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U.S. Can Learn From Russia About Unity

By The Moscow Times

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The extended holiday weekend gave us a chance to think about how the U.S. should borrow a page from Russia and introduce a new holiday of its own also called National Unity Day.

As Americans go to the polls Tuesday to elect a president, the din from "blue" supporters of incumbent Barack Obama and the "red" proponents of challenger Mitt Romney has grown to a mind-numbing roar. The two groups' stringent opposition to each other's ideals represents — a bitter rivalry rarely seen since slavery split the country and led to the Civil War from 1861 to 1865.

What ever happened to a common vision and the desire to work for the common good, universal values that once won the admiration and envy of people around the world? Instead, moderate Americans are vanishing as they join the ranks of once-fringe elements of the Democratic or Republican parties, all the while insisting that their side represents true patriotism and U.S. democratic values.

The Americans have the right to fight among themselves. They are, however, creating

an embarrassing spectacle as the world looks on, amazed at the divisive bickering of an economically declining nation that once stood proud as a global leader. But when U.S. pettiness and pride start roiling international markets, as it did when mean-spirited brinkmanship nearly caused the U.S. government to default on its debt last year, the world also has a stake in the battle.

In this heated atmosphere of anger and hatred, the first act of the next U.S. president should be to set aside a day for national unity and to lead the way by taking the first public steps toward reconciliation.

This would stand in marked contrast to President Vladimir Putin, who took a lot of flak in 2005 when he created National Unity Day, a public holiday that commemorates the defeat of invading Polish fighters in 1612 and was remembered only by the most studious historians. Putin has done little to promote unity, and there is little doubt that he chose the Nov. 4 date for its proximity to Revolution Day, thus allowing him to discard the Soviet-era holiday on Nov. 7 while still giving people a day off from work.

The new holiday also has its own problems, particularly since Russia's own fringe "patriots" have steadfastly tried to hijack it as a time to promote racial intolerance under the banner of "Russia for Russians." Furthermore, many Russians still don't know the reason for the holiday and consider it little more than a day off work, according to a Levada Center opinion poll released last week.

But the idea for the holiday, national unity, is commendable. In 1994, South Africa introduced the Day of Reconciliation, celebrated on Dec. 16, to foster national unity after the bitter era of apartheid. Germany celebrates Unity Day on Oct. 3, the anniversary of the reunification of the two divided Germanies.

Even before Putin introduced National Unity Day, President Boris Yeltsin in 1996 renamed the Nov. 7 holiday as the Day of Accord and Reconciliation, believing that memorializing the 1917 Revolution was dividing society rather than uniting it.

Americans are tearing each other apart, and it's not only those on the losing side who will be bitter, bruised and broken after Tuesday's election.

The U.S. president doesn't often look to Russia for lessons. But this is one case where he should.

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

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