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The Case for a “Strategic Pause”: Russia and the United States in a New Era¹

By Maxim A. Suchkov (Moscow State Institute of International Relations, MGIMO)

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Abstract

U.S.–Russia relations are no longer central to international relations, but they still occupy center stage when it comes to global security. While these relations are usually analyzed based on problem areas between the two countries, this article argues that the key issue between Russia and the United States at the moment is not the poor state of the relationship, but rather its changed nature, since the two pillars that used to shape the relationship—principles and agenda—have evolved. The essay also argues that Moscow and Washington need a “strategic pause” to critically assess the value of relations for each party and that it may take some time—and a few election cycles in the US and a change of power in the Kremlin—to produce a situation that is qualitatively different from what we are observing today.

It has become commonplace to begin any discussion of U.S.–Russian relations by referring to them as “the lowest since the end of the Cold War.” This is an accurate assessment where things stand today. But there’s even worse news: relations between Russia and the United States as we knew them throughout the Cold War and in the post-Soviet era no longer exist. One can debate whether this was caused by a single crisis or followed many years of gradual erosion. But the two fundamental pillars—principles and agenda—that used to define the relationship dramatically changed some time ago, even if the thinking about them largely persists.

Re-Thinking the Cold War Paradigm

The Cold War, although frequently referred to as a benchmark, is a misleading one today. In contemporary Russian discourse, the term “Cold War” is used primarily in three contexts:

(a) to describe a historical period that shaped the international system for a good portion of the twentieth century; (b) as a catch-phrase for contemporary U.S.–Russia confrontation; and (c) to refer to a time when, despite bitter disagreements, the great powers still abode by certain “gentlemen’s agreements” and unspoken rules of the game—a vision propounded by many senior Russian experts and policymakers. In this latter reading, the Cold War is counterintuitively portrayed as a “gold standard” that the contemporary great-power rivalry should seek to reproduce if it wants to avoid massive nuclear conflict.

The problem with this vision is that today, both the intentions of the actors and the structural factors of the rivalry are different. The modern world is more complex and intertwined than the world between 1946 and 1991. Today’s Russia is no Soviet Union. Its resources

are more modest, the scope of its global ambition is narrower, and unlike the USSR, Russia promotes no particular ideology on the world stage. The autocratic character of Putin’s governance and Moscow’s seeming inclination toward “conservative values” offer some competitive advantages for Russia in international politics, but they do not make up for the lack of ideology in modern Russia, nor even pass for one, albeit that they are often perceived that way by outsiders.

Unlike during the Cold War, there is today a great *asymmetry* between the US and Russia in terms of what they each want *from the world* and *from one another*.

The United States seeks to preserve its declining—yet still dominant—position against a rising China. Russia, meanwhile, does not seek to establish dominance on the world stage, nor does Moscow seek to prove that its socio-political formation is a more efficient development model than that of the US, as it did during the Cold War—this is China’s approach. Rather, having been deceived by the West in the 1990s and mistreated in the 2000s, *Moscow has embarked on de-Westernization of the international system*, even if Russia still occasionally attempts to engage with that system on its own terms.

As a result, in Russian political discourse, the idea of a “multipolar” world—a concept coined in the mid-1990s—has come to represent the ideal of a “just” and “inclusive” system that would be more responsive to Russia’s national interests. The concept is raw, as reflected in its contradiction with another view widely shared in the Russian policy-making community: that a world with multiple power centers may be a lot more chaotic and is unlikely to be any friendlier to Russia. This contradiction, however, is seldom seriously addressed, since dissatisfaction with the existing U.S.-dominated system prevails over rational concerns about what the

¹ Maxim Suchkov acknowledges the financial support of RFBR and EISR (project number 21-011-31278) in the preparation of this study.

“multipolar” world might bring. Simply put, Russia does not necessarily know what system it wants to construct, but it does know what system it wants to deconstruct.

