

US-Russian Relations: How Did We Get Here?

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Abstract

During the past two decades of Russian-US relations, Russia has coped with Putinism, while the United States has endured significant changes to its foreign policy through the power of administrative exchange. Tensions between the two nations relaxed under the Bush years, while rising under Obama. This piece will work to formulate an understanding of the present issues creating friction between Russia and the United States by analyzing the recent history that led to the current problems facing the relationship of the two superpowers.

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Introduction

Russia and the United States have a complex relationship. Longtime allies in global wars, fundamentally different in culture and foreign policy outlook, nervously twitching when the other brings up nuclear weapons, the two nations have enjoyed a passive aggressive relationship for decades.

A good metaphor for this relationship became apparent to me several years ago, when I found myself in St. Petersburg's Small Marble Palace, attending a talk by then-US Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul. I was startled by his incredible lack of knowledge or even regard for the Russian culture and language. The Russians in the audience around me fidgeted uncomfortably. A feeble "thank you" was his only employ of the Russian language as his speech came to a close, and the applause was noticeably muted. Both audience and speaker had done everything by the book, and yet there had been no meaningful connection between them.

Unfortunately, the current political atmosphere has amped tensions, exacerbating the "aggressive" part of the equation to near Cold War levels. But how did we get here? The Russian Federation, birthed from the collapse of the Soviet Union, has enjoyed much more political stability than the United States of the past 25 years. (Of course, stability is much easier to maintain when a reigning leader can change the Constitution to allow himself ever more presidential terms).¹² This piece will analyze the stability of both power structures as well as the dynamic of public perception and approval of national leadership. Through review of literature and examination of public polling, we will see

¹ The Constitution of the Russian Federation now allows an additional decade for presidential terms, up from the original two terms which mirrored the United States rule.

² Blomfield, Adrian.

that the opinion of domestic audiences is important in understanding ongoing international relations because they are largely shaped by them, and how those relations affect not only public perception of their own leadership, but also the reactions of the nations' maneuvers towards one another.

The Russian public is therefore a crucial part of this analysis. While doing field research in Tatarstan in 2013, we stopped many passerby in the capital to ask them what they identified as: Tatar, Russian, or a citizen of Russia? The overwhelming majority picked citizen. A remnant of Soviet camaraderie, perhaps, or is their sense of cultural community more open than the West recognizes or even understands?

Russia has the unique position of being much more diverse than outsiders realize. Early Rus was settled by a mix of Viking and Old Slavic tribes, and the Mongolian invasion several hundred years later brought even more variety. Russia's early rulers came from old Byzantine families, Karelian tribes, and in the Caucasus region, Muslim warriors. Until 1917, the emperor of Russia was a close cousin of the English Queen Victoria. Stalin was a native of Georgia. There is even an entirely Jewish region in Russia's east, aptly dubbed the "Jewish Autonomous Oblast."

With such a rich historical background of diversity, it may be hard to understand why the Russian people were so approving of a continuation of Putinism over time (his approval ratings fluctuate, yet usually maintain an impressive 80%³). We will explore what Putin did to receive such nationwide acceptance because it is important in understanding the delicate relationship of Russia to the West. It should be noted, however, that there is a significant number of Putin detractors, and questions concerning

³ Sputnik News.

poll legitimacy and election fraud domestically may display Russian bureaucratic bias in polling results and statistics.

The ultimate takeaway is that Putin has seamlessly controlled Russian politics for decades, whereas the United States has seen executive power change hands from Clinton, Bush, Obama, and now to Trump. This one-sided dynamic, as we will show, has allowed for less accountability between the nations, more misunderstandings, and a general struggle for maintaining positive relations.

This paper seeks to grasp a better understanding of the current situation in US-Russian relations. We will explore the background of Russian and American policies and presidential administrations of the past several decades, coupled with the changing public perceptions of relations over this time. This will give a clearer picture of the causes and effects that led to the current state of unease between Russia and the United States, and hopefully aid in the assessment of how and where to go from here towards a future of improved relations and increased positive perceptions of one another.

Background

Russia

“The country didn’t have a future...It would have been very difficult to sit inside the system and wait for it all to collapse around me.” – Vladimir Putin⁴

Economic Policy

What matters historically is Russia’s timeline from the fall of the Soviet Union, because we are dealing with the era of Putinist Russia as it rose from the USSR to the Russian Federation. Vladimir Putin’s presidencies have shaped much of the way the

⁴ Putin, Vladimir. pp. 85.

present day Russian state operates. After the Soviet collapse and Boris Yeltsin's presidential term (1991-1999), Vladimir Putin ascended to the presidency. The nation's economy was undergoing a gradual displacement of an official state economy by a shadow economy. The West had enjoyed a new, hopeful relationship with former leader Boris Yeltsin, and despite lingering Cold War nuclear tensions, the legal approval of the Russian shadow economy in 1993 by the Gaidar and Chernomyrdin cabinets showed the West a Russian desire for neoliberal reform. By 1996, Western interest in Russia was at an all-time high: American corporations such as McDonalds and Coca Cola began to trickle into the former USSR to become acquainted with a new population of customers.

In 2000, Putin's tactics introduced the Gref Program to the country, aimed at improving the economic situation and bringing Russia up to speed with the rest of the world's global market system. Mirroring much of the interests of Republicans in the US, Russia was continuing to enjoy positive press by Western media. The program was well received domestically as well, because the economy grew immensely between 1999 and 2008 due in part to the Gref Program (named for the CEO of Russia's state-owned Sberbank Bank), and in part to Western economic integration. These were the five key reforms of the Gref Program:

1. Taxation would now consist of a flat income tax of 13%.⁵
2. Private ownership of land, something Russia was unfamiliar with after centuries of serfdom and Sovietism, was finally a reality by 2001.⁶
3. Relaxed labor laws with employer-friendly legislation were "adopted with the genuine use of democratic mechanisms and procedures."⁷

⁵ Goyette, Braden.

⁶ Reynolds, Maura.

