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The Reason Russian-Americans Dislike Obama

By Alexei Bayer

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Among my 400 Facebook friends are people I've known all my life, former colleagues and a bunch of random people whom I crossed paths with over the years. They can be divided into four categories: Americans (both native and foreign-born), foreigners in different countries, Russians living in Russia and Russians living in the U.S.

Tuesday's U.S. presidential election was an opportunity to gauge their political attitudes. My sample is the most biased: New York reliably votes for the Democratic Party, and even those friends who work in the financial services industry tend to be moderates, although some do vote Republican.

Foreigners among my Facebook friends overwhelmingly cheered U.S. President Barack Obama's re-election. This confirms the findings of a more scientific BBC poll, which determined that in 20 out of the 21 countries surveyed, Obama was favored. And the United States' closest allies — France, Britain and Germany — expressed the strongest support.

Most of my Moscow friends who took an interest in the U.S. election and knew the difference between the candidates fell into the same category. This wasn't because they feared that Republican candidate Mitt Romney would make good on his promises to stand up to Russia. On the contrary, few among Russia's intelligentsia support President Vladimir Putin, and they probably wouldn't mind if the West took a tougher stance against Russia's current leadership.

But the majority of Russians in the U.S. not only decried Obama's victory but also condemned his policies in almost the same terms applied to them by the anti-immigrant, fundamentalist right wing of the Republican Party. Dire predictions for the next four years abounded: the imminent triumph of socialism, weakness in foreign policy, kow-towing to Muslims, and welfare freebies for blacks and other minorities.

I've heard that before. Soviet Jews who arrived in the U.S. before the 1976 election had barely stepped off the boat before they started warning liberal American Jews who helped them settle in their new country that a vote for Democratic presidential candidate Jimmy Carter would spell an end to America. Similar doomsday predictions were made about subsequent Democratic candidates, especially Bill Clinton.

Back then, they claimed that having lived in the Soviet Union, they knew the inherent dangers of communism, and that Americans were naive about socialist government programs. Although the Soviet threat is long gone, these virulent anti-liberal attitudes endure, mainly because many of these emigrants from the Soviet Union still lack experience with liberal democracy. Russia was never a democracy, and authoritarian regimes are especially resentful of liberalism, with its emphasis on the needs of the individual and respect for personal choices, rights and freedoms. Stalin and Hitler may have disliked each other's ideology, but both really hated liberals.

Coming to the free world, former Soviet citizens reached the very flawed conclusion that democracy was something similar to their own system, except it was directed against communists. Notably, right-wing attitudes have been seen among Russian-speaking newcomers in Israel, Germany and Britain as well. In the U.S., they felt ideological affinity with the indigenous anti-liberal movement, which has been gathering strength as a result of declining U.S. economic power and the growing diversity and complexity of American society.

This created a paradox for the Russian intelligentsia. Those who stayed in Russia have become more liberal and are feeling the Kremlin's wrath against liberal elements. Meanwhile, Russian speakers from the same social group who have moved to the U.S. and other Western countries are clinging to their anti-liberal biases of the Soviet era.

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