US-Russia Experts Paint a Dim Picture of Bilateral Relations Before Summit

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US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin are set to meet in Finland next week, where they will likely discuss the future of Ukraine, the civil war in Syria, arms control, and Russia's alleged interference in the 2016 US election. However, experts on the US-Russian relationship—interviewed before the summit was announced[1]—think that decreased communication between the two governments, toxic media coverage, and the natures of both presidents pose formidable challenges to the relationship. During the Cold War, US-Russian cooperation on nuclear and conventional arms control provided some degree of information-sharing and transparency. Experts warn that the lack of communication on this front today could result in heightened risk for escalation.

Key Findings

- Almost all experts in the United States and Russia express scant hope for the US-Russian relationship in the near term. Some, however, could see a path towards improved relations in the distant future.
- Experts in both countries say that both sides—and both presidents—are responsible for the strained relationship.
- They place a good portion of the blame on the United States, particularly for how US leaders have conducted foreign policy since the end of the Cold War.
- Experts also blame Russia's recent forays into Western election interference and Russian insecurities about US intentions for the current bilateral difficulties.
- Another frequently cited source of ill-will on both sides is Russian and US media.

[1] The Chicago Council surveyed 57 US-based experts on the US-Russian relationship between April and May, 2018. The Levada Analytical Center interviewed 19 Russia-based experts between April and June, 2018.

- Russian and American experts see a real need for cooperation on nonproliferation and arms control.

Following surveys among the American and Russian general publics, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Levada Analytical Center reached out to experts on US-Russian relations to see how closely their views aligned with public opinion. The Council surveyed 57 US-based experts at universities and research institutes and Levada interviewed 19 Russia-based journalists, academics, and research experts. While the discussion guides differed for each set of experts, this report focuses on those areas where comparisons are possible.

A Crisis of Trust

The overall picture of the US-Russian relationship painted by experts is grim. American experts rate the relationship an average of 3 on a scale of 1-10, with 1 meaning very hostile and confrontation between the two states likely and 10 meaning very friendly with virtually no possibility of confrontation. Both Russian and American experts describe the relationship as hostile, fueled by misinformation and toxic language on both sides. Even those who identified themselves as optimistic that the two countries could find common cause in narrow areas of cooperation expressed doubt that such efforts would be successful in the current climate.

> **"There is a crisis of trust on the one hand and an unwillingness to have a dialogue… and national pride on the other."**
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> Russian Expert

Polling among the general publics in both countries shows that average Americans and Russians feel this antagonism. A December 2016 Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey found that American sentiment towards Russia had dropped to Cold War lows, and 2017 marked the first time Americans favored working to contain Russian influence rather than looking for areas of cooperation. Levada surveys have found that Russians have grown more negative toward the United States in the past year and tend to prefer that Russia work to constrain the United States rather look for opportunities to cooperate. At the same time, since the election of US President Donald Trump, they have grown less hostile toward the United States and more positive about US-Russia cooperation.[2]

According to the experts who were interviewed in this project, President Trump and Russian President Putin are not helping matters. They say that Putin's response to Western actions—designed to limit his aggressive behavior abroad—has been to

[2] According to Levada polling, the percentage of Russians describing the US-Russia relationship as "hostile" or "tense" decreased from 74 percent in October 2015 to 53 percent in August 2017. The percentage who say that Russia should cooperate with the United States grew from 32 percent in July 2016 to 47 percent in December 2017).

double down on anti-American sentiment. At the same time, the unpredictability of Trump's actions and Congress's attempts to shape US policy towards Russia have similarly added to an already tense environment.[3]

Anti-American Sentiment in Russia: Historical Resentments and Suspicions

> **"Russia is the natural heir of the European values that the modern world is leaving behind. It's a bastion in the struggle against American hegemony, a counterbalance against attempts at a unipolar world."**
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> Russian Expert