But here is where the reference to the Cold War era comes in handy. For the majority of the Russian political establishment, thinking in “Cold War” terms props up the idea of Russia’s “greatness.” Perhaps this is one reason why among all episodes of the Cold War, Russia often focuses on *détente*, the period when—in the face of nuclear disaster—great powers abode by the same rules. This is the period when Moscow felt “most equal” to Washington.

For American elites, the Cold War paradigm likewise seems comfortable and understandable. This was an era of rapid American development, an era that helped mobilize the population against a serious enemy, and an era from which America emerged as a winner. Whereas the Russians stress *détente*, the Americans, perhaps not coincidentally, frequently highlight the Reagan presidency—the period when the US dealt the most decisive blow to the Soviets.

Now that the grand showdown with China is on the agenda, the era of the Truman presidency is also being evoked. America needs a new strategy for containment of China, similar to the one that was designed in the late 1940s and early 1950s to combat the Soviets and communism. There seems to be a bipartisan consensus in Washington that the rivalry with Beijing is systemic and will define the 21st century. Whereas China is a strategic challenger, Russia is a strategic nuisance—and only enjoys the modifier “strategic” due to its nuclear arsenal, cyber, and some space capabilities. This essentially dissolves the philosophy that shaped the relationship in the previous era—“the systemic struggle of the two mutually respected great powers”—and puts the U.S.–Russia relationship in some other category. To make matters worse, the dissolution of this philosophy of the relationship overlaps with the exhaustion of the agenda of the previous era.

Russia and the United States until 2024: “Further No Harm”

The current state of relations between the U.S and Russia is a logical result of where things have been drifting since the “reset” policy of 2011 failed and set relations on a downward trajectory. Rare episodes of cooperation, such as the joint Putin–Obama initiative for the destruction of Syria’s chemical arsenal in 2013, have not developed into something more sustainable. Russia condemned the US for what it considered America’s “superpower arrogance,” which it believed prevented Washington from seriously considering Russian proposals to address “issues of mutual concern.” The US, in turn, labeled Russian behavior in international conflicts (particularly in Ukraine and Syria) as the “revisionism of a declining power.”

The election of Donald Trump and the widening socio-political divide in the US made Russia a “toxic factor” in American domestic politics—an unpleasant addition to its usual status as “foreign adversary.” The relations between the two nuclear superpowers “narrowed” to the topic of the interference of these powers in each other’s domestic affairs. The word “cooperation” gradually disappeared from bilateral parlance, giving way to “de-conflicting” when American and Russian troops came dangerously close together in Syria.

The list of issues that the parties can even discuss has been dramatically reduced. When Moscow and Washington realized—perhaps after the Trump–Putin summit in Helsinki on July 16, 2018—that even discussions were fraught with new escalations and sanctions, the format of presidential summits lost its meaning. Communication channels were cut off; diplomatic missions were shut down. The only intriguing question that remained was which new crisis or scandal would plunge relations to new lows.

From Moscow’s perspective, the Democrats sought to punish Russia for its electoral interference and alleged support for Trump. The Republicans, for their part, appeared keen to rid themselves of their newfound status as the pro-Russia party—a status largely driven by Trump’s complimentary remarks about Vladimir Putin and the general appreciation expressed by Trump’s conservative base for Putin’s style of governance—and therefore aimed to punish Russia in order to avoid appearing weaker than their Democratic opponents. At the same time, the United States expressed confidence that as soon as America needed Russian assistance on major issues, Moscow would be happy to help. This attitude apparently persists: “You can walk and chew gum at the same time,” as President Joe Biden put it.

Russia was dissatisfied with this attitude and eventually recalled its ambassador from Washington after Biden agreed with the journalist George Stephanopoulos, who interviewed the U.S. president, that Putin was a “killer.” Russia’s action may have been largely symbolic, but the driving force behind that decision—other than Putin’s wounded ego—was the need for a reassessment of Moscow’s relations with Washington. The bilateral relationship paradigm that existed in the 1990s symbolically sank into oblivion during Putin’s Munich speech in 2007. The paradigm of the 2000s lost its value with the Russian takeover of Crimea in the spring of 2014. The “killer” moment represented the most recent “cut-off point.”

