



Policy Paper

Russia's intervention in Libya: is it undermining the EU?

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Background

More than eight years after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, Libya remains highly unstable, with major powers manoeuvring for influence in the region. Libya is today divided between the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by General Haftar, who controls the East (Cyrenaica and Benghazi) and the internationally recognised Government, which controls Tripoli and the west of the country (Tripolitania). The multiplication of foreign actors involved in Libya, including Russia, could jeopardise the EU's efforts to resolve the conflict.

The fall of the Gaddafi's regime in 2011 did not bring peace nor democracy to Libya. The result of the 2014 parliamentary elections, was not accepted by the General National Congress (GNC), which voted to replace the newly elected parliament.¹ In response, the House of Representatives relocated to Tobruk and aligned increasingly with General Haftar, who is the Commander of the Libyan National Army. Libya was thus split between rival governments. General Haftar has the loyalty of the House of Representatives in Tobruk, while the rival GNC has the support of various militias. This political crisis led to the beginning of the second Libyan civil war in 2014.

The Libya Political Agreement (LPA) was signed in Skhirat (Morocco) by the Libyan House of Representatives and by the General National Congress in 2015 to stabilise the country.² The agreement was negotiated under United Nations (UN) auspices to prepare the political transition in the country. The LPA gave executive authority to the Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Fayez al-Sarraj, while the House of Representatives would continue to exist as a legislative body.³

Despite the agreement, al-Sarraj's government has been unable to operate as it was initially expected, since the government has not been approved by the internationally recognised House of Representatives (also known as "Parliament of Tobruk") which is under Haftar's influence.⁴ The LPA, which was presented in 2015 as a way for Libya to transition into peace and democracy, has not managed to put an end to the second Libyan civil war.

On April 4th, 2019 General Haftar, who controls most of eastern Libya, launched an assault against the GNA based in Tripoli. The attack did not give either side of the conflict a clear victory and led to further destabilisation of the country. The stalemate between General Haftar and Fayez al-Sarraj does not seem to end, despite foreign powers, including the European Union (EU), Russia and Turkey, trying to promote their favourite government.

Initially, there was unity from the international community behind the United Nations process and the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement. However, foreign powers gradually sided with either General Haftar or with al-Sarraj. The European Union appeared divided on the Libyan conflict, as some of its member States supported different sides of the conflict.⁵

Specifically, Italy has a long history of presence in the country, since it established colonies in Libya in 1911, and until 1947. During Colonel Gaddafi's rule, Italy was one of the few countries to maintain diplomatic ties with Libya. Even after Gaddafi's fall, Italy still considers Libya as a traditional

¹ <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/libyas-conflict> p.6

² <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/Libyan%20Political%20Agreement%20-%20ENG%20.pdf>

³ <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/Libyan%20Political%20Agreement%20-%20ENG%20.pdf>

⁴ https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/12/17/un-an-apres-l-accord-de-skhirat-la-derive-de-la-libye-parait-inexorable_5050664_3232.html

⁵ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2423286 p.184

preserve, and expects to keep exerting influence in the country. Moreover, Italy has important economic investments in Libya. The Italian company Eni keeps extracting oil and gas in the country.⁶ Italy supports the Government of National Accord (GNA), with whom it deals to mitigate the migration crisis.⁷ However, the current Italian government appears less hostile towards General Haftar. On January 8th, 2020 Prime Minister Conte met with General Haftar.⁸ Italy has been actively trying to bring together al-Sarraj and General Haftar to negotiate but did not succeed to find an agreement.

France is, on the other hand, involved in counter-terrorism policies in the region, which led the country to increasingly rely on General Haftar to combat terrorist groups.⁹ As part of this approach, the French President Emmanuel Macron had hosted General Haftar on May 22nd, 2019 to discuss the resumption of peace negotiations and the establishment of a cease-fire in Libya.¹⁰ France had also invited Fayez al-Sarraj to the Elysée Palace the week before. French support to either side remains discreet but could complicate relations with Italy, since Rome fears to be marginalised on the Libyan case.

With the growing internal tension in Libya, the EU is facing a massive challenge to ensure its internal coherence. This is also partly due to the fact that the situation in Libya has become increasingly complex since more regional and international powers have decided to support opposing sides. General Haftar is openly supported by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).¹¹

On the other hand, Turkey is supporting the United Nations-backed government and started sending mercenaries on the ground in January 2020.¹² The interest of foreign powers in Libya can be explained by its strategic position. Libya is a transit country for migrants on their way to Europe and is the country with the largest resources of oil in Africa.¹³ It is also important for neighbouring countries to prevent Libya from becoming a safe haven for terrorist groups.

