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Russia's Approach to the Conflict in Libya, the East-West Dimension and the Role of the OSCE

Ekaterina Stepanova

Three main characteristics of post-Soviet Russian policy in the Middle East have been pragmatism, a non-ideological approach to partners and interlocutors and selective opportunism.¹ This last implies a readiness to engage in cooperation with most regional actors, despite tensions between them, with them or within them. Russia's hyperactive engagement on Syria appeared to represent a certain deviation from this general pattern, because it was in large part driven by considerations beyond Syria, or even the Middle East, such as Russia's troubled relations with the West. Yet, the special Syrian case has not fundamentally changed the pattern of Russian policy towards the broader region. This is demonstrated by Russia's good longstanding relations with both Iran and Israel, the recent normalization of the bilateral relationship with Turkey, improved relations with all Gulf states and engagement with a wide variety of regional actors involved in the Syrian conflict (including Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Qatar). On Syria, Russia's main extra-regional counterpart remains the United States, despite all the complications between the two, while European states play a rather marginal role in

¹ For background, see Russian International Affairs Council, "Russia and the Greater Middle East", in *RIAC Reports*, No. 9 (2013), <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/publications/russia-and-the-greater-middle-east>; Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia in the Middle East: back to a 'Grand Strategy' – or enforcing multilateralism?", in *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 81, No. 2 (summer 2016), <https://www.ifri.org/en/node/11686>.

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¹ For background, see Russian International Affairs Council, "Russia and the Greater Middle East", in *RIAC Reports*, No. 9 (2013), <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/publications/russia-and-the-greater-middle-east>; Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia in the Middle East: back to a 'Grand Strategy' – or enforcing multilateralism?", in *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 81, No. 2 (summer 2016), <https://www.ifri.org/en/node/11686>.

conflict management. One area, however, where Europe has a larger or even lead role in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is Libya. Stabilization and the establishment of a functional state in Libya are in Europe's interest more than anyone else's.

Of Europe's two main security institutions, NATO (along with several European powers) played the lead role in the 2011 military intervention in Libya that had devastating consequences, including full state collapse and ensuing chaos. Against this background, can the EU assume the role of lead political and security institution on conflict management and stabilization in Libya? What, in turn, are Russian interests in Libya and what role could Russia play in international efforts to bring stability and reconciliation to the country?

Permanently excluded from the two main security institutions in Europe, Moscow has a long-time adversarial relation with NATO and a deteriorating relationship with the EU, mainly as a result of the 2014 crisis in Ukraine that led to the imposition of EU sanctions on Russia. Since the mid-2010s, Russia-West relations have declined to their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. Against this backdrop, could a looser format such as that of the OSCE, originally built around the East-West dichotomy and which over the past decades has largely been downgraded to a forum for consultation between Russia and the West, make a significant contribution to conflict management in Libya?

4.1 RUSSIA'S POLICY ON THE LIBYAN CRISIS

4.1.1 *Background*

In the MENA region's many contemporary conflicts, Russian involvement has been untypically large – and heaviest – in Syria and most limited in Yemen. As Moscow started to play a growing role in Libya, the reflex among many observers was to try to find parallels with Russia's engagement in Syria.² However, these parallels are largely superficial and may

² Azeem Ibrahim, "After Imposing His Will on Syria, Putin Is Moving Onto Libya", in *Al-Arabiya English*, 4 June 2016, <http://ara.tv/vacdq>; Tarek Megerisi and Mattia Toaldo, "Russia in Libya, A Driver for Escalation?", in *Sada*, 8 December 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/66391>; Owen Matthews, Jack Moore and Damien Sharkov, "How Rus-

be quite misleading. They overestimate both Moscow's interest in, and leverage over, Libya while ignoring the significant differences between the two conflicts.

On the one hand, Libya has become an epitome of the chaos and fragmentation that follow complete state collapse mainly caused in this case by external intervention, with major splits not only among violent non-state actors, but also between nascent institutional actors of a rump national state. On the other, the conflict in Libya is of a much smaller scale than that in Syria, while the gravely complicating factor of Sunni-Shia tensions, domestic or regional, is absent. Oil is a potentially unifying economic factor that necessitates national infrastructure and creates shared economic interests. It ultimately requires a negotiated power-sharing agreement at the national level and could pay for much of the post-conflict reconstruction. That makes Libya look more like Iraq than Syria. Finally, Libya's main problem appears to lie in the proliferation of uncontrolled militias, violence by local powerbrokers, *de facto* absence of borders and the presence of jihadist actors, mainly foreigners with broader transnational agendas. Tensions at the national level – between (relatively moderate) Islamists and more secular forces, the Tripoli-based and Tobruk-based authorities or between proponents of the more or less unitary state – are more opportunistic than critical or existential in nature.

