



Americans and Russians Are Mostly Disinterested and Disengaged with Each Other

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The last few years have seen a substantial deterioration in relations between the United States and Russia. The international crisis over Ukraine, Russia's interference in the 2016 US presidential election, and US sanctions against Russia have all contributed to the growing acrimony. [Recent surveys](#) conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Levada Analytical Center reveal that large majorities of both Russians and Americans now view their countries as rivals. But in the midst of heightened tensions between Moscow and Washington, how do regular citizens of each country view one another?

A joint project conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, the Levada Analytical Center, and The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University shows that despite the perception of rivalry between their countries, Russians' and Americans' views on the people of the other country are more favorable. However, the survey results also show that Russians and Americans are not particularly curious about each other, they rarely follow news about one another, and the majority of each group has never met someone from the other. Nonetheless, self-reported interests from each side in arts and sciences suggest that there are non-political paths toward warmer relations.

Key Findings

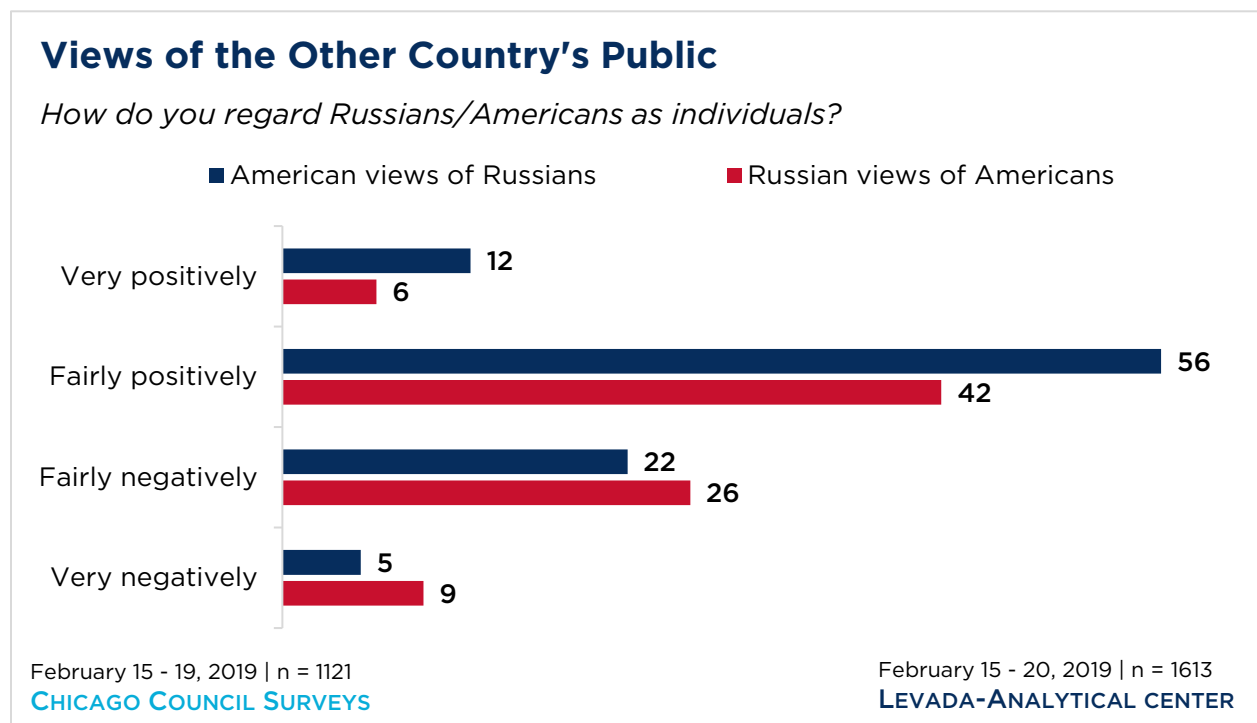
- 68 percent of Americans view Russians either very or fairly positively, while 48 percent of Russians have those views of Americans.
- Majorities of Russians (80%) and Americans (61%) have never knowingly interacted with a person from the other country.

- Each public is disengaged from the news about the other country, with 44 percent of Americans and 47 percent of Russians following the other country's news occasionally while 35 percent of Americans and 26 percent of Russians never follow the news.
- Most Americans (61%) and Russians (70%) responded that they are not very or not at all interested in the other country.

