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The Eastern Mediterranean in Transition

Multipolarity, Politics and Power

Edited by Spyridon N. Litsas
and Aristotle Tziampiris

The International
Political Economy
of New Regionalisms Series

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Russian Foreign Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean since 1991

Pavel Shlykov

Introduction

The foreign policy of the Russian Federation in the Eastern Mediterranean divides into three periods distinguished by both the presence and activity of Russia in the region: the stage of retreat (during the 1990s), the phase of recovery (first decade of the 2000s) and the years of global destabilization after the Arab Spring.

During the Cold War, the region of Eastern Mediterranean was a zone of confrontation between the two blocks. Both the Soviet Union and the Western states had equipollent military alignment in the region and contested with each other for allies in the region. In the 1990s the situation underwent radical changes: the West in general came to dominate the region solely, while the Russian Federation which took the place of the dismantled Soviet Union abandoned the Eastern Mediterranean as a sphere of strategic interests to the West, which started to promote its geopolitical projects in the region. A benchmark for this period was 1990 when Moscow kept itself aloof from the geopolitical competition in the region and gave up taking concrete steps in preventing a coalition led by the USA from defeating the army of Saddam Hussein during the first Gulf War.

Inner political and economic problems hindered Russia from implementing large scale international initiatives in the region. Under President Boris Yeltsin Russia was satisfied with the role of an observer in the Eastern Mediterranean: Russia's military presence in the region virtually came to an end and relations with Eastern Mediterranean countries were drastically reduced. This situation in many respects predetermined the character of Russia's presence in the region for the following 15 years. This presence contrasted with the situation during the Cold War essentially and functionally. The range of Russia's interests also underwent important changes: these interests narrowed to commercial preferences, concerns about spiritual values of the Holy Land and tourist attractions of the Mediterranean resorts.

When in 2000 President Vladimir Putin came into power, a distinct intention to regain a leading role in the Eastern Mediterranean became one of the most important aspects of the Russian foreign policy. Consequently, during the first decade of the twenty-first century the region swiftly transformed into a zone of geopolitical and geoeconomic competition between Russia and Western states.

However, both the nature and forms of this competition differed greatly from the struggle of the Cold War period. This competition wasn't military and ideological but a contest in the spheres of energy and arms sales that resembled market competition. Though military dimensions throughout the last two decades were still important, the main tensions were not about control over territories and loyalty of regional allies but concerned primarily the issues of control over energy flows and arms markets. Western countries considered the growing activity of Russia in the Eastern Mediterranean as a challenge to their strategic interests in the region. For Eastern Mediterranean countries, the increasing tensions between Moscow and Washington meant the growing of their own influence on the scale of world politics priorities for both global and regional actors.

Energy Security Dimensions

By contrast with the period of the Cold War when tensions between the two blocks in the Eastern Mediterranean were military in manner and ideological in matter, the current interests of Russia in the region concern primarily energy security and arms sales. After having explored large reserves of natural gas off the coast of Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey the Eastern Mediterranean region attracted increasing concerns by global actors. Competition for the right to explore these resources has facilitated the escalation of existing tensions in the region about sovereignty.

The growing activity of Russia in the Eastern Mediterranean throughout the last 15 years was much more about the promotion of Russian oil and gas companies on the regional market. This economic advance was closely associated with basic development problems of the EU, for example the dilemma of growing demand for energy resources and declining indigenous production of both oil and gas.[1]

During his first two tenures as president Vladimir Putin established Russia as the EU's most important supplier of energy resources, satisfying about a quarter of European demand of oil and gas. At the same time, EU policy-makers started to express a growing concern about the reliability of Russia as the most important energy provider. Russia was generally accused of energy blackmailing against the EU which followed a rising confrontation between Russia and the West in general (sharp criticism of Russian policy in Chechnya and during the armed conflict in August 2008 between Georgia on one side, and the South Ossetia and Abkhazia on the other). As then British Prime Minister Gordon Brown (2008) summed up the attitude to Russia's policy in his article to the Observer "no nation can be allowed to exert an energy stranglehold over Europe" The US also considered the EU's dependence on Russia's energy supply as a factor undermining American predominance in the region. The administration of George W Bush, Jr traditionally criticized Moscow for the energy blackmailing of Europe. The Obama administration despite all the declarations about the reset of US–Russian relations used the similar lexicon in the official comments on Russia's policy since the