Under President Dmitri Medvedev, Russia supported limited international sanctions against Muammar Gaddafi's Libya in the wake of a new round of Benghazi-based protests in Libya in late 2010.³ However, in contrast to the lead Western states, but in concert with some UN Security Council (UNSC) members – China, Germany and Brazil – Moscow abstained on UNSC Resolution 1973, approved on 17 March 2011. That resolution paved the way for the military intervention in Libya by a coalition led by France and the UK, with active roles taken by the United States and NATO, and also involving Italy, Spain, other European states and Qatar. The 2011 intervention led to

sia Became the Middle East's New Power Broker", in *Newsweek*, 9 February 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/node/554227>. See also footnotes 11 and 12.

³ Russian Presidency, *Executive Order on Sanctions against Libya*, 10 March 2011, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/10558>. For more detail, see Ann Karin Larssen, "Russia: The Principle of Non-intervention and the Libya Case", in Dag Henriksen and Ann Karin Larssen (eds.), *Political Rationale and International Consequences of the War in Libya*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 67-85.

US-led intervention in Iraq, undertaken without a UNSC mandate, of one of the main cross-cutting/cross-regional “nerves” in Russia’s foreign policy agenda: a strong aversion to any Western-driven “regime change” by force and “aggressive democratization”.⁷ The “Libya effect” also played a very direct role in shaping Russia’s subsequent policy on Syria, including an inclination to stand by President Bashar al-Assad,⁸ at least until the conflict ends. Had there been no Libyan precedent, Moscow would have probably taken a softer stance on suggested measures at the UNSC to step up pressure on Assad at the early stages of the Syrian civil war (both Russia and China repeatedly vetoed relevant draft UNSC resolutions).

Second, Moscow has systematically underlined the link between state collapse anywhere (especially if resulting from regime change by force) and ensuing chaos, erosion of borders and spillovers of violence and instability in and beyond the region – both as a destabilizing vacuum that risks being filled by terrorists and as a much broader and problematic challenge than terrorism itself. As applied to the Middle East, Russia officially attributes “the period of disturbances that this region is passing through” as resulting from “the misguided practice known as ‘geopolitical engineering’, which includes interference in internal affairs of sovereign states and regime change” and has led to an “unprecedented upsurge in the level of the terrorist threat”.⁹ Libya in particular is seen as the manifest case of the destabilizing effects of military intervention by external powers: by “bombing Libya” and “overthrowing its government”, intervening actors have helped to turn “the country into a black hole and a transit lane for terrorists, thugs, arms traffickers and illegal migrants”.¹⁰

⁷ This theme is also one of Russia’s foreign policy imperatives that are connected to and reinforced by a domestic angle and a Eurasian regional aspect, with a deeply embedded image of an “expanding West” encroaching on Russia’s post-Soviet neighbourhood and domestic politics.

⁸ See Dmitri Trenin, “The Mythical Alliance: Russia’s Syria Policy”, in *Carnegie Papers*, February 2013, p. 4-9, <http://ceip.org/2vBZst9>; Justin Morris, “Libya and Syria: R2P and the Spectre of the Swinging Pendulum”, in *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 5 (September 2013), p. 1265-1283; Ekaterina Stepanova, “Russia in the Middle East”, cit., p. 3.

⁹ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Remarks by Lavrov at the Ministerial Session of the Russian-Arab Cooperation Forum*, Abu Dhabi, 1 February 2017, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2621092.

¹⁰ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh*

4.1.2 *Russia and Haftar: security and counterterrorism*

In the first half of the present decade, Russia did not show particular interest in Libya, although it maintained formal support for the Skhirat Agreement signed in Morocco on 17 December 2015 and the UN-led mediation efforts. However, the implementation of the Skhirat Agreement has stalled, not least because it has been less inclusive than originally promised. The caretaker Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Prime Minister and head of the Presidential Council Fayez al-Sarraj failed to garner support from the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) or even to establish control over Tripoli, as the security situation worsened. Against this backdrop, Russia started to show signs of support for Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, a military strongman who is allied with and backed by the legitimately elected HoR (which remains one of the three opposing power centres in Libya) and is also supported by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The move seemed logical, as Haftar had managed to crush Ansar al-Sharia Brigades and other jihadist militias in Benghazi, consolidate the remnants of Libya's armed forces into the only functional security institution in the country – the Libyan National Army (LNA) – and gain control over Libya's main oil facilities and several major ports before handing them over to the National Oil Corporation. The emerging strongman also enjoyed tacit support from France, particularly in the realm of anti-terrorist operations, and has more recently been received in Italy, notwithstanding the latter's reluctance to engage with him and its official support for the GNA.

