

Russia in the Mediterranean Region: (Re)sources of Influence

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The year 2008 was marked by Russia's growing activism in a number of regions where it claims to have "come back" after years of neglect and indifference. The Mediterranean region is certainly one of them. Yet Russia's alleged "return" raises at least two important questions. *First*, how does Moscow perceive the region whose importance it claims to rediscover? In particular, does it see the Mediterranean as a region-in-the-making, or as a mere group of different states loosely tied to each other? *Second*, how do the current Russian policies differ from previous times, and what are the key instruments the Kremlin uses to foster its regional credentials?

It is mainly these two questions that I would like to focus on in this paper. Consequently, two arguments will be developed. *Firstly*, for Russia, in my view, the Mediterranean does not constitute a more or less coherent region; and *secondly*, Moscow tries to give an upper hand to economic and cultural tools of influence, yet these are inevitably accompanied by the political resources Russia has to resort to.

The Mediterranean in Russian Foreign Policy Imagery

By and large, Russia views its policies in the Mediterranean region as an extension of its relations with at least four types of actors. *Firstly*, North Africa and the Middle East are definitely part of Russia's policies toward the entire Muslim world. *Secondly*, Moscow pursues a separate agenda while dealing with the southern EU members, in the meantime remaining rather sceptical about the ability of the European Union to speak with a single voice. *Thirdly*,

in some cases the developments in the Mediterranean are viewed as a continuation of the challenges the Kremlin faces in the Black Sea region (from Russia's search for a possible substitution for the Sebastopol naval base to the intention to "balance" the Ukrainian church in Libya with the construction of a Russian church in this country, as pledged by the ambassador to Tripoli Vladimir Chamov).

Arguably, there is a *fourth* actor that usually serves as a reference point for Russia, namely the United States. Moscow's worldwide policies are captured by an idea of redrawing the negative consequences of a US-centred world order. At first glance, the Mediterranean seems to be a good fit for this strategy. Yet in the meantime, there is a sense of oversimplification in Russia's reasoning: in the traditions of zero-sum-game mentality, the Kremlin tends to anticipate that the 'dethroning' of the United States would automatically boost Russia's position. Even against the background of the presumably weakening US role in world affairs, the number of conceptual problems Russia faces is only growing. Should it, for example, support the region-building projects under the aegis of the EU as a materialization of "multipolarity" strategy, or, perhaps, ought Russia either ignore or even resist these projects?

However, there are some indications that eventually Russia might take the Mediterranean region more seriously. One may recall that Lavrov repeatedly refers to those countries bordering on Russia (in particular, the Caucasus) as having to be able to make major security decisions autonomously and block attempts to impose those decisions from the outside. Of course, unlike in other cases of region-building (such as the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, and the Barents Sea regions), Russia in the Mediterranean is not a region-maker but rather an external power. Yet the progress in "regional development" was mentioned by Putin as one of the most important effects of the South Stream

project implementation. In fact, much praised by the Kremlin, *multipolarity* can be understood as a form of *multiregionality*, which makes Russia support the region-building efforts in the areas of Russia's neighbourhood with Europe. Lavrov has favoured "multi-optional" strategies and "regionalization of global politics", rhetorically asking why a single Europe should be formed from one centre, instead of relying upon several platforms simultaneously. In accordance with this logic, the Mediterranean may eventually be viewed as one of the possible regional "platforms" on which the future Europe may rest. The perspective of turning the EU into a less coherent and more diversified type of actor can be welcomed in Moscow, which seems to find more convenience in dealing with a Europe of multiple dimensions than with a unitary bloc. Now, let's turn to the question of the practical tools that Russia is relying upon in the Mediterranean. Despite the implicit announcement of the "comeback" strategy, the Kremlin ceaselessly reiterates that today's Russia is different from the Soviet Union in two respects: instead of ideological domination Moscow uses its economic and cultural resources as foreign policy instruments.

Russia's Economic Tools

Today's Russia presents itself as a depoliticized actor whose behaviour is governed by economic and financial arguments and rests upon managerial qualities of the state. Moscow, therefore, rejects and even disavows political connotations of its economic projects. In the Mediterranean, most of Russia's economic interests are grounded in fostering cooperation with key regional actors in the energy sphere motivated mostly by commercial reasons, though sometimes security also matters. The best example is the South Stream project launched as a joint *Russian-Italian* venture, which Putin dubbed "a genuine breakthrough" in the energy security of all of Europe. The Italian companies Enel and Eni have succeeded in acquiring shares of some Russian enterprises, while Russian investments in the Italian energy sector have also grown, as was confirmed during the visit of Giorgio Napolitano to Moscow on 16 July 2008. The importance of South Stream, in Russian eyes, was only actualized by the gas transit dispute of December 2008-January 2009 with Ukraine.

