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A New Year of Protests

By Alexei Bayer

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The protest rallies in December were a response to two domestic events: Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's crude declaration on Sept. 24 that he plans to seek a third presidential term and blatant fraud in the Dec. 4 State Duma elections.

It may be a stretch to claim that the Russian protests were inspired by the Arab Spring, a wave of revolutions that swept North Africa and the Middle East last year. By their history and self-image, Russians aspire to be world leaders, not followers of Third World nations. Indeed, over the past century, Moscow has been the center of the international Communist movement, the focus of the worldwide fight against fascism and the capital of a global empire. Even as communism foundered, developments in Moscow were what started velvet revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989. A visit by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev to Beijing that same year inspired pro-democracy rallies on Tiananmen Square, which became the starting point of China's economic miracle.

Today's Russia remains a nuclear superpower. Thanks to high oil prices of the past decade, it is now richer than at any time since the 1917 Bolshevik takeover. But under Putin's

kleptocracy, Russia has become all but irrelevant, falling behind not only its BRIC co-members China, India and Brazil, but the likes of Indonesia and Turkey as well.

Russia now resembles a nontransparent, authoritarian Arab nation more than a European country or a dynamic developing one. Putin, who has now staked a claim to being Russia's strongman for life, rules through Soviet-era siloviki, much like Egypt's ousted President Hosni Mubarak used to rule through his country's military.

Time Magazine, by naming the "unknown soldier" of the international protest movement as its Person of the Year, made protests the symbol of 2011. Street protests are once again being used by disaffected citizens to make themselves heard. But unlike past protesters, the new generation organize on social media sites. In Russia, Persons of the Year 2011 are using Facebook — the creation of Mark Zuckerberg, the Person of the Year 2010 — to stage rallies against Person of the Year 2007 Vladimir Putin.

Last year's protests may not have been directly inspired by one another, but connections between the Arab Spring and the protests in Russia are not completely accidental. The course taken by the revolutions in different Arab countries should be studied by Russian protesters as lessons and cautionary tales.

In Bahrain and Yemen, local leaders have refused to leave, despite massive, ongoing protests. Syria presents an even more chilling picture. Its rulers ordered soldiers to shoot unarmed protesters, provoking a full-scale civil war and allegedly resorting to outright terrorism to cling to power. In Libya, the civil war produced instability fed by armed and battle-hardened militias.

Even where change came promptly, the outcome remains questionable. In Tunisia, a free election strengthened the hand of Islamists. In Egypt, meanwhile, change has been mostly cosmetic. The Army withdrew its support from Mubarak and put him on trial, allowing a bit more democracy. But the country is still ruled by a nontransparent and nonaccountable military junta.

Any of these outcomes are possible in Russia. What is important is that last year's protests were only the beginning. Neither the Arab Spring nor Russian protests have achieved their goals. Much of these efforts remain work in progress. This year will need to become a genuine Year of Change for the Year of Protests 2011 to enter history as anything more than a year of false hope.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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