Therefore, similar engagements with Haftar on the part of Russia – which, unlike European powers, is a secondary extra-regional actor with no major stakes in Libya – should have hardly raised eyebrows in Europe or the region. While a limited upgrade of Moscow's diplomatic activity on Libya, initially focused on contacts with Haftar (held mainly through Russia's Defence Ministry), has occurred, Russia's engagement has by no means been reduced to such contacts alone. Nevertheless, they have been blown out of proportion, particularly in Europe.¹¹ This was perhaps to be expected,

Hassan Shoukry following 2+2 talks between Russian and Egyptian foreign and defence ministers, Cairo, 29 May 2017, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2769439.

¹¹ Wesley Dockery, "Russia Seeks Influence in Libya", in *Deutsche Welle*, 6 December 2016, <http://p.dw.com/p/2Tpwh>; Henry Meyer, Caroline Alexander and Ghaith Shen-

given the bitter crisis in Russia's relations with Europe and the West, Russia's rapprochement with Egypt under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (one of Haftar's main supporters) and, more broadly, Moscow's partial "return" to the Middle East and especially its direct military involvement in Syria.

The West's excessive concerns about a supposed Russian "grand bet" on Haftar (with speculations about Haftar as "a next Assad"),¹² or Moscow's "grand plans" in Libya and the prospect of another Syria-style military intervention, are largely unsubstantiated. Western countries exaggerate both Russia's interests in Libya per se – alleging far-reaching plans ranging from the full revival of Gaddafi-era arms deals and investment projects¹³ to turning Benghazi into a large Russian naval base – and the degree of Moscow's focus and reliance on Haftar in particular.

This is illustrated, first, by the fact that, as discussed in more detail below, Moscow's initial focus on Haftar soon evolved into a more diversified approach that included reaching out to all "veto players" in Libya, including not only the GNA, but also, by mid-2017, the Misrata militias that have been opposed to Haftar. Second, the increased attention paid by Russia to Libya since late 2015, and especially its initial emphasis on engagements with Haftar, has been largely driven by opportunism, based inter alia on several calculations in and beyond the MENA region itself.

nib, "Putin Promotes Libyan Strongman as New Ally After Syria Victory", in *Bloomberg*, 21 December 2016; Andrew Rettman, "EU Urges Russia's Man to Give Back Libya Ports", in *EUobserver*, 15 March 2017, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/137246>; "In the Middle East, Russia Is Reasserting Its Power", in *The Economist*, 24 March 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21719425-bombs-and-diplomacy-both-part-toolkit-middle-east-russia-reasserting-its-power>. For a less typical, more nuanced and balanced analysis, see: Mattia Toaldo, "Russia in Libya: War or Peace?", in *ECFR Commentaries*, 2 August 2017, http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_russia_in_libya_war_or_peace_7223; Lincoln Pigman and Kyle Orton, "Inside Putin's Libyan Power Play", in *Foreign Policy*, 14 September 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/14/inside-putins-libyan-power-play>.

¹² Emadeddin Zahri Muntasser, "Russia Is Emboldening a Libyan Strongman Who Could Dictate the Future of the Country", in *Huffington Post*, 8 April 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/russia-libya-haftar_us_58d01ebee4b0be71dcf6eccc.

¹³ Masha Alexandrova, "The Arab World: Russia's Lost Profit" (in Russian), in *BBC Russian Service*, 20 April 2011, https://www.bbc.com/russian/business/2011/04/110420_arab_russia_economics.shtml. For more detail, see Ekaterina Stepanova, "La política de Rusia en Oriente Medio ante la 'primavera árabe'", in Javier Morales (ed.), *Rusia en la sociedad internacional. Perspectivas tras el retorno de Putin*, Madrid, UNISCI, 2012, p. 183-188, https://www.ucm.es/data/cont/media/www/pag-72408/Rusia_Sociedad_Internacional.pdf.