Economic interests are an important factor explaining Russia's involvement in Libya. Contracts worth more than 2 billion euros were signed between Russia and Libya in 2008 for the construction of transport infrastructure.¹⁴ Other contracts signed by Russia and Libya focused on energy cooperation, and the purchase of Russian weapons.

Another key point, which is often echoed by Russian officials, is that the fall of Colonel Gaddafi's regime in 2011 led Russian companies, including Gazprom, to lose huge investments.¹⁵ Russia claimed it lost up to 4 billion USD in arms sales to Libya.¹⁶ Moreover, significant advantages could be achieved by Russia during the reconstruction of Libya, in particular with contracts in the field of transport and energy.

⁶ https://www.eni.com/enipedia/en_IT/news-archive/operations/enis-activities-in-libya.page

⁷ https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/libyas_global_civil_war1 p.3

⁸ https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/01/11/avec-l-irruption-de-la-turquie-et-de-la-russie-rome-craint-d-etre-marginalise-en-libye_6025535_3210.html

⁹ https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/libyas_global_civil_war1

¹⁰ <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/05/22/entretien-avec-m-khalifa-haftar-commandant-general-de-larmee-nationale-libyenne>

¹¹ https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/libyas_global_civil_war1

¹² https://ec.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/72659/libya-statement-spokesperson-decision-turkish-parliament_en

¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/20/business/energy-environment/oil-price-opec-libya.html>

¹⁴ https://www.pism.pl/publications/Russia_s_Libya_Policy

¹⁵ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/moscow-s-presence-libya-new-challenge-west>

¹⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-libya-arms-idUSL5E7M221H20111102>

However, the significance of these economic interests should be nuanced. Russia has been bolstering its regional influence through its involvement in the Syrian war.¹⁷ Russia is now consolidating its diplomatic clout by intervening in Libya. By presenting itself as a key actor in this conflict, Russia refuses to be excluded from a settlement and hopes to gain even more international influence.

Russia has been involved in the peace process in Libya since September 2015, not only through the United Nations, but also through other initiatives, such as the Palermo conference organised by Italy in 2018. Russian influence should not be underestimated, as it was Moscow which incited Haftar to take part in the Palermo talks. Russia intensified its involvement with the arrival in Libya of Russian paramilitary groups in September 2019. These mercenaries were reported to be fighting alongside General Haftar's troupes.¹⁸

Officially, Moscow denies any connection to the Wagner Group, which is the Russian private military group hiring the mercenaries in Libya. Despite the presence of the Russian paramilitary groups fighting with General Haftar, Russia's official support remains undetermined, since it regularly spoke to all sides of the conflict. Keeping an open dialogue with all the players allows Russia to maintain a strong influence in the peace talks, no matter which side prevails in the end. With its discreet support to General Haftar, Russia's main approach is to remain an indispensable actor in Libya.

State of play

1) Competing initiatives on the peace process: the Russian-Turkish discussions and the UN 3-point initiative

After calling for a cease-fire on January 8th, 2020, Russia hosted a meeting with Turkey to discuss the situation in Libya on January 13th, 2020. General Haftar and al-Sarraj did not meet in person but negotiated through Turkey and Russia. However, the cease-fire talks in Moscow did not lead to a bilateral understanding, as General Haftar left without signing any agreement.¹⁹ Despite supporting different sides of the conflict, Turkey and Russia appeared as indispensable actors in the Libyan conflict. This attempt by the two powers to resolve the Libyan matter on their own terms was seen as a way to bypass the EU and to take over the negotiations.²⁰

Through its intervention in Syria, Russia has been reinforcing its experience, both militarily and diplomatically, which seems now valuable in Libya. The intervention in Syria demonstrated Russia's ability to project itself outside the post-soviet world.²¹ The intervention in Syria allowed Moscow to strengthen its influence, by enhancing its relations with regional actors, such as Egypt or UAE.²² The intervention in Syria also proved that Russia could deploy forces quickly and efficiently to protect its allies.²³ Russia is trying to rebuild its influence in the Middle East and North Africa, and its successes in Syria led Moscow to believe it could also intervene in Libya.

¹⁷ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/630293/EPRS_BRI\(2018\)630293_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/630293/EPRS_BRI(2018)630293_EN.pdf)

¹⁸ <https://www.euronews.com/2019/12/18/who-are-the-russian-mercenaries-waging-war-in-libya>

¹⁹ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/18/russia-libyan-civil-war-europe/>

²⁰ <https://www.ft.com/content/823220de-3238-11ea-a329-0bcf87a328f2>

²¹ <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/ce-que-la-russie-a-gagne-de-son-intervention-militaire-en-syrie,2660>

²² <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/libye-la-nouvelle-carte-russe,1715>

²³ <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/workingpapers/russian-policy-in-the-middle-east-dividends-and-costs-of-the-big-game/>

The Russian-Turkish discussions revealed that the two powers had to be included in international negotiations about Libya, but it also showed the international community that Russia and Turkey alone did not have enough leverage to make General Haftar and al-Sarraj come to an agreement. Convincing General Haftar to take part in multilateral negotiations turned out to be complicated even for Russia. This means that despite being important players in Libya, Turkey and Russia will need other powers to weight in to reach a lasting agreement among the parties involved.

