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Russia on Libya: playing with chaos

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Since 2015, when the Russian Contact Group for Intra-Libyan Settlement was established, Russia has been actively rebuilding its political influence in that country. The Russian policy is of a dual nature. On the one hand, Moscow is clearly in favour of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, who leads the so-called 'Libyan National Army' and controls most of the country's territory (with a centre in Tobruk in eastern Libya), by offering him limited political and military support. On the other hand, it has declared that it adheres to the 'equal rapprochement' principle and so is also keeping contacts with the so-called 'Government of National Accord' led by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj which controls part of the territory in the west of the country, with the centre in Tripoli, and which enjoys the backing of the Western countries. Russia also officially supports the UN's efforts to bring about a political compromise between all the political forces in Libya (above all, Haftar with the Sarraj-led government). Apparently, the Russian moves are aimed at capitalising on the chaos in Libya to gain the position of a key mediator and arbiter between the political forces there. In turn, Russia will be able to use this position to: a) tacitly sabotage any political settlement in Libya that would not guarantee a dominant position to the side favoured by Russia; b) politically bargain with European countries from the Mediterranean region interested in stabilising the situation in Libya in order to hold back the stream of refugees; c) lobby for lucrative economic contracts in Libya. Even though Russia's engagement in Libya, especially in military terms, is quite limited, the West already perceives Russia as an important factor influencing the situation in this country.

Russian interests in Libya

Russia, continuing the Soviet Union's policy, maintained friendly relations with the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi by offering economic support (including investments in infrastructure and the petrochemical sector) and military support (weapon supplies). As a consequence, Libya's debt to Moscow has reached a level of around US$4.5 billion. The ousting of Gaddafi in 2011 as a result of rebellion (which erupted as part of the Arab Spring) and a Western military intervention has been used by Vladimir Putin as an argument proving the alleged existence of a US-led Western conspiracy intended at making geopolitical transformations that serve the interests of the US and are aimed against Russia. Therefore, after Gaddafi's fall, Russia maintained a distanced attitude towards Libya, which would soon plunge into a civil war. Russia's state propaganda employed the chaos in the country as an argument to discredit the idea of changing undemocratic regimes. However, since 2015, after the successful Russian military intervention in Syria, Moscow has resumed its

engagement in Libya, treating it as another 'front' of its rivalry with the USA, rebuilding its image and position as a powerful state and creating a leverage of influence in relations with the EU and selected member states (especially Italy and France).

As regards the economy, Russian energy firms over the past few years have made attempts to build bridgeheads for their possible return to the Libyan market. In February 2017, a framework co-operation agreement with the NOC (National Oil Corporation of Libya) was signed by Russia's state-owned company Rosneft. However, this move has not yet had any tangible effects. Furthermore, Rosneft and the NOC in 2017 entered into an annual contract concerning the purchase of small amounts of oil. In 2013, the Russian oil company Tatneft made attempts to resume the implementation of the licences for oil production in the Ghadames and Sirte regions it had been granted during Gaddafi's rule, but it had to suspend its activity already in the second half of 2014 due to the lack of security guarantees. Gazprom is also engaged in Libya – through its shares in Germany's Wintershall AG, which is active in nine production fields (1.5 million tonnes of oil and 0.2 billion m^3 of LNG in 2017). On the one hand, the continuing civil war in Libya impeded the implementation of Russian energy projects and on the other, it stimulated growth of oil prices on global markets, which was beneficial for the Russian economy.

Russia's favourite

Russia's intensive contacts with Haftar, who has been received on several occasions in Moscow, have been visible since at least 2016. In June 2016, he met with the Minister of Defence Sergey Shoygu and the Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Nikolai Patrushev, and in November 2016 with the Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov. In 2016, Russia printed banknotes for the Eastern Central Bank controlled by Haftar (a competitor of the Central Bank in Tripoli). In January 2017, Haftar was invited to the Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov which was sailing close to the Libyan coastline (on that occasion he took part in a teleconference with Minister Shoygu). Further meetings with the Russian Minister of Defence took place in Moscow in May and November 2018 (Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the company which manages – amongst others – the 'private military firm' known as the Wagner Group, also took part in the latter talks). In 2017, Russia officially accepted Haftar's two hundred wounded soldiers for medical treatment. Moscow officially rejected Haftar's requests for supplies of Russian military equipment – an international embargo on weapon supplies has been imposed on Libya. However, in 2017, the British and the Arab press (quoting sources in the British and US governments) published information revealing the presence of Russian mercenaries (from the so-called 'Wagner Group') hired to safeguard port and oil installations in the eastern part of Libya controlled by Haftar and also probably to train Haftar's troops. In March 2019, the same sources reported that as many as three hundred Russian mercenaries were active at Benghazi base in eastern Libya and that there were artillery, tank, drone and ammunition supplies organised by Russia. In the official Russian media, Haftar has been consistently presented as a politician who has a friendly attitude towards Russia – and at the same time it is emphasised that he underwent military training in the USSR, his good command of the Russian language and principled struggle with Islamic radicalism and terrorism are praised with recognition.

