## **DETAILS OF THE FOUR SESSIONS**

### **The Interests of Putin's Russia in the MENA Region: Grand Strategy or Tactical Opportunism?**

Mira Milosevic gave insights on how the role of Russia has gradually changed overtime and listed the three main school of thoughts regarding Russia's agenda. The first theory claims that there is a Middle East agenda and that it is working, a second theory argues that although this regional agenda exists,

it is not proceeding as planned, and the third deals with the argument that there is no strategy, but merely opportunism. In order to analyze the different perspectives and detail her own views, the researcher took into account different factors such as the impact of the Arab Spring, the US withdrawal from the region and several changes in regimes and non-state actors, which affected Russia's goals and tools in the region.

From the scholar's analysis, it appears that Russia's goal is not to be the most prominent actor on the regional scene, but to exploit its role on the regional level in order to become a more strategic actor in the international arena. This is the reason why it is exploiting economic partnerships and other actors' losses in the region for its own broader agenda, which does not necessarily focus exclusively on the MENA region.

However, Milosevic claims that Putin is aware that in order to achieve these goals, Russia needs to increase its economic partnership in regards of both export, which now is mainly limited to arms sales and hydrocarbons, and import. The researcher concludes by explaining which actors may be hindering Russian influence in the region, namely China, Iran and US. The diverse interests of these players are in some occasions instrumental for Russia and in other troublesome. In particular, China, although a key ally against US presence in the region, is also an important competitor for Russia over economic exchange in the Middle East.

Milosevic concludes by stating that Russia aims at returning to the Middle East in a way similar to the Soviet Union's presence, but that it does not want to replace the United States' role. Thus, there is an ambition of expansion, but not a grand agenda towards the Middle East. This ambition can be interpreted as part of a bigger strategy regarding the global arena.

#### *Feedbacks from other researchers and stakeholders*

Researchers' views on Russia's agenda in the region were quite divided. While some claimed Russia was acting based on tactical opportunism with no clear

agenda, this clashed with the idea brought forward by other scholars who argued that there was a broader agenda, but that it revolved around seeing the region as part of a greater strategy regarding Eurasia.

Additional topics were also discussed such as: the internal fragility and economic difficulties of Russia; the relevance of economic gains and the politics of Russia; insights on Russia's relations with international actors, above all US.

There was a general understanding that Russia might be seizing the opportunities available, by exploiting the power vacuum in the region, by remaining in Syria, and by having a more active role, thanks to the absence of the US on the ground.

#### **How is Russian Presence Influencing the Balance of Power and the Posture of Other Players in the Region?**

Ziad Akl addressed Russian engagement with the actors in the region from the perspective of a sociologist. Thus, he looked at how and why regimes and in particular political – and especially military – elites are interested in cooperating with Russia. He focused mainly on Egypt and Libya, while including some references to Syria and Turkey. The starting point Akl stressed on is the post-Arab Spring context. The situation the region finds itself in is characterized by the “revolutionary outcomes”, which are relevant as they show who the post-revolutionary elites (the actual decision-makers) are. Akl also highlighted the importance of militaries and their role. The third factor to take into account is the role of international intervention in the post-Arab Spring scenario and the extensiveness of international (and thus Russian) presence on the regional stage. Lastly, the patterns and types of revolution that occurred are important to define. All these factors are essential to understand how the Arab World has changed until this point.

In Syria, Libya, Egypt and Turkey, new elites emerged and within some countries, we have been witnessing conflicts between them. Russia has been

very cooperative with the new elite in Egypt and has been reciprocated by the regime, which found in the Russian leadership a significant partner. It is thus important to understand not only Russia's own interest but also where this finds a common ground in the region, and the mutual gains of both the elites and the Russian government. The scholar then claimed that it is not casual that the regime Russia gets along with elites backed by military forces and the army, because historically Russia privileged these partners in the MENA region.

Thus, Akl identified certain characteristics of the elites that Russia has decided to ally with: conservative regimes, supported by the army or having a military background. In Egypt, there are giant infrastructural projects involving Russia, in the energy and several other sectors, while in Syria and Libya there are several military projects and post-conflict plans. In Libya, Russia is still very flexible in its interaction. Although General Khalifa Haftar is the main actor Russia interacts with, it also deals with Fayeze al-Sarraj, president of the Government National Accord. Russia is looking at Libya also for the post-conflict, post-stabilization scenario, in order to establish economic partnerships. In this regard, Russia has somehow invested in the "idea of political vulnerability" and aimed at exploiting the fact that unstable countries might need Russian help. This careful analysis concludes with looking at how Russia can benefit from future leaders and elites as well as defining what its role will be.

#### *Feedbacks from other researchers and stakeholders*

The role of elites was debated and discussed by several researchers. Participants focused in particular on the difference in Russian relations with military regimes or post-revolutionary governments such as Iran and where the elites mentioned in the presentation by Akl come from. At the same time, the role of politics within public opinion has been discussed, especially highlighting how the prominence of politics has been somehow diminished. The debate then revolved around the lack of social change in the Arab revolutions, which somehow explained the failure of those political transformations. Additionally, a reflection on how relations between new leaders, especially from the Gulf countries, and Israel will expand in the future was brought forward.