Publics Favor People Over Government

At least eight in ten Russians (85%) and Americans (78%) view each other's countries as rivals, according to polling conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Levada-Center. [Experts on the US-Russian relationship point to several factors](#) that contribute to this: the character of each country's president, the media's propagation of toxic sentiments, the United States' foreign policy following the Cold War, and Russia's alleged interference in Western elections. Nonetheless, both publics express warmer views of the regular people in the other country. Two-thirds of Americans (68%) have a positive view of Russians as individuals, while nearly half of Russians (48%) feel similarly about US citizens. For Russians and Americans, the people who have a very or somewhat positive view of the other population are more likely to have met people from that population.

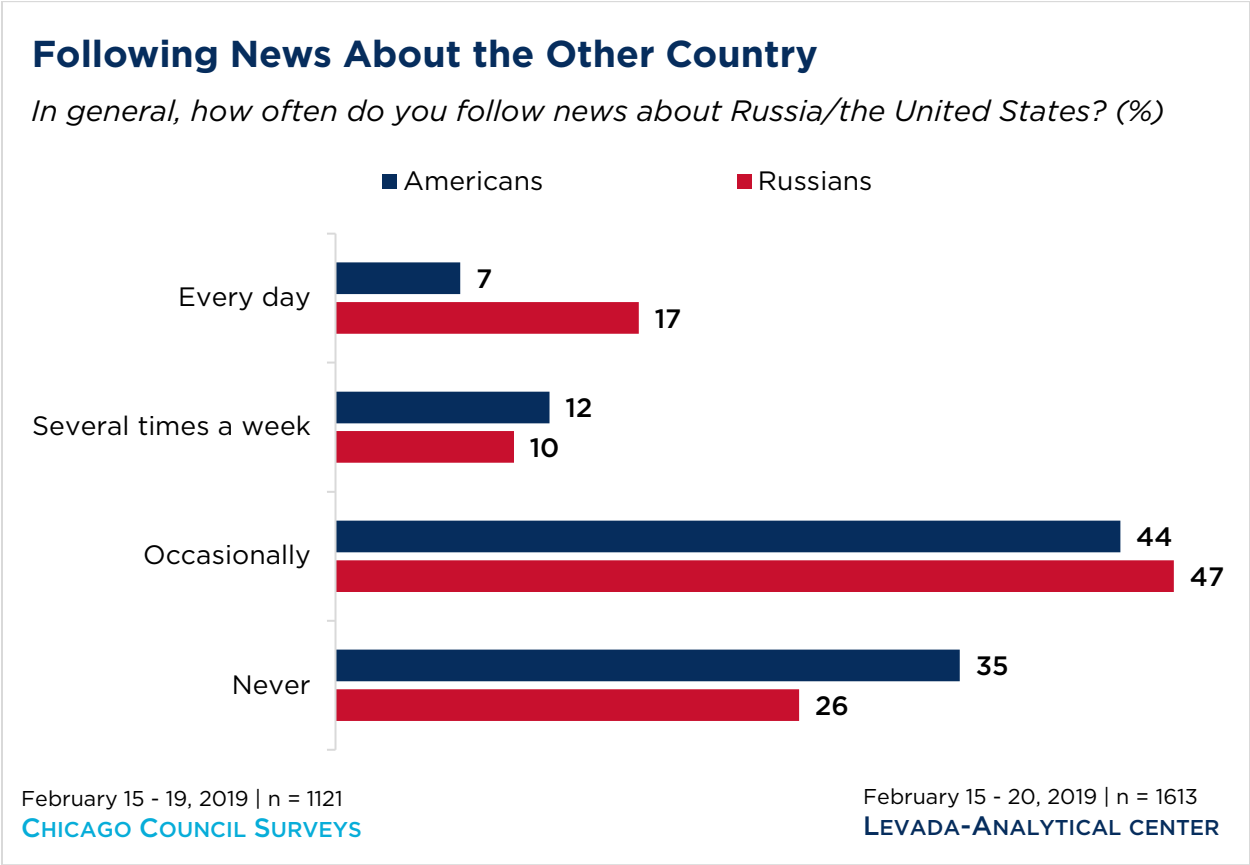
[The Levada-Center's data](#) on Russian sentiment shows that since the start of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014, most Russians (55% in May 2018) have had negative views of the United States, though previously they had been positive. For their part, Americans have historically had lukewarm views of Russia, with the 2016 Chicago Council Survey showing the average sentiment being 40 degrees out of 100.



