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Egypt's Lessons for Russia

By Victor Davidoff

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Recent events in Egypt are being discussed so passionately on the Russian Internet that one might be mistaken into thinking that Egypt is a geographical neighbor. The two countries certainly have a lot in common. Modern Russia, like Egypt under Mubarak, is a pseudo-democracy, where the rulers are in power largely thanks to rigged elections, control of the mass media and dependent judges. Russia is as corrupt as Egypt &mdash and perhaps even more so. There are enough similarities that Russian political commentators regarded events in Egypt as something that might have a direct influence on the future of Russia.

Predictably, the frontline between the warring commentators runs along the fault line of attitudes toward the ruling regime in Moscow. Up until the last possible moment, supporters of the regime held out for Mubarak. The well-known conservative Dmitry Olshansky (D-olshansky) wrote: "May God grant that he hold on to the last. There is nothing worse, nothing more horrible than 'democracy' &mdash especially in countries like Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan and Russia."

Television talk show host Vladimir Soloviyev (Vsoloviev) warned that "Mubarak's defeat

might give a mighty push to protest activism [in Russia]."

The unsavory pro-Kremlin propagandist Maxim Kononenko gave the most radical advice: "I personally wish that Mubarak would stop this crappy revolution and drown it in blood. Let there be thousands, dozens, hundreds of thousands of victims. ... Anyone who supports the revolution &mdash even in word &mdash should be arrested on the spot!"

On the other side, Mubarak's resignation was cheered in the camp of Russia's pro-democracy opposition. "The train stopped at the station in Cairo. Next stop: Moscow," wrote Natalya Novozhilova (1gatta_felice), a journalist and blogger in Vladimir.

The democratic youth activist Roman Dobrokhotov (Dobrokhotov) predicted, "Soon this will come to Russia," and then advised Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, "Start packing your bags, Vladimir!"

Dobrokhotov noted that in Egypt, like in Russia, there wasn't a large, active opposition. In fact, until these events, Cairo had never seen the kind of protests that have become a regular occurrence in Moscow. "The revolution sprung out of nowhere, simply because people had enough volition. ... The Egyptian scenario destroyed the last myth that you hear from those opposed to change in Russia, that there isn't a strong leader, there isn't an alternative the people would follow. Who would replace Putin? Who would replace Mubarak? These questions need to be asked after the dictator is overthrown because beforehand no one is given the chance to show his worth."

One of Runet's most popular bloggers, Anton Nosik (Dolboeb) shattered another myth &mdash the myth of the importance of technical means of communication in political events. Nosik noted that in the first place, the common belief that it is impossible for authorities to close down the Internet is wrong. In Egypt, the major Internet providers were ordered by the government to stop services for five days. Although it cost them at least $90 million in losses, technically it is perfectly possible.

Secondly &mdash and Nosik believes this is the most important lesson from events in Egypt &mdash "Shutting down the Internet had absolutely no effect on the demonstrators. A few days after the Internet was shut down, there were more than 1 million protestors on Tahrir Square in the center of Cairo."

Nosik wrote: "If someone thought that Twitter and Facebook made people go out on the square, they are mistaken. The Internet can't be shut down because it isn't in cables today. It is in people's minds. Thanks to the Internet, people simply understood something about themselves, their country and their society. They realized that millions of other people share their thoughts and feelings, even if they'd never know that by watching television. You can keep pulling the plug and blocking sites, but you can't turn back people's mentality to the time before the Internet. People who have lived even once in an open world of information can't be made to forget it. No one has invented a button that deletes the experience of freedom from human memory."

Ultimately, it is unlikely that events in Egypt will have a direct influence on Russia. But the scenario in Cairo could work equally well in Yemen, Tehran or Moscow. Virtual freedom leads to real political freedom. This gives hope to the millions of people today who long to be

free.

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