In Russia's relations with *Greece* in 2008, the key project was the Burgas-Alexandroupolis pipeline,

which Putin assessed as the key to the diversification and competitiveness of the energy markets in all of southern and eastern Europe. At his meeting with Prime Minister Konstantinos Karamanlis on 29 April 2008, Putin addressed Greece as a pivotal country on the European energy scene. Parenthetically it can be mentioned that Putin has downplayed the political significance of Greece's blocking the NATO membership of Macedonia, and restricted his comments to the reiteration of Russia's negative attitude to the NATO enlargement as such.

Relations with *France* in the economic field seem to be more competitive. Most Russian analysts interpreted the Union for the Mediterranean as an economic project meant to control the vast energy resources of North Africa. In this sense, the "gas OPEC" (OPEC being the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) that was announced in December 2008 may be partly interpreted as a reaction to the French policies. Yet official discourse, of course, omitted explicit references to possible rivalries: according to Lavrov, the Russia-Iran-Qatar negotiations are aimed at avoiding the influence of "incredible fluctuation of oil prices" upon the process of price-making in the still-unformed gas market.

Yet in the case of *Algeria*, Russia has to admit that its policies to a significant extent are a reaction to the European moves. At negotiations with Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Vladimir Putin mentioned that Russia is aware of the perspectives of forming a free trade area between the EU and Algeria by 2012, which makes Russia readjust its strategy accordingly. In particular, the Russian Railways company has gained a large contract in Algeria (yet only after Moscow agreed to take back the 15 military jets it earlier purchased from Russia). The same goes for *Egypt* as well: at the meeting with Hosni Mubarak on 25 March 2008, Putin underlined the success of the car producer Lada in this country, as well as that of the Lukoil and Novotek companies working in exploitation of the local energy resources. In the case of *Libya*, Russia has agreed to write off this country's 4.5 billion dollar debt in exchange for the lucrative contracts that Muammar Gaddafi offered to Russian energy companies when he visited Moscow on 1 November 2008.

Politics Looming Large

Yet the de-politicized model of foreign policy inevitably meets political circumstances, which come in two

versions. *Firstly*, political arguments are advanced when the purely material considerations are insufficient for describing the plethora of Russian attitudes to the Mediterranean region. Russian diplomats tend to include the Mediterranean in the list of regions where Russia faces the perspective of marginalization and thus has to enact political mechanisms to define its relations with regional actors. Moreover, historical parallels with the Byzantine Empire, much more pronounced in 2008 Kremlin-sponsored discourse than ever before, pointed to the fact that Russian foreign policy imagery includes those parts of the Mediterranean Sea that were under the influence of Orthodoxy. Russia boosts its growing positions and influence in the countries of North Africa by pretending to play the role of a nation that, after a short period of oblivion, is “coming back” to the countries that still keep their best memories of enjoying good relations with the Soviet Union and preserving the sites which have symbolic meaning for Russia (including the Orthodox churches, cemeteries, and other cultural and religious places). The Middle East keeps its particular importance as part of the “Russian world” concept. In particular, the Russian Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society chaired by Sergei Stepashin was instrumental in returning to Russia some Russian religious buildings in Jerusalem. It is in this context that one has to view the issue of Russia’s cultural heritage in Turkey: having met with Babacan in July 2008, Lavrov has expressed his gratitude to the Turkish government for the restoration of the monument to the Russian immigrants in the city of Gelibolu. *Secondly*, there are situations in which the rules of the game are subject to political choice. Political accents seem to be very strong in Russia’s relations with *France* and *Italy*, which remain the chief supporters of Moscow within the EU. Both countries have strengthened –in the Kremlin’s eyes– their reputation of “good” or “loyal” Europeans, as opposed to Poland or the Baltic countries, which were put in a different category of unfriendly states. In the aftermath of the Russia-Georgia War in August 2008, the Russian-French relations achieved momentum, as the Medvedev-Sarkozy talks demonstrated, despite Brussels’ decision to discontinue the negotiations on a new bilateral treaty with Moscow. The crisis in the Caucasus, in Medvedev’s interpretation, was “imposed” upon both Russia and the leading EU countries, which could be translated into an invitation to enhance partnership between Moscow and countries like France and Italy.