Media Affects Mutual Perceptions

For both Americans and Russians, domestic television is the main source of information about the other country (28% for Americans, 50% for Russians). The next most popular sources of information for Americans are various forms of international media (19%) and domestic newspapers and magazines (10%), while Russians’ next choices for information about the United States are social media (17%) and international media (15%). Each public’s reliance on domestic media for information may provide an insight into how they develop their views of one another. With the increasing polarization of US media’s depictions of Russia—mainly in regard to alleged Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election—and the political agenda of [Russia’s state-run media](#), this trend likely has a substantial effect on cross-country attitudes.

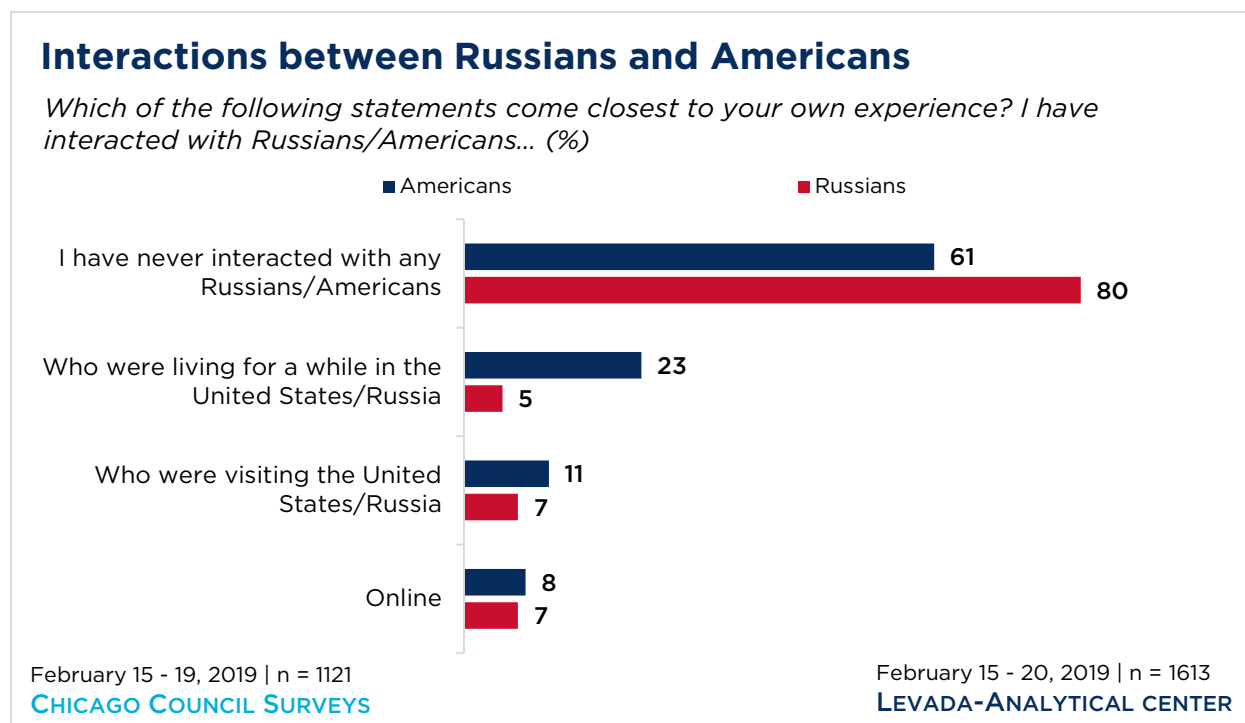
Only 19 percent of Americans say that they follow news about Russia either every day or several times a week, while 27 percent of Russians follow news about the United States as frequently. Of those Americans who follow the news every day, 58 percent view Russians either fairly or very positively, while 46 percent of Russians who follow the news at the same frequency view Americans the same way. However, a plurality of both publics (44% of Americans, 47% of Russians) follows news about the other country only occasionally—less than several times a week.



While much of Russian media is controlled by the Kremlin, more Russians view Americans positively (6% very positively, 42% fairly positively) than negatively (26% fairly negatively, 9% very negatively). In his [2017 article with the Carnegie Moscow Center](#), the Levada-Center’s sociologist and expert Denis Volkov attributes Russians’ improving attitudes toward Americans to Russian leaders’ desire to improve their relationship with Western nations following President Trump’s election victory—a desire transmitted through domestic television. He goes on to note that the tone of media coverage in Russia on the United States is directly related to the ability of the two nations to reach compromise on contentious issues; it is possible, Volkov adds, that Russian public opinion of the American people will turn sour if the Trump administration cannot reach compromise with Russia.

