

Dr. Donald N. Jensen

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Putin Makes Anti-Americanism a Centerpiece of His Campaign

Faced with popular protests against Kremlin manipulation of the December Duma elections and uncertainty over whether he can achieve a first round victory in the March 4 Presidential vote, Vladimir Putin has turned to a Soviet-era tactic to help him come out on top: finding a foreign enemy. The Russian government has tried to smear the new US Ambassador to Moscow, Michael McFaul, as an agent of American imperialism by accusing him of personally supporting the opposition movement. Russian television recently aired documentary program portraying Putin as a savior who protected Russia from Western villains. Putin himself accused Secretary of State Clinton of sending a “signal” to demonstrators to turn out on the streets to oppose the official parliamentary results. The U.S. “wants to control everything” and takes unilateral decisions on key issues, Putin told an audience in Tomsk on January 26. “Sometimes I get the impression the US doesn’t need allies, it needs vassals.”

Putin has long mistrusted the United States, according to press reports. In the past he has compared the US to Nazi Germany and blamed it for the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. The Russian Prime Minister has ratcheted up the rhetoric in recent weeks, however, due to both to electoral considerations and broader geopolitical concerns.

First, Putin hopes to mobilize popular support, especially outside Moscow, for his presidential candidacy. Russian nationalism is a strong concern among key constituencies and Putin has long sought to co-opt its more moderate elements. Putin also has brought the outspoken former Russian Ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, former head of the Rodina (Motherland) party back to Moscow to head the military industrial complex. Since his return Rogozin has strongly criticized the United States and published an article about the meaning of “Russianness” calculated to appeal to conservative voters.

Second, Putin’s attacks reflect the regime’s nervousness about its own future. Available evidence suggests that the Kremlin was surprised by the poor showing of the ruling United Russia party in December and is concerned that Putin will not get a first round win without ballot manipulation. US-Russian relations suffered in 2011 when Moscow and Washington had

differences over the NATO campaign that lead to the overthrow of Libyan dictator Moammar Ghaddafi. In the past few days Russia (and China) vetoed a UN Security Council Resolution censuring Syria's crackdown on unrest, in part because Moscow saw the proposal as another Washington-led effort at regime change.

Finally, Putin criticism of the US reflects his frustration with differences between Moscow and Washington over missile defense. Although the Obama Administration has pledged to repeal the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, a Cold War-era law that barred trade relations with the Soviet Union unless Jewish emigration were tolerated, there are growing doubts in Congress about whether the amendment should be repealed.

For all the tough talk, there are signs that Putin and Medvedev want to avoid inflicting so much damage on the relationship with Washington that they cannot return to at least a businesslike relationship after the election. President Medvedev, differing with many Russian commentators, stated that the opposition meeting with McFaul was a routine occurrence (though he warned that the U.S. Ambassador should respect Russian political sensitivities). Even Putin has said on occasion that he still hopes to work constructively with the US. Kremlin criticism of the United States, moreover, is almost always focused on McFaul or Clinton rather than President Obama. It is unlikely, however, that the relationship will return anytime soon to the level of cordiality that marked the Reset two years ago. During the dustup over Syria last week, for example, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov seemed to be purposely avoiding talking to Clinton.

The results on Election Day will show whether Putin's harsh anti-Western tone will have any resonance at the polls. Russia's political stagnation and corruption probably will be at least as strong a factor determining the choice of many voters. It is hard to argue that sinister outside forces are to blame, as analyst Jacob Laksin has pointed out, when the opposition to Putin comes from within Russia. One witty Russian expert visiting Washington recently noted that in Kamchatka, in Russia's Far East, officials from Moscow are today far more unpopular than visitors from the United States.