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# Don't Call It a Cold War: Findings from the Russian-American Relations Survey 2019

HENRY E. HALE & OLGA KAMENCHUK

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WORKING GROUP PAPER 10

JULY 2020

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**WORKING GROUP ON THE FUTURE OF U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS**

**РАБОЧАЯ ГРУППА ПО БУДУЩЕМУ РОССИЙСКО-АМЕРИКАНСКИХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ**

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## Working Group on the Future of U.S.-Russia Relations

The Working Group on the Future of U.S.-Russia Relations convenes rising experts from leading American and Russian institutions to tackle the thorniest issues in the bilateral relationship. By engaging the latest generation of scholars in face-to-face discussion and debate, we aim to generate innovative analysis and policy recommendations that better reflect the common ground between the United States and Russia that is so often obscured by mistrust. We believe our unique, truly bilateral approach offers the best potential for breakthroughs in mutual understanding and reconciliation between our countries.

The Working Group is a project of the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University on the U.S. side and of the National Research University—Higher School of Economics in Russia. The activities of the Working Group on the Future of U.S.-Russia Relations have been made possible with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Valdai Discussion Club, and the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy.

The statements made and views expressed in this publication are solely the responsibility of the authors.

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# Executive Summary

Russian-American relations seem to be worsening with every year. After an attempted “reset” under U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev exhausted itself, a steady stream of events has kept tensions on a high burn. Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea. American economic sanctions on Russia. Russian countersanctions. Accusations of Russian “meddling” in the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the theft of COVID-19 research. Spy scandals. Mass expulsions of large numbers of embassy personnel. The list goes on.

At the same time, we find considerable hope for an eventual improvement in relations coming from the U.S. and Russian populations. While neither side appears willing to give in on some of the most important flash points, we at least do detect more underlying popular willingness to seek ways to avoid conflict and improve relations than may appear to be the case if one watches the news regularly in either country.

We base these conclusions on the results of a survey we conducted simultaneously in both Russia and the United States in 2019 on these countries’ mutual relations. Some specific findings were:

- Majorities in each country follow international affairs regularly but depend heavily on television, have very few sources of direct information about each other, and have limited factual knowledge.
- Large shares of each country’s population see each other as more similar than different.
- In neither country do negative views of the other completely dominate, though negativity is significantly greater in the United States than in Russia. The roots of American negativity are mainly linked to views of Russia’s domestic political system, while Russians’ negative views of the United States mainly regard American foreign policy behavior and attitudes.

- Majorities in each country see the other side as a source of threats, thinking they are being treated by the other as an enemy or a rival. Both populations blame the other's country for everything from the Russia-Ukraine war to cyber hacking in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.
- At the same time, both Russians and Americans favor treating the other country better than they think it is treating them, rejecting tit-for-tat foreign policymaking.
- The U.S. and Russian populations generally reject the pursuit of “spheres of influence” in their own neighborhoods, reject “fighting fire with fire” in the cyber sphere, and support compromise for the sake of improving U.S.-Russian relations in the abstract. But majorities in both countries refuse to cede position on the two issues that are arguably the biggest points of conflict: Russian support for insurgents in eastern Ukraine and American economic sanctions on Russia. Major steps forward will likely need to start with smaller issues on the path to regaining trust.
- Framing current relations as “a new Cold War” does not help unless one advocates further conflict. While Cold War imagery has no discernible effect on Russian public opinion, it does make Americans significantly more likely to favor an aggressive policy of containing Russia worldwide, including through the use of military force.
- While surely current tensions have some roots in these countries' Cold War histories, a sober assessment of the situation requires more nuanced and contemporary conceptual tools.

Considerable international relations research now documents that public opinion can influence policymaking even in nondemocratic regimes.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this explains why both the United States and Russia spend so much money to try to influence it. For anyone interested in the future of U.S.-Russian relations, not to mention shaping it, it is therefore important to follow patterns in public opinion carefully.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Y. Kono, “Does Public Opinion Affect Trade Policy,” *Business and Politics* 10, no. 2 (2008): 1–19; Richard Sobel, *The Impact of Public Opinion on U.S. Foreign Policy Since Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Daniel S. Treisman, *The Return: Russia's Journey from Gorbachev to Medvedev* (Simon and Schuster, 2012).

# How We Conducted the Russian-American Relations Survey (RARS)

On exactly the same dates, July 22–25, 2019, leading public opinion agencies asked samples of Russian and American citizens a series of identical (or analogous) questions about the other country. Both samples included 1,600 adult respondents chosen to be, with proper weighting, representative of each country’s population as a whole. We chose the best affordable method in each country. For Russia, this meant identifying respondents through an area probability technique and interviewing them by telephone, a process carried out by the polling agency VTsIOM. In the United States, we used the survey firm YouGov and its online interviewing technique, which selects individuals to interview by matching possible respondents to a nationally representative sample frame from the most recent American Community Survey. In both cases, the margin of error is generally less than 3 percent.

# Interest Levels and Informedness: Broad but Thin

How interested are Americans and Russians in each other, where do they get their information, and how informed are they? In general, we might characterize mutual interest and sources of information as broad but thin.

At the most general level, Americans and Russians are quite interested in world politics. Big majorities of Russians (81 percent) and Americans (85 percent) keep track of international affairs all the time or sometimes. Only 14 percent of Russians and 16 percent of Americans follow international affairs very rarely, with 5 percent and 9 percent, respectively, not following the topic at all. Digging a bit deeper, we found that men are slightly more likely to be interested in international news than women in both countries, and older people are more engaged than youth, though majorities in all age categories report following foreign affairs.

But do people really care about relations with the other country? We thought a novel way to answer this question would be to see whether the other country mattered enough to appear in people’s dreams; this should capture the most intense forms of mutual concern. While we did not ask whether the dreams were good or bad, it turns out that only small shares of each country’s population could recall ever having dreamed at least once about the other country (Figure 1). At the same time, the shares are not entirely trivial. While only 6 percent of Russians report the United States’ being in their dreams, this figure leaps to 17 percent for young Russians, those aged eighteen to twenty-four. The share of those dreaming about the other country is noticeably larger in the United States, where 13 percent of the whole population say they have dreamed about Russia.