In an effort to halt the escalation of tensions, Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin held a summit in Geneva on June 16, 2021. Following the meeting, Moscow and Washington established a diplomatic channel led by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov to discuss arms control and cybersecurity. In parallel, the two

countries' respective Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley and General Valery Gerasimov, opened a military channel.

These channels are part of the political infrastructure to “manage confrontation” and are instrumental in at least two ways. First, they help address urgent security challenges, such as avoiding a direct military clash in places where American and Russian forces operate in close proximity or take actions that the other side may deem provocative. Second, they serve the long-term objective of maintaining strategic stability in the new technological era. The nature of strategic stability, however, has been changing both quantitatively and qualitatively. With regard to the former, China has been catching up with Russia and the US in building up its nuclear capabilities, including missiles and the means of their delivery. As for the latter, the focus of great powers today is on the development of precision-guided and hypersonic weapons that are almost as destructive as their nuclear counterparts but are not subject to the same treaty regulations. The rise of technology may soon shift the focus of strategic stability from nuclear arms to the cyber domain altogether: like nuclear weapons, cyber warfare has the potential to be a marker of one's military might and great-power status.

Even if all of this is taken into account, the negotiation infrastructure designed to work on these issues is defensive. It is oriented toward fending off (mostly military) threats but is *not* designed to “multiply cooperation” in other areas.

That the U.S.–Russia relationship is in dire need of a comprehensive common agenda is glaringly apparent every time Russians and Americans get together—whether for academia, in expert circles, or as diplomatic working groups. They tend to energetically seek a positive agenda, even as the energy of the U.S.–Russia relationship is gradually waning.

The kind of agenda that would at least have caused the parties to consider cooperation a decade ago—for instance, cooperation on Afghanistan or counter-terrorism—is no longer exciting for Moscow and even less exciting for Washington. Climate change is now a high-priority issue for the US and is often brought up in conversations on the future of the U.S.–Russian relationship, but there is little here for Russia and the US to talk about. Russia's reliance on oil and gas as its primary energy resources, the very structure of its economy, its small domestic market, its climatic conditions, and its vast geography do not militate toward the rapid development of a “green economy.” It does not help that many senior members of the Russian government believe absolutely that the climate change agenda has been pioneered by the West as a tool for maintaining its economic, technological, and political dominance. In light of all this, it is arguably actually a good thing that Russia has not yet taken a serious interest in the cli-

mate change agenda, as it would likely diverge from the American agenda and propose its own vision for how things should work in this area.

Conclusion

U.S.–Russia relations are no longer central to global international relations, but they still occupy center stage when it comes to global security. The previous paradigm for the relationship has been exhausted, yet no new paradigm is emerging. Indeed, it may take some time—and a few election cycles in the US and a change of power in the Kremlin—to produce a situation that is qualitatively different from what we are observing today. The spiraling confrontation seems to have been brought under control since the Biden-Putin meeting and is being managed by the diplomats and the military, but the relationship as a whole lacks resiliency and seems to be one crisis away from collapsing.

Today, both the US and Russia are, for their own reasons, looking inward. The state of relations between Russia and the United States is now dictated *less by bilateral dynamics and more by outside events*—be these events crises in the Middle East or conflicts in the post-Soviet state. This is the “new normal” in the relationship.

Under such circumstances, perhaps the best solution for the present moment would be to take a “strategic pause” to critically assess the value of relations for each party. Russia should ask itself what exactly it wants from the United States in the new era. The US should ask itself whether its current approach to Russia is in America's long-term interests.