One should not discount a degree of genuine Russian concern on Libya tied to the terrorist threats, particularly in view of Moscow's determination to position itself as one of the champions of the global and regional anti-terrorism agenda. However, this concern should not be overstated. As a war-torn country with no central authority or control over its borders, Libya has obviously become a major source of terrorist threats, especially for its neighbours, including European states across the Mediterranean. Such concerns are aggravated by the presence of jihadists linked to the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (also known as ISIS or *Daesh*) in the country and the outlying region, as well as the threat of foreign fighters returning from Syria and Iraq or seeking to cross into Europe. However, Russian experts have pointed at "greater chances for *Daesh* foreign fighter outflow to pop up in Yemen than in Libya",¹⁴ while a direct threat to Russia from Libya-based jihadists or the presence of militants of Russian origin in North Africa is minimal.¹⁵

At the regional level, the upgrade of Russia's Libya policy was, to an extent, a natural progression of Moscow's renewed partnership with Egypt under Sisi, especially in the sphere of military-technical cooperation (ranging from arms contracts to Russian military advisers in Egypt). In this context, Russia's contacts with Haftar could also reinforce Moscow's image as a supporter of strong leaders against terrorism (which could gain it additional points in some parts of the region). Increasingly Russia has also tactically cooperated with the UAE (and, to an extent, Saudi Arabia) on Libya, at least at the diplomatic level, and not least as a means to counterbalance their disagreements over Syria.

Finally, Russia's uneasy relations with Europe and the West, while hardly the main or only driver, have also played a role in Russia's growing focus on Libya. Gaining even minor extra leverage in a region of high or

¹⁴ Presentation by Vasily Kuznetsov, Director of the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies, Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, at a IFRI conference on "Russia and the EU in the Wider Middle East", Paris, 7 July 2017.

¹⁵ Interview with Lev Dengov, head of Russia's Contact Group on Libya, quoting a top Libyan security official on "the absence, at present, of any militants from Russia or other post-Soviet states" in Libya. See Elena Chernenko and Maksim Yusin, "In Libya, we don't want to be associated with any side of the conflict" (in Russian), in *Kommersant*, 3 August 2017, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3374208>.

vital strategic importance to Europe is seen as beneficial to Russian interests, if only as a means to conduct a regular dialogue on the matter.

While Haftar has called for the lifting of the UN arms embargo, and sought Russia's support in this regard, Moscow has repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to preserving the embargo. As stated by Lev Dengov, head of Russia's Contact Group on Libya, in August 2017, "Russia does not have military advisers in Libya", nor does it "take sides in this conflict or intend to arm some against the others. We'd prefer all sides to be in a similar position. It is only following the national elections that would bring to power a fully legitimate government (today, no single party has this status), that the UN Security Council could address the issue of lifting the arms embargo. To raise it now is mindless and dangerous, as it would only lead to escalation of the conflict".¹⁶

However, no matter how limited and indirect Russia's security support to Haftar may be, Moscow cannot fully drop its political backing of the general. Russia is well aware that diplomatic engagement alone, especially by a second-rate, out-of-the-region stakeholder, can hardly provide significant leverage over local actors or the broader crisis, something that European member states and the broader EU have learnt in the context of Syria. As Russia itself has no plans for any military role in Libya (such as joining Italy – and others – in maritime operations along the Libyan coast, for example), Moscow can only secure a degree of influence in hard security matters by

- maintaining contacts with the main military actors on the ground in Libya, such as Haftar's LNA, which remains the largest and most influential security actor and is likely to form the core of Libya's future armed forces; and
- periodic activities of the Russian standing naval force in the Mediterranean (that was comprised, as of May 2017, of seven ships and one submarine), such as rocket firing exercises off the Libyan coast in late May 2017.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Pavel Kazarnovsky and Ivan Tkachev, "Russia warned about the Navy's by Libya's shore" (in Russian), in *RBK* (RosBusinessConsulting), 17 May 2017, <http://www.rbc.ru/politics/17/05/2017/591b90c09a7947e06e8652e0>.

the toppling of the Gaddafi regime. Russia, like Arab states such as Egypt and Algeria, heavily opposed the intervention and insisted that the UNSC mandate only allowed for the protection of civilians, not regime change.

Up until late 2015, the only identifiable aspect of Russia's policy on the Libya crisis was diplomatic aversion to external military intervention that stretched the limits of the UNSC mandate, and a strong emphasis on the grave consequences resulting from state collapse in Libya. Russia was not invited to the first two meetings – in Doha and Rome – of the Contact Group on Libya, created in London in March 2011 and composed of representatives of 40 states, the UN, the Arab League and the African Union.⁴ Moscow declined invitations for the following meetings in Abu Dhabi and Istanbul. It criticized the use of the Contact Group as a way to bypass and sideline the UN Security Council which “must continue to fully play its central role in resolving the Libyan crisis” and the Contact Group's inclination to support “one of the parties to the ongoing civil conflict in Libya”.⁵ In hindsight, this may be seen as an early indication that Moscow was already considering a future mediating role in Libya, as chaos and conflict in the country became protracted.