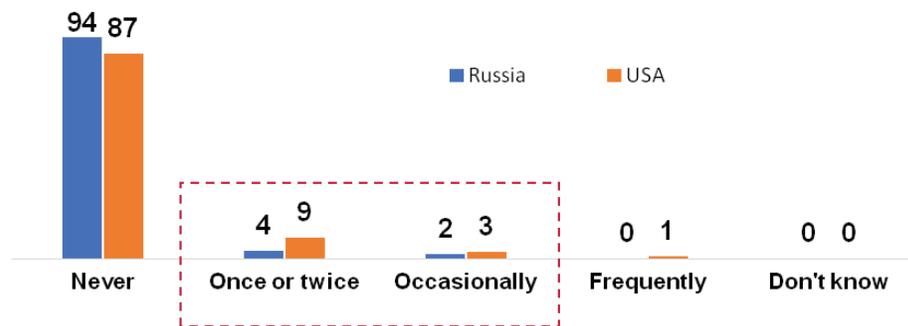


Figure 1.  
“Have you ever dreamed about the United States [Russia]?” (% of total respondents, one answer)

So where do Russians and Americans, regardless of how intensely they care, get their information about each other? As a first answer, we looked at sources of news. As Figure 2 shows, for both Russians and Americans the main answer is television, though much more so in Russia (56 percent) than in the United States (39 percent). Youth are different, however: The youngest respondents in both countries consult mostly online sources, with Americans relying more on social media and Russians on news websites. Similar shares of each country's population rely on news websites (19 percent in Russia, 22 percent in the United States), conversations with people (7 percent and 6 percent), paper publications (2 percent and 4 percent), blogs (5 percent and 3 percent), and foreign sources (1 percent and 2 percent). But Americans are much more likely than Russians overall to seek information from social media (15 percent as opposed to 5 percent) and radio (9 percent as opposed to 3 percent).

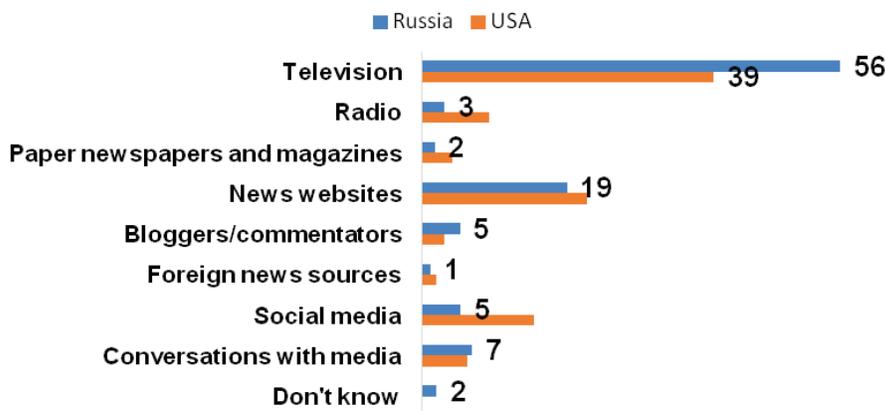


Figure 2. "On which of the following do you most rely as your primary source of news on politics? Please choose the one that is most important for you." (% of total respondents, multiple answers)

Because so little is known for certain about the extent to which people are forming opinions based on first- or second-hand impressions, we also investigated personal ties that individuals might have to the other country, including experiences that individuals in Russia have had with the United States and vice versa. To turn first to travel, while many Americans (65 percent) and Russians (44 percent) have traveled abroad since they were old enough to remember the trip, visits between the United States and Russia are quite rare. Only 4 percent of Russians have ever made it to the United States, and 57 percent of these spent less than one month and 29 percent less than one year there. Most Russians who have been to the United States are in either the youngest (eighteen to twenty-four) or oldest age group (7 percent each) and tend to have higher levels of education (among Russians with a research degree or two other kinds of higher education diplomas, 11 percent have been to the United States). Similarly, only 3 percent of Americans have ever been to Russia. In the United States, this travel is not linked to age, but people with postgraduate education are far more likely (9 percent) to have gone to Russia than those with the lowest education levels (1 percent).

Of course, people can form first-hand impressions not only via travel but also through personal relationships. We thus wanted to know how many Russians and Americans have connections with anyone living in the other country. As Figure 3 shows, 12 percent of Russians have family or friends who currently reside in the United States. Such Russians are primarily inhabitants of big (million-population) cities (20 percent), urban residents more generally (21 percent), and persons with a higher degree (21 percent). Only 2 percent of Americans, though, have anyone in their immediate circle living in Russia. That said, when asked if they are acquainted with any Russians (in addition to friends or relatives), 14 percent of Americans reply yes, as opposed to 10 percent of Russians regarding Americans. Overall, we find that only relatively small shares of each country’s population have the potential for direct access to the ways of thinking of someone inside the other country’s media and political environment.

Overall, our findings confirm that Russians and Americans have little access to first-hand information to fall back on in interpreting messages they hear about the other country in their own mass media.

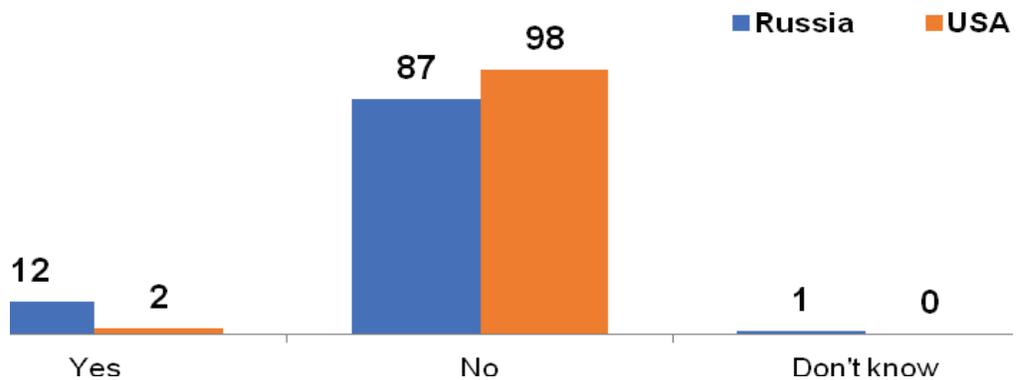


Figure 3. “Do you have family or close friends who live in the United States [Russia] now?” (% of total respondents, one answer)

Among people who do encounter people from the other country, Americans appear to be more likely than Russians to take advantage of the opportunity to discuss international affairs with them (Figure 4). Specifically, 12 percent of Americans and 6 percent of Russians report they have explicitly discussed international affairs with a representative of the other country. In Russia, this means 9 percent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds, 9 percent of men, and 16 percent of persons with a postgraduate degree. In the United States, such conversations are more frequent among older and more educated people and are reported by 16 percent of men.