Five years hence, we may well see a picture similar to what we are observing today: Russia and the US on opposite ends of almost every regional conflict; persistent divisions in some of the post-Soviet states; economic crises or pandemics not having brought the parties together. Looking at the relationship in a ten-year perspective, there is a chance that relations will have a more optimistic outlook. In fact, both countries face three of the same major challenges that may define them in the 21st century: how smoothly they navigate periods of elite change; what type of social contract and control system their governments establish with Big Tech; and their respective relationships with other influential regional powers (India, the EU, Turkey, Iran, etc.) Russia and the U.S. may still hold divergent values, but they may also emerge as two big powers that understand each other's redlines and do not interfere in each other's internal affairs. If not, a decade from now, commentators will still be referring to U.S.–Russian relations as being “the lowest since the end of the Cold War.”

Please see overleaf for information about the author and recommended literature.

About the Author

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- Andrey Sushentsov & William C. Wohlforth (2020) “The Tragedy of US-Russian Relations: NATO Centrality and the Revisionists’ Spiral,” *International Politics* 57 (3), pp. 427–450.
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ANALYSIS

Mutual Images of Russia and America as Part of Their Domestic Culture Wars

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Abstract

Conflicts over national identity in both Russia and the US have helped to fuel the deterioration in relations between the two countries. Understanding the nature of these conflicts improves our understanding of how each side views the other and highlights the nature of the obstacles standing in the way of improved relations.

Conflictual Domestic Politics

Over the past few years, U.S.–Russian relations have cooled almost to freezing, putting them at a level comparable to the worst days of the Cold War. Indeed, “new Cold War” has become a popular descriptor in books and articles analyzing contemporary international politics. The two most popular explanations for the deterioration of relations between the two countries are rooted in (1) foreign policy, where one side reacts to the actions of the other; and (2) domestic politics, where politicians mobilize support and justify their actions by inflating the foreign threat. Without rejecting these explanations altogether, I suggest shifting our attention to the processes of social change that have altered the context of U.S.–Russian relations.

During these years of rising tensions with each other, both Russia and the United States have seen their domestic politics overwhelmed by conflicts that reflect competing approaches to their respective national histories.

In the United States, the removal of monuments to the leaders of the Confederacy started in 2017 and had developed by 2020 into a wave of iconoclasm against historical figures expressed in everything from vandalism against statues to the *New York Times*’ “1619 Project,” an ambitious effort to rewrite national history. Russia, meanwhile, has seen the passage of a series of “memory laws” that began with the 2014 law prohibiting the “rehabilitation of Nazism” and continued through the 2020 constitutional amendment that requires the state to defend “historical truth.” Different state actors have increasingly come to interfere in the domain of history, while the largest social movement of the epoch is the Immortal Regiment, an annual mass rally to commemorate Russian war veterans.

In my view, the simultaneous rise of these two conflicts is no coincidence. They represent two sides of the same culture war—or domestic fight for identity—that has been particularly acute in the second decade of this century.

What Is the Identity Struggle?

Any group of people—or indeed, any individual—defines itself by drawing lines between “us” and “them.” In the age of nation-states, the search for national identity and the effort to redefine national identity during crises have become an important part of the political struggle. National identity can be understood as the answer to the question “What are we (who are we)?” that is shared by the majority of people in the nation. Whereas in the 19th century identities seemed stable and universally accepted, by the early 21st century nations found themselves split between multiple identities. The constant fight for redefinition reflects the shifting balance of power between different social groups within the nation.

There are two main ways of answering the question “What are we?” The first is to describe one’s group by reference to its past: what the people did together, what they achieved, and what shared sufferings created their social cohesion. The second is to define the group as distinctively different from another: “we are not they,” “we are not like our neighbors,” “Canadians are not Americans,” “Ukrainians are not Russians,” and so on. When using this second variant, the nation needs to construct not only an image of itself, but also an image of its “constitutive Other,” because the nation we habitually use to define ourselves must possess the features we do not.

Scholars know that the United States has served as Russia’s “constitutive Other” since at least the end of the 19th century. Russia played a similar role for the US during the Cold War (and arguably from the late 19th century onward) and has reemerged in that role over the last few years.