The *Russian-Spanish* relations also contained strong political flavour, since neither country recognized the independence of Kosovo. King Juan Carlos’ visit to Moscow on 16 June 2008 has confirmed a certain degree of political solidarity between the two countries. Yet in the meantime, a number of differences between Russian and Spanish diplomacies may be traced. *Firstly*, Spain –unlike Russia– maintains some military presence in the Balkans, which makes it take a more pragmatic and less confrontational stance. *Secondly*, Spain –unlike Russia– is very reluctant to draw any parallels between Kosovo and other regional conflicts, admitting that Kosovo deserves separate treatment. *Thirdly*, for Russia the Kosovo incident reveals Russia’s distinctive identity mostly oppositional to the West. This is certainly not the case for Spain, which prevents any possible anti-European modalities in its diplomatic position. Of course, Russian media praised the position taken by Madrid while in the meantime interpreting it not as a principled rejection of the violation of international law, but rather as a fear of a “domino effect” inside Spain itself. Some Russian commentators pointed to what they dub Madrid’s “inconsistency”: Spanish troops in Kosovo, according to the Russian point of view, were installed to repress the Serbian minority, and thus they contributed to the establishment of Kosovo as an ethnic state. The fact that Spanish leaders repeatedly insist that the Kosovo conflict has to be tackled by Europeans themselves also provoked hidden resentment among Russians, who are sensitive to any gestures of exclusion against those considered “not fully European.” The political framework of Russia’s relations with *Cyprus* was also defined by the attempts to draw parallels between this country and Kosovo. At the news conference with his Turkish colleague Babacan, Foreign Minister Lavrov has accused the European governments of a policy of double standards: in the case of Cyprus the EU insists on the implementation of the UN resolutions, while in Kosovo most of these governments act in contradiction to the international law. In the *Middle East*, Russia tried to maintain its status as a politically important nation capable of exerting due influence in the region. Russia’s relations with Palestine were filled with ostensibly political content, since Hamas recognized both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The political dimension of relations with Israel was reinforced by Tel Aviv’s consent to abolish visas for Russian citizens starting in September 2008 –a gesture that ranks very high in Russia’s normative priorities.

Turkey is another political partner for Moscow, mostly in light of “the eroding of the US strategic partnership with Turkey” (Kelashvili 2008, p.2). The ostensible political format of the Russian-Turkish relations may be explained by the fact that both countries feel disadvantaged within the Euro-Atlantic institutional structures. The Russian Foreign Minister has welcomed the Turkish initiative on the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform after the Russia-Georgia War. Russia praised the intention of Ankara to take advantage of the uniqueness of the situation and normalize relations with Armenia. The effects of the Russian-Turkish rapprochement are ostensibly political: some analysts in Baku “started to talk about a pact between the two powers, similar to one signed between the Bolsheviks and Kemalist Turkey” (Valiyev 2008, p.5). The case of Turkey illustrates that a country’s NATO membership is not an impediment for developing fully-fledged bilateral cooperation, which may suggest that Russia is not against NATO as an institution but resists its enlargement to certain areas that Moscow treats as belonging to its traditional sphere of interests. In the meantime, the Turkish factor plays a politically constraining role in Russia’s attitudes towards the gradual self-assertiveness of the Kurdish provinces in Iraq.

In other cases, political dimensions were only occasional. Thus, having commented on the Burgas-Alexandropoulos pipeline, Lavrov referred to the United States as a country attempting “to frighten Greece” and “exert open pressure” on its government. In the case of *Tunisia*, it was mentioned that both countries support a “world without dividing lines”, which sounded like a political declaration of solidarity.

Conclusion

There are two sources of ambiguity in Russia’s posture in the Mediterranean. *Firstly*, Russia plays different roles simultaneously, from an interest-oriented actor to a political broker. In the Mediterranean –due to its relative geographical remoteness and the absence of “hot points” like Kaliningrad in the Baltic Sea and Crimea in the Black Sea– it is capable of playing the role of a “technocratic” power, yet in the meantime it may not avoid political collisions that inevitably politicize Russia’s stand.

Secondly, Russia’s attitudes to the Mediterranean region remain ambivalent. On the one hand, officially, Russia seems to be far away from accepting the Mediterranean countries as forming a single region. Yet on the other hand, a wider foreign policy discourse in Russia gives some indications that it may take some political advantage(s) of the process of region-making in Europe’s margins.

Bibliography

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