Russia–Ukraine crisis in 2009. Russian officials denied all the accusation of using oil and gas supplies as political instruments to put pressure on the other countries. However president Putin has never dissembled the importance that energy plays in Russia's current foreign and security policy even before 2009. Thus, in 2005 during his Opening Address at the Security Council Session on Russia's Role in Guaranteeing International Energy Security Putin stressed that "Russia is one of the leaders in the world energy market today it is mainly energy that ensures the growth of the world economy well-balanced and regular sources of energy is undoubtedly a key factor in global security" (Kremlin, 2005). We can see similar estimations of energy issues for the revival of Russia's influence in world politics in the "National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation to 2020" approved in May 2009 (Russian Federation Security Council, 2009).

From the EU perspective, the growing concern about national energy security made the diversification of external energy supplies one of the core objectives for the EU energy policy. Apart from the increasingly developing relations with Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa on energy issues, this trend resulted in the strengthening of energy cooperation between Western Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean countries. Thus, in 2008 the EU initiated the establishment of the Union for the Mediterranean as re-launching of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (the Barcelona Process of 1995) with special emphasis on energy security. And in July 2009, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union adopted the EU's Third Energy Package aiming to limit and withdraw foreign ownership for the gas and electricity companies in the EU Russia reacted to these steps by the virtual repudiation of the European Energy Charter which Moscow signed in 1991 and began to promote the idea of comprehensive energy pact that could boost energy development in Europe and satisfy the requirements of the both net importers and net suppliers of energy resources.

Military Security Dimensions from Russia's Perspective

During the Cold War the US dominated the region of the Eastern Mediterranean. Although the USSR had a comparable (in both number and power) military presence in the region, that is the Fifth Eskadra (Kasatonov, 2009, p. 49), Washington with the Sixth Fleet held the strategic advantage because the Soviets had to deal with access difficulties to the Sea. After the evacuation of the Soviet naval base 'Pasha Liman' in Albania in 1961 (Lüthi, 2008, pp. 201–209) and the expulsion of the Soviet military advisors from Egypt in 1976 (Vasilyev, 1993; Vego, 2000, pp. 164–190) the Syrian port city of Tartus became the only Soviet naval military base in the Mediterranean Sea. In 1991 Russia's military presence in the region materially sputtered out. Due to economic and political difficulties, Russia's military presence was swiftly decreasing in different regions of the world throughout the early 1990s and the Eastern Mediterranean was not an exception. The last decade on the contrary witnessed a moderate recovery of Russia's

military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. A symbol of this recovery was a reappearance of the Russian navy in the Eastern Mediterranean announced by Vladimir Putin in 1999 when he was Prime minister. Subsequently the aim of re-establishing military ties with the region was stated in the "Naval Doctrine of the Russian Federation until 2020" approved in July 2001 In the Doctrine military and political stability in the Mediterranean required the sufficient naval presence of Russia in the region. Thus the Doctrine proclaimed that the Mediterranean Sea along with the Baltic Sea, Black Sea and Azov Sea as spheres of Russia's strategic interests (RF Security Council, 2001). However, the initial steps in pursuance of these aims were taken only by the first decade of the 2000s. In 2006 Russian newspapers reported about the Kremlin's plans for the modernization of the Soviet naval base in the Syrian port city of Tartus including the transformation of this base into a full-scale military base that would be used even for the partial relocation of the Black Sea fleet of Russia. Moscow considers Tartus as a strategic point and a gateway for the Russian fleet that would provide full-scale military presence not only in the Mediterranean but also give access to the Red Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, and so on.

Russian politicians often emphasized the need to counterbalance the US' naval and military activity in the region. And regular military training exercises in the region with the Heavy Aviation Cruiser "Admiral Kuznetsov," the cruiser "Varyag" and many other smaller ships from different fleets which were conducted for the first time in late 2007 became a symbol of Russia's reappearance in the Eastern Mediterranean. Yet the predominance of the American Sixth Fleet meant that the US did not consider Russia's renewed naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean as a particular deterrent factor for NATO in the region.