Not all the reasons for Russia's growing role on Libya since 2015 have been directly related to Libya itself. However, two inter-related features more specific to that country were highly relevant to shaping Russia's response and approach to the crisis.

First, the Western-led foreign military intervention was the main catalyst for regime change and the ensuing escalation of the civil war. As noted by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, “Libya was subject to massive bombing with the only aim of eliminating an uncooperative leader”.⁶ For Moscow, that made Libya not just the clearest illustration since the 2003

⁴ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *MFA Spokesman Alexander Lukashevich answers the question of Turkey's Anatolia News Agency*, 13 July 2011, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/200150.

⁵ *Ibid.* See also Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Transcript of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview to Russian media following attendance at Arctic Council Meeting*, Nuuk, 12 May 2011, http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/70vQR5KJWVmR/content/id/207142.

⁶ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of the Republic of El Salvador Hugo Roger Martinez Bonilla*, Moscow, 3 March 2017, http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/70vQR5KJWVmR/content/id/2666773.

4.1.3 *From counterterrorism to peacemaking: Russia as a facilitator of intra-Libyan dialogue?*

Russia's partial "return" to the Middle East, mostly due to its untypically high-profile involvement in Syria – its only military operation outside post-Soviet Eurasia since the end of the Cold War – should not overshadow two no less important substantive shifts in its approach to the Middle East. Both are directly relevant to the evolution of Russia's policy on Libya.

First, between the 1990s and through to the mid-2000s, Russian policy in the Middle East, and its approach to Islamist forces in and out of government, was excessively and adversely affected by concerns about Salafist-jihadi extremism in the North Caucasus. In the present decade, the conflict in the North Caucasus has subsided, with violence becoming fragmented and low-scale. This was in part the result of the effective use of loyalist Chechen ethno-confessional, traditionalist forces against Salafist-jihadi militants. As the conflict in the North Caucasus abated, perhaps the single largest improvement in Russia's policy in the Middle East has been a certain "normalization" of its approach to relatively moderate Islamist forces across the region and a realization of the need to differentiate between them and violent jihadists.¹⁸

Coupled with Russia's traditional embrace of pragmatism and opportunism in the Middle East, this led to Moscow's readiness to reach out to some of these forces, as shown by its diplomatic contacts with the Palestinian faction Hamas or periodic consultations with various Syrian opposition groups. Furthermore, in select cases (when, for instance, merited by the degree of the ISIS threat or by an imperative of regional peace consultations) Moscow has also held contacts with more radical Islamist groups opposed to transnational Salafi-jihadism, for example with the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Second, what distinguishes Moscow's approach to post-conflict political transition from that of the region's republican strongmen (notably, Syrian President Assad) is Russia's readiness to accept and even support more representative, inclusive and pluralistic systems. The need to build such systems is seen, inter alia, as a *sine qua non* condition for ensuring

¹⁸ See, for instance, Vitaly Naumkin et al., *Islam in Politics: Ideology or Pragmatism?*, Valdai Discussion Club Analytical Report, Moscow, August 2013, p. 100-106, <http://valdaiclub.com/files/11450>.

vance Russia-West dialogue on multilateral cooperation and conflict resolution in Libya?

4.2.1 *The East-West dimension*

The OSCE was born out of the Cold War, in the context of the bipolar system. For Russia, much as for the Soviet Union before it, the main and only rationale for the OSCE has remained its original and unique East-West dimension.³² The OSCE provides an institutional framework aimed at promoting a broadly defined European security and encompasses all Western and post-Soviet states of the Northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok.

On 21 November 1990, a week after the unification of Germany, heads of 34 states gathered at the summit of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) to sign the Charter of Paris for a New Europe that declared an end to the Cold War. The CSCE was then upgraded to a formal institution and later, in 1995, became the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe or OSCE. This would lead to the start of the so-called Paris process, aimed at turning the OSCE into the main, all-inclusive security institution in Europe. However, the process soon stalled, and, by the mid-1990s, the United States had already come out rejecting the idea of an “all-European home”, focusing instead on NATO enlargement and adaptation. As NATO – a Western military, collective defence bloc inherited from the Cold War – expanded closer to Russian borders, Moscow increasingly saw it as a major security threat. It is NATO and the EU (neither of which includes Russia) that emerged as the two main security institutions in Europe, and this to the detriment of the OSCE, of which Russia is a full member. As a result, the OSCE was increasingly perceived as gradually degrading into an extra consultation ground between Russia and the West, and Moscow started to gradually lose interest in this format.³³

³² For background reading, see Kiril Benediktov, “Russia and the OSCE: Real and Perceived Prospects for Cooperation” (in Russian), in Dmitri Trenin (ed.), *Russia and European Security Institutions. Entering the 21st Century*, Moscow, S&P, 2000, p. 172-209; Igor Yurgens, Alexander Dynkin and Vladimir Baranovsky (eds.), *The Architecture of Euro-Atlantic Security*, Moscow, Institute for Contemporary Development/Econ-Inform, 2009, p. 13-16, http://www.insor-russia.ru/files/euro_atlantic.pdf.

