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NYT

## **The Politics of Dignity**

Thomas L. Friedman

January 31, 2012

Dateline: Moscow

Memo to: Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitri Medvedev

Subject: Russia and the Arab Spring

From: A traveler to Cairo and Moscow

Dear Sirs: You may think that the situations in Egypt and Russia have nothing in common. Think again. Yes, these two countries have starkly different histories. But having visited both in recent weeks, I can tell you that they have one very big thing in common: the political eruptions in both countries were not initially driven by any particular ideology but rather by the most human of emotions — the quest for dignity and justice.

Humiliation is the single most underestimated force in politics. People will absorb hardship, hunger and pain. They will be grateful for jobs, cars and benefits. But if you force people to live indefinitely inside a rigged game that is flaunted in their

face or make them feel like cattle that can be passed by one leader to his son or one politician to another, eventually they'll explode. These are the emotions that sparked the uprisings in Cairo and Moscow. They don't go away easily, which is why you're in more trouble than you think.

Have you gentlemen looked at the homemade videos going viral around Russia these days? One of my favorites was made by two Russian paratroopers-turned-singers, posted on YouTube under the title "Russian airborne veterans against Vladimir Putin." Their lyrics were aimed directly at you, Mr. Putin, in the wake of the Sept. 24 announcement that President Medvedev would step down and pave the way for you and your party (now widely known as "the party of crooks and thieves") to run for president for two more six-year terms — 12 more years! Russians immediately started calculating how old they'd be when they might see their country led by someone other than you, Mr. Putin. It was depressing for many — made more so by the fact that Mr. Medvedev said that your "trading places" was planned long ago. Yet no one else was consulted, and you two didn't even bother to offer a narrative as to why Putin should have 12 more years. No wonder that song by the paratroopers to Putin was all about dignity: "You're no different from me,/a man and not God./I'm no different from you,/a man, not some hick./We won't let you keep lying./We won't let you keep stealing./We're liberated troops who defended the motherland."

Aleksei Navalny, the shareholder-activist-blogger who helped stoke the rallies against you, said to me that nothing spurred the protests more than the daily experience of Muscovites having to sit in traffic while a car with a flashing blue light carrying some Putin crony behind tinted glass speeds past. "It is all about

dignity,” said Navalny. “Who are these people? Why don’t they care about our rights? It doesn’t matter at all how good a career you build. You will stand in this traffic, and these people and their sons will drive past you with their blue lights.”

Mr. Putin, you have substantial achievements. During your first eight years as president, starting in 2000, you stabilized a collapsing Russia and oversaw the emergence of a big urban middle class. Admittedly, you didn’t achieve this with kid gloves, and it was attended with widespread corruption and fueled by oil exports. But enough trickled down so that a real middle class of professionals and entrepreneurs emerged. They are your accidental political offspring — “maybe the first independent political class in modern Russian history,” says Max Trudolyubov, the editorial page editor of the Vedomosti newspaper — and now they want a voice in their future.

Have you spoken lately to Mikhail Dmitriev, the president of the Center for Strategic Research? He has been doing focus groups since 2009, which I am told your aides were shown but didn’t believe. The anti-Putin protests, Dmitriev found, were not driven by the unemployed but rather by “the highly skilled part of the Russian population” that has come to feel as though “Russian society is a two-lane highway, with one lane for the privileged individuals in proximity to state power,” with its own laws or lack of them, “and one lane for the rest of the population.”

Beginning in 2009, says Dmitriev, his focus groups all started indicating that this new “wealthy, self-respecting middle class,” felt that “they are not recognized as deserving individuals and entitled to be treated with equal rights of everyone else.” One phrase, he says, “suddenly appeared all over the country: ‘We

are not cattle.’ ” This, he says, is when he realized that “this is a matter of dignity and self-respect.”

This struggle between you and your accidental offspring will play out over a long time. But, good sirs, have no doubt about this: politics is back in Russia. Watch out. You, Mr. Putin, will surely win the March presidential election, predicts Dmitriev, “but in a weakened way.” The Putin brand is declining, he says. “The trend is downward. This will ensure that Putin is a weak president with declining support.”

Therefore, argues Dmitriev, your only hope to remain relevant is to “set up a coalition government, including the opposition, on the basis of free and fair elections and move toward a more balanced and competitive political system.”

I’d listen to him this time.