The other important manifestation of Russia's growing military and political presence in the region was the increasing military-technical cooperation with the Eastern Mediterranean countries. Apart from Syria, which had close ties with the Soviet Union in the sphere of military-technical cooperation, such traditional Western allies as Israel and Egypt became Russia's partners. And the sphere of arms sales constituted another zone of rivalry between Russia and the West that resulted in the transformation of arms sales from a seller's market of the 1970s and 1980s to a buyers' market. Yet this tendency revealed itself more distinctly in the Russia–Syria relations.

Changing Relations with Egypt before the Arab Spring

Egypt occupies a special position in both the Eastern Mediterranean and the Afro-Asian region in general. The President of the Republic of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser, was a good friend of the Soviet Union. However, following his death in 1970, the golden age of Soviet–Egyptian relations came to an end. The ideological calculations of Moscow and Cairo which constituted a solid foundation of the close bilateral relations in the 1960s lost their relevance. The new President of

Egypt Anwar Sadat considered the US as a more advantageous "big brother" than the Soviet Union and relations between the Soviet Union and Egypt were virtually frozen. The pro-Soviet political course was replaced by the pro-US politics of liberalization reforms and separate agreements with Israel. Since the mid-1970s, Egypt strengthened itself in the role of a most important US ally in the region getting annual military and economic support of US $1.3 billion from Washington (US Department of State, 2014).

However, throughout the last decade, the relations between Russia and Egypt were getting increasingly closer. This tendency comes back to 1992 when Russia and Egypt radically reformatted their relations establishing a totally new foundation for these century-long contacts. After having refused the ideological determinism, both Moscow and Cairo began to build their relations according to practical mutual interests. Apart from common issues dealing with bilateral relations, these interests comprised different regional cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean on the question of security and joint struggles against Islamic radicalism. During the 1990s the two countries managed to renew the legal basis of bilateral relations.

Following these radical transformations in the first decade of the 2000s, the relations between Russia and Egypt were completely re-established and acquired a mutually beneficial character in both the political and economic spheres and not just on security issues. Historical visit of the Russian president Vladimir Putin to Egypt in April 2005 broke a 40-year-long pause in high level visits of Russian leaders to Egypt. The Joint statement on increasing friendly relations and partnership which was adopted during this summit stated that relations between Russia and Egypt were acquiring a strategic character. In 2009, President Dimitry Medvedev also visited Cairo and signed the Treaty on strategic partnership between the Russian Federation and the Arab Republic of Egypt (Russia Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009b). These visits created a good background for increasing military and technical cooperation. Since 2002 Russia resumed its arms sales to Egypt had almost ceased in the 1970s. For the first four years (2002–2006) the total amount of signed contracts exceeded US$300 million. Russia sold Egypt primarily anti-aircraft defense systems but in 2006 part of the negotiating was a deal on MIG-29 bomber-fighters. However, all these new projects and new forms of cooperation didn't make Egypt Russia's key-partner in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Cooperation with Syria before the Civil War of 2011

The role of Syria in realization of the Russian foreign policy strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean was always far more significant than the one of Egypt. Since Soviet times, Syria traditionally has been one of Russia's main strategic allies in the region. In 1980 Syria and the Soviet Union signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation that strengthened the strategic partnership between the two countries (Vasilyev, 1993). Consequently Syria was among those few Arab regimes which

didn't criticize the Soviet operation in Afghanistan during the discussion at the UN General Assembly meeting in January 1980 (Cobban, 1980; Nossiter, 1980).

Syria did not merely host the USSR's and later on Russia's only permanent maritime military base in the Mediterranean. Damascus has traditionally been a major customer for Soviet military exports. Throughout the history of independent Syria (since 1946) the total amount of contracts on arms sales with the USSR and the Russian Federation is estimated at more than US$35.2 billion (SIPRI, 2014). Despite all the changes and backtracking in bilateral relations in the early 1990s, Syria remains a key springboard for Russia's growing political, economic and military influence in the region.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the position of Russia was constantly weakening. The reasons for this tendency of the 1990s were behind not only a swiftly diminished resource base for Russia or the reluctance of Damascus in paying back its Soviet debts but also in the transformation of Russian foreign policy. During the first years of Boris Yeltsin presidency Moscow continuously sought the approval of its Western partners trying to prove Russia's loyalty and adherence to democracy. Russian foreign policy was characterized by an overwhelming tendency to avoid any discord with the West even at the expense of national interests. Consequently the export turnover between Russia and Syria dropped from US$1 billion in 1991 to US$88 million in 1993 (RF Federal State Statistics Service, 2014). In the late 1990s Russia again changed its foreign policy strategy and introduced the concept of "selected partnership" aimed at developing relations with primary partners—for example the US and the EU Contrary to the previous years, Russia bargained with the West to retain its own opinion and strived to secure the right to make decision on its own when it was necessary, to act in concert with the West, but also keep away from Western initiatives (Bogaturov, 2007).