³³ In 2005, Russia stopped financing OSCE projects considered to be in conflict with its interests and reduced its funding to 9 per cent of the OSCE budget. At the OSCE ministerial meeting in December 2006, Foreign Minister Lavrov did not even exclude a possibility of

Russia's relations with the West further deteriorated and, with the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, reached their lowest point since the end of the Cold War, with most of Russia's cooperation links and contacts with NATO and the EU cancelled. In this context, one could expect the OSCE, as the only regional institution that still includes Russia (and its allies), NATO countries and other European states, to rediscover its rationale as a safeguard mechanism for East-West relations. Indeed, the OSCE's role in the Donbass crisis in Eastern Ukraine has appeared to give new momentum to the organization (even as both Ukraine and Russia now support the need to strengthen the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, launched in March 2014, with a UN peace support operation).

However, prospects for a more ambitious reactivation of the OSCE along the East-West dimension remain quite limited. Any convergence of interests between Russia and the West appears tactical, situational and short-term in nature. While the deep crisis and near total lack of trust in Russia-West relations have stimulated some "positive activation" of the OSCE, such developments have also had adverse effects on this format. Examples include an unprecedented "cadre crisis" at the OSCE in July 2017³⁴ and Russia's renewed reservations about the OSCE's relations with NATO: on 11 July 2017, Lavrov again accused "OSCE members, who are also members of the North Atlantic Alliance" of attempts "to usurp key security decisions" at the OSCE.³⁵

Russia leaving the organization altogether. For more detail on the Paris process and the erosion of Russia's hopes on turning the OSCE into the main security institution in Europe, see, for instance, Alexey V. Fenenko, "Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe: History and Prospects" (in Russian), in *Moscow University Journal of World Politics*, No. 2 (2015), p. 22-50, http://fmp.msu.ru/attachments/article/341/FENENKO_2015_2.pdf.

³⁴ Elena Chernenko and Kirill Krivosheyev, "The OSCE without the head and three other important ones" (in Russian), in *Kommersant*, 11 July 2017, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3351372>. The crisis left the top four positions in the OSCE unfilled, due to, among other things, disagreements between the United States and Russia, and required a special informal summit to be sorted out, resulting in the compromise appointment of a Swiss diplomat, Thomas Greminger, as the OSCE Secretary General on 18 July 2017.

³⁵ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions following the OSCE Informal Ministerial Meeting*, Mauerbach, 11 July 2017, http://www.mid.ru/en_GB/foreign_policy/rso/-/asset_publisher/0vP3h-QoCPRg5/content/id/2811931.

4.2.2 *The North-South/Mediterranean dimension*

In the 21st century, for southern European powers, especially France and Italy (but also Spain, Greece and others), the EU's southern neighbourhood – the Mediterranean – has acquired an even greater human and national security importance than the “eastern neighbourhood”, notably on such aspects as migration. This has had a bearing on their policies within European institutional formats, including the OSCE. Efforts to expand the OSCE's political and geographical scope beyond its main focus area and the East-West vector to somewhat reorient it to the North-South dimension have already resulted in a greater focus on the Mediterranean dimension of the OSCE, including through the OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation and the adoption of a number of measures within the OSCE Secretariat that are specifically directed at the Mediterranean.

In the field of security and cooperation in Europe, Russia has constantly had reservations about a general tendency to endlessly widen the scope and agenda of existing organizations, squeeze new tasks into old formats, and expand them to new areas, especially in view of NATO expansion to the east and its growing out-of-area missions. However, Moscow's take on the OSCE is more complex. On the one hand, it is cautious about a further erosion of the functions and area of responsibility of this institution. On the other, Russia still has not fully given up on its hopes to strengthen and reform the institution. Among other things, Russian proposals for OSCE reform have long stressed the need for “a legally binding charter”³⁶ – a “founding document fixing the goals of [the] Organization, the membership criteria, the principles of the work of the legislative and executive authorities”³⁷ (a position that has not formally changed, even as, more recently, Russian officials tend to confine themselves to calls for

³⁶ See the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: *Russia in the OSCE*, <http://www.mid.ru/rossia-i-diskussii-o-budusem-obse>. For an expert discussion, see: “[Why the OSCE has not created security and cooperation in Europe]”, in *Rosbusinessconsulting*, 12 November 2017.