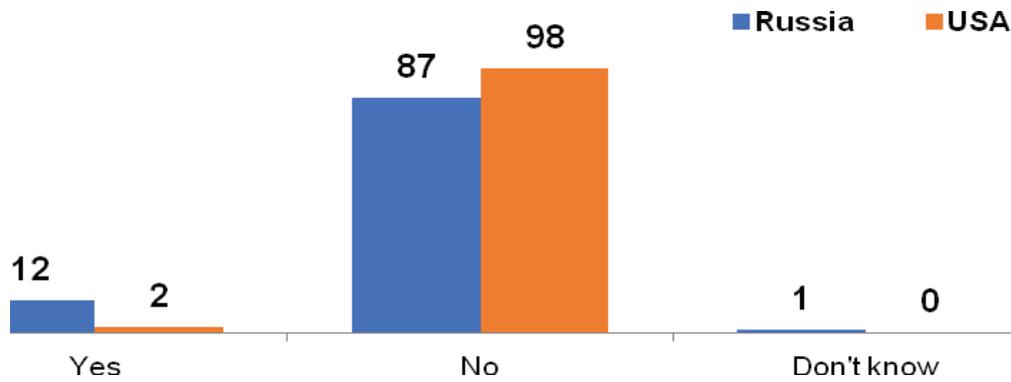


Figure 4.  
 "Have you ever talked with an American [a Russian] about international affairs?" (% of total respondents, one answer)

Finally, how much do Russians and Americans actually know about their mutual relations? Political knowledge is hard to evaluate without extensive testing, which was not our main goal, so we opted just to ask respondents three basic questions. Most people know the name of the other country's president. But beyond that, knowledge is very weak (Figure 5). Only 9 percent in each country could name the other's foreign minister/secretary of state. We also asked each country's citizens whether they knew the official U.S. position on Crimea, one of the most fundamental issues dividing the countries today. While 68 percent of Russians correctly believed that the United States considered Crimea part of Ukraine, only 23 percent of Americans got it right. This difference likely reflects the fact that American opposition to the Crimea annexation is much more an everyday media affair in Russia, which among other things continues to feel the effects of economic sanctions imposed by the United States and other Western countries for this act. It may, though, also reflect some confusion among the American public as to what U.S. policy actually is, given that President Donald Trump and some of his supporters have signaled that his own position on Crimea is closer to Russia's.

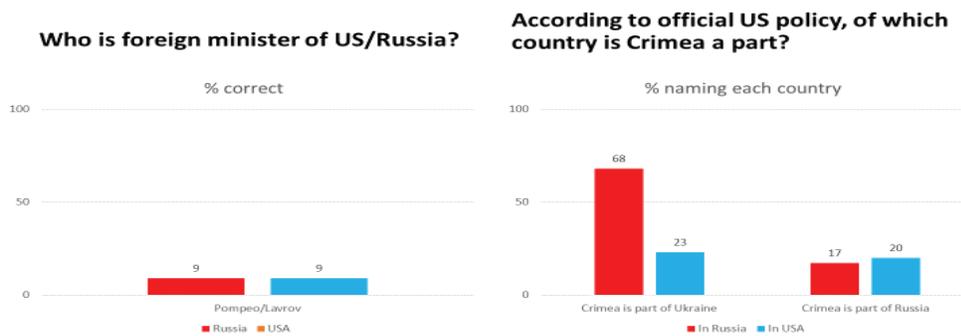


Figure 5.  
 How much do Americans and Russians know about mutual relations?

Overall, our findings confirm that Russians and Americans have little access to first-hand information to fall back on in interpreting messages they hear about the other country in their own mass media. We might add here that most people do not generally have the language skills even to follow each other’s native-language media, should they encounter it: Only 31 percent of Russians know English well enough to read or understand television, we find, and even this is far greater than the minuscule share of Americans who have such skills in Russian.

With broad but shallow mutual interest, and information on current affairs heavily influenced by television and other mass media, what do Russians and Americans think about each other?

Turning first to perceived levels of commonality and difference, we find that both countries are split over whether the United States and Russia are part of the same “European civilization.”

# Large Shares Think We Are More Similar than Different, Especially in the United States

Turning first to perceived levels of commonality and difference, we find that both countries are split over whether the United States and Russia are part of the same “European civilization.” Among Russians, 46 percent see the United States as sharing their own civilizational heritage, and this view is held by 41 percent of Americans (Figure 6). If we drill down into the demographics, we find that these results depend heavily on age, but not in the same way: Senses of shared civilization are most prevalent among the young in Russia (60 percent in the eighteen to twenty-four age group) and among the old in the United States (48 percent in the sixty and over age group).

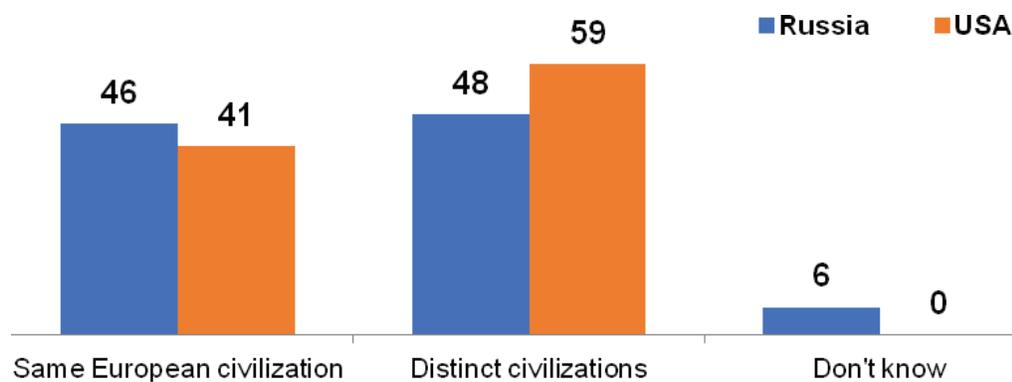


Figure 6.  
Do both Russia and the United States belong to European civilization despite their differences, or do they instead belong to distinct civilizations? (% of total respondents, one answer)

We also asked people to rate, on a scale from zero to ten, how similar they think “ordinary people” in the other country are to ordinary people in their own country. As summarized in Figure 7, we find that Americans are much more likely to see net similarity (58 percent) than are Russians (31 percent). About the same number in each country (19–22 percent) gave an answer at the midpoint, indicating similarity and difference in roughly equal measure.