4. Deregulation initiatives removed hurdles to private entrepreneurship, stating in the program's official writings that the government should "withdraw from practices of unnecessary intervention in business affairs"⁸ and;
5. Welfare spending was reduced and social benefits were monetized by 2004.⁹

In addition, the devaluation of the ruble, reforms pre-established by the Yeltsin era, increasing oil prices, and new, cheap credit from Western banks all combined to allow Putin to declare the transition from USSR to Federation a huge success for his administration. Putin lay claim to the statement that the poverty rate nationwide was cut in half by the end of his first two presidential terms.¹⁰

Domestic Policy

Despite economic improvements domestically, Russia had inner turmoil brewing. It was not until 1999 that tensions between the United States and the new Russian Federation began to upset relations within the country as well. Putin's war in the Caucasus, a centuries-long continued battle between Kremlin powers and the Chechen population in the South, gave the West reason to question Russian militarist intentions. The people of Chechnya suffered through colonization from tsars as far back as Peter the Great, only to be deported to Stalinist gulags during the USSR period. With the emergence of Putinism came a new imperialist attitude towards Russian regions seeking independence; with oil and prime real estate, the Republic of Chechnya was bound up in conflict instead of liberation. This rest of the world watched as Russia waged two civil wars against the people in one of its own republics.

⁷ Grigorev, Ivan, pp. 184.

⁸ Mennicken, Andrea, pp. 88.

⁹ Sinitsina, Irina, pp. 8.

¹⁰ Interfax Ukraine.

Foreign Policy

Yet relations with the international community could have been worse. With the terrorist attacks on US soil in 2001, the Bush administration ramped up what they declared to be a global “War on Terror,” and due to the positive personal relationship between George W. Bush and Putin, Russia was brought on board as an ally and active participant in battling terrorism. For Putin, this was the perfect excuse to continue oppressing his Southern Muslim regions, giving rise to an ever more reactionary and threatened population therein.

Ariel Cohen, a prominent scholar in the Russian and Eurasian fields, explains that, “Putin immediately ordered intelligence on ties between bin Laden and the Taliban to be passed on to the United States,” and that Russia sought to “cooperate with the United States on search-and-rescue missions...to allow the United States to use air corridors and military bases on their territory.”¹¹ She argues that it was the joint response to the threat of the Taliban that created this cooperation, and that has continued today in the face of the rising threat of ISIL. “The Russians have worked very hard,” she adds, “to link the events of 11 September to Chechnya.”¹² Indeed, in today’s ongoing conflict in Syria, thousands of extremist rebel fighters have poured in from Russia’s troubled Caucasus.

Unfortunately, media crackdowns – for which the Putin administration was famous – did nothing to prevent the Beslan crisis from flashing across television screens

¹¹Cohen, Ariel. pp. 561

¹² *ibid*, pp. 564

to global audiences in 2004, displaying massive “inefficiency”¹³ of the Putin administration to think on its feet and protect its citizens with as little violence as necessary.

In the Beslan crisis, Russia endured a particularly tragic domestic terror attack when Chechen-supporting rebels took hostages in an elementary school. Putin’s inability to negotiate during the nearly four days hundreds of parents, teachers, and students were held inside the school led to a bloody gun battle (ordered and initiated by Putin himself) that ended in the accidental detonation of one of the terrorist’s bombs. Hundreds of civilians perished in the resulting gymnasium fire, half of whom were children.¹⁴

Yet this tragedy garnered a majority of support from Western audiences and US government officials.¹⁵ President Bush took the opportunity to emphasize the importance of his War on Terror, and the rekindled Bush-Putin relationship deepened.

By the time Obama was running for president of the United States, Putin was beginning to determine how best to remain Russia’s leader after the expiration of his term limits. As he lined up the statesman Dmitri Medvedev to serve as president in the interim, domestic instability increased due to inevitable changes in power. The United States was enduring something similar as the nation went from eight years of a Republican president to electing their first black man in the staunch liberal Barack Obama.

Unfortunately, Russia’s problems were bigger than who to elect (or re-elect). In 2005 a wave of “Color Revolutions” (largely non-violent uprisings in former Soviet states to gain more independent powers) swept across parts of the former Soviet Union,

¹³ Gidadhubli, R. G., pp. 4704.

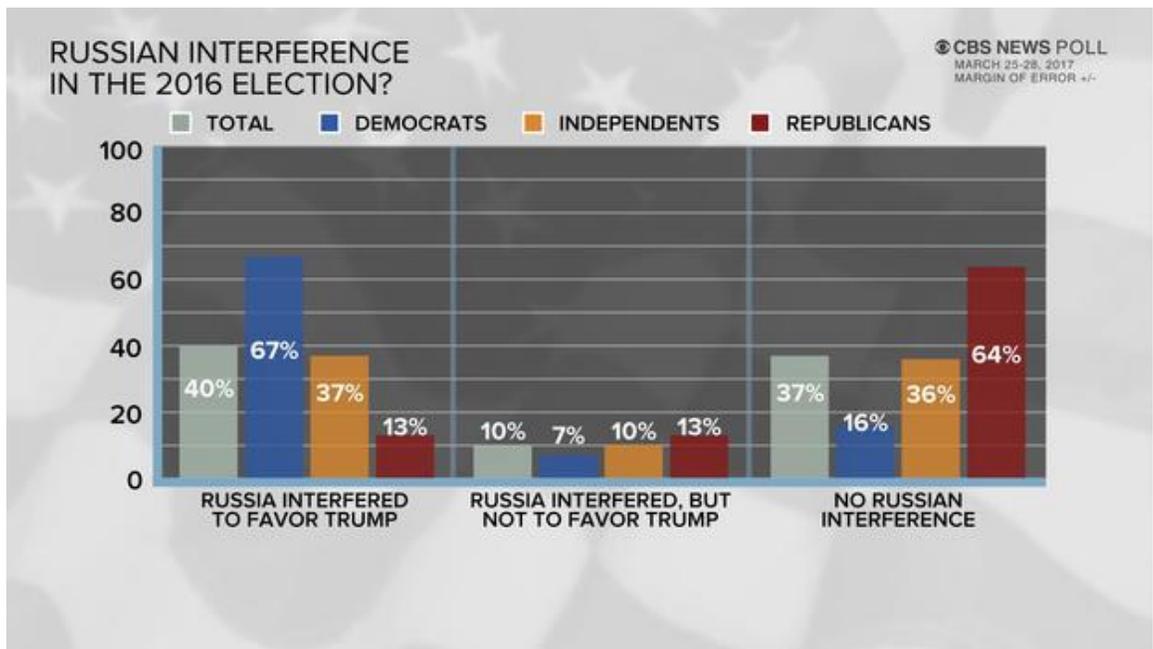
¹⁴ OC Media.