Russian experts and some Americans agree that post-Cold War anti-American sentiment in Russia is partially a response to US foreign policy since 1990. In the early days of Russia's post-communist transition, the United States worked closely with the Russian government to aid its economic and political transition. Russian experts say this made the United States a natural scapegoat for the economic and political instability at that time. This contributed to a "perception that the United States used Russian weakness in the 1990s to its own advantage,"[4] even deliberately engineering the "collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent collapse of the Russian economy."[5] Russian experts also describe a sense of resentment toward the United States. According to one such expert, "almost everything the Russian elite does is explained by some psychological complexes of dependence on America."[6] Another similarly remarks, "we are always comparing ourselves to the United States."[7]

Moreover, US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has exacerbated Russians' suspicions of US motives. Both American and Russian experts say that NATO's expansion to the former Soviet sphere and the establishment of US missile defense in Europe are interpreted in Russia as a threat to Russian security and an encroachment

[3] Russian experts are somewhat confounded by the unpredictable nature of American policy decisions and the extent of political polarization in the United States. "Currently [US] relations with Russia are very confusing. On the one hand, diplomats are being expelled, and on the other, Trump is trying to arrange a meeting with Putin … this internal friction results in the United States often behaving very inconsistently in the foreign policy arena," states one Russian expert. Another comments that "the United States is in the midst of an intense civil war, a war between the globalists and the isolationists … At the same time, the elite in Washington – who traditionally play an important role behind the scenes in politics – are also split. It's not clear who to talk to there either."

[4] Open response from survey of US experts.

[5] Open response from survey of US experts.

[6] Russian expert interview.

[7] Russian expert interview.

on Russia's sphere of influence.[8] Experts on both sides also consistently point to the same string of US interventions (and at times, perceived unilateralism) as another root of Russian mistrust: Kosovo, Iraq, and Libya.[9] Russian experts point to these military actions to explain Russia's desire to protect the sovereignty of other countries and to stop the United States from "carry[ing] out humanitarian interventions without being authorized to do so by the UN or the government of a country seeking help, requesting to intervene and provide assistance."[10]

Experts from both the United States and Russia also point to US democracy promotion abroad as exacerbating suspicions, especially those efforts conducted in "the post-Soviet space."[11] American experts in particular, describe the "Kremlin's obsessive fear and conviction that the United States seeks to overthrow Putin, and encircle, weaken, constrain and coerce Russia under Putin."[12] This fear has been exacerbated by "dangling NATO membership" to Georgia and Ukraine, and by perceptions that the United States tried to influence politics in Ukraine.[13] As one American expert put it: "Putin truly thinks that the United States seeks his downfall via a color revolution."[14]

Many experts reference the US failure to incorporate Russia into the post-Cold War world order. Perhaps as a result, most of the Russian experts say that Russia now stands as a counterbalance to the US-led world order, by serving as a check on the United States in international institutions like the UN Security Council. As one Russian expert put it, "there is no other institution [except the UN] we get so much from, investing so little in it."[15]

Still, Russian experts generally view US foreign policy intentions as "preserving the existing system of international relations and trade, since the United States is the main beneficiary of this system."[16] Taking this further, another Russian expert said the US aims to preserve "dominance and control over everything that's happening in the

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[8] NATO expansion since the break-up of the Soviet Union is another sore spot for many Russian officials who think either Russia should have been included in NATO expansion or that the alliance formed for collective security during the Cold War outlived its usefulness. Most recently, US decisions to install missile defense systems in Romania is viewed in Russia as targeting Russia, rather than the Middle East as the United States claims.

[9] Russian government officials frequently reference the same set of US actions to criticize its overall foreign policy approach. Kosovo refers to the NATO air campaign against Serbia during the Kosovo War in the late 1990s. This incident was particularly off-putting to Russians because it took place in the former Soviet sphere of influence without consulting the Russian government. Russia also objected to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which it blames for the increase in terrorism in the region to this day. The Russian government has criticized the US for the NATO-led enforcement of a UN Security Council resolution because it believes the US used the resolution as a justification to aid the overthrow of Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi.

[10] Russian expert interview.

[11] Open response from survey of US experts.

[12] Open response from survey of US experts.

[13] Open response from survey of US experts.

[14] Open response from survey of US experts.