The recovery of Russia's partnership with Syria especially in the sphere of military and technical cooperation took place only during the first decade of the twenty-first century. At that time Moscow officially considered again Syria as one of its main allies in the region. In January 2005 Syrian President Bashar al-Assad visited Moscow and signed the Joint Declaration on deepening relations of friendship and cooperation, recognizing their role in achieving just and comprehensive peace in the region and the world. The declaration also fixed mechanisms for the development of military cooperation. Both the visit and joint declaration signified a breakthrough in the Russian-Syrian relations: the two sides solved the problem of Syrian debt which in 1991 amounted to US414 billion and bilateral relations took a turn for the better. Moscow assented to write off 73 percent of the Soviet debt (approximately US$9.8 billion) in exchange for guaranties on new arms sales contracts (Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 2005).

Throughout the post-Soviet period Russian policy on the Syrian track has been determined by the specific international environment around Syria. First, the US put pressure on Damascus accusing it of supporting Arab terrorists and called for international sanctions. Second, Washington accused Syria of working on

producing weapons of mass destruction and even elaborated plans for a preventive strike on Syria (using the Iraqi template). Third, Israel put pressure on Syria and bombed sites near Damascus, claiming there were terrorist training camps for jihadists (Huggler, 2003).

During these years of isolation, Damascus affirmed itself in the role of the most important ally of Russia in the region. Moscow has maintained Syria's dependence on arms sales from Russia considering the Syrian market as one of the most promising. Having suffered from international isolation and sanctions, Syria required Russia's political support on both the global and local levels (in the UN Security Council and other international organizations). From the Russian perspective, the strategic location of Syria has facilitated the growing presence of Russia in the Eastern Mediterranean and Moscow made use of Syrian track as a sort of strategic platform for increasing its influence and advancing Russia's interests in the region.

Politics in the Context of the Arab Spring

The wave of mass demonstrations and protests (both non-violent and violent), riots and Civil wars started in December 2010 in some countries of the Eastern Mediterranean and more generally throughout the Middle East. From a Russian perspective, these hardly expected events couldn't be evaluated univocally for the Arab Spring raised great uncertainty about the future of the region. The growing radicalism and nationalism in the Arab segment of the Eastern Mediterranean could lead to new threats (both regional and global) and simultaneously intensify the old ones. Since 2011 Moscow's aspirations to support Russian businesspeople in the Arab States has collided with rising instability, the passing away of the authoritarian and odious but traditional and familiar partners and the obvious prospects for redistributing the energy and arms sales market. However, the new leaders of the post-revolutionary states will most likely be interested in the diversification of external contacts and preservation of political and business ties with Russia.

The level of external intervention in the events of different Arab States differed greatly. However, Russia's rising concern about the military force as the only main tool for the overthrow of disloyal regimes determined the official reaction of Moscow to the popular protests in the Arab spring.

President Dmitry Medvedev (Kremlin, 2011) in his opening address at the meeting of the National Anti-Terrorism Committee in Vladikavkaz in Ferbruary 2011 expressed the core of Russia's attitude towards the Arab revolts:

> Look at the current situation in the Middle East and the Arab world It may come to very complex events, including the arrival of fanatics into power. This will mean decades of fires and further spread of extremism We must face the truth. In the past such a scenario was harbored for us, and now attempts

> to implement it are even more likely. In any case, this plot will not work. But everything that happens there will have a direct impact on our domestic situation in the long term, as long as decades.

The new reality of the post-bipolar world has already altered Moscow's foreign policy in both the Eastern Mediterranean and the other regions in the world. Among Russian policy-makers there is now growing concern about the problems of the modern world order. During all stages of the *Arab Spring*, Russia's declared main priority was global responsibility. Many European policy-makers considered the Russian stance as a recurrence of neo-Imperial logic and then an attempt to retain at any price arms markets and the military base in the Syrian port city of Tartus which is currently a small material supply center (two floating docks and fuel storage with repair crew on the shore).