¹⁵ Gidadhubli, pp. 4704.

taking Ukraine with it in their own successful Orange Revolution. This occurred in the wake of their own contentious presidential elections in 2004, which many citizens viewed with concern and skepticism over Russian influence. Russia had failed to prevent this problem in Ukraine, but thankfully for Putinism, a color revolution never succeeded inside Russia proper.

The United States

Currently nearly half of the United States population is in favor of a probe into the possibility of Russia having meddled in the 2016 presidential election (see poll below):



A recent Gallup Poll puts unfavorable attitudes towards Russia at an all time high since the Cold War era, as well.¹⁶

How did we get here? The United States, unlike Russia, has seen power change hands four times since the 1990s, as compared to Putin’s continued grip on Russia with his election at the end of Boris Yeltsin’s term of office in 1999. These changes have led

¹⁶ De Pinto, Khanna, & Salvanto.

to increased tensions between the two nations, spurring disagreements on foreign policy, reigniting Cold War era conflicts, and creating new points of contention.

Clinton

During the presidential terms served by Bill Clinton (1993-2001), the break up of Yugoslavia led to political derision between the US and Russia. Allies of Serbia, Russia considered the US's military intervention in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia Herzegovina to be an overstep in power and a violation of Balkan sovereignty. The US, ever insistent on its role as a defender of democracy, ended the war by bombing Belgrade in 1999, something considered by many in the Moscow Kremlin to have been a cruel and unnecessary act of violence (many civilians perished in the airstrikes). In the "Moscow News" newspaper, A. Grachev wrote of the Russian dream of a 'common European home' as having been 'left in pieces,' by US actions, with Derek Averre of *International Affairs* commenting that the United States "had bombed not only Milosevic but also the UN and Post-Cold War Europe."¹⁷ Clinton's decisions on Yugoslavia polarized his relations with Eastern Europe, and in the already rocky relations with Russia, this problem only exacerbated the tumultuous bond.

However, progress was made the following year, when presidents Clinton and Putin met multiple times throughout the summer and fall to discuss improving nuclear peace, coming together to sign the "Strategic Stability Cooperation Initiative," aimed at securing arms control and relations between Russia and the United States. Yet political analysts at the time, such as Philipp Bleek of *Arms Control Today*, suggested that "US officials no longer expect... agreement to be negotiated during the remainder of President

¹⁷ Averre, Derek, pp. 575-591.

Clinton's term and appear to be pursuing uncontroversial 'strategic stability cooperation' as an alternative to more substantive work on strategic arms control."¹⁸ Thus, while rhetoric between the US and Russia improved with Putin's presidency, critics argue that these were mere surface changes to tangible foreign policy.

However this was still improvement from the Yeltsin presidential era, where Clinton and Yeltsin had exchanged very public and very harsh words. Yeltsin once said of Clinton, "He obviously must have forgotten...that Russia possesses a full arsenal of nuclear weapons. He's forgotten it, and that's why he's decided to flex his muscles, as they say."¹⁹ This was in the context of discussion with the Chinese president on not allowing the United States to try to dictate governing around the globe after Clinton had decried the civil wars in Chechnya, and after which Clinton promptly reminded him, "You know, I didn't think *he'd* forgotten that America was a great power when he disagreed with what I did in Kosovo."²⁰

Even back then, the prime minister of Russia was the young Vladimir Putin, and his own response to the exchange was foretelling of future Clinton-Putin interaction. "Russia maintains very good relations with the United States, [Putin] said, and Clinton's criticism of Moscow's actions in Chechnya 'was motivated by the wish to save Russia additional problems.'"²¹ Perhaps due in part to Putin's outlook, Clinton ended his presidential terms with some improved footing in Russian-US relations. However he proved his early, hardline statements had remained his administrative position; as political analyst Lilya Shevtsova observed: "Clinton believed that he needed to prevent

¹⁸ Bleek, Philipp.

¹⁹ Paddock & Kuhn.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ *ibid.*

Russia ‘from blowing up in our faces’ as the former foe began feeling its way forward toward an uncertain political future.’²² What remained uncertain at the close of Clinton and Putin’s relationship was nuclear arms, a recurring and unsolved theme in Russian-US relations. We will see that even in the Bush administration years, discussions on this topic yielded very little in the way of tangible change or improvement.

Bush

Relations between the two countries’ administrations improved only under George W. Bush, with the two finding common ground in anti-Middle Eastern sentiment. But George Bush’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were costly, and the American public cried out against military action. In Putin they began to perceive someone with a similar taste for war as the Bush dynasty, and this was for many their first impression of the new Russia. Polls illustrate clearly the dip in American perception of Russia around the time of 9/11 and the beginning of the war on terror, despite an increase in the nations’ administrations working together.²³ The situation may have opened an improved dialogue, but uncertainty and public disapproval remained.

“President Bush’s Russia advocates include the Department of State and Commerce. However, Russia fails to inspire most others who count in politics and business. American investors – badly burned by their experience of the Russian economic crisis [prior to the Gref Program] – are tentative. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice are skeptical of anything beyond tactical support from the Russians.”²⁴ This rang true, until the events of September 11th

²² Shevtsova, Lilya, pp. 18.

²³ Gallup Poll, 2017.