The lack of unity among EU members states is often pointed out regarding the Libyan case. The European Union has a strong interest in avoiding escalation considering Libya's key position in managing migration flows to Europe. Therefore, since 2013 the EU has been involved in EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) to secure Libyan borders, and since June 2015, it has been conducting Operation Sophia to fight human trafficking off the Libyan coast. Since 2014, the EU has also allocated up to 44 million euros for humanitarian assistance in Libya.²⁴ On January 8th, 2020, the President of the European Council Charles Michel met with Favez al-Sarraj and reaffirmed the support of the EU towards the Government of National Accord.

When it comes to a solid roadmap to solve the conflict in Libya, the EU supports the three-step approach defended by the UN Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) Ghassan Salamé, which includes “an immediate ceasefire, a return to the political process, and the strict implementation of the arms embargo.”²⁵ An arms embargo was imposed by the UN in 2011 but so far has been poorly implemented.²⁶ A strict enforcement of the UN arms embargo is deemed necessary to de-escalate the situation. The three steps proposed by the UN are interconnected, since enforcing the embargo on weapons is necessary to impose the ceasefire. Enforcing sanctions against actors violating the embargo would rise the cost of the fight and the warring parties would be more likely to respect the ceasefire. A ceasefire is needed to avoid further regional escalation and to allow the country to resume its political process on the long-term.

2) The multilateral summit in Berlin: a modest breakthrough

The Berlin summit, which took place on January 19th, 2020, is a step in the right direction regarding the Libyan conflict.²⁷ The last time a summit on Libya of this scale happened was in Palermo in November 2018, at the initiative of Italy. Since then, the peace process in Libya has been stalling. Germany has recently managed to bring 11 States and 4 international organisations, including the EU, Russia and Turkey, to the negotiating table. Although the General Haftar and Favez al-Sarraj refused to meet in person, this summit can be considered a “small diplomatic success.”²⁸

Germany organised the summit to revive negotiations, in a context where the EU was being increasingly marginalised by Russia and Turkey in Libya.²⁹ It was also an opportunity for Germany to appear as a driving force regarding the situation in Libya and to present the EU as a diplomatic clout. The initiative can also be explained by Germany wishing to control migration flows from Libya, because of their impact on German domestic policy.³⁰

²⁴ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/19163/EU-Libya%20relations

²⁵ https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/libyas_global_civil_war1 p.19

²⁶ <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1970>

²⁷ https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/01/17/a-berlin-l-ue-veut-se-montrer-unie-pour-contrer-l-axe-turco-russe-en-libye_6026202_3212.html

²⁸ <https://www.touteurope.eu/revue-de-presse/revue-de-presse-libye-quel-role-pour-l-europe-dans-le-processus-de-paix.html>

²⁹ https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/vfc_views_from_the_capitals_the_libya_conference_in_berlin

³⁰ https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/01/18/la-diplomatie-allemande-sort-de-sa-reserve_6026422_3210.html

The participants to the Berlin summit pledged to halt their interference in the Libyan conflict.³¹ They also publicly reaffirmed their support for the de-escalation and the UN 3-step plan. However, the agreement is not legally binding and does not provide for sanctions in cases of non-compliance. Following the Berlin meeting, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel announced: “I wish to reaffirm today the commitment of the European Union to the immediate cessation of hostilities in Libya in the interest of stability in its immediate neighbourhood. We support the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Libya, and this in the interest of regional stability and prosperity – this is vital for Europe.”³²

The EU, through the Germany initiative, is still trying to promote a multilateral solution, as EU member States refuse to be side-lined by Russia and Turkey. The competing initiatives offered by foreign powers in Libya have been hampering the negotiations and led the warring parties to switch from one initiative to the other.

Future prospects and recommendations

1) Future prospects: Russia is likely to remain an important interlocutor

Several factors led to making Russian diplomacy indispensable in Libya. First, the United States have been little involved in Libya and have been progressively withdrawing from North Africa and the Middle East.³³ Moreover, EU member states have been so far unable to fill the vacuum left by the US and did not manage to achieve a unity in their collective external actions. These two main factors gave Russia room to grow at an international level, and in the Middle East in particular.