Both Russian policy-makers and most experts regarded the Arab Spring in form and in content as a "great Islamist revolution" (Mirskiy, 2011) which provided the change of secular regimes to Islamist ones and accession of al-Qaeda associates to power. Contrary to the EU and the US which compared the events of the "Arab Spring" with the Revolutions of 1848 and 1989 in Europe, Russian experts drew parallels with the Russian Revolution of 1917 (Trenin, 2013, p. 16). The head of Russian diplomacy, Sergey Lavrov, even called references to the Arab Spring and democracy as "baby talk" (ITAR-TASS, 2012). Russia's attitude towards Syria is based on traditional views of the global order. Within this conceptual framework (Naumkin, 2011), a regime change from the outside is destabilizing, involvement in other's civil wars is counter-productive and should be avoided; and military intervention is only a step of last resort. Sergey Lavrov repeatedly declared this formula of Russian foreign policy: "We don't participate in the games of changing regimes." (Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013).

From the first days of the Arab Spring, Russia has considered dialogue to be the only way for solving the social conflicts. Moscow strived to persist consistently in its position and proved efficacy of this idea for the regulation of the inner conflict in Syria.

Russia promoted the calling of the Geneva conference on Syria without any preconditions and with the participation of all sides of the conflict and regional powers like Iran and Saudi Arabia (Solana and Hoop Scheffer, 2013). The inertia of armed struggle and the polyphony of Islamist extremists' interests made the reconciliation of the Syrian crisis almost impossible. The overthrow of President Bashar al Assad with direct or indirect foreign military intervention would only help extremists aiming at the "Talibanization" of the region.

Finally, the military tensions around Syria (which came to climax in the summer of 2013), were virtually dissipated by the Russia-US agreements on the "Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons" under international control. This initiative increased the chances for diplomatic adjustment of the Syrian crisis.

Pragmatism of Increasing Russian–Turkish Cooperation

After the collapse of the Soviet Union the development of Russian–Turkish relations exhibited several distinct stages based on specific objectives and changes in the international context. In the early 1990s, Turkey strived to be politically compensated for the years under the pressure of a powerful northern neighbor, forcing Ankara to make national security a core topic of foreign policy. Throughout these years, Turkey had been limited in its international relations and mostly couldn't separate its own position from the interests of the US and NATO. Accordingly, in the 1990s, Turkey tried to take advantage of a weakening Russia and play an active role in the newly independent states of Central Asia and the Caucasus and somehow even in the Turkic regions of the Russian Federation. This type of politics consequently led to rising tensions in the bilateral political relations with Russia.

The start of a new stage in Russian-Turkish relations was chronologically near to the beginning of the twenty-first century. In November 2001, the then Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Ivanov and his Turkish counterpart Ismail Cem signed the "Plan for development of cooperation between Russia and Turkey in Eurasia" which officially called for the new era in relations that would be a transition to regional cooperation in all fields "in the spirit of friendship and mutual trust." (Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2001). The document opened a broad corridor of opportunities for cooperation in such de-politicized spheres as trade, culture and tourism but also had to lay the foundation for a new political dialogue.

Certainly both pro-Western political and market reforms in Russia in the 1990s and new geopolitical realities caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union laid solid preconditions for positive developments. However, the qualitative shift in the bilateral relations dates back to the period of the first presidency of Vladimir Putin. The rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP—*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) in 2002 and the subsequent formation of single-party government in Turkey had also a positive effect on the development of relations with Russia. The strong and stable position of the AKP afforded the government to follow an active policy, combined withrefusal to pursue a pretentious orientation towards the Turkic republics, further facilitated increasing cooperation with Russia.

The visit of president Putin to Turkey in December 2004 which broke a 32-year pause in official visits of Russian leaders to Turkey marked the real beginning of a new era in Russian-Turkish relations. The visit resulted in the signing of a Joint Declaration on the Deepening of Friendship and Multidimensional Partnership which didn't only mark a wide range of common interests and growing political confidence but also set a road-map for the diversification of partnership as an imperative for increasing cooperation of these "two Eurasian states" (Kremlin, 2004). At that time, Moscow and Ankara reached consensus on many pressing regional issues: The two countries shared a concern about the US' offensive policy in the Greater Middle East. Even more important was the accumulation of internal

and external factors facilitating the constantly increasing progress in some aspects of bilateral relations.