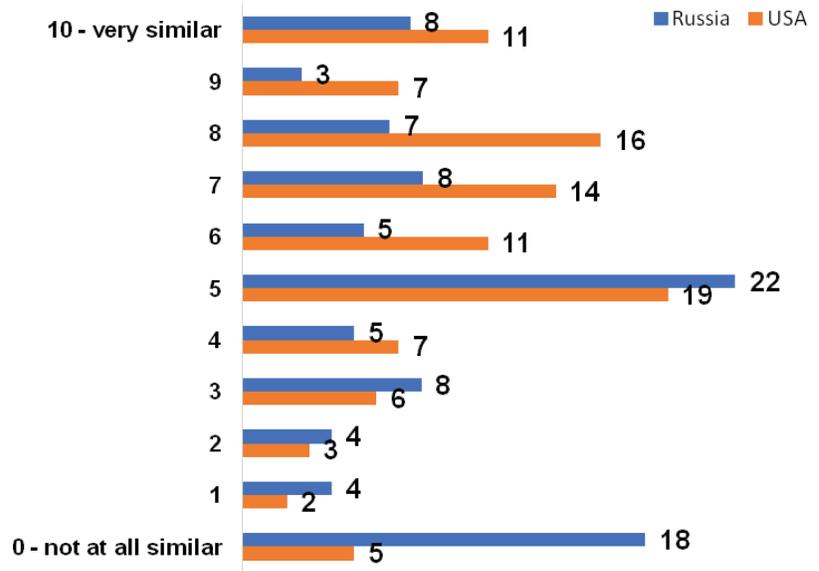


Figure 7. Thinking about ordinary people who live in our country, imagine a scale where 0 means that these people are not at all like we are in our country, and where 10 means that people there are essentially just like us. Using this scale, how similar to us or different from us do you think ordinary Americans [Russians] are? (% of total respondents, one answer)

# But There Is More Negativity from Americans than from Russians

Does perceived similarity or difference translate into favorable attitudes? In the United States, it appears not. Despite the majority's feeling commonality with the Russian people, some 69 percent of Americans report unfavorable attitudes toward Russia on balance (Figure 8). In Russia, only 39 percent report net unfavorable attitudes toward the United States. While a very large share of Russians (22 percent) find it too hard to venture an answer to this question, even if we posit that all of these people are just hiding hostile views, the degree of negativity is still considerably lower than in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

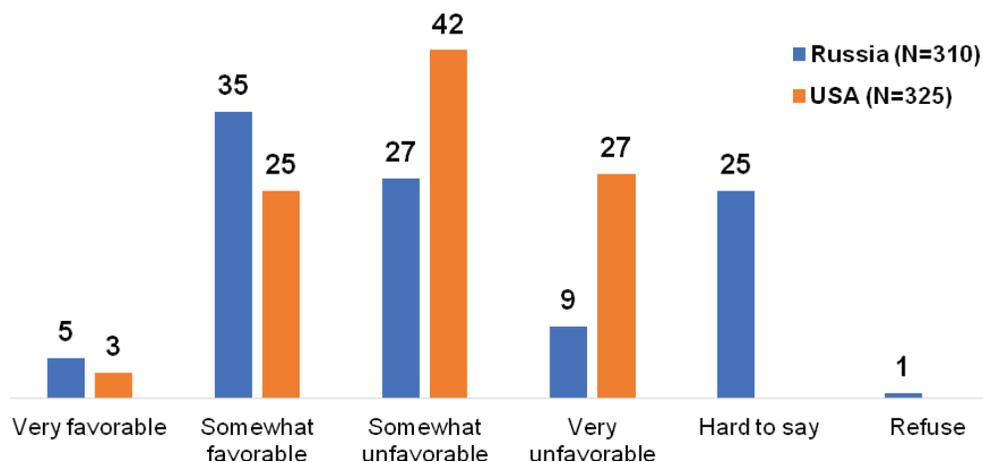


Figure 8. Please tell us if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of the following countries: United States [Russia]

Because people with weakly grounded views might be influenced by what they think is prevailing public opinion, we also asked respondents whether they think a majority in their own country has positive or negative views of the other country. Interestingly, most people in both places think their own prevailing view is negative, which we show here is true for the United States but not for Russia. If people are typically swayed toward majority opinions when they learn about them, then it would appear there is greater promise for pro-American views to rise in Russia than there is for pro-Russian sentiment to grow in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> The figures in this paragraph are based on only 325 respondents in the U.S. sample and 310 in the Russian sample because it was only for these that the most straightforward version of the question was asked. Margins of error are thus wider here and in the few other instances where our findings are based on subsamples of our pools of respondents.

What specifically do Russians and Americans like and dislike about each other? We asked all respondents to tell us in their own words, naming up to three things they liked and disliked about the other country. No single response occurred very frequently in either country, indicating that mutual feelings are linked to a wide variety of considerations—sometimes serious but often trivial—rather than to any single overweaning perceptions.

As for likes, Russians were most appreciative of the United States for public welfare, protection of human rights, and social policies. Other positive qualities cited include climate and nature (9 percent), people’s openness (8 percent), and democracy and freedom (8 percent). For Americans, Russia’s positives were strongest for many aspects of its culture, including literature and the arts, with smaller but substantial shares citing the appeal of Russian history and values.

Regarding dislikes, Russians most frequently mentioned American anti-Russian rhetoric, a perceived sense of superiority, what many see as an international striving to impose its position, and U.S. interference in the affairs of other countries. Americans most often said they disliked Russia’s political system or Russian President Vladimir Putin personally. Smaller but substantial shares of U.S. citizens were put off by Russia’s association with communism, certain values (including anti-LGBTQ sentiment), and severe weather. Politics, then, appears to be a big bone of contention for the U.S. and Russian publics, with Americans concerned most about the nature of Russia’s political system and Russians more focused on actual American behavior.

Finally, as Figure 9 shows, we asked respondents in each country what they thought of the other’s current president. Interestingly, far more people in the United States on balance agree with Putin on world affairs (22 percent) than people in the United States do with Trump (8 percent). Larger shares in both places believe the other leader is on balance good for his own people (40 percent in the United States for Putin, 51 percent in Russia for Trump).<sup>3</sup> In the United States, these figures hide a pronounced partisan divide: Putin is significantly more popular among Republicans than for the rest of the country.<sup>4</sup>

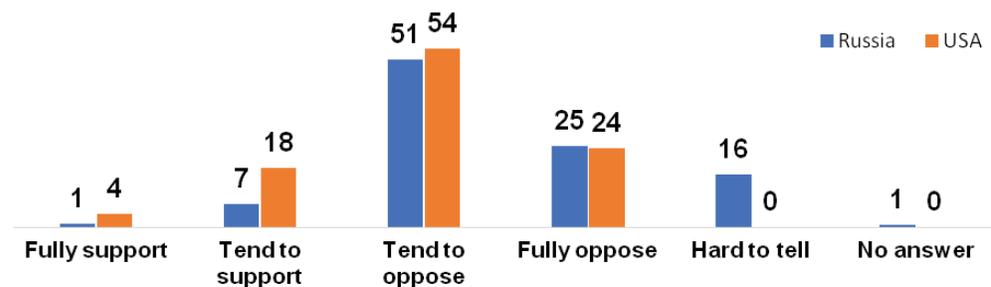


Figure 9.

<sup>3</sup> For this specific question referenced in this sentence, in the United States, the straightforward version of this question was asked of only 405 respondents (about a quarter of the sample), and these are the results reported here. In Russia, the results reported here are based on 798 respondents (about half of the sample). The figures from the previous sentence are based on the full sample in both countries.