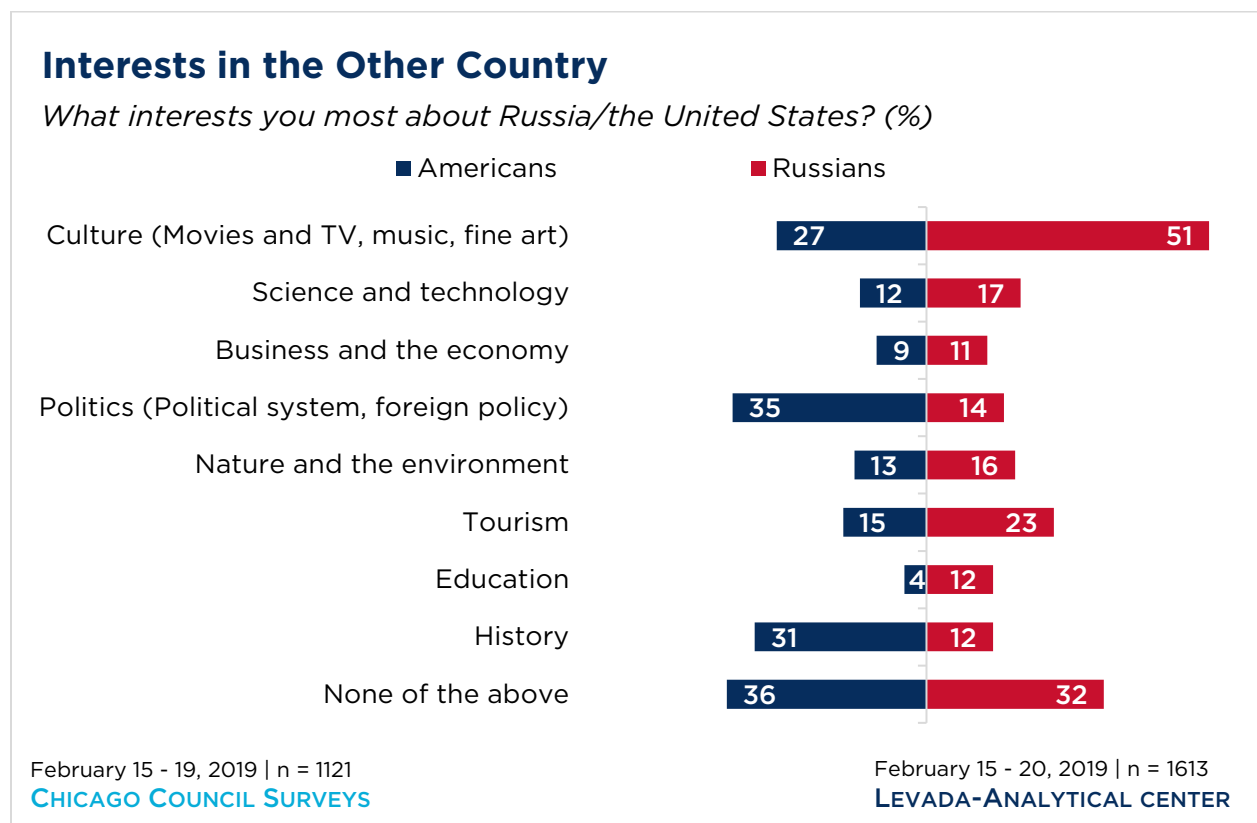
Lack of Interaction, Differing Interests

Majorities of each population have never interacted with individuals from the other country. Eight in ten Russians (80%) and six in ten Americans (61%) say they have never interacted with Americans or Russians, respectively. About a quarter of Americans (23%) say they have met Russians who were living for a while in the United States, and handfuls of both Russians and Americans have met people from the other country while traveling, visiting, or living abroad. Moreover, both groups express that they have little to no interest in information or knowledge about the other country (61% of Americans, 70% of Russians). For people in Russia and the United States, those who are high-income earners or those who have a higher education tend to have a greater interest in information about the other country and generally have had more interactions with people from the other country.



