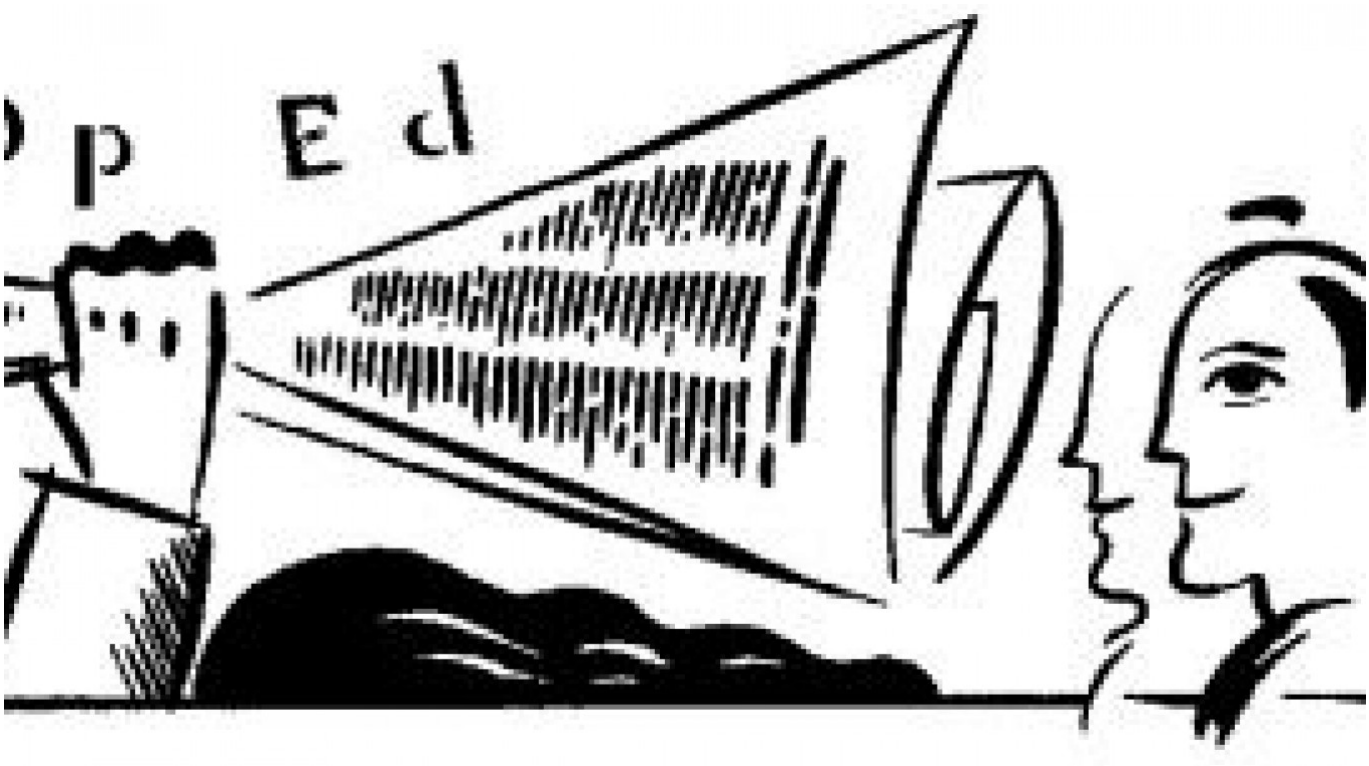
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Tunis, the Birthplace of the Arab Spring, 2 Years On

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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I first visited Tunis four years ago. I liked its French-Arab feel, the streets that still carried such French names as Lafayette, Jaures and Pasteur, and the tram connecting the city center to the residential area that the locals proudly referred to as a "metro." Tunis even had streets named for Russia and Vladimir Lenin. Walking outward from the center, I passed rows of snow-white houses built in a kind of "modern colonial" style before coming upon the gate to the Medina, the old city. At that point the French influence ended, giving way to labyrinthine streets crowded with masses of people buying and selling every manner of goods.