Turkey was among the first NATO countries to sign a defense cooperation agreement with Russia in 1994. This agreement helped Ankara to get military equipment for its struggle against activists of Kurdistan Workers' Party (Western allies didn't provide Turkey with such know-how). In 2000, the two countries established a commission on military cooperation, yet subsequently Russia didn't get the expected contracts on the arms sales and participation in the modernization of Turkey's military structure; and Moscow considered the proclaimed military cooperation as Ankara's plan to use it as an instrument meant to put pressure on the Western companies for getting better conditions (Kandaurov, 2001). On the level of political cooperation Turkey supported Russia's aspiration to obtain observer status at the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation and to join the World Trade Organization. Ankara also played a key role in establishing the Russia–Islamic World Strategic Vision Group (2006). However Russia's support of Turkey's initiatives during the last two decades was more limited: Moscow vetoed the Cyprus report submitted by Kofi Annan in the UN Security Council (2004) and reacted to Turkey's desire to obtain membership status in the EU with skepticism (2005). Vladimir Putin characterized the EU's aspiration of Turkey as a potential obstacle in the development of Russian–Turkish relations (Sen and Cetinkaya, 2005).

Political flexibility proper to the Turkish political culture affected Russian-Turkish relations on different levels. Despite the constantly increasing mutual trade which amounted to US$38 billion in 2008 (following the Global Financial Crisis of 2007–2008 this index has been decreasing and for 2013 amounted US$32.8 billion (Federal Customs Service, 2014)) and perceptions of Ankara as a key partner, its membership in NATO limits the potential scale of Russian-Turkish cooperation.

Favorable development in bilateral relations are influenced by three major factors: high level of mutual trust achieved at the political level, a solid economic relationship and third, psychological compatibility of both nations sharing a centuries-long history of two Euro-Asian powers.

For the first time in history, Russian-Turkish relations are being built on a completely new ideologically free basis, of mutual respect, democracy, human rights, market economy (Kremlin, 2004) and determined by mutually beneficial trade and economic cooperation. Economic cooperation is a key element of the Russian–Turkish relationship. Russia is Turkey's main foreign energy supplier and Turkey is a major purchaser of both primary energy resources and a large number of Russian intermediate goods (ferrous and non-ferrous metals) together with chemical productions.

Among the factors contributing to the Russian–Turkish strategic partnership is the special relationship between the political leaders of the two countries. For the last two decades, Russia and Turkey managed to overcome the legacy of Cold War confrontation and de-ideologize bilateral relations. However, the current state of the Russian–Turkish relations has reached its limits: the model of partnership

with economics being dominant (energy supply and tourist flows) had already played out its full potential, while political dialogue has remained unrealized. The situation around the Syrian crisis where Moscow and Ankara took different positions clearly demonstrated limits in bilateral relations, an acute shortage of mutual trust and a clear-cut need for the future articulation of mutual interests and challenges.

Israeli Direction of the Russian Foreign Policy

The current Russian–Israeli dialogue started in 1991 following the resumption of bilateral diplomatic relations that had been broken after the war of 1967 In the 1990s Russia mostly demonstrated a mostly pro-Arab political course in the Middle East, sometimes to the detriment of its relations with Israel. And contacts between Moscow and Tel Aviv have been largely dependent on Russia's relations with Syria, Palestine and Iran. The closer Russia's position was to these Muslim states the less productive were relations with Israel (Tel Aviv generally considered Russia's policy in the region as a threat to its national security and as a manifestation of unfriendly attitude towards the Jewish state).

Under Vladimir Putin, Russia began to implement a more balanced policy in the region and good relations with Israel were recognized as one of the foreign policy priorities in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, the true character of bilateral relations remained ambiguous. Despite regular political consultations and a semblance of political dialogue, the relations stagnated. During the first eight years of Putin's presidency, the frequency of official visits and large scale of information and cultural exchanges failed to overcome the excessively formal character of the relations have often complicated by external factors. Thus, Russia's plans to sell Syria S-300 which is regarded as one of the most potent anti-aircraft missile systems currently fielded had many repercussions in Israel and also became on the most debated issues during the meeting of Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu in May 2013 (RIA-Novosti, 2013). The two sides finally managed to overcome tensions—something that proves the diplomatic acumen and flexibility of both Russia and Israel.