<sup>4</sup> Henry E. Hale and Olga Kamenchuk, “Why are Republicans using Putin’s talking points? This study helps explain,” *The Washington Post*, The Monkey Cage blog, February 4, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/02/04/why-are-republicans-using-putins-talking-points-this-study-helps-explain/>, accessed February 4, 2020.

Now let us talk a little bit about political leadership in the United States and Russia. Do you usually fully support, tend to support, tend to oppose, or fully oppose the statements that Donald Trump [Vladimir Putin] makes when he speaks out on world affairs? (% of total respondents, one answer)

While many on both sides think we have a lot in common and see each other positively, our survey finds a very strong sense of mutual threat.

# Most Agree: The Other Side Is a Threat

While many on both sides think we have a lot in common and see each other positively, our survey finds a very strong sense of mutual threat. Below, we show how people evaluate the state of relations in general and how they think the other country is treating them, and then we gauge the intensity of the perceived threats. Next, we then show that each side tends to see its own government as relatively innocent and powerless while perceiving the other as highly influential contributors to developments they regard as negative.

Figure 10 reports that popular views are in line with expert opinion in both countries: Russian-American relations are overall “tense” or “chilly.” In the United States, a full quarter of the population considers relations “normal” or “calm,” but this view is held disproportionately by Republicans, who generally today have much more favorable opinions of Putin than do others.

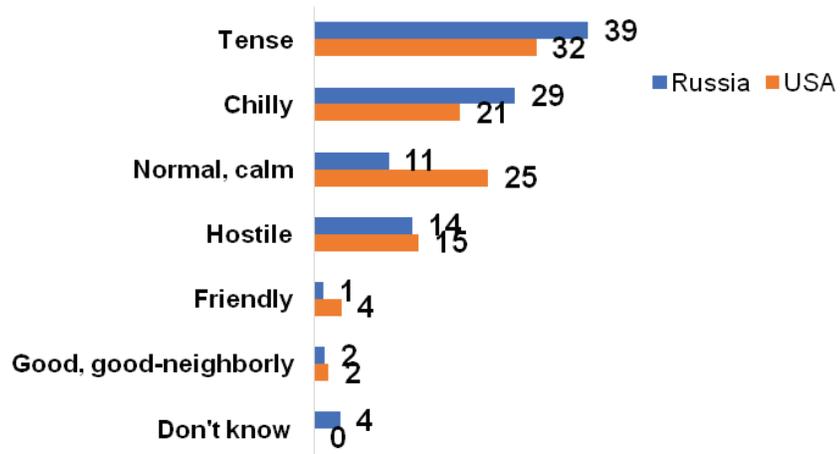


Figure 10.  
How would you generally assess the current state of Russia-US relations?  
(% of total respondents, one answer)

Large majorities in both countries also believe they are being treated as an “enemy” or as a “rival” by the other country (78 percent in Russia, 73 percent in the United States), as can be seen in Figure 11. Here, too, we find Republicans disproportionately likely to think Russia is treating the United States as an ally or friend (35 percent as opposed to 20 percent of Democrats), though a majority even of Republicans perceives Russian behavior to reflect

rivalry (42 percent) or enmity (23 percent) (the respective figures for Democrats are 47 percent and 33 percent). Almost identical shares of the Russian (75 percent) and American (74 percent) population overall agree that the other country is “trying to weaken” their own.

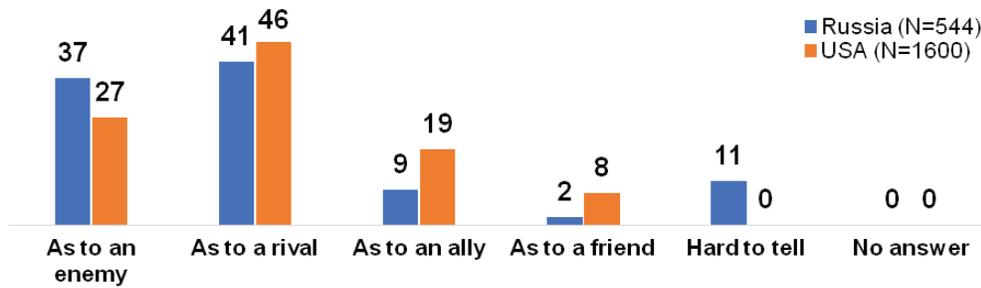


Figure 11. What kind of policy does the US [Russia] pursue with respect to Russia [the USA]? (% of total respondents, one answer)\*  
 \* In Russia there were three subsamples. The one reported here concerns the United States while the other subsamples were asked about the European Union and the West (not reported here but available upon request).

To assess the depth of this anxiety, we asked whether anyone had trouble sleeping at night thinking about what the other country might do. Interestingly, 11 percent of Russians and a surprisingly high 18 percent of Americans reported insomnia related to worrying about the other country (Figure 12). While these numbers are far from a majority, the fact that more than a tenth of each country’s population experiences anxiety deep enough to disturb sleep indicates that fears of the other country are felt rather intensely, especially in the United States. If we again break the American numbers down by party, we find that nearly a quarter (23 percent) of Democrats experience deep worry, as opposed to only 13 percent of Republicans, 17 percent of independents, and 16 percent of other parties’ supporters.

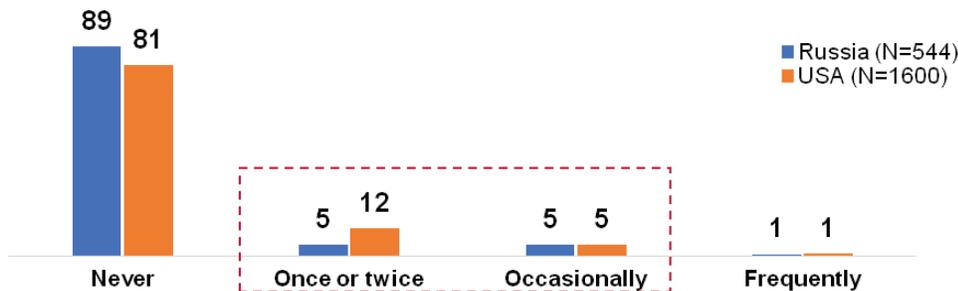


Figure 12. Have you ever had trouble sleeping at night, worrying about what the United States [Russia] might do? (% of total respondents, one answer)

We further find that both sides tend to blame the other, considering one’s own country either an ineffective or positive force in the world while viewing the other as a combination of powerful and at least mildly malevolent. Figures 13 and 14 thus show that most Russians consider the United States responsible for starting the war now playing out in Ukraine and for the deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations generally, all the while rejecting that their own country bears responsibility for these problems. Russians do not, on balance, blame

the United States for Russian economic woes, though they also do not primarily blame their own government. Americans generally point to Russia as causing the Russia-Ukraine war, though they are more willing to accept a role for their own country in the deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations. Sharp disagreement over the other's influence also appears on the question of Russian interference in American elections: 58 percent of Russians feel that their country is not responsible at all for the hacking and release of e-mails from the 2016 Hillary Clinton presidential campaign, and only 13 percent thought it entirely responsible. For Americans, 59 percent laid the blame mostly with Russia (including 28 percent calling it entirely responsible), with only 11 percent denying any Russian role.