* Excluded responses in which both publics responded less than 5% (While visiting Russia/the United States, While visiting another country, While living in Russia/the United States, While living in another country)

These results suggest a divide in the way each public views the other, with Russians perceiving the United States as a cultural entity and Americans viewing Russia in a historical and political context. When asked about their interest in the other country, Americans point primarily to Russia’s history (31%), politics¹ (35%), and culture² (27%). Russians for their part are primarily interested in American culture² (51%) and tourism (23%). It is important to note that for this question, one of the highest rates of response for both publics was “none of the above” (36% for Americans, 32% for Russians). Between the lack of interaction and the general disinterest (or interests more specific than those listed in the response options), it appears that each public’s view of the other is informed by these specific fascinations in addition to media portrayals.

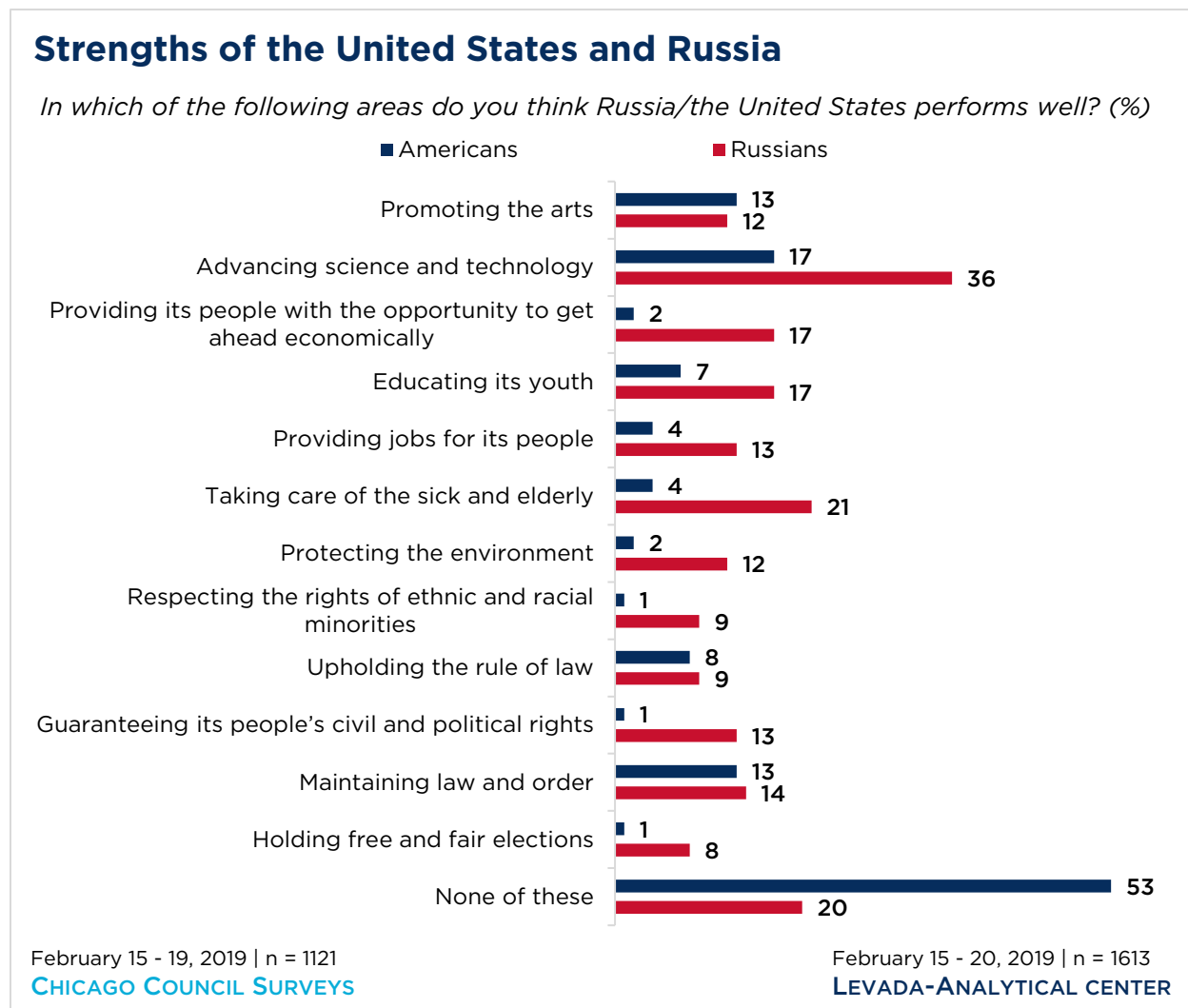


Additionally, respondents were asked in which areas the other nation performs well. Americans think that Russia does well in its efforts to advance science and technology (17%), promote the arts (13%), and maintain law and order (13%). Russians also said that the United States performs well in advancing science and technology (36%) and also included social protection for elderly and sick people (21%), youth education (17%), and providing economic opportunities for Americans (17%). Once

