



Worldview: Russia of the past facing Russia of future in Sunday's election

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I'm headed to Moscow this week to observe a struggle for human dignity as important as any in the Arab world.

It's no accident that Prime Minister (and-soon-to-be-third-term-President) Vladimir Putin is backing the Syrians: Both countries' leaders are men of the 20th century, clinging to the certainties of the Cold War, while a younger, Internet-savvy generation wants to live in the 21st century. That generational clash in Russia will come to a head after presidential elections Sunday.

In Russia and the Mideast, men of the past blame their countries' problems on the West to distract attention from their own failures. They control national TV so they can feed that false narrative to the hinterlands, where the Internet is less common. They use violence to crush the opposition, blatantly in Syria, intermittently in Egypt, and cleverly in Russia - where pesky journalists are murdered or beaten and activists harassed or arrested.

In Russia - a country with a rich culture, a highly educated populace, and one foot in Europe - you'd think the new generation would face better odds than in Syria or Egypt. Yet it's unclear whether Russians will have more success than their counterparts in the Mideast.

Even so, in December, large numbers of middle-class Muscovites - heretofore apolitical - suddenly took to the streets in protest. Until then, most Russians - dogged by a tragic history and a traumatic transition from communism - seemed to passively accept Putin as tsar.

Russia suffers from a level of government corruption so staggering that it undermines daily life and the economy. On Transparency International's index of official corruption (the higher the number, the more venality),

Russia stands at 143, tied with Nigeria! Russia is worse than even Syria (129), Egypt (112), and Tunisia (73).

But, as in Tunisia, where the self-immolation of a frustrated fruit vendor triggered the Arab Spring, a specific affront jolted young Russians to act.

After serving two terms as president, and one as prime minister, Putin announced he would swap places with President Dmitry A. Medvedev. This was not only constitutionally questionable, but made the March 4 elections almost irrelevant.

"The new generation born after the Soviet Union collapsed was not strongly anti-Putin, but they were humiliated after Putin and Medvedev announced the switch," says Yevgenia Albats, the courageous editor of *New Times*, one of a handful of independent Russian print publications remaining. I spoke to her by phone in Moscow, where her staff is working night and day to cover these stunning events.

As a reaction to the switch, says Albats, "a lot of young people decided to work as [independent] election observers during the Dec. 4 parliamentary elections." They were further outraged by blatant ballot rigging in favor of Putin's United Russia party (now referred to by the opposition as "the party of thieves"). "That was the trigger, like in North Africa," says Albats. It drove middle-class Russian professionals over the edge.

Their anger prompted huge and unprecedented demonstrations, starting in December, in Moscow and other cities. This week, 30,000 demonstrators formed a human chain around Moscow's inner-ring road to protest Putin's return to power in a rigged system. They will also demonstrate after Sunday's elections, even if they're refused official permission.

As in the Mideast, grassroots modernizers face mammoth odds in trying to reform Russia. The Kremlin controls much of the economy, and its security services will target opponents.

Putin still has strong support from more traditional elements of society, especially outside the big cities, who credit him with creating stability. Like Putin, they fear and mistrust the Internet. "Putin is a man of traditional Russia," says Albats, "who believes the Internet is porno and [represents] a dangerous world he does not understand."

Putin's critics say he will resist any political reform beyond cosmetic gestures. "He sees what happens with leaders who tried to do that," says former Putin economic adviser Andrei Illarionov, now a senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington. "He sees that [Egyptian President Hosni] Mubarak is gone, while [Syrian President Bashar] Assad is still in power."

Illarionov believes Putin will try to avoid outraging the outside world, especially Europe, by a blatant crackdown, but "is likely to use the smart power of the security services to isolate the most active and attractive [opposition] leaders, while forcefully dispersing the rest of the people who come to the streets."

Can the Internet generation mount a serious challenge to the Kremlin - despite lack of access to media and the harassment of their leaders? Can they find common cause with anti-Putinists who come from communist or nationalist factions? Or are they likely to be outflanked by harsh men who want to retain the old order, no matter the cost? The answer matters not only for Russia's people, but for its relations with Western countries and the world.

Next week, in conversations with opposition leaders and their critics, I'll be trying to find out.