[15] Russian expert interview.

[16] Russian expert interview.

world and suppress or neutralize all strong players … so that no [country] can rise above the United States."[17] Some experts also believe that Russia helps to represent "the countries that didn't find their place in the process of globalization," or "the world of outcast countries."[18] They point to the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America as regions that align to Russia's worldview because they share concerns about the US export of liberal democracy.

Anti-Russian Sentiment in the United States: Russophobia Strengthened since Crimea Annexation

Most Russian experts believe that Russia was viewed more favorably in the West as it began its post-communist transition. "The late 1980s was a period of hope. In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. It was one of the most welcome developments in the image of the Soviet Union. Everybody, especially in Europe, took these processes well."[19] By comparison, they think American elites are now disappointed in the nature of Russian democracy, dashing their "hope that the Soviet Union could be democratized during the reset in post-Soviet Russia."[20]

"Empathy is entirely lacking on the US side, we are currently experiencing another Red Scare."

US Expert

Presently, many American experts point to the "demonization" of Russia or the lack of understanding as their largest concerns for the US-Russian relationship. Some US experts describe the threat that Russia poses as "exaggerated," alluding to Cold War anxieties.[21] At a higher level, other experts said, the US government "is not interested in genuinely understanding Russia's position… [or] those proposing a more nuanced analysis."[22] Still, several are hesitant about whether Russia is able to be a cooperative partner. One expert explains, "I can see the many ways in which the United States has provoked Russia into feeling besieged … Russia's behavior in the last eight-ish years, however, has been increasingly bellicose despite the US attempt to reset."[23]

The most recent catalyst for anti-Russian fervor in the United States is Russian interference in the 2016 US elections, which the majority of American experts say was very or somewhat successful. Quite a few Russian experts criticize the Russian government for not anticipating the response to its interference in the US election. As one Russian expert puts it, "The interference exacerbated the crisis of confidence and made Russia non-credible for sure. Those who perhaps doubt Russia's role in the 2016 US election said that the government should have done more to aid with US

[17] Russian expert interview.
[18] Russian expert interviews.
[19] Russian expert interview.
[20] Russian expert interview.
[21] Open responses from survey of US experts.
[22] Open response from survey of US experts.
[23] Open response from survey of US experts.

investigations to curb 'false accusations.'"[24] Some went further, calling the claims that Russia attempted to tip the scale of the US election "fake news."[25] For their part, the US media—the experts say—is also contributing to the spread of disinformation by over-emphasizing the effectiveness of the Russian tactics.

While Russia's involvement in the US elections intensified frictions between the two countries, the most striking shifts in mutual perceptions occurred just after Russia annexed Crimea. Public opinion polls conducted in 2014 recorded plunging favorability ratings of the respective countries to Cold War lows. American experts name a number of conditions on which any sanctions relief must be dependent, including the end of Russian economic and military support to separatist forces in Eastern Ukraine and fully implementing the Minsk II agreement.[26] Russian experts primarily demonstrate Russia's acceptance of the situation as it is, saying that Ukraine will likely remain a frozen conflict, with little hope for resolution.

Russian and American Experts at Odds on Syria and Western Sanctions against Russia

> **"We are virtually neighbors with the Middle East… This is a direct threat for us. For [the United States], it's either peripheral or indirect."**
>
> Russian Expert

Syria is another area where experts from each country see things differently. There are major disagreements between the Russian and the US governments as to which groups *are* terrorist organizations in the Middle East and on what to do about Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Experts in Russia believe Assad's removal will further destabilize Syria and make it easier for terrorist organizations to operate.[27] Americans see the two countries' positions in Syria as a barrier to bilateral cooperation. As one expert puts it "The ongoing military conflicts in Ukraine and Syria comes in conflict with US national security interests. Only after these conflicts are resolved, it would be possible to find mutual ground for cooperation and engagement with Russia."[28] Some Russian experts suggest that US involvement in the region as a whole has been careless.