²⁴ Bremmer & Zaslavsky, pp. 11.

and the consecutive Global War on Terror, in which Russia joined the United States to fight terrorism. “Moscow’s support was essential... Russian intelligence assets in the region were far more extensive than those of the United States. Moscow’s interest in and contacts with the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan were matched only by Iran...”²⁵

Despite this public and close-knit activity rekindled by the Putin-Bush relationship, perceptions within Russia at the time were polarized. Some offered sympathy and approved of the Putin administration’s call to action against global terrorist threats. Others, however, outright decried their belief that the United States *deserved* 9/11. In fact nearly one third of the Russian population believed this at the time.²⁶ At the same time however, political analysts saw a clear means (in the War on Terror) by which relations could improve, an opportunity Bremmer & Zaslavsky dubbed “the biggest the world has seen since the collapse of the Soviet Union.”²⁷ Unfortunately, with a change of presidential administrations in the United States – and still without a concrete Bush-Putin consensus on nuclear arms, this would not come to pass.

Obama

The election of Barack Obama as the first black president of the United States was cause for wide celebration domestically, and garnered plenty of international attention. Racism in Russia is alive and well, with football matches annually enduring hundreds of racist attacks in their stadiums alone, and against Russian nationals who simply happened to be born in a different province.²⁸ Black people are therefore a rare observance inside Russia, and the Russian idea of Obama’s race is curiosity with negative connotation.

²⁵ Ibid, pp. 12.

²⁶ Ibid, pp. 13.

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 17.

²⁸ SOVA, Center for Information and Analysis, 2015.

“How do you like your ***** president?” was the first thing my Russian real estate agent asked me when I moved to the comparatively-liberal city of St. Petersburg in 2012. Lack of experience with foreign ethnicities, coupled with the following eight years of disagreements with Putin caused Obama’s approval rating by the Russian people to be dismal (these statistics will be reviewed in detail further on). But what were these disagreements, and how did Putin and Obama handle them?

President Obama entered the White House at a time when the international community was speaking out against Russian actions in Georgia. Military presence and administrative influence there would set a precedent for things to come in Ukraine, where on the 18th of March, 2014 Putin annexed Crimea, citing the Crimean people’s desire to continue to be a part of Russia, and himself desiring to keep the strategically-placed Russian Black Sea Fleet port in Yalta.

Interestingly, where Russia and the United States differed in their foreign policies was the issue of sovereignty, and when it is considered “just” to interfere in the affairs of other countries’ issues. The Putin administration had long criticized the United States for certain aspects of the aftermath of the War on Terror. Specifically, Russia spoke of “noninterventionism”²⁹ in regards to most international conflict the United States busied itself with, and the Putin administration has maintained support for the Assad regime in Syria partly for this reason, citing Washington’s “justifications” for intervention as a “threat to world security.”³⁰ These violations of sovereignty did not apply to Russia’s own activities of course, from Georgia to Crimea, and the disagreements on this issue alone spurred declining relations for Obama and Putin.

²⁹ Stent, Angela. Pp. 82.

³⁰ Ibid.

For Obama, a “reset” in international relations was the key goal, and his main objective with Russia was to secure improved relations concerned with the elephant in the room: nuclear arms. This would, however, begin and end with political blunders that left Obama in much the same position as his predecessors; with no real change in US-Russian talks on the nuclear issue.

“When Secretary of State Hillary Clinton held her first meeting with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Geneva in March 2009, she handed her Russian counterpart a small gift box. With reporters eagerly looking on, Lavrov unwrapped the gift and found inside a red button emblazoned with the English word ‘reset’ and the Russian word *peregruzka*. Lavrov took one look at the button and, with a surprised look on his face, exclaimed, ‘You got it wrong.’ He had been given a button with the Russian word for ‘overload.’”³¹

A good metaphor for how things continued, Obama eventually concluded his nuclear decisions with the Iran Deal in 2015 which, though Russia was an additional signatory, garnered Obama a lot of domestic backlash, with critics on both sides saying it was either a continuation of Clinton’s do-nothing, say-something policies, or else much too soft politically on Iran.

Obama’s presidency ended with sanctions against Russia resulting from the Ukrainian conflict and heightened tensions surrounding the dispute of how to best approach a Syrian solution. In his book *Dangerous Doctrine: How Obama’s Grand Strategy Weakened America*, Robert Kaufman considers Obama’s main issue when tackling Russia was his inability to approach the nation as a separate cultural and political

³¹ Stent, Angela. Pp. 211.

entity, something mirrored in Russian sentiment as well as Slavic academia. Kaufman argues, “The *Obama Doctrine* is a synthesis of various elements of classical realism, neorealism, and liberal multilateralism; it appropriates the most problematic features of these paradigms without their countervailing virtues. Like neorealism, the Obama Doctrine underplays the importance of ideology and regime type in determining friends, foes, threats, and opportunities. This conceptual error accounts largely for the administration’s serial miscalculations dealing with Putin’s authoritarian Russia...”³²

The Obama administration may have truly made mistakes when faced with Russian issues, but the blame cannot solely fall to him. Putin maintained his stubborn hardline against pro-Western Ukrainians, Assad’s marginalized populations, and refused to bat an eye as Western sanctions toppled his nation’s currency.

Additionally, if the United States has faced such abrupt and often polarizing changes in its administrative leadership, and still no consensus between the two nations can be reached on the dire topic of nuclear arms, perhaps something more is at work than American inability to negotiate. Clinton, Bush, and Obama all made various and diverse attempts to solve the issue of a Russian-US nuclear peace agreement. It seems on this issue, Putin refuses to budge towards a real safe and lasting change.

Methodology: Where Are We Now?

State Positions

In 2016, Russia was booted from the UN Human Rights Council. This was in response, like the US sanctions, to the Ukrainian Civil War and the Syrian conflict, and the world’s perspective on Russian aggression involving the annexation of Crimea and

³² Kaufman, Robert. Pp. 185.

the infiltration of Russian air force operatives into Syrian airspace. 2016 was a difficult year for Russia. At its end, amid election influence accusations and continued sanctions, the Russian army choir, made famous for its beautiful, triumphant vocals from its beginnings as the Red Army Choir, were en route to sing for the troops over the Christmas holidays in Syria when the plane crashed, killing all members of the choir on board. This tragedy went largely uncovered in Western media, overshadowed by the fallout of the US Presidential election.