³⁷ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Interview of the Spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia A. K. Lukashevich for “RIA Novosti” in connection with the forthcoming participation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia S. V. Lavrov at the meeting of the Council of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of OSCE*, 5 December 2012, http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/answers/-/asset_publisher/OyrhusXGz9Lz/content/id/131814.

improving or “adopting the [OSCE] charter” and “the rules of the work of executive bodies”).³⁸ Also, having complained for decades about the OSCE’s “geographical imbalances” interpreted as its degradation into a Western watchdog over human rights, democracy and electoral standards for countries “east of Vienna”,³⁹ Russia might welcome a Southern turn for balance.

Within the OSCE, Libya has emerged as a pressing security issue in the Mediterranean for some old European powers, especially France and Italy. However, the Libya crisis can hardly gain priority attention from the other 56 OSCE members. It is therefore unlikely to become a mainstream issue for the organization or seriously affect the OSCE’s institutional reform and evolution (aside from stimulating more attention towards the Southern Mediterranean). The OSCE has been and remains an East-West-centred organization. Still, there are at least two ways in which the OSCE is relevant and could potentially contribute – especially in view of Italy’s chairmanship of the organization in 2018 – to finding a way out of the Libya crisis, based on its particular advantages compared with other institutional frameworks.

- With all three of Libya’s neighbours (Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia) and Morocco already part of the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership for Cooperation (together with Israel and Jordan), the OSCE is the only “regionalized” institutional format (below the UN, but above and beyond any bilateral channels or other narrow formats and alliances) potentially capable of ensuring a functional link between *the regional dimension and the European track on Libya*. A natural institutional space and policy context for that link is the processing of Libya’s longstanding request to join the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership.
- The OSCE provides a useful, relatively *neutral and inclusive venue for discussing and coordinating Russian and European positions on*

³⁸ See Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks at the 24th OSCE Ministerial Council Meeting, Vienna, 7 December 2017, p. 3, <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/362426>; Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova*, Moscow, 29 March 2018, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3145417.

³⁹ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: *Russia in the OSCE*, cit.

Libya. This is a unique crisis where: (a) some lead European powers (and the EU) have major interests and a significant role to play in conflict management (unlike in Syria, Iraq or Yemen for example, and with a higher profile than Europe's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) and, (b) Russia has gradually established its own role in Libya with a potential mediating role as well.

4.3 IN LIEU OF CONCLUSION: RUSSIA, THE OSCE AND LIBYA

Russia's dialogue with European states on Libya is mostly handled through bilateral channels and, to a very limited extent, as part of the EU-Russia agenda. However, bilateral contacts cannot substitute for some broader and relatively inclusive regional and multilateral security framework, especially against the background of:

- the complexity and fragmented nature of international engagement on, and foreign involvement in Libya, including both the need for, and the lack of, a proper regional track, due to disparate interests of regional powers, their fragile domestic situations and relative diplomatic weakness; and
- a growing convergence of interests between the main extra-regional players on Libya (including not just European powers and Russia, but also the United States) that could create sufficient common ground for cooperation.

In this context, the OSCE can play a role in bringing Russia and Europe closer on Libya in view of the following factors:

- the Libyan crisis is a matter of major, in some ways even vital, concern to several key European states and, in that sense, of growing importance to the EU as well;
- it has developed in a situation that partly reproduces some of the conditions that had originally given rise to the CSCE/OSCE, that is, a lack of dialogue and trust between the East (Soviet Union/Russia) and the West – arguably broadly worse today than in the later Cold War years;
- the US also plays a role, but hardly as a dominant or decisive power; indeed, the Trump administration has taken a relatively hands-off

approach to Libya where Washington's mediating capacity is more limited than that of European actors; President Trump insisted on not seeing a "[US] role in Libya" beyond his country's regional focus on "getting rid of ISIS";⁴⁰ and

- Russia-EU dialogue on policy matters is largely frozen and will remain curtailed, with the EU sanctions likely to continue for some time to come.

Against this backdrop, the OSCE can provide an institutionalized, multilateral space and a regional security framework for Russia-West (and especially Russia-Europe) dialogue on Libya, making up for its loose nature through its broad membership, inclusiveness and flexibility. While the 2018 Italian OSCE chairmanship could hardly achieve more than strengthened dialogue among major external actors involved in Libya, it should at the very least lay the groundwork to achieve that aim.