### **How Does the EU Perceive the Russian Role in the MENA Region?**

Chiara Lovotti and Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti presented their joint paper on the perception EU institutions have regarding Russia's role in the MENA region. This study was based on an analysis of speeches and statements of the main EU institutions on Russian military engagement, diplomatic and economic agendas.

The authors moved on explaining their findings regarding views on Russian military engagement, in particular in the Syrian conflict. Three main points emerged; firstly, the EU's disapproval of the Russian intervention and the lack of concern showed for human rights; secondly, since Russia is considered to be moving unilaterally and alone, this was seen negatively by the EU; thirdly, there has been a shift from an accusing rhetoric to a more appeasing one, in light of the reconstruction plans for Syria, as it cannot be established without Russian involvement.

Regarding Russian diplomatic agenda, on paper the EU institutions have appeared more supportive, especially due to the prominence of Russia within the Astana process. The authors argue that this is because the Astana process is considered key to a solution and is important for the EU, as it is the major donor in Syria, and nonetheless has to consider Russian mediation role in the future of Syria.

Libya and Iran are two other arenas where the Russian diplomatic agenda is seen as highly important. Libya however might result to be a complicated stage, as some military involvement from Russia might occur. Regarding Iran-Russia relations, the perceptions of the EU concern mainly the nuclear deal and see Russia as a possible constructive actor, since there is a commitment on both sides to preserve the deal.

The economic agenda was yet to be developed by the authors, who nonetheless outlined the main themes that would be covered in the section: Saudi Arabian-Russian partnership in the energy section; Egyptian-Russian

ties; and Algeria. However, the authors struggled to find relevant economy-related material from EU institutions.

#### *Feedbacks from other researchers and stakeholders*

The debated revolved around not only how the EU perceives Russia, but also the other way around and whether EU is seen and has been analyzed as a homogenous actor. Additionally, further questions came up on how and why Russia was perceived as a vital actor in regards of the resolution of the Syrian conflict. It seems that the EU's perception has changed in the last years and that the EU has adopted a more pragmatic approach in order to resolve the conflict and plan the reconstruction. Thus, somehow Russia has grown to be considered a constructive player compared to the past. An alternative interpretation given to the shift in EU perception stated that the EU was seeking a “burden-transfer” from EU states to Russia regarding the costs and commitments of the post-conflict reconstruction.

#### **Russia in the MENA Region: An Economic Perspective**

In the last session, Christopher Hartwell dealt with the relationship between Russia and MENA countries from an economic standpoint. His main argument was that the extent of Russian trade with MENA countries was still very limited, mainly consisting in the exchange of raw materials, energy resources, and arms. Even in regards to the products that Russia exports to the region, the volume is still limited. Hartwell clearly explained the reason behind this: Russia has always subordinated its economic goals to political ones and thus in the MENA region, Russia pursue economic deals as a means to foreign policy strategies. However, if the range of Russian trade is somehow limited, the investment between Russia and its regional partners is more extensive, and follows its political agenda. The author claimed that this prevented Russia from reaching its full potential and it keeps an economic model that resembles the Soviet Union's. It lacks private commerce and maintains a government-to-government type of economic exchange. However, the fault of this failing attitude between Russia and the MENA region also partially falls on the latter. In fact, the region still lacks proper trade infrastructure and diversification of the economies, showing limited export opportunities.



The author concluded by stating that it is unlikely that a change in Russian “business as usual” will occur, especially since it feels threatened by important competitors such as US and China. Nonetheless, a reform regarding its approach to economic relations is needed, otherwise Russia will remain a weak economic power, by leaving energy and arms sales as the two only main sectors of exchange, and this could cause major losses on both sides.

#### *Feedbacks from other researchers and stakeholders*

In this last session, researchers discussed the arms sales and the principle economic markets Russia deals with. While the Gulf mainly trades with the US, Iran and North Africa remain the main Russian partners. The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) was then brought up in the discussion to show once more the unsuccessful way Russia deals with economic relations and the researchers had similar views on this aspect. Nonetheless, with a radical change of point of view, this Union could be used to foster economic and trade exchange. The scholars agreed on the fact that the economic approach of Russia was always driven by its geopolitical goals and the EEU is a relevant example. The partnership between Turkey and Russia was mentioned as well, while it was not brought up in the author's presentation, and in addition to this, some researchers stressed the importance of several countries in North Africa, such as Algeria and Tunisia. There, Russia is giving its expertise in matter of nuclear power plants and investing as well. To conclude, the scholars and researchers seemed to agree that Russia has the potential to become an important economic partner. However, they also concluded that several changes in its approach were needed, especially since domestic and regional policies were already transforming the economic and political scenario in a way that could favor Russia.



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