¹ Politics was calculated by adding together political system (19% of Americans, 6% of Russians) and foreign policy (16% Americans, 8% Russians).

² Culture was calculated by adding together movies and television (3% of Americans, 21% of Russians), music (8% of Americans, 19% of Russians), and fine art, including painting, dance, and theater (16% of Americans, 6% of Russians).

more, this question elicited the highest frequency of the response “none of the above” for Americans (53%) and the third highest frequency for Russians (20%).



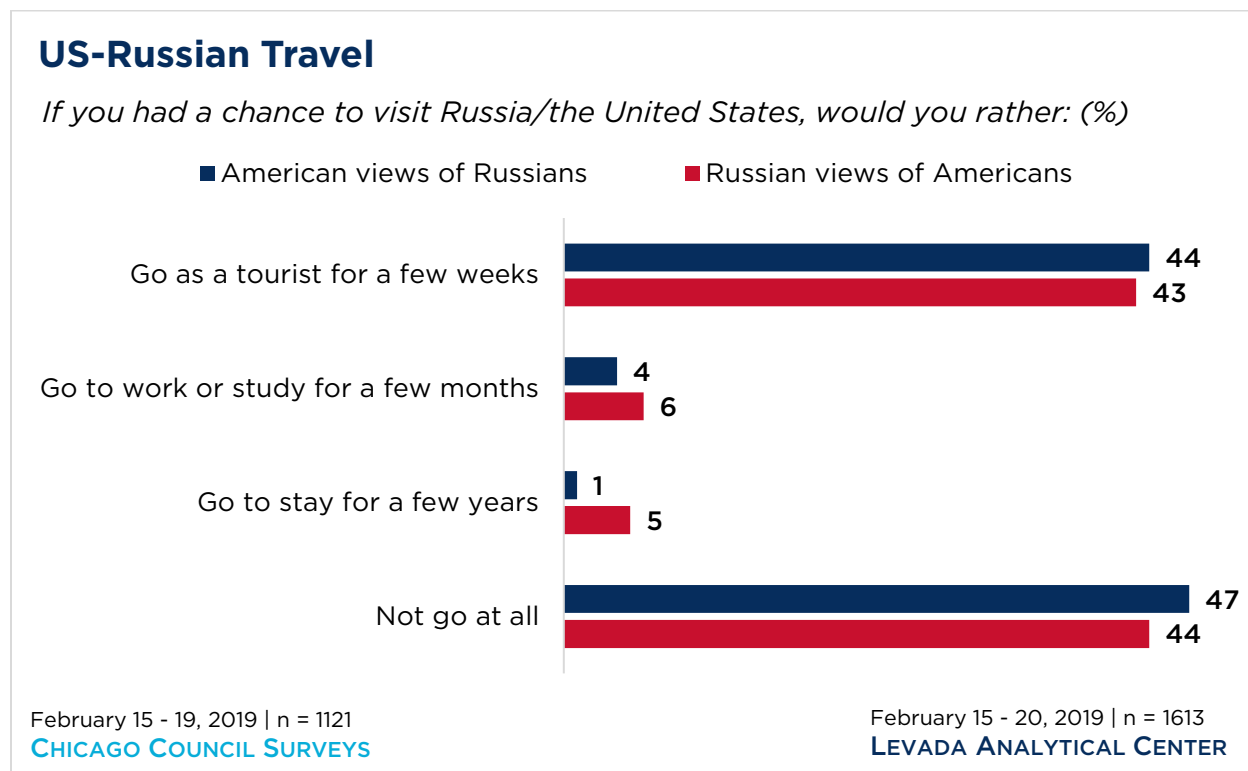
Russians See Divergence in Values

Americans are split, with 49 percent expressing they share values with Russians to a great or to some extent and 47 percent saying to little or to no extent. Russians, however, are more decisive—68 percent respond that Americans share little to no attitudes, beliefs, or worldviews with Russians.