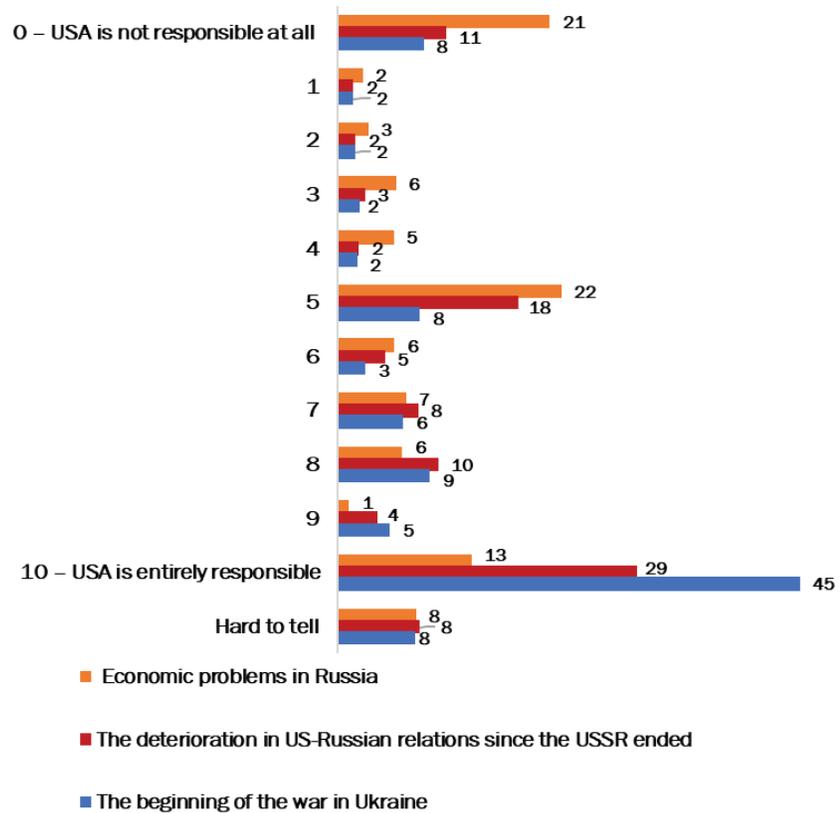


Figure 13A. Russia  
 Many these days talk about the influence that the United States has in the world. Please imagine a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means the United States is not responsible at all for an event while 10 means it is entirely responsible. Using this scale, please tell me, to what extent is the United States responsible for . . . (% of total respondents, one answer per position)

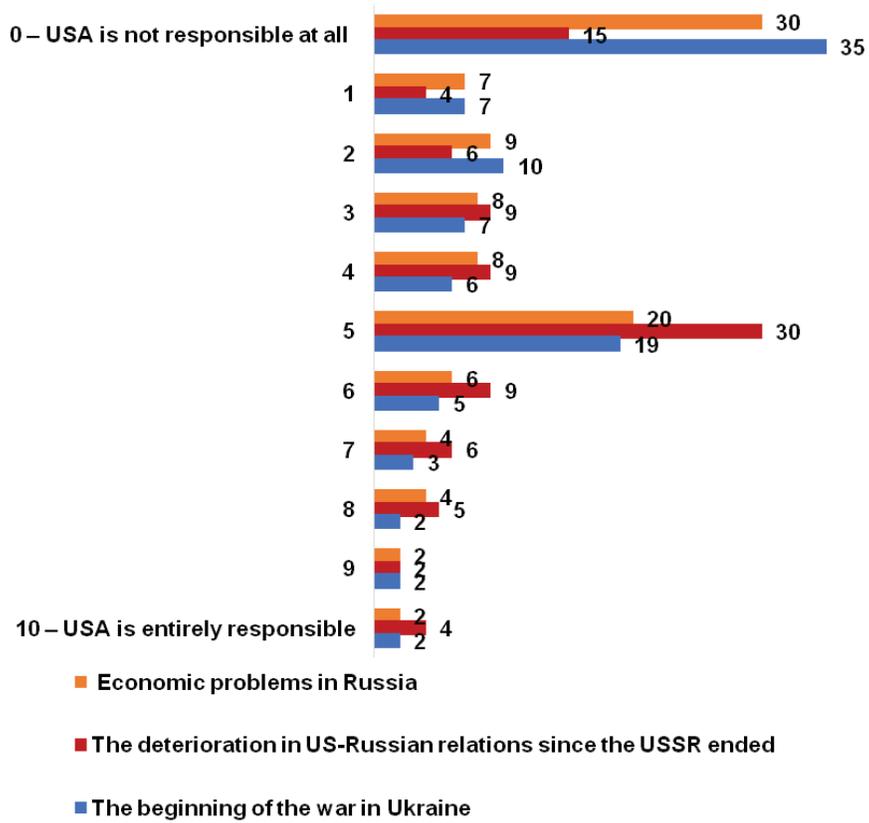


Figure 13B. United States  
 Many these days talk about the influence that the United States has in the world. Please imagine a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means the United States is not responsible at all for an event while 10 means it is entirely responsible. Using this scale, please tell me, to what extent is the United States responsible for . . . (% of total respondents, one answer per position)