Identity Crises in Russia and in the United States

The Russian identity crisis began with the fall of the Soviet Union. During the 1990s, Russians struggled to redefine their national identity in a context in which history was being rewritten and the old Others-foes seemingly turned into Others-friends. The first decade of the new century saw a nascent Russian identity start to emerge: the symbolic universe of the Russian state was recreated (a national anthem, emblem, and flag, each representing different periods of the Russian past, were adopted), a new hierarchy of national heroes replaced Soviet ones, and the United States was restored as Russia’s Other (even if Russia itself returned to international politics as a European power). In the middle of the second decade, however, the Kremlin smashed that fledgling identity and forcefully began to promote a new one based on “traditional values,” anti-liberalism, and opposition to the West. To the surprise of Russia’s intellectuals, the authorities began to describe Russia’s rather urban and contemporary European society as the parochial stronghold of the anti-liberal social order. This

changed identity was definitely linked to the anti-Putin protests of 2011–2012, the annexation of Crimea, and Putin’s plans to prolong his presidency indefinitely. My goal here is not to analyze this connection, but to underline the fact that Russia was plunged into a new identity crisis before it had fully recovered from the previous one.

America’s own identity crisis developed over the last decade, though its foundations were arguably laid much earlier, when the end of the Cold War eliminated at a stroke the foreign threat (what constructivists call domestic usage of the constitutive Other). Throughout the “triumphant” years of Bill Clinton’s administration, the anxious “War on Terror” presided over by George W. Bush, and the almost post-racial period inaugurated by Barack Obama, the country steadily and rapidly entrenched liberal values: tolerance, freedom, and minority rights. As we now know, this did not meet with universal approval among Americans. Donald Trump’s 2016 victory in the presidential elections laid bare the split in U.S. society. Under President Trump, America’s liberal identity was called into question, reigniting old “culture wars” not only along the familiar lines of race and gender, but also about attitudes toward the nation’s past.

Russia’s Anti-Americanism as Part of the Russian Identity Crisis

The Putin regime monopolized the process of constructing a new Russian identity. Its goal was to unify the nation behind the current rulers while marginalizing the opposition. Starting in the protest winter of 2011–12, state propaganda became fiercely anti-American. Simultaneously, it began to depict opposition leaders as somehow connected with the United States, thus creating an image of the opposition as being part of an alien anti-Russian force. From this perspective, the invention of “traditional values” rhetoric was the result of the regime’s efforts to present Russia as the absolute opposite of the U.S. liberal empire. This juxtaposition was intended to recreate the old bipolar world, although this time substituting opposite value systems for opposing political ideologies. When the Kremlin learned that the vast majority of urban Russians opposed the policy, it adopted a worldview that painted whole strata of educated and active citizens as American pawns. To make this view crystal clear, the Kremlin introduced the label of “foreign agent,” which it continues to apply to independent NGOs, media, and select individuals.

The election of Donald Trump was greeted warmly by many Russians, but at the same time, it damaged the idea of two polar-opposite value systems: Trump’s America looked much more familiar to Russians than its liberal Obama-era counterpart.

The Russian past was also redefined during this period. The regime overwhelmingly used the Second

World War as the source of its legitimacy and of the very political language it used when speaking about contemporary issues. From 2014, a series of laws and regulations made it illegal to take any critical approach to the history of the war—and, by extension, to the role of the USSR in Europe in the mid-20th century. However, such overuse of memory of the war provoked a popular reaction: starting in 2012, a grassroots initiative to commemorate the war dead through a Victory Day procession carrying portraits of veterans became extremely popular. By 2019, some ten million people were taking part in the Immortal Regiment nationwide and in other countries. The state and grassroots organizers' fight for control over the movement constitutes part of Russian historical politics, along with the never-ending disputes about the Soviet past, including commemoration of Stalin and memory of Stalin's victims. It seems that the Kremlin deliberately turns political struggle into arguments about the past; however many reasons there may be to criticize it for its current policies, taking up the position of the "defenders of the sacred past" makes history a commanding eminence controlled by the ruling group.