Still, in the political realm, Russia seemed to be okay with being ousted from the UN's Human Rights Council. As a member of the UN Security Council, Russia retained the ability to veto anything it did not like, as it has done numerous times (and with a particular focus on vetoing "sovereignty violations" in Syria as of late). Putin has never hidden his disdain for global organizations, railing time and again against NATO, the IMF, the EU, and going so far as to shut down certain liberal institutions reflecting global community ideals within his own borders.

For example, in 2009, my alma mater the European University at St. Petersburg, was shut down following funding received from George Soros (a big Hungarian-American investor that Putin also holds a particular disdain for). Government agents entered the building – a prime piece of historical real estate humbly named the "Small Marble Palace" – and declared the doors would have to shut on education due to a small "fire hazard" infraction. The school fought and won, briefly, and every year on the anniversary of the event, students and faculty triumphantly carry a symbolic fire hose through the palace in remembrance.

Unfortunately, coinciding with the rise in aggressive Western rhetoric against Russia in the wake of the 2016 election, the government targeted the school again, revoking its license entirely and bringing learning to a halt. Rumors inside Russia at the time suggested that the Putin administration had gotten wind of LGBT subject matter in course teachings (a 2013 law went into affect in Russia declaring any discussion or visibility of LGBT issues to be illegal “propaganda” that “targeted children for conversion” into “perverse lifestyle”). Others postulated that Putin wanted to rid the university of Soros-like liberalism once and for all. Strangely, Putin himself spoke out against these things, defending the university for the first time, and graciously allowing the university a chance in appeals court to regain their license. EUSP is currently awaiting the decision of its third circuit of appeals court.

Banning “LGBT propaganda” in Russia is not the worst news for discrimination based on sexual orientation, and Russia continually makes Western headlines with homophobic legislation and actions. In early 2017 reports began to emerge out of the Republic of Chechnya, saying that homosexuals – males in particular – were being rounded up, thrown into prisons, tortured, and even killed. Despite Putin’s track record of speaking out against violent Chechen activities, the Kremlin has remained silent on this issue as human rights organizations around the world hone in. Petitions and media campaigns swept the Western world when the news surfaced, with nearly 200,000 signatures collected by Amnesty International UK demanding “Russian and Chechen authorities to investigate.”³³ In some instances, such as race and sexuality, Russian

³³ Amnesty International UK.

cultural perspective has a long way to go to reach the civil rights levels granted in the United States.

Russia and the United States definitely have strong positions, and they will have to work together to compromise if they wish to improve relations between their countries. It is crucial therefore, that valuable Western institutions inside Russia – like the European University at St. Petersburg – continue to exist. Equally important are higher educational programs within the United States that focus on understanding our Eastern European contemporaries. Fortunately, though President Trump has made early moves towards budget cuts for higher education, Congress has made a bipartisan effort to reject cuts,³⁴ and must continue to do so for the sake of international relations education.

The biggest issues standing in the way of cooperation are issues of energy, property (with both nations vying for conflict intervention in oil-rich territories), and differing perceptions of how to cooperate in the global community. The United States' hardline stance on NATO is perceived by Russia as an act of aggression, moving bases into Eastern Europe puts Putin on high alert and increases his distrust of the US. As both hegemony scramble for natural resources, the Crimea and even Arctic territory arguments flare tensions. In Ukraine, the United States sees a country wishing to progress into the European Union and commence with Western trade, while Russia views the Ukrainian Civil War as a necessary pre-emptive strike for preserving its rights to Crimean and Eastern Ukrainian territories with rich Russian history. Similarly, both countries with northernmost landmasses touching the Arctic (along with US ally Canada) believe in

³⁴ Center for American Progress.

their own right to our planet's glacial crown, as yet largely untapped for resources and oil drilling.

Conflict over territory and resources is nothing new; as we saw in the Clinton years with the break up of Yugoslavia, and Russia's undying loyalty to their Serbian brothers, clashes concerning territories that neither country may even have a right to, but feel they both have a stake in, have been a part of Russian-US relations as a rule rather than an exception.

Syria is the newest volatile issue for Russia and the United States. With extremists reacting to both powers, Syria has seen an influx of Russian nationals joining ISIL in the Syrian Civil War, with Russian and US military strikes both battling the terrorists for different reasons. Putin as a long time ally of Assad and domestically hailed as a defender of the Orthodox Syrian minority should Assad fall from power, Russia has sealed its role in the conflict as support of the oppressor, whereas the United States traipsed in under the guise of defending democracy, similar to its hegemonic tactics in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, etc. Russia gets no pass on hegemonic actions by supporting the Assad dictatorship, but chooses to point the blame at the West for creating terrorism in the first place. Long gone are the days of the Bush-Putin partnership in the global "War on Terror." However, nuances in the US-Russian relationship surrounding the issue of terrorism continue.

Russia estimates that at least 1,000³⁵ of its nationals have entered Syria as jihadist fighters, putting the percentage of Russian-born ISIS fighters at 6% of ISIS's *total* foreign membership. Finally, in summer of last year, Chechen fighters led the battle

³⁵ Graham & Saradzhyan,

against the Kurds, gaining respect and eventually formal recognition by ISIL. ISIL officially renamed the Russian region from whence the insurgents came “The Caucasus Province (ISIL-CP).”

Still, on the 2nd of September 2015 the Caucasus Province found enough extremists within its borders to carry out its first attack in Russia. The ISIL-CP attacked Russian military barracks in southern Dagestan, killing and wounding an undisclosed amount of personnel. Following this, on the 29th of September 2015, the US State Department added the ISIL-CP to its list of “threats posed” by “Foreign Terrorist Fighters,” naming Rustam Asel’derov - the ISIL-CP ring-leader - a “Specially Designated Global Terrorist.”