Russia and Israel share concerns about the rising instability in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East in general. Tel Aviv traditionally considers security the top priority for its domestic and foreign policy. Leaders of Russia and Israel demonstrate similar attitude towards the problem of Radical Islam, something which also facilitates mutual cooperation. Political dialogue between the two states has been integrated into the broader context of bilateral relations. The sphere of mutual trade throughout the last two decades had a limited character but both sides keep on proclaiming the need for its intensification. Culture, science and education as spheres of cooperation have proved to be much more promising. Thus, in December 2008, Israeli authorities officially recognized Sergey Mission in Jerusalem (a symbol of Russia's presence on the Holy Land) as a property of the

Russian Federation (Lenta.ru, 2008). Another confirmation of positive dynamics in Russian-Israeli cultural relations became the constantly increasing list of new culture initiatives.

Russia and Israel also possess a great potential for military cooperation. Both Russia and Israel are considered to possess one of the most powerful military-industrial complexes and act as the world's main exporters of arms (the volume of military exports in Russia amounts to US$12 billion, the one of Israel is about US$8 billion) (Shulman, 2013). At the same time the two countries generally don't compete with each other for arms sales markets—they rather complement each other: Russia has specialized mostly in the export of metal consuming weapons (tanks, warships, planes) and Israel is a leading exporter of high-tech weapons.

Similar domestic threats regarding terrorist activities determine the character of Russian-Israeli military and technical cooperation. Policy-makers in Russia and Israel often draw a parallel between the struggles against Chechen separatists and the fight with Palestinian military organizations. In the first decade of the 2000s, then Prime-Minister Ariel Sharon openly mentioned the success of Russian policy in Chechnya (Katz, 2005, pp. 51–59). During the second Chechen War the special-services of the two countries even organized an exchange of security information.

Russia has traditionally demonstrated great interest in Israeli military facilities especially unmanned aerial vehicles commonly known as drones. In 2009, Russia signed contracts worth several US$ million contracts for the supply of drones and early warning radar system (*Falcon*, etc.).

The growing political and military cooperation between Russia and Israel reflects the endeavor by Tel Aviv to balance the traditional diplomatic and military support of the US with interaction and cooperation with Russia. Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman implicitly proved this tendency in his support of the strategic partnership with Russia (Lieberman, 2009). However, any realistic analysis of Russian-Israeli relations shows the permanent priority of the US-Israeli relations for Tel Aviv. The US remains the main donor with annual military aid of US$3 billion and Israel will always look at Washington whenever it takes any political steps, and yet the growing radicalization of the region will stimulate the further strengthening of Russian-Israeli cooperation.

Cooperation with Greece

Relations with, Greece occupy a special position in Russia's foreign policy. According to Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, "there are only few countries in the world with such a long history of sincere friendship like Russia and Greece" (Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009a). Russia and Greece generally have no serious claims against each other which could create obstacles for development of mutual cooperation. Consequently many Russian policy-makers and their European counterparts have considered Greece as a country with which politics have always been very close to or even coincided with

Russia's. Thus, the authors of the paper "A Power Audit of EU-Russia Relations" (prepared by The European Council on Foreign Relations) even called Greece "the Trojan horse of Russia" (Leonard and Popescu, 2007).

However, throughout the first decade of the 2000s the bilateral relations with Greece demonstrated another dynamic (Tziampiris, 2010). Following the increasing pressure of the World financial crisis and internal political tensions Greece revised its relations with Russia. When the project of the Burgas-Alexandroupoli pipeline, was stopped, together with all military-technical cooperation, the dynamics of Russian-Greek relations distinctly decreased. One Greek official, while estimating the situation, noted that "Russian–Greek relations were virtually frozen between October 2009 and June 2012" (Voice of Russia, 2013).

The cooling of relations between Moscow and Athens since 2009 coincided with a specific trend in the world politics: in the age of globalization, trade and investment issues have come to the foreground and solid economic foundation of cooperation determines the progress in bilateral relations. Throughout the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, economic aspects of Russian-Greek relations were relatively weak (in 2008 the total turnover of Russian-Greek trade reached its peak but it was less than Russian-Bulgarian or Russian-Romanian one) (Federal Customs Service, 2009).