On the other hand, the scale of Russian engagement in supporting Haftar's forces in Libya is still very limited (at least in comparison to the support offered to the Assad regime in Syria). Moscow is neither the sole nor even the main sponsor of Haftar. He benefits above all from regular military support from Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. In his struggle with radical Islamists in Libya, Haftar was also backed – or continues to be backed – by Italy, France, the United Kingdom, the USA and Israel. Haftar himself until recently maintained close contacts with the USA. From 1987, when he became opposed to Gaddafi's regime, he was protected and supported by the CIA. From 1990–2011, he lived in the USA and was granted US citizenship. It appears that these elements of his biography mean he is trusted only to a limited degree by the Russian establishment.

The diversification of contacts

While supporting Haftar, the Russian diplomacy has also maintained contacts with the government led by Prime Minister Sarraj. In March 2017, Sarraj visited Moscow and in August 2017 Russia granted consent for his government to take over the building of the Libyan embassy and accepted an ambassador he designated (and at the same time enabled representatives of the Haftar administration to have their offices in the embassy's building). The government led by Sarraj made efforts to gain Moscow's support declaring its readiness to recognise at least part of the contracts which Gaddafi's government signed with Russian firms (in particular, the contract signed in 2008 with Russian Railways worth US$2.2 billion concerning the construction of a railroad running from Benghazi to Sirte). Lower-ranking delegations representing Sarraj's government have also been received in Moscow. Officially, Russian diplomats adhere to the principle of 'equal rapprochement' with all the political forces in Libya (obviously with the exception of groupings affiliated with al-Qaeda and Islamic State) and have declared support for the efforts under the UN (Ghassan Salamé, a Special Representative of the Secretary General) to develop a political compromise between all the political forces in Libya and to hold a general presidential election.

Russia's unclear stance on Haftar's offensive

The Russian reaction to the offensive on Tripoli launched on 4 April by Haftar's troops perfectly illustrates the dual nature of the Russian policy in Libya. The statements from the president's spokesman Dmitri Peskov and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov, and the official announcements of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia contain appeals for military activity to be withheld and emphasise the need to find a political solution to the conflict that would extend to all political forces in Libya. At the same time, there is a striking absence of any direct criticism of Haftar, who initiated the present round of military operations. Instead, Minister Lavrov criticised the government for intending to use air forces against Haftar's troops. Furthermore, at the forum of the United Nations Security Council on 7 April, the Russian diplomacy blocked the draft resolution put forward by the United Kingdom imposing an obligation on Haftar to stop the offensive on Tripoli and discontinue any military operations and threatening to use consequences against anyone disturbing the peace in Libya. Instead of this, Russians proposed making an appeal to all forces in Libya to agree to a cease fire. This approach adopted by Russia in fact protects Haftar from possible

consequences from the international community.

The Russian diplomacy views blocking Western pressure aimed at convincing the parties to the conflict to enter into a political compromise as a matter of key importance. Therefore, Russian officials emphasise that a political compromise in Libya must be achieved by Libyans themselves and that they should act without any external pressure and without any 'artificial' deadlines imposed from outside. This stance adopted by Russia in practice contributes to the continuation of the political deadlock which, in turn, may be used as a political alibi for attempts to overcome this deadlock by force – under the pretext of introducing law and order and combating terrorism (this was the slogan used by Haftar during his offensive on Tripoli). Thus this stance in practice favours the party which is the strongest in military terms – in this case Haftar. This solution has additional benefits from Moscow's point of view: above all, it makes it difficult for the West to burden Moscow with the responsibility of supporting Haftar. It also opens up opportunities for legitimising Haftar's authority on the international arena should he push through a political solution with the use of force. The latter, in turn, is a necessary condition for legalising trade with oil originating from the oil fields controlled by Haftar. However, it seems that Russia is not interested in political stabilisation in Libya (whether resulting from Haftar's total victory in the civil war or based on a political compromise of the warring sides). This scenario would mean Russian diplomatic and military engagement would no longer be valuable and necessary both to the parties to the Libyan conflict and to the key external actors desiring stabilisation in Libya.

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