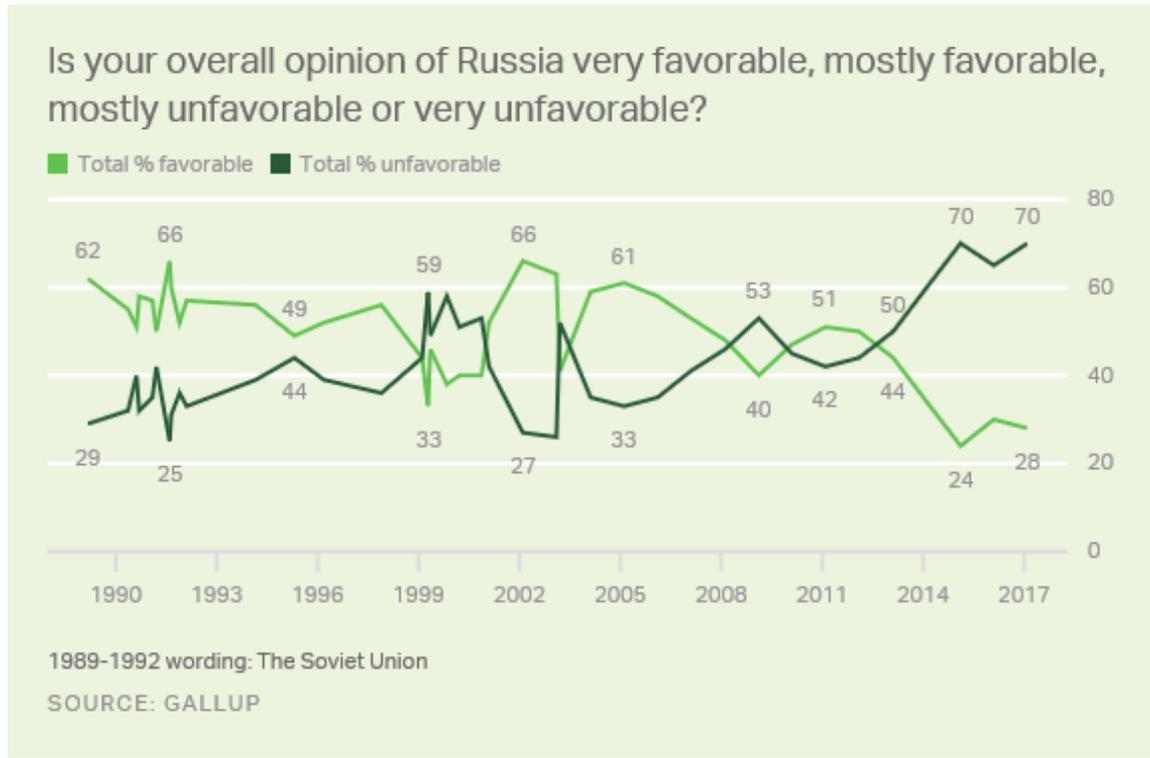
This was, however, the beginning of the United States’ outspoken reaction to the existence of the ISIL-CP. The United States approached Russia as a partner in the fight against terrorism yet again. Scholars looking back on the beginning of the War on Terror say it was “the first time since World War II [that] intelligence cooperation between the United States and Russia was exemplary.”³⁶ In this one instance, the two are still joined at least in rhetoric against radical “terrorism.”

Of course, this does not mean that there is a mutual understanding concerning the Russian and US respective responses to Syria and ISIL. Russia continues the old adage of noninterventionism and continues to support the Assad regime in the name of preserving Syria’s sovereignty. The war wages on while vested US and Russian interests take no backseat to democracy.

Public Perceptions

³⁶ Cohen, Ariel. pp. 556.

In this section we will discuss public perceptions in relation to the above-mentioned historical contexts. The public perception of Russia by Americans over time is clearly illustrated in the table below:



At each significant rise and fall of the favorable and unfavorable ratings, we can examine the context of events and discussions taking place at the time between the two nations to better understand why public perception swung one way or another. For example, in the early days following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the chart displays higher unfavorable outlooks, while this takes a dip towards George W. Bush's introduction of the joint Putin cooperation concerning the Global War on Terror. These favorability ratings dip again during Obama's presidencies, and unfavorable perceptions grow exponentially around the beginning of the 2014 Sochi Olympics and the ongoing Syrian conflict. Like any Olympic event, the media was quick to condemn the Russian government's stadium building and local populations being forcibly ousted to make way

for the games. Compounding this however, were more general concerns over how Russia would treat its visiting LGBT athletes. Public opinion therefore soured. The chart's unfavorable ratings predictably reach their crescendo in 2017, around the fall out in the wake of the 2016 US Presidential election.

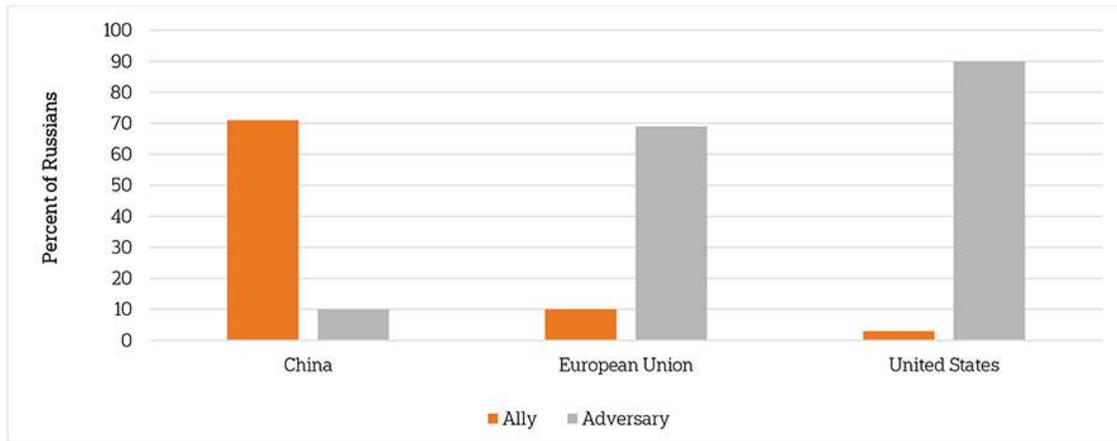
However, further investigation would be required to understand why there seems to be a median at which favorable and unfavorable relations maintain a certain amount over time. What is the deep-seated semi-approval and disapproval Americans have with Russia? Is it Cold War remnants, now exacerbated by prevailing issues that have continued to be points of contention for the two nations? Further research and observation would be required to answer these questions. The observation we can take away for our purposes is that certain political events and discourse can affect public perceptions positively and negatively, and we can consider these events and discourse when attempting to explain and understand how the US-Russian relationship has arrived at its current state, and why and how public perception trends positive or negative respectively, over time.

