

Russia will solve its own political problems

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The author is from Rosewood Heights and once taught at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. He now lives in Russia. This is an essay he wrote about the recent Russian elections.*

By JOHN TAYLOR, Ph.D.

Americans should stay out of Russia's current debate over the recent elections to the Russian Duma, or parliament. Russia will solve its own political problems.

In particular, Americans should refrain from negative comments about the Russian prime minister, Vladimir Putin. Putin's party won parliamentary elections last Sunday, although they got less than 50 percent of the vote and their parliamentary majority disappeared.

However, Putin is los-

ing the public relations debate that is going on now. U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton made negative comments about Russia's election, and so did many U.S. and European newspapers. In return, Putin blamed Russian dissent and unrest on foreign criticism. He singled out Clinton and America for blame.

The current situation resembles in some respects the Georgian War of 2008; Georgia is a small country that used to be part of the old USSR but that became an independent state. In 2008, Georgia invaded Russian-held territory, and Russia fought back successfully, winning the shooting war with Georgia hands down. However, Russia lost the



Taylor

PR war that followed. The New York Times and President George W. Bush wrongly blamed Russia. The Times later apologized for its astonishingly inaccurate reports.

The resemblance is that Americans — and our European friends — have stereotypes about Russia, and we roll out these stereotypes whenever there is a crisis. We Americans are especially likely to roll out these stereotypes when, as now, we are in the middle of one of our own elections. We say that Russia is backward, its democracy a sham and its leaders authoritarian. These stereotypes damage our relations with Russia, and they damage our economy. We need good relations.

Despite his problems, Putin is a strong leader who has been good for Russia. If he were to dis-

appear from the scene suddenly, disorder would result, and Russia would be weaker. Russian people would resent this weakness, and they would be bitter about foreign countries that intervened in Russia's affairs to weaken them and their country.

We Americans should be silent and polite about Russia. In order to recover economically from the present downturn, America needs a stable and prosperous Europe, and that means we need a stable and prosperous Russia. Wisdom seldom counsels desperate actions. We should wait upon events.

The author is professor of history emeritus at Southern Illinois University. He was a Fulbright Senior Scholar in Russia in 2004. The photo of him is courtesy of Manis Photography, Wood River.