[24] Russian expert interview.
[25] Russian expert interviews.
[26] Levada public opinion polling shows there is little support for this domestically, with large majorities opposed to stopping economic and military support of separatists in Eastern Ukraine (58%) or reversing the annexation of Crimea (79%).
[27] Russian policy makers often point to Iraq as an example of what could happen in Syria if Assad is removed from power, arguing that after Saddam Hussein was overthrown it created a power vacuum which the Islamic State filled.
[28] Open response from survey of US experts.

As for the sanctions imposed against Russia, the majority of American experts believe US sanctions on Russia have been at least somewhat effective thus far. The reasons are three-fold: some think that the moral sentiment behind them was important even if the sanctions do not effect policy change, others say that sanctions have hindered the overall economy and curbed Putin's ability to act internationally, still others say that elites in Russia are feeling the effects of the sanctions and will eventually put pressure on Putin. One American expert notes "it's hard to see what other tool could be used by the Western alliance to make clear that invading Ukraine and unilaterally changing its borders was unacceptable."[29] Russian experts also say that while US sanctions have hurt the Russian economy, it was sanctions from Europe—particularly Germany—that have more significantly impacted the Russian economy.[30]

Domestic Dividends to US-Russia Antagonism

The negative profiling of the United States in Russia, and of Russia in the United States, seems to be, at least partly, geared toward domestic audiences. Experts from both countries emphasize that the Russian government uses the media to promote anti-American sentiment. This is a way to deflect attention by "distracting the population from domestic issues with flashy foreign policy actions and steps."[31] This strategy helps to offset the costs of Western sanctions by presenting "the sanctions as unfair efforts by the West and United States against the state."[32] Media attention also helps to boost the image of Russia in countries such as China when Russia is depicted as "taking a stand against some kind of a Western dictate."[33]

"Widespread ignorance of the perspective of the other country has made it possible for unhelpful stereotypes on both sides to spread."

US Expert

Russian experts also view "Russophobia" in the United States as a means of shoring up domestic and international support for US policy. As one Russian expert

[29] Open response from survey of US experts.
[30] American experts were additionally asked if they thought Europe and the United States would maintain a united front on Russia and the majority believe it is likely. Those who felt this way consistently pointed to interference in elections and Russia's alleged use of a chemical agent in the United Kingdom as reason for the cohesion. However, even those who responded affirmatively expressed concern that the Trump administration's lack of commitment to its European allies could cause a splinter. Russian experts spoke optimistically about Russia's relationship with individual European countries, frequently stating that Russia prefers bilateral relations with individual European countries. Germany was named most often as the European country with which Russia would like to improve relations.
[31] Russian expert interview.
[32] Russian expert interview.
[33] Russian expert interview.

summarized, "Russia is a convenient opponent [for the United States] for maintaining a certain domestic political consensus, providing cohesiveness, and keeping their allies on their toes."[34] Another US expert noted that negative news about Russia in the United States is exacerbated by the "desire of the bipartisan establishment to oust Trump via Russiagate."[35]

The media also play a role, according to these interviews, in facilitating the deterioration of relations. "The image of a snarling bear never left," commented one Russian expert, referring to holdover stereotypes from the Cold War.[36] But the "propaganda"[37] has evolved and deepened in some respects. Another Russian expert summarized: "today, the Americans demonize us, especially Putin. If you read Western media, he's just an all-mighty wizard and evil-minded."[38]

"The United States can teach Russia a lot, and the United States can also learn a lot from Russia."

Russian Expert

Potential for Cooperation?

The consensus from the experts interviewed seems to be that cooperation between the two countries is unusually difficult at the moment, even though they deem US-Russian relations to be critical for international security. One Russian expert comments, "It is obvious that our government has gone too far with this anti-Western rhetoric. However, there is very little room for maneuver. Having saddled up the nationalistic discourse and having called the collapse of the Soviet Union the collapse of Russia, there is no turning back."[39] An American expert notes that "bargaining with an expansionist power will only result in greater challenges" and asks "what would constrain the challenger after it got what it wanted?"[40]