We must also examine how Russians have viewed the United States. In 2014, the Associated Press's NORC Center for Public Affairs Research³⁷ found that nearly 90% of Russia's citizens viewed Russia as an adversary instead of an ally, a much darker ranking than the European Union received at barely 70% adversarial views, and compared to

³⁷ The Associated Press, 2014.

China's over 70% ally rating, this looks very concerning (see table below):

Percent of Russians who see China, the European Union, and United States as adversaries or allies in 2014

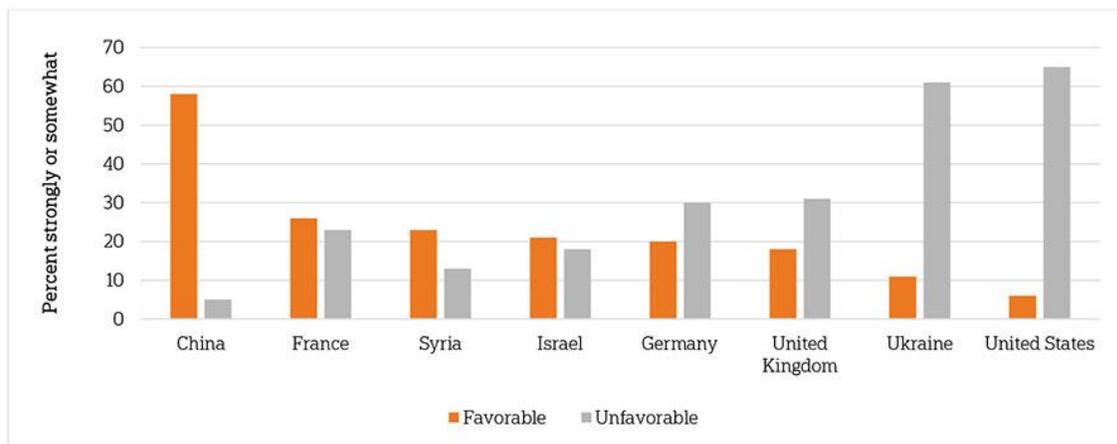


Question: In general, do you think of [the United States/the European Union/China] as more of an ally or more of an adversary?

The Associated Press's NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2014.

When asked if Russians held a favorable or unfavorable view of the United States, among other countries, the United States scored almost 70% of Russians believing America to be unfavorable. To put this into context, even Syria scores a higher favorability rating (see table below):

Percent of Russians rating each country as favorable and unfavorable in 2014

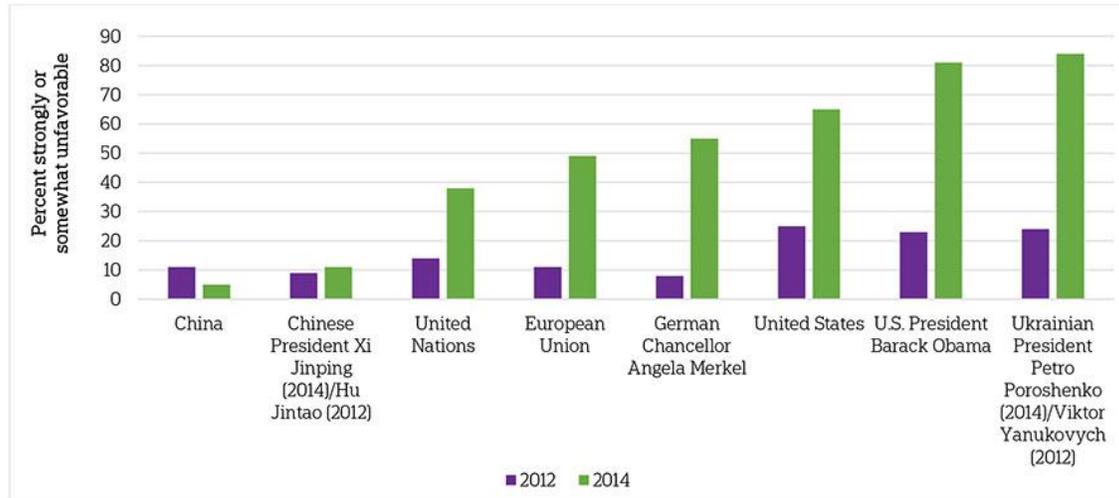


Question: Please tell me if you have a favorable, unfavorable, or neither favorable nor unfavorable view of each of the following countries?

The Associated Press's NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2014.

Because these Russian polls were done during the Obama years, we can even observe the drop in favorability of his presidency. In 2012, less than 30% of Russians held an unfavorable view of President Obama. However, by 2014, this number had made the significant increase to nearly 80% (see table below):

Percent of Russians who rate each individual or institution as unfavorable in 2012 and 2014



Question: Please tell me if you have a favorable, unfavorable, or neither favorable nor unfavorable view of the following people and institutions?

The Associated Press's NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2014.

