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Why Russia No Longer Emulates the United States

By Alexei Bayer

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Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has declared that those who participated in the recent wave of protests against rigged State Duma elections were encouraged and paid for by the United States.

I don't know whether Putin was misinformed or misled others, but there is not an iota of truth in these assertions, just as it is patently untrue that the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine was engineered by former U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, whose influence on U.S. foreign policy Russians tend to greatly overestimate.

The United States had very little to do with anti-government protests in Russia — unfortunately so.

Russians don't need money from Washington to fund their rallies. Putin clearly underestimates the financial resources of the country's middle class, just as he

underestimates the scope and seriousness of popular disaffection with his regime. In the run-up to the Dec. 24 rally, protest organizers collected about 3 million rubles ($96,000) in just a few days, much of which came from individual contributions of from 100 rubles to 500 rubles.

Nor would the protesters have accepted money from the United States. Unlike in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the United States was very popular in Russia and was seen as a model for building the country's future democracy, America has become a dirty word for many Russians.

This has nothing to do with official Kremlin propaganda and is the result of Washington's own actions. Over the past decade, the United States has completely squandered its moral authority. It started a war of aggression against Iraq, and — much like the Soviet Union — the United States has become overly self-righteous, nationalistic and ideological, and it often considers itself above international law.

For more than a decade and spanning two presidents in the White House, it has operated a legally dubious jail in Guantanamo, where prisoners are still held for years without trial. Government officials who gave orders to ignore the Geneva Convention, run secret prisons, torture detainees and spy on Americans have gotten off scot-free.

When Russians contemplate their political future after Putin, few look to Washington's dysfunctional government as a model, nor do they want to emulate its mean-spirited, buffoonish politicians. Moreover, the Third World-like gap between rich and poor in the United States is hardly inspiring, particularly since Russia has had plenty of the same at home over the past 12 years of Putin's rule.

It is a shame, really, because much of U.S. democracy is directly relevant to Russia. For example, the U.S. concept of separation of powers is crucial in reining in the country's traditionally strong executive. Soviet and post-Soviet Russian rulers have all too often looked and acted like tsars, not elected leaders. The U.S. Constitution was devised specifically to make sure that no president becomes an autocrat. U.S. respect for rule of law can also be crucial in a country that tends to suffer from periodic personality cults. Finally, the U.S. tradition of tolerance and acceptance of different religions, nationalities and races should also be useful for Russia as it rapidly becomes a melting pot and a country of immigrants.

The United States is going through a crisis. It is, above all, a crisis of democracy. It currently does not present a particularly appealing face to the rest of the world. But I hope that the rising, democratic Russia will not give up on it.

Alexei Bayer, a native Muscovite, is a New York-based economist.

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