The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Arab World's Riled Youth vs. Russia's Dying Star

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

January 31, 2011

One of the hot discussion topics in Russia these days is the revolutionary events in Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Yemen and other Arab states. For years — even decades — these countries have been led by harsh, authoritarian regimes that are just as unscrupulous in using force against dissenters as they are in finding ways to enrich their ruling dictators and their families. It has become fashionable to theorize that the Russian regime — just as unscrupulous and corrupt, with a brutal leader who recently marked 10 years in power — could become one of the next rotten autocracies to collapse. But there is no reason to make such a prediction. Russia is fundamentally different from the countries of the Arab world, and Russian society and politics are developing along a completely different path.

The Arab world is experiencing a tremendous population explosion. Of the 80 million people in Egypt, 40 percent are young people under the age of 15 — or 32 million people. In Iran, there are 25 million youth, or 35 percent of the country's population. The population of Egypt grows by more than 1 million people every year, and purposely understated official figures put

unemployment and illiteracy at 10 percent. With 17 million people, Cairo, like other megacities in the region, is extremely overcrowded and faces catastrophic urban problems. All the countries in the region grapple with overpopulation, widespread poverty while the ruling elite basks in luxury, a shortage of drinking water, high unemployment, miniscule incomes that make basic necessities unaffordable and a lack of access to education and health care.

It is the numerous and embittered Arab youth — deprived of opportunities by economic stagnation and aging dictatorships — that formed the combustible material first for the "Jasmine Revolution" in Tunisia, and then for the fires of revolution breaking out in other Arab states. In this respect, Russia is the exact opposite of Tunisia, Egypt and Iran. The Arab world is a boiling cauldron of discontented youth, but Russia is an old and cooling star.

Unlike Arab states, Russia's population continues its rapid decline, faced not with an excess but an acute shortage of young people. As that shortage grows at an alarming rate, it is having a major impact on the military, universities, employers, schools and the pension fund. There are 40 million retirees in Russia today as opposed to only 75 million people of working age — and that imbalance continues to increase. The workforce is expected to shrink by 900,000 people this year alone. Even with a deep economic crisis and the current stagnation, unemployment remains relatively low, and this is because of growing labor shortages that are mitigated in part by an influx of foreign workers. Youth can expect to find jobs in Russia with far greater ease than their peers in the Arab world. With growing demand in Russia's labor market and an increasingly nationalized economy — including more jobs with the government and siloviki structures, even though half of the workforce is already employed by the state — youth are more likely to choose a strategy of adaptation and conformity than protest.

Neither does religion play the same role in Russia as it does in the Arab world. In Cairo, mass demonstrations broke out immediately after Friday prayers in the mosques. In Russia, even though the majority of people consider themselves Russian Orthodox, in reality few participate regularly in religious services or community life. The Russian Orthodox Church does not organize or rally the masses. Indeed, it openly supports the government.

Participation in the political process, interest in politics, mutual trust and solidarity of the people remain at extremely low levels in Russia. According to a recent Levada Center survey, far more people are generally satisfied than dissatisfied with current conditions. A significant majority of respondents agreed with the statement that "life is difficult but bearable," and few said they were "unable to adapt." Most of those questioned said they prefer stability to rapid change.

In 1989, 52 percent of those surveyed said other people could be trusted. Now only one-third believe that. Before, 41 percent felt it was necessary to be cautious with other people, but now that number stands at 66 percent.

Only 3 percent of Russians are "very interested" in politics, as compared with 5 percent to 7 percent over the last five years. Those who are "sort of interested" in politics number 29 percent, although in 2009 it was 37 percent. And an incredible 64 percent said they were "completely uninterested" or "sort of uninterested" in politics.

At the same time, people are growing more alienated from the authorities. As Levada Center

sociologist Boris Dubin said, the typical attitude today is, "The state — it's not me!" And in accordance with this statement, Russians can be characterized by their "nonparticipation and noninvolvement" in the affairs of society. Of those surveyed, 85 percent say they do not know where the country is going. Eighty percent believe that society does not control the authorities and that abuses of power and corruption are growing. As many as 66 percent hold that the entire machinery of the state is corrupt and broken down. Also, 60 percent of respondents feel they hold no moral responsibility for the authorities and their activity. Only 25 percent would like to participate in the political life of at least their city or village. Even fewer are theoretically ready to take part in protests.

We have before us a picture of a country and a people slowly sinking into the mire. The sluggish society — placated by benefiting to varying degrees from the country's resource wealth — cannot find the initiative to support newly minted social movements such as the anti-fascists, "blue buckets," the Party of People's Freedom, defenders of the Khimki forest and Strategy 31. The Kremlin continues to be panic-stricken over the prospect of a Russian "Orange" or "Brown" revolution, failing to see that the real threat facing Russia's future is something else entirely: the deepening apathy, alienation, cultural degradation and disintegration of society and the state. The country's best and brightest are immigrating to the West and taking with them the very social dynamism that is needed to revive Russia's lagging fortunes.

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