Russia will probably maintain diplomatic ties with both sides of the conflict. Russia does not risk being destabilised by the situation in Libya, contrary to EU member states. However, Russian oil companies plan on returning to Libya once the situation is stabilised, to benefit from significant contracts. Thus, Russia has a strong interest in appeasing the situation in Libya.³⁴

The current situation in Libya allows Russia to increase its political influence in the region. Russia is likely to keep maintaining contact with both sides of the conflict, but it is unlikely to engage in further military action, as it is already active on other battlefronts.³⁵ A military support from Russia in Libya as strong as the one in Syria does not seem likely. Supporting General Haftar has allowed Russia to become a key player in Libya but Moscow is reluctant to provide Haftar with more military support.³⁶ Russia will keep negotiating with other factions to keep its options open in case General Haftar fails to take control of more territory. Considering Russia's success in being a key actor, it is likely to keep developing ties with all sides to remain indispensable, benefitting from European division.

The escalating conflict could potentially destabilise Libya's neighbourhood, in particular Tunisia and Algeria. This could jeopardise European security, as Libya is a close neighbour. Migration flows have been creating disunity among EU member states since the 2015 migrant crisis. Because Libya is one of the sources of migration flows to Europe, the EU is increasingly concerned about the deterioration of the situation.

³¹ <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/un-secretary-general-international-conference-libya-berlin-19-january-2020>

³² <https://cutt.ly/5rGLpyq>

³³ https://www.pism.pl/publications/Russia_s_Libya_Policy

³⁴ <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/workingpapers/russian-policy-in-the-middle-east-dividends-and-costs-of-the-big-game/> p.14

³⁵ <https://jpia.princeton.edu/news/echoes-abstention-russian-policy-libya-and-implications-regional-stability>

³⁶ <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/ST2019.pdf> p.78

2) Recommendations: inviting key actors to the negotiation table and maintaining internal EU coherence

This means including all the stakeholders in the negotiations, to avoid maintaining a deadlock in Libya. As long as parallel initiatives coexist, international consensus cannot be found, and the situation might escalate even further. A comprehensive approach would also prevent Russia and Turkey from feeling isolated. Isolation would lead them to push for their own initiatives and going against European efforts to appease the conflict. In this sense, the Berlin summit was the right approach for the EU. In exchange for the recognition of Russia as a main player in Libya and for its integration in peace talks, the EU could urge Russia to reduce its support to General Haftar.

The UN process has flaws and so far, has not managed to provide a solution for Libya. However, the future reconstruction of Libya should be conducted through the UN process in order to involve all parties.³⁷ Individual initiatives will not suffice to resolve the conflict. Consensus from all parties involved is needed in order to implement the UN 3-step action plan. The risk would be that Libya remains torn in half, with General Haftar and Fayed al-Sarraj ruling different sides of the country. Having a permanent division of Libya should be avoided at all cost for the EU, because instability would persist, and it would strongly impact Europe.

Russia and Turkey act actively to bypass multilateral peace process, playing on European disunity. Russia and Turkey are unlikely to oppose each other directly in Libya, as they share common interests in Syria. However, only a solid unity among European member states can prevent the EU from being side-lined by other foreign powers. By speaking with a single voice, the EU will reclaim its role at the centre of negotiations.

In order to maintain the internal coherence of the EU, Italy and France need to find common denominators in Libya. France could step back and follow Italy's lead in Libya. Italy could also take into account French interests in the region. This would foster to a stronger cooperation between the two countries.³⁸ This would lead France to reduce its support to General Haftar and to support al-Sarraj more explicitly. Reducing support to Haftar, from France and Russia, would probably unblock the stalemate and bring him to negotiate. For now, Haftar is strong enough to refuse to sign any agreement. The window seems to be closing for the EU to be at the centre of negotiations in Libya. The longer the crisis in Libya lasts, the more influence other powers gain, including Russia, to the detriment of the EU.

Conclusion

The presence of Russia in Libya is a challenge for European foreign policy. As member states were divided, in particular France and Italy, Russia was able to take advantage of the situation through its support to General Haftar. Russia, drawing from its experience in Syria, has succeeded in becoming an indispensable actor in Libya. Other foreign powers are also asking for a seat at the table to shape Libya's future. But the multiplication of actors involved has made the peace talks more complex. If the EU maintains its internal coherence, it can still appear as a strong negotiator in the Libyan crisis. Nine months after the start of General Haftar's assault, the situation in Libya is still critical, but at least international discussions have been reopened.

³⁷ https://pism.pl/publications/Russia_s_Libya_Policy

³⁸ https://www.aies.at/download/2018/AIES-Fokus_2018-05.pdf

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