Concerning the potential for dialogue and cooperation with Russia on Libya in the OSCE format, two main reservations have to be kept in mind. The first concerns Russia's lack of enthusiasm regarding Libya being prematurely admitted into the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership. For Russia, unlike for France or Italy, the issue is not a priority, nor even an important objective. However, Moscow does not oppose Libya's membership in principle: for instance, at the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly level it has approved the long-term call to encourage, among other things, "facilitating Libya's admission as a unified and democratic country to the Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation at the earliest practical instance".⁴¹ However, Russia has not seen Libya's inclusion as "practical", for obvious reasons. These include ongoing complex and highly fragmented armed conflict, lack of basic security and a united and functional national government, and the non-inclusive and very weak nature of the UN-backed Tripoli-based government (and Moscow's un-

⁴⁰ Italian Government, *Gentiloni-Trump Joint Press Conference* (video), Washington, 20 April 2017, <http://www.governo.it/media/gentiloni-washington/7193>; White House, *Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Gentiloni of Italy in Joint Press Conference*, 20 April 2017, <https://it.usembassy.gov/?p=18722>.

⁴¹ Minsk Declaration, para. 34. See OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, *Minsk Declaration and Resolutions adopted by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly at the Twenty-Sixth Annual Session*, Minsk, 5-9 July 2017, p. 5, <https://www.oscepa.org/documents/all-documents/annual-sessions/2017-minsk/declaration-25>.

willingness to add extra international legitimacy for it before the divisions between Libya's main institutions are bridged). Unless tangible progress is achieved on these tracks, Moscow will remain lukewarm to the idea of admitting Libya to the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership for Cooperation.

Secondly, in addressing Libya either within or beyond the OSCE framework, Russia can hardly be expected by its European partners to be active on those issues/initiatives about which it has no direct concern (such as stopping or reducing the flows of illegal migrants to Europe via/from Libya and improving the security of Libya's borders).

Rather, two main directions of Moscow's OSCE-related activity on Libya would be: (a) discussion on peacemaking efforts to facilitate and support political settlement in Libya (at all OSCE levels and relevant meetings, including the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership events as an expanded dialogue platform involving most states of the region);⁴² and (b) anti-terrorism.

For Europe and Russia, transnational terrorist threats linked to the Middle East and North Africa and especially the flow of foreign fighters are not just a genuinely shared concern (Europe and Eurasia are the two main regions of origin outside the Middle East of foreign fighter flows to Syria and Iraq), but also a partly overlapping security issue⁴³ (even as, in relation to Libya as such, the direct overlap is minimal).

While Europe, unlike Russia, is directly affected by terrorist threats emanating from the Libya crisis, Moscow is not only one of the lead anti-terrorism players at the UN and, since mid-2010, in the Middle East, but also a champion of this agenda within the OSCE. Anti-terrorism appears to be one of the few areas at the OSCE that are minimally, if at all, affected by the Russia-West conundrum. Russian-drafted resolutions on strengthening the organization's role in anti-terrorism passed with flying colours at the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly on 7 July 2017, with its emphasis on "preventing the transboundary movement of persons, weapons and

⁴² While Russia may also undertake other diplomatic efforts on Libya concerning OSCE Mediterranean Partners – for instance, through engaging and perhaps even moderating the positions of such actors, as Egypt – this activity is not within the scope of the Partnership, nor within the OSCE framework.

⁴³ Some ISIS fighters of Russian origin may for instance prefer to flee to European and European neighbourhood countries than return to Russia.

financial assets associated with terrorist activity”⁴⁴ and other recommendations of particular relevance to the Libya case.

Furthermore, within or outside the OSCE, Moscow may be one of the few actors capable of balancing the anti-terrorism and peacemaking aspects of its approach to Libya, by showing a degree of flexibility in dealing with key local players, including armed Islamist actors, needed to ensure that counterterrorism priorities do not impede peacemaking efforts and vice versa.

Another way to increase Russian interest in addressing the Libya crisis within the OSCE framework is to stress its potential to correct and improve the geographical imbalance within the OSCE that Russia has long complained about. In the case of Libyan crisis, and in contrast to some other conflicts within the OSCE space, there is growing congruence of interest between all European stakeholders and a considerable degree of complementarity of their mediation efforts. This makes it possible to adopt a more productive approach to the Libyan crisis, one that can overcome the current East-West antagonism.

⁴⁴ Resolution on Strengthening the Role of the OSCE in Countering Terrorism, para. 19. See OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, *Minsk Declaration and Resolutions adopted*, cit., p. 37.