As these topics constitute a broad range of ideas, it is important to consider what ideas are in question. [Polls conducted by the Pew Research Center and Gallup in 2014](#) identified areas where American and Russian perceptions differ: over 80 percent of Russians approve of their leader (versus around 40% of Americans), 19 percent of Americans think being lucky is important to getting ahead in life (versus 49% of Russians), 72 percent of Russians think homosexuality is immoral (versus 37% of Americans), and several others. These ideas, as well as media portrayals, could help to explain why Americans and Russians perceive a difference in values.

However, the imbalance of perceived shared values may be influenced by broader geopolitical currents in addition to contemporary cultural norms.

Finally, the Chicago Council and Levada-Center asked Russians and Americans what they would prefer if they had the chance to visit the other country. A plurality of both publics says that they would prefer not to go at all (47% of Americans, 44% of Russians). A marginally smaller proportion of both groups says they would like to go as a tourist for a brief stay (44% of Americans, 43% of Russians). However, when it comes to spending any extended period in the other country both Russians and Americans are uninterested. As few as 6 percent of Russians say they would want to work or study in the United States for a few months, and 5 percent of Russians express interest in staying for a few years. Similarly, 4 percent of Americans would want to go to Russia for a few months, and just 1 percent want to go to stay for a few years.



Gap in Public Outreach Could Exacerbate US-Russian Tensions

These results paint a mixed image of the mutual perceptions of the two groups. Despite the more positive views toward the regular citizens of the other country, there does not seem to be much interest, admiration, or curiosity between either of the groups. Perhaps this trend is indicative of a need for more public diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges to bridge the gap in sentiments and understanding. Programs such as the [US-Russia Relations Initiative](#) of The Fletcher School, the [US-Russia Peer-To-Peer Dialogue Program](#), and other [educational and cultural exchanges](#) may offer constructive paths to improving US-Russian relations outside of the scope of traditional diplomacy.

Moreover, there are policy areas where each public prioritizes cooperation. When asked in both 2017 and 2019 about priorities for policy cooperation, Americans' and Russians' top three choices included both reducing nuclear weapons worldwide and combatting terrorism. With the recent [collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty](#), non-proliferation efforts are in poor form; unfortunately, it is unlikely that the public will alone can change that.

Increased use of Track II diplomacy—informal and unofficial channels such as scientific and cultural cooperation among universities and non-governmental organizations—to manage and resolve conflict may have far-reaching effects beyond the realm of international relations; it may have a tangible impact on how regular Russians and Americans think of each other. However, it is apparent that public opinion of a country and its people are two separate elements, and it will take more interaction and interest between the populations of Russia and the United States to improve cross-country perceptions.

Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on data from a joint survey on Russian and American Attitudes conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Levada Analytical Center in February 2019.

The US survey was conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs using their national online omnibus service, KnowledgePanel™, between February 15-19, 2019 among a weighted national sample of approximately 1,121 American adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of error is ± 3 percentage points.

The Russia survey was conducted between February 15-20, 2019 by the Levada-Center among a representative sample of 1,613 persons aged 18 years and older, living in eight federal districts of the Russian Federation. Inside each district, the sample is distributed among five strata of settlements proportionally to the population living in them, 18 years of age or older. The margin of error is ± 3.4 percentage points.

About the Chicago Council

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization that provides insight—and influences the public discourse—on critical global issues. We convene leading global voices, conduct independent research, and engage the public to explore ideas that will shape our global future. The Council is committed to bringing clarity and offering solutions to issues that transcend borders and transform how people, business, and governments engage the world. Learn more at thechicagocouncil.org and follow [@ChicagoCouncil](https://twitter.com/ChicagoCouncil).

About The Fletcher School

The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University is the oldest exclusively graduate school of international relations in the United States. The Fletcher Russia and Eurasia Program is dedicated to teaching and research on a broad range of historical and contemporary issues related to Russia, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. Its mission is to educate future scholars and practitioners, generate cutting-edge scholarly analysis of the region, and foster US-Russia cooperation. Learn more at sites.tufts.edu/flecherrussia and follow [@FletcherRussia](https://twitter.com/FletcherRussia) or on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/flecherrussia).