During a recent visit, I discovered that Tunis had changed dramatically. There were now posters with political slogans in French and Arabic, and I heard people speaking of politics beginning with my taxi driver at the airport. The newspapers are full of analytical material and polemical articles. Four years ago, the local French-language newspapers were unbearably boring and provincial, even compared to those in other Arab countries. Today, the local newspapers debate the issues as well as any newspaper in Paris.

But one aspect of Tunis has visibly worsened. Walk just 30 meters to either side of the Avenue Habib Bourguiba and the streets are filthy. Trash is piled on the sidewalks and driveways with nobody to haul it away. I had remembered Tunis as a fairly clean city relative to others in Northern Africa and the Middle East. Apparently, revolution and garbage collection do not go hand in hand.

Tunisians haven't realized yet that they could hire migrant laborers for such work, a common practice in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Every now and then migrants do appear on the streets, but they are treated no better than are migrants in the two Russian capitals. Right in front of me, two young men literally jumped a dark-skinned man who managed to run off in search of the police. His assailants shouted after him in Arabic, and I distinctly caught the words, "You don't belong here!"

In contrast to Moscow, where policeman seem to be everywhere, except where and when you really need them, policeman are rarely seen on the streets of Tunisia. Attractive young women wearing tall caps reminiscent of French gendarmes regulate traffic at intersections. State institutions are protected by barbed wire and armed guards — another sign of the revolution. The soldiers are young and harmless looking. They pressed up against the walls of buildings as columns of demonstrators pass, singing, on their way to the 2013 World Social Forum in late March.

In fact, I was in town to attend that forum. It was logical to discuss social rights in the same country where in January 2011, a popular uprising had forced its repressive leader, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, to flee the country on a plane stuffed with gold bullion. This protest rally was surprisingly well organized, with columns of contending demonstrators careful to maintain a respectful distance from each other. Unlike Western Europe, where every rally is cordoned off by hostile riot police ready to attack protestors at the slightest provocation, here it was not the police who maintained order. That job was carried out by numerous young men wearing vests labeled "Volunteer Organizer." There were many young women among them, and all worked in perfect harmony and coordination. Not one of the female volunteers wore a hijab, although many could be seen among the ranks of the demonstrators.

The political situation in Tunis is more complicated and less optimistic. Political freedoms have been secured, but social problems remain. The economic crisis has not disappeared. The ruling coalition of Islamists and Social Democrats is losing popularity and society is becoming increasingly polarized and impatient. Contraband alcohol is flowing from Tunisia across its now open border with Libya, a country that formally observes the Islamic ban on drinking. Libyans admit that alcoholism had increased during the final years of Moammar Gadhafi's rule as people looked for a way to spend their modest share of the country's oil wealth. Now the Libyans have come up with a new export of their own: selling off the former regime's arsenal. Some of those weapons have found their way into Tunisia where they are warehoused for possible future needs. Everything looks peaceful at the moment, but as the old saying goes, "If you keep a gun in your home, it will probably get used."

If elections are held soon, the Islamists would have to relinquish power. The main reason is that their electorate is rapidly diminishing. They won the last elections not so much through popular support but because of the fragmentation of their opponents. The leftists won more votes overall, but those were spread out over eight fairly large parties and many smaller ones.

The Islamists voted as a unified front. The electoral math worked in their favor, although they were forced to include two left-center factions when forming the government. The left learned from that experience, formed the Popular Front and quickly gained influence in the country, although it would be premature to conclude that the left is now fully united. Two social democratic parties remain in the coalition with An-Nahda and several other factions aligned themselves with the liberal coalition that advocates values of a secular state.

By contrast, the Popular Front calls for social change in addition to the democratic norms, equality for women and the secular state that has been in force since Tunisia gained independence. These issues remain the top priorities for society. Tunisia has one of the highest levels of education in the Arab world and it needs new jobs, not only in tourism, but also in industry, to make use of its intellectual and technological potential. But the paralyzing effects of the global crisis have kept the country's economy stagnant.

Tunisians place all their hopes on Russian tourists, according to the country's tourism officials. Russians have shown that they are not frightened by revolution, political tensions or the economic crisis when they pick their vacation spots. Most important, they love to spend whatever money they have. And that means Russians are still welcome and appreciated in Tunisia.

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