However, among European countries, Greece has always been Russia's first partner in military-technical cooperation and despite pressure from Brussels and Washington, Athens has showed an interest in buying Russian arms. The foundation of the military cooperation was led in 1995 when a special intergovernmental "Agreement on cooperation in military and technical spheres" was signed and Greece became one of the first NATO countries to buy arms from Russia. Since then the two sides have exchanged high military official visits on a regular basis and in 1997 Russia and Greece even established a permanent intergovernmental commission on military and technical cooperation. The training of Greek students at Russian military academies and joint military exercises are other spheres of military cooperation. For example, in December 2010 Russian and Greek paratroopers conducted joint military exercises in Elefsina in Greece.

Positive changes in political relations with Greece took place after the coming to power of Antonis Samaras government in June 2012. Both Russian and Greek policy-makers demonstrated a high level of activity in unfreezing bilateral relations in order to celebrate in 2013 the 185th anniversary of diplomatic relations. Having overcome the stagnation of 2009–2012 the two countries showed a basically positive development in economic and political relations throughout the last two decades. Despite some disagreement in the early 1990s between Moscow and Athens over the name issue of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and the flourishing Russian-Turkish relations, Greece and Russia remain good partners sharing views on most issues of the world politics regarding developments in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

Conclusion

The Eastern Mediterranean as a part of the Greater Middle East bears great importance for the national interests of the Russian Federation. First, the region possesses a great amount of energy resources which today ensures the growth of the world economy. Second, the main trade routes that connect Europe with the rapidly developing countries of South, South-East and East Asia historically run through the Eastern Mediterranean. Third, the division between Christian and Muslim civilizations constitutes one of the core characteristics of the region. Accordingly the restoration and increase of previous positions in the region (both political and economic) has become one of the priorities for Russian Foreign policy since 2000.

During the 1990s, Russia was constantly giving ground in the Eastern Mediterranean to the West and its interests. But in the early 2000s, the growing interest and activity of Russia in the region which distinguished Vladimir Putin's foreign policy were mostly considered as an attempt to return to the Eastern Mediterranean. Consequently, Russia's active policy resulted in growing concern of the West and the Eastern Mediterranean once again becoming (as it used to be during the Cold War) a zone of rivalry and tension between Russia and the West. However both the form and content of this rivalry differed essentially from the ones of the previous periods when the struggle was mostly for territory through military domination and networks of military-political allies. In the 1990s, the ideology-centered opposition faded away, the military aspects remained important for both Russia and the West but was essentially transformed primarily into a market competition for arms sales and energy markets. Thus, the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West in the Eastern Mediterranean which was typical for both the twentieth century (and even in the times of the previous Russian Empire) gave place to a geoeconomic one.

From the perspective of Eastern Mediterranean countries the growing competition between Russia and the West signified the end of their predicament in which each country of the region was bound to belong to one of the two opposing Super Power-led blocks. Henceforth the regional actors of the Eastern Mediterranean have felt themselves freer in making decisions based on national interests (both political and economic) and mostly disregarding the determinism of block solidarity.

Analysis of the Russian policy in the Eastern Mediterranean throughout the post-Soviet decades represents an essentially different configuration of Russia's presence in the region. Russia doesn't possess really close allies in the region (like Egypt under Nasser and then Syria for the Soviet Union) yet Moscow also doesn't have consistent political adversaries (like Israel and Turkey during the Cold War). Russia has managed to build and maintain a sometimes difficult but usually constructive dialogue with all the countries of the region.

Since the 1990s, the only permanent enemy for Russia in the region of the Eastern Mediterranean has been radical Islamism. In the long-term perspective,

this factor will serve to consolidate Russia's relations with other states of the region which share the same concerns.

Regarding Russia's presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, throughout the last 10 years the regional actors increasingly required Russia's both presence and activism. Eastern Mediterranean states consider Russia as an influential external actor and think that cooperation with Russia could facilitate the rise of their position in international affairs. Though Russia can't balance the US' power, the regional states can and should develop cooperation with Moscow in order to diversify their external political and economic affairs.

Notes

1 Currently, the EU is the world's largest importer of oil and gas. It buys 82 percent of its oil and 57 percent of its gas from third-party states. This is projected to rise to 93 percent of its oil and 84 percent of its gas over the next quarter-century (European Commission, 2009, pp. 4–9).

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