About the Levada-Center

The Levada-Center is one of the leading research organizations in Russia that conducts public opinion surveys, expert and elite surveys, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and other survey methods. The Center brings together experts in the fields of sociology, political science, economics, psychology, market research, and public opinion polls. The Center's research and experts have been cited in national and international media such as *Kommersant*, *Vedomosti*, *RBC*, *The Economist*, *The Wall*

Street Journal, The New York Times, Reuters, BBC Radio, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and others. Learn more at levada.ru/en and follow [@levada_ru](https://www.facebook.com/levada.ru) or on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/levada.ru).

This research is made possible by the generous support of Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Appendix 1: Topline³

Q1. Do you speak at least one foreign language more or less fluently? (%)

	Yes	No	No Response (NR)
Americans	24	75	1
Russians	16	83	8

Q3. In general, how often do you follow news about Russia/the United States? (%)

	Every day	Several times a week	Occasionally	Never	NR
Americans	7	12	44	35	2
Russians	17	10	47	26	1

Q4. Which of the following statements come closest to your own experience? I have interacted with Russians/Americans... (%)

	Americans	Russians
While visiting Russia/the United States	3	1
Who were visiting the United States/Russia	11	7
While visiting another country	4	3
While living in Russia/the United States	1	0
Who were living for a while in the United States/Russia	23	5
While living in another country	4	1
Online	8	7
I have never interacted with any Russians/Americans	61	80
NR	2	1

³ Due to rounding, totals may not add up to 100%

Q5. What is your main source of information about Russia/the United States? (%)

	Americans	Russians
Domestic television	28	50
Domestic radio	3	2
Domestic newspapers and magazines	10	2
Books	2	1
Travel	1	1
International media (radio, television, online)	19	15
Social media	9	17
Friends, acquaintances, neighbors	4	4
None of the above	22	8
NR	2	1

Q6. How do you regard Russians/Americans as individuals? (%)

	Very positively	Fairly positively	Fairly negatively	Very negatively	NR
Americans	12	56	22	5	5
Russians	6	42	26	9	18

Q7. To what extent do you think Russians/Americans share similar attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews with Americans/Russians? (%)

	To a great extent	To some extent	To a little extent	To no extent	NR
Americans	7	42	34	13	5
Russians	3	19	37	31	10

Q8. In general, how interested are you in Russia/the United States (information, knowledge about the country)? (%)

	Very interested	Somewhat interested	Not very interested	Not at all interested	NR
Americans	5	31	35	26	3
Russians	5	23	37	33	2

Q9. What interests you most about Russia/the United States? (%)

	Americans	Russians
Literature	9	7
Movies and television	3	28
Music	8	17
Sports	6	14
Fine art (painting, dance, theater)	16	6
Video games	2	5
Cuisine	8	6
Science and technology	12	17
Business and the economy	9	11
Political system	19	6
Foreign policy	16	8
Nature and the environment	13	16
Tourism	15	23
Education	4	12
History	31	1
None of the above	36	32
NR	3	2

Q11. In which of the following areas do you think Russia/the United States performs well? (%)

	Americans	Russians
Promoting the arts	13	12
Advancing science and technology	17	36
Providing its people with the opportunity to get ahead economically	2	17
Educating its youth	7	17
Providing jobs for its people	4	13
Taking care of the sick and elderly	4	21
Protecting the environment	2	12
Respecting the rights of ethnic and racial minorities	1	9
Upholding the rule of law	8	9
Guaranteeing its people's civil and political rights	1	13
Maintaining law and order	13	14
Holding free and fair elections	1	8
None of these	53	20
NR	6	13

Q12. If you had a chance to visit Russia/the United States, would you rather: (%)

	Go as a tourist for a few weeks	Go to work or study for a few months	Go to stay for a few years	Not go at all	NR
Americans	44	4	1	47	3
Russians	43	6	5	44	2

Q13. The United States/Russia collaborates closely with some countries—including Russia/the United States—in trying to solve international problems. From the list of problems below, please select which one of these problems should be the top priority for cooperation between the United States and Russia?

	Americans	Russians
Eliminating North Korea’s nuclear weapons program	11	2
Improving cyber-security worldwide	5	4
Climate change	9	3
Sustainable development in the Arctic	1	3
Reducing nuclear weapons worldwide	22	19
Combating international terrorism	12	22
Ending the conflict in Ukraine	5	16
Ending the conflict in Syria	8	11
Peacekeeping around the world	21	10
None of the above	*	7
NR	6	5