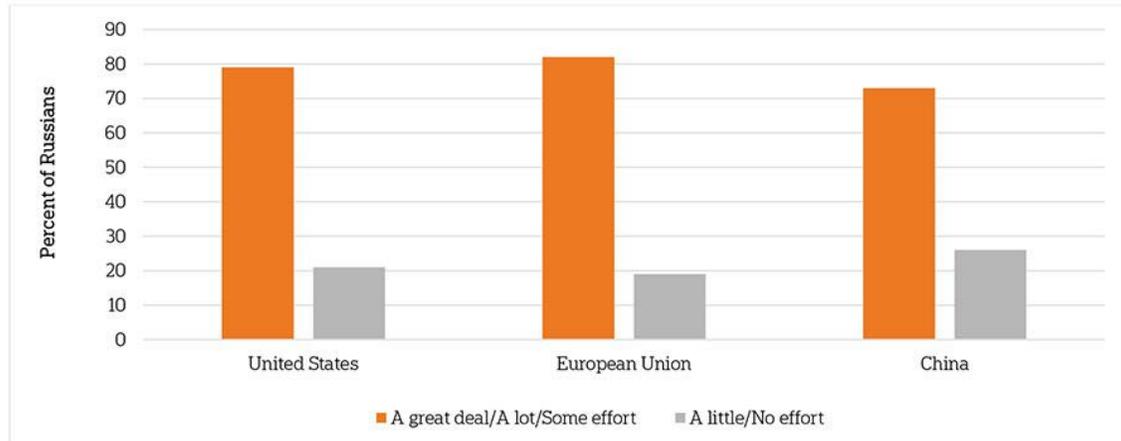
Through these changes in public perception, we can better understand the responses of the citizens of both Russia and the United States when their leaders make decisions that often clash with one another. These statistics are most important now more than ever, because we are witnessing concerning, record lows in the time of the Russian Federation's very existence. For all intents and purposes, our relations have reached the low levels of the US-USSR relationship.

Findings

While public perception and diplomatic relations are at rock bottom, there is still hope. The same Associated Press survey given to the Russian public on how positively

they view their adversaries in the West also gathered information on what Russians believe Russia *should do* about negative relations, and the overwhelming response was that the average citizen wished for improvement and renewed partnership with the United States (see table below):

Most Russians believe their country should make efforts to improve its relationship with the United States, the European Union, and China



Question: How much, if any, effort should Russia make to improve its relationship with [the United States/the European Union/China]? Would you say a great deal of effort, a lot of effort, some effort, little effort, or no effort at all?

The Associated Press's NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2014.

Russians believe that a lot of hard work is required to reconcile with the West, and would be interested to see the government attempt it. This will unfortunately prove difficult as we can observe American approval of Russia in general continues to plummet. With almost half of the United States population in favor of investigating Russia in the wake of the failed Hillary Clinton campaign, the US seems more keen to find blame in an old adversary than in trying to repair relations and move forward. Even as Trump flip flops on his opinion of Putin, it is hard to retrieve concrete evidence that any tampering by the Russian Federation occurred at all.

Many reputable and non-partisan sources have suggested the possibility of Russian media working against the positions of Democrats and slandering Hillary Clinton

during her run, however there is, as yet, nothing to suggest direct ties to Putin's administration. In recent weeks, Putin has even spoken of the new US President Trump warily as the unorthodox American leader goes back on many of his campaign promises and backtracks on positions previously agreeable to Putin. Amid accusations that President Trump leaked confidential and sensitive information concerning US security to Russian envoys on May 17th 2017, Putin even offered to share the transcripts with US Congress.³⁸ However this too, remains to be seen in terms of a true offering of transparency, and US Putin critics have already "laughed off"³⁹ Putin's offer as insincere at best, or an attempt to manipulate the truth at worst.

The 2016 US election, however, could be a research piece in itself. For the purposes of this analysis, the simplified take away is that an atmosphere of animosity and distrust has led Russia and the United States even deeper into tensions in relations and public perception of one another, which, election tampering or no, is the real tragedy for both nations.

Solutions/Conclusion

If two nations are to be allies on good terms, understanding and transparency are key. Unfortunately, transparency is not a talent of either Russia or the United States with each other. This will be the most difficult struggle. The simpler solution is to tackle understanding one another.

Russia must be willing to negotiate with the United States no matter the presidential administration of the time, and to be a true ally (and it is not even concluded

³⁸ Roth, Andrew.

³⁹ Wang, Amy.

that this is the true goal of either Russia or the United States, though both current leaders voice this intent to some extent) must avoid interfering in issues of sovereignty such as national elections. However for Russians, US interference in the Middle East and even Ukraine is just as much of a breach of sovereignty. The problem of inability to understand each other's perspective may not be easily overcome, but increasing dialogue and transparency are key steps towards that process.

Professor Sergei Prozorov of the Petrozavodsk State University postulated to my class at the University of Tampere, Finland in 2009, "If the West seeks a democratic Russia, it must retreat from the idea of Russian capitalism, particularly as undistorted from Western capitalism." To Prozorov, Putin is an adequate representation of Russia for the West in the neoliberal globalization context. The biggest obstacle in the way of improving US-Russian relations is the clash of two hegemonies, with both bending neoliberalist ideals to suit their own interpretations, condemning one another for breaches of sovereignty of states of interest, and continuing to further their own interests in foreign policy, without much regard for one another. To better deal with Russia, the United States desperately needs to learn from insight to have a clear understanding of the way the nation's culture and its government work. Hopefully, Russia shows interest in meeting the United States half way in this educational process.

Russian-American activist and author Masha Gessen has been an avid critic of Putin and United States leadership for decades. In a recent article "Russia: The Conspiracy Trap" that she wrote for *The New York Review of Books*, she reminds us of the problems both nations face moving forward in relations with each other. She specifically talks to her American audience saying, "Russiagate is...promoting a xenophobic

conspiracy theory in the cause of removing a xenophobic conspiracy theorist [Trump] from office.”⁴⁰

More broadly – regardless of the future findings of a possible investigation into Russia’s influence on the United States 2016 Presidential election, Americans should not partake in Russophobic sentiments simply to explain how their domestic turmoil reached its current levels. No US presidency – Trump or otherwise – can be solely attributed to foreign collusion, and to attempt to do so in an already tense era in our relations with the Russian Federation is a detriment to peace and diplomacy.

It is possible to disagree with the actions of one another without waging a media war, a Cold War, or any other contentious prospects. It is possible to enter into talks on nuclear arms and make decisions both parties can live with (in terms of nuclear security, it is safe to conclude that both Russians and Americans want to live). Accountability and openness are key, from the Kremlin to the White House, to the doorsteps of the homes of the citizens of both nations.

⁴⁰ Gessen, Masha.

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