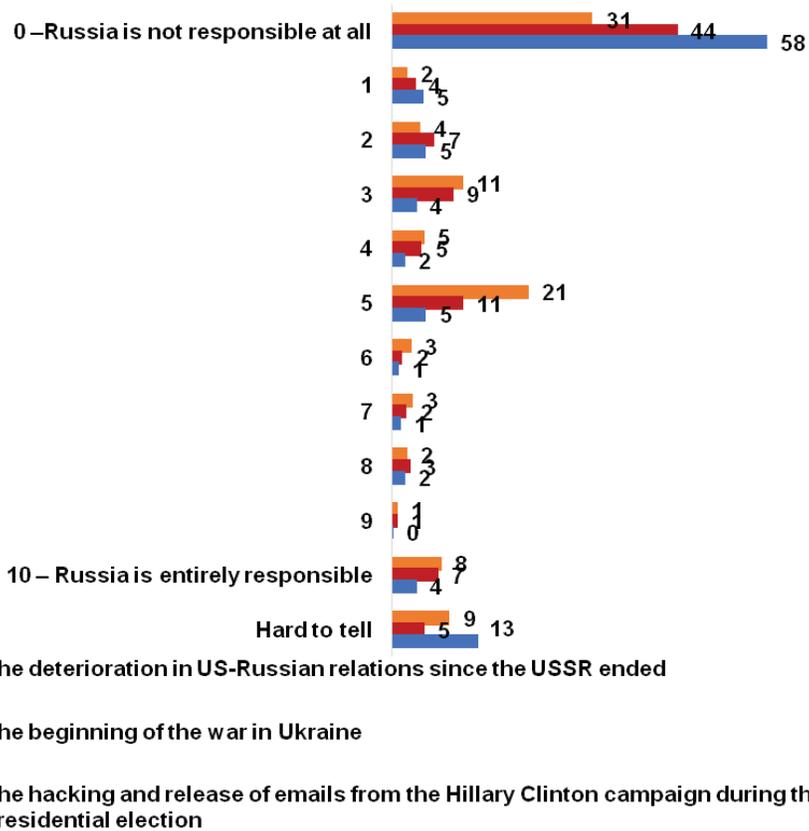


Figure 14A. Russia  
 Now let us talk about Russia's influence in the world. Please imagine a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means Russia is not responsible at all for an event while 10 means it is entirely responsible. Using this scale, please tell me, to what extent is Russia responsible for . . . (% of total respondents, one answer per position)

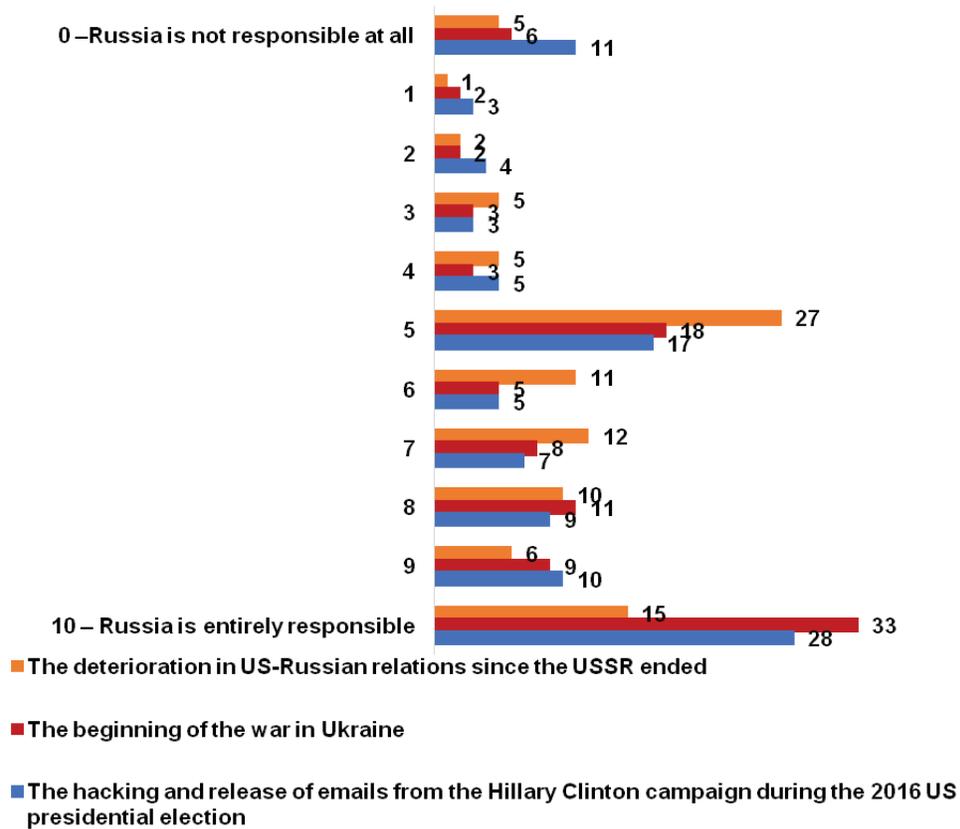


Figure 14B. USA  
 Now let us talk about Russia's influence in the world. Please imagine a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means Russia is not responsible at all for an event while 10 means it is entirely responsible. Using this scale, please tell me, to what extent is Russia responsible for . . . (% of total respondents, one answer per position)

Drilling deeper on the issue of cyber threats, our surveys reveal that more than two-thirds of Russians consider U.S. cyber attacks a serious threat to Russian national security (Figure 15). Asked about different types of such attacks that might be imminent, Russians tend to think that the promotion of social and political unrest poses the most serious danger to national security (72 percent). Russians express lower levels of concern about the potential for hacking and disruption of key infrastructure or government facilities (67 percent), the spread of “fake news” (65 percent), and the hacking of voting machines and electoral counting (64 percent). American fears are even more prevalent than are Russians’: Some 86 percent consider Russian hacking of infrastructure and government at least a somewhat serious threat, as do 80 percent the promotion of social and political unrest and 78 percent election-related hacking and the spread of “fake news.”

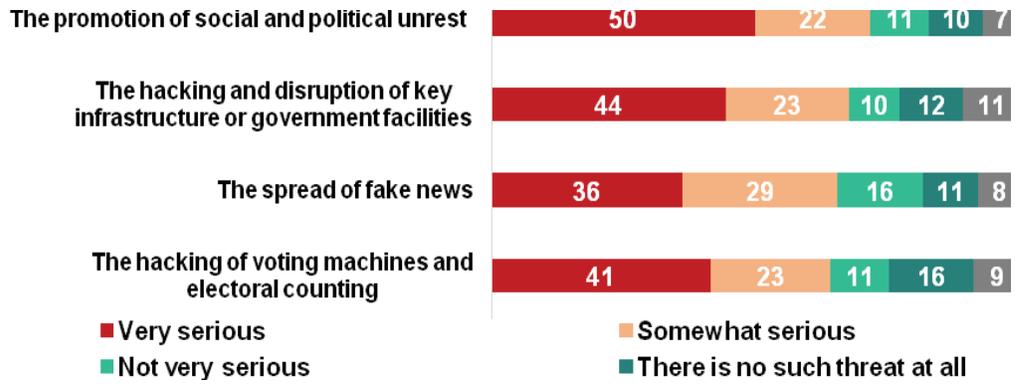


Figure 15A. Russia  
 Regarding the cyber sphere, please tell me, how serious of a threat to our national security are the following types of Internet-related attacks from the United States? (% of total respondents, one answer per position)

