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How Russia Resembles Libya

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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Russia's leaders have searched for the proper approach to the revolution in Libya like a person who hopes to find a picture of reality in a distorted mirror in a fun house. Instead, they have found only the reflection of their own prejudices and stereotypes.

Just like after the Russia-Georgia war in 2008, the discussion on Libya has focused on nonessential questions. In place of an analysis of Libyan society, Russian officials have become bogged down in an argument over a clash of values. These arguments do not further our understanding of the events in North Africa.

Russian analysts and commentators either condemn the regime of ousted Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi or sympathize with it. Arguments on both sides tend to be personal and lacking in any political substance beyond the occasional slogan.

It is clear that many Russian leaders were disgusted by the Libyan leader's eccentric behavior, his poor record on fighting terrorism, his constant vacillation between the ideological left and right and between calls for nationalism and closer ties with the West. At the same, however,

there were many who applauded Gadhafi.

The debate over Gadhafi resembles the endless and fruitless debate between the Stalinists and anti-Stalinists. For Stalinists, his bloody and tyrannical rule is the main reason they hold him up in masochistic adoration.

They justify Stalin's years of repression by pointing to the Soviet Union's achievements — the country's industrial revolution, the elimination of illiteracy and its scientific achievements. The results of Soviet modernization hold no emotional appeal for them and are only mentioned as the positive byproduct of tyrannical power.

Conversely, anti-Stalinists are ready to completely discredit those achievements and even deny that they ever existed — all in an emotional attempt to lash out at that same tyrannical power as it continues to hypnotize them like a boa constrictor mesmerizes a rabbit.

The same patterns distinguish the current debate over Libya. Behind many of Russia's official statements is an underlying, perhaps subconscious, dislike for democracy. And this dislike does not stem from criticism of Western liberal institutions but from a pathological distrust of the Russian masses. Leaders perceive the lower class of society as nothing more than simple workers or as objects of the state who can be manipulated and who must loyally carry out the will of their ruler.

Any discussion of a welfare state is reduced to an estimate of how many rubles were spent on this or that social program, and whether the money reached the intended recipient or was pilfered along the way. The idea that some people value freedom, human dignity and social development strikes the country's leaders as silly and naive. As long as it remains like this, we can forget about the rise of social movements or the development of civil society.

Russia, meanwhile, is left with the task of putting its own house in order. But leaders can achieve that goal only once they begin to respect themselves and the people as a whole, seeing them as compatriots and co-workers — and not merely as masses who must be led by the right ruler.

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