The simultaneous escalation of arguments about the United States (the constitutive Other) and Russian history reflects an identity crisis. What is distinctive about the Russian case is that these crises were provoked from the top down: the Kremlin created these crises instead of healing them. Thus, the ruling group are perhaps better presented as challengers who seek to overturn Russian identity than as defenders of it.

The US' "Russian Meddling" Obsession as Part of the American Identity Crisis

Let me start with a disclaimer: this section is not about Russian meddling, and I have no intention either of denying it or of arguing that it happened. My point here is that in a different time, or with a different country involved, similar evidence would not have produced such an emotional and long-lasting discussion in the U.S. media and among American politicians.

However, the news that Russian hackers had somehow helped Donald Trump to get elected President of the United States found fertile ground in a context of mass Democratic refusal to accept Trump. In the eyes of anti-Trump Democratic activists, his election reopened a side door for the domestic culture wars that had seemingly been defeated. In their attempts to undermine the president's legitimacy, the Democrats turned to a strategy similar to that used by the Kremlin against its domestic foes. Trump was un-American and a "Russian asset,"

leading journalists wrote, thus "exporting" him to Russia. Making Trump's alleged Russian connection really toxic necessitated making Russia appear like a real threat to the United States, prompting the immediate demonization of Putin's Russia, which followed the same logic as the demonization of the US on Russian television.

Russia as a traditional threat and presumed Trump ally thus once again served as a constitutive Other in U.S. political discourse. Discussions about the Other are always a form of discussion about the Self: the Russian meddling campaign signaled Americans' demand to refresh their visions of who they are. Another such sign was the conflict over how to understand the past.

American clashes around historical monuments in 2017 and 2020 were part of the country's culture wars. The balance established after the Civil War between Northern and Southern narratives has come to an end, with the result that even the place of the war in U.S. history is now being called into question. More than that, a whole line of traditional heroes, starting with Christopher Columbus, has been problematized. In the U.S. case, it is less obvious than in the Russian case what political force provoked the crisis. However, the Trump presidency rendered previously silent tensions acute and led to the removal and vandalizing of many statues around the country.

The Future of U.S.–Russian Relations

The ongoing discursive conflict between Russia and the United States is amplified by the domestic identity crises in the two countries, for both of which the other country's distorted image is an essential part. We can expect that when the identity crises are resolved, relations between Russia and the United States will start to improve. Until this happens, we should learn to distinguish between domestic use of the Other and the real problems and opportunities of U.S.–Russian relations.

In a more distant future, we may expect that another country will take on the role of constitutive Other for one or both of the US and Russia (in the case of the US, China is the first country that springs to mind, but this is not yet predetermined). If this happens, bilateral relations as a whole may take on a different character, as happened with U.S.–English relations once Americans stopped looking at their former ruler as the Other.

The United States will maintain its role as Russia's Other for longer. Of course, history testifies that Russian "othering" of the United States has not always been hostile: during every cycle of Russian reforms, the country has turned to America as a source of innovations.