Putin's international actions are seen as a cumulative strategy to increase or reinstate Russia's prominence as a leading power. "At this point, Crimea, sanctions, Ukraine, Syria, and quite literally everything else can be considered a single strategy to get Russia the great power status [Putin] believes it deserves (and does in my opinion)," writes one US expert.[41] A Russian expert adds, "Our goal is to maintain our status as a great power in the modern system of international relations and to take part in developing the rules of the new world order. These goals are characteristic of any large country in the modern world."[42]

[34] Russian expert interview.
[35] Open response from survey of US experts.
[36] Russian expert interview.
[37] Multiple interviews.
[38] Russian expert interview.
[39] Russian expert interview.
[40] Open response from survey of US experts.
[41] Open response from survey of US experts.
[42] Russia expert interview.

At the same time, Russian experts said that they did not believe Russia is viewed as important enough to the United States to merit a US effort to improve relations. As one Russian expert remarked, "The United States is important to the Russian government…While Russia is pretty much unimportant to the Americans."[43] Most described Russia as acting from a place of insecurity, while placing high priority on improving its power relative to the United States.

Most experts, in both the United States and Russia, touched on the potential of risk of escalation between the two countries in the current environment. This is of particular concern to American experts. Both nuclear posturing and the presence of many different interests in the Syrian civil war increases these risks and highlights the need for continued communication. Many expressed a need to return to an old Cold War standard: narrowly focused engagement, exchange of information, and cooperation on a few key security issues. One American expert is pessimistic about successful engagement in the near term, but emphasizes that "the goal should be a substantive reset that re-establishes military to military ties, high level discussion, scientific and infrastructure ties … to rebuild social trust for the future and create channels for communication in case of crisis." [44]

The most frequently mentioned areas for cooperation amongst both groups were bilateral arms control, nonproliferation, and counterterrorism.[45] But experts are skeptical that the two countries can now cooperate on even standard issues like arms control. One Russian expert comments that while there is some interest on both sides for renewing or creating new agreements on nuclear and conventional weapons, "it's a very challenging topic … there are many unresolved issues and complaints on both sides."[46]

Methodology

Selection of US experts: The report is based on a survey among selected US-based experts from the top US universities and research institutes. The Chicago Council Survey team identified researchers in Russia and Eurasia programs from the top 50 think tanks listed in the "2017 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report," and selected professors with expertise in US-Russian relations and/or Russian policy from universities identified in the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies 2015 report "The State of Russian Studies in the United States." The survey was fielded using SurveyMonkey, an online survey platform. The Council initially targeted 186 experts by email on April 9, 2018. The final reminder email was sent on April 30, 2018, and the fielding was closed on May 4, 2018.

[43] Russia expert interview.
[44] Open response from survey of US experts.
[45]American experts were asked to select from a list the problems that should be a priority for cooperation between the two countries; eliminating North Korea's nuclear program, limiting Iran's nuclear program, and reducing nuclear weapons worldwide were the three top choices.
[46] Russia expert interview.

Selection of Russian experts: The Levada Analytical Center selected experts from three groups: research institutes (8), academia (7) and the media (4). The participants were about evenly divided between those who were more sympathetic to the Russian government and those more sympathetic to Western ideals. Experts from research institutes included senior fellows, program coordinators and head of departments at top Russian think tanks and other NGOs focused on US-Russian relations. Experts from academia included senior fellows and professors at top Russian universities. Experts from the media included editors and leading journalists at top Russian liberal and conservative media. All hold prominent positions in their institutions and have experience in international relations. The Levada team interviewed 19 experts between April and June, 2018; seventeen interviews were conducted face-to-face and two were conducted via email.

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About the Levada Center

The Levada-Center is one of the leading research organizations in Russia that conduct mass public surveys, expert and elite surveys, depth interviews, focus groups as well as other survey methods. Staff of the center brings together experts in the field of sociology, political science, economics, psychology, market research, and public opinion polls. Polling results and expertise of the Center's staff is broadly covered by national and international media such as Kommersant, Vedomosti, RBC, The Economist, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, Reuters, BBC Radio, Radio Liberty, and others. Learn more at levada.ru and follow @levada_ru or on Facebook.

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