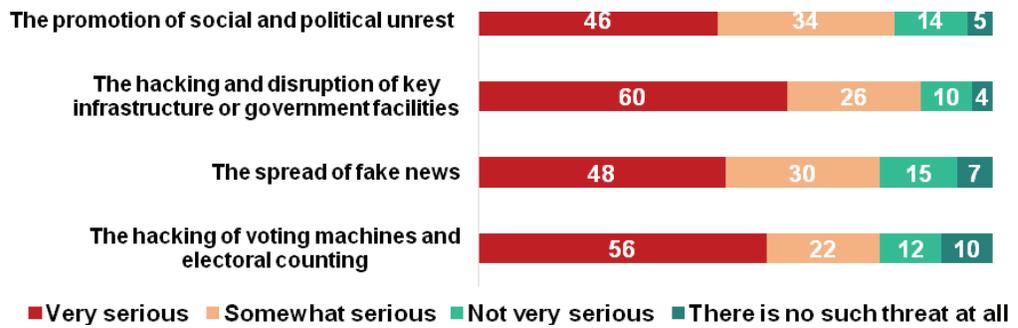


Figure 15B. United States  
 Regarding the cyber sphere, please tell me, how serious of a threat to our national security are the following types of Internet-related attacks from Russia? (% of total respondents, one answer per position)

One point where threat perceptions diverge concerns the other country’s state media. Russia’s population generally does not see American state funded media (like Voice of America) as a danger, believing “it is normal when state media from the USA broadcasts news to our citizens” (55 percent agree, 39 percent disagree). Only 35 percent in the United States agree with the analogous proposition for Russian state media, however, and 66 percent disagree.

# Rejecting Tit-for-Tat, But the Devil's in the Details

If we look at many of the flash points in current relations, prospects for improving relations appear rather grim. More people than not in each country support a wide range of status quo positions from their own governments that are contested by the other (Figure 16). An overwhelming 87 percent of Russians back the annexation of Crimea, which Americans who know about the issue refuse to recognize by a ratio of nearly two-to-one (41 percent to 24 percent). Accordingly, 57 percent of U.S. citizens are in favor of continuing economic sanctions on Russia, and 52 percent of Russians want to continue the “countersanctions” Putin has introduced in response. Pluralities even back the expulsion of large numbers of the other’s diplomats, with support outweighing opposition by 44 percent to 28 percent in Russia and 42 percent to 35 percent in the United States. The exception to this pattern among the questions we asked concerns Syria: While Russians support their own nation’s intervention in that country by 54 percent to 30 percent, Americans generally oppose their military’s being involved: Only 30 percent support such U.S. intervention while 49 percent are against it.

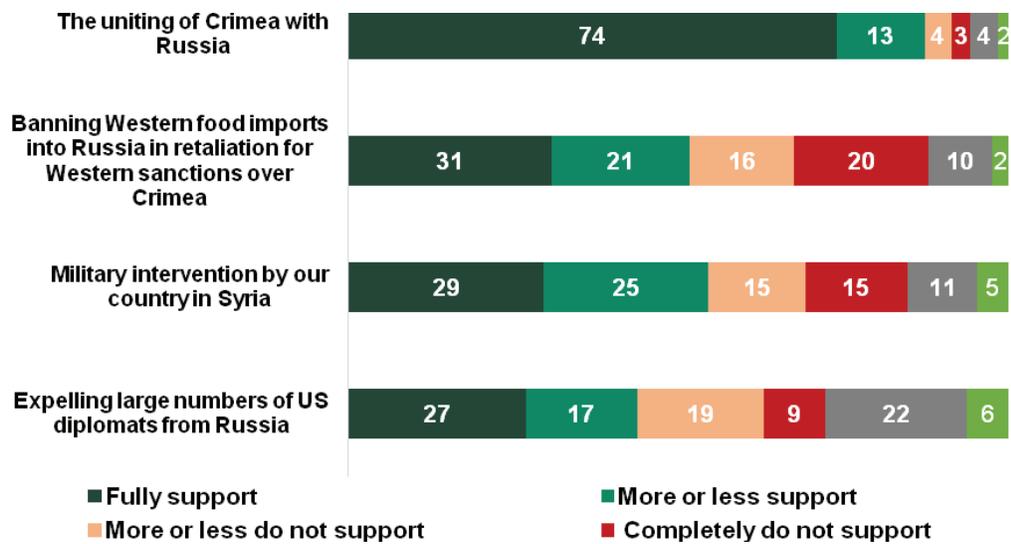


Figure 16A. Russia  
Some people support different official policies and actions while others do not support them. Tell me please, do you or do you not support the following official policies and actions? (% of total respondents, one answer per position)

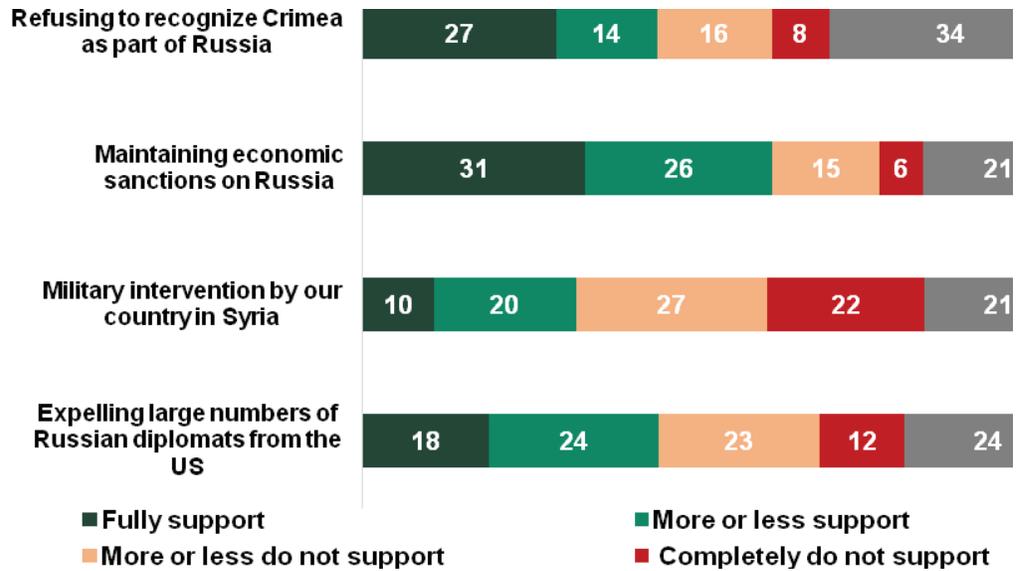


Figure 16B. United States  
Some people support different official policies and actions while others do not support them. Tell me please, do you or do you not support the following official policies and actions? (% of total respondents, one answer per position)

More broadly, we find each country’s people supportive of projecting its own values abroad. Some 65 percent of Americans tend to agree that “the US has a historical mission to spread freedom to other countries,” with 34 percent opposing. As for Russians, 51 percent mostly or fully agree that “Russia has a historical mission to spread its values in other countries of the world” (42 percent oppose).

At the same time, we find a broad desire on both sides to improve relations. In fact, comparing Figure 17 with Figure 11 reveals that