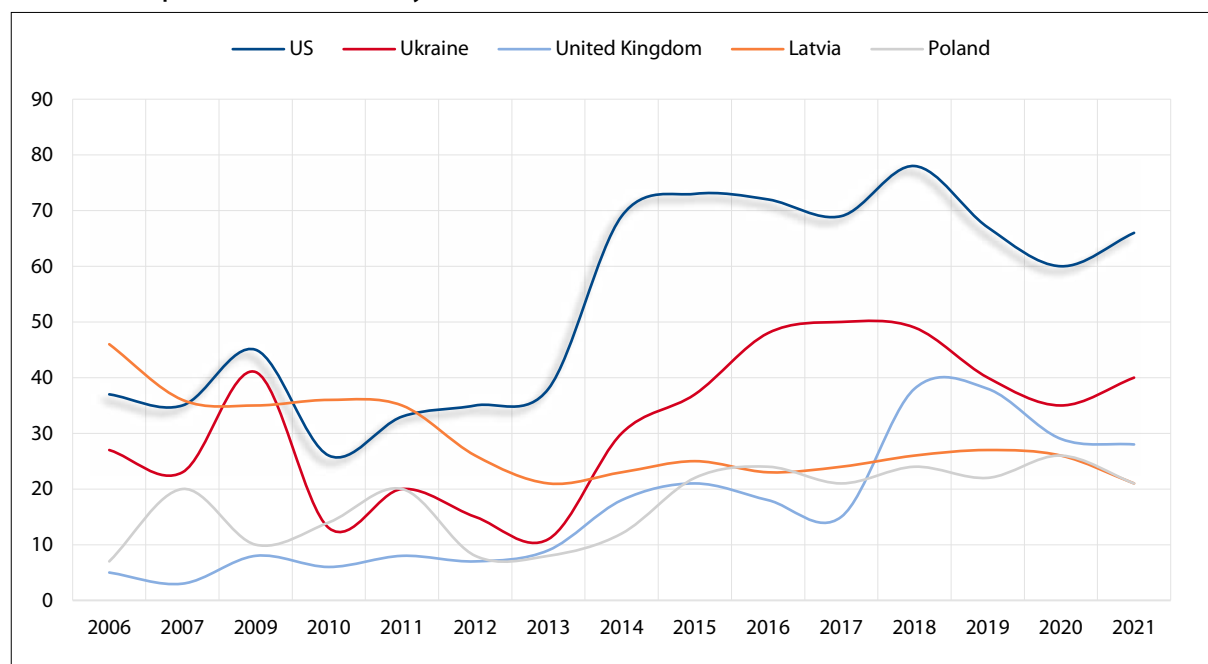
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OPINION POLL

In Russian Public Opinion, the US Is the Most Unfriendly Country

Figure 1: Which Five Countries Would You Say Are Most Unfriendly and Hostile Towards Russia? (% of respondents, 2006–2021; respondents were shown a card with a list of countries and could choose several countries; top five countries as of May 2021)



Source: representative opinion polls conducted by Levada Center from 2006 to 20–26 May 2021, published in "Glavnye 'druzhestvennye' i 'nedruzhestvennye' strany" ["The Main 'Friendly' and 'Unfriendly' Countries"], 15 June 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/06/15/glavnye-druzhestvennye-i-nedruzhestvennye-strany/>; English wording of question based on <https://www.levada.ru/en/2020/09/30/attitudes-toward-countries-4/>

Table 1: Which Five Countries Would You Say Are Most Unfriendly and Hostile Towards Russia? (% of respondents, 2006–2021; respondents were shown a card with a list of countries and could choose several countries; top ten countries as of May 2021)

	2006	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
US	37	35	45	26	33	35	38	69	73	72	69	78	67	60	66
Ukraine	27	23	41	13	20	15	11	30	37	48	50	49	40	35	40
United Kingdom	5	3	8	6	8	7	9	18	21	18	15	38	38	29	28
Latvia	46	36	35	36	35	26	21	23	25	23	24	26	27	26	21
Poland	7	20	10	14	20	8	8	12	22	24	21	24	22	26	21
Lithuania	42	32	35	35	34	25	17	24	25	23	24	23	26	26	20
Georgia	44	46	62	57	50	41	33	19	11	10	9	8	11	16	15
Germany	2	2	3	1	4	3	3	18	19	19	24	17	18	15	16
Estonia	28	60	30	28	30	23	16	21	19	16	16	15	12	11	9
Czech Republic	1	2	1	<1	1	1	<1	1	2	1	<1	1	1	2	9

Source: representative opinion polls conducted by Levada Center from 2006 to 20–26 May 2021, published in "Glavnye 'druzhestvennye' i 'nedruzhestvennye' strany" ["The Main 'Friendly' and 'Unfriendly' Countries"], 15 June 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/06/15/glavnye-druzhestvennye-i-nedruzhestvennye-strany/>; English wording of question based on <https://www.levada.ru/en/2020/09/30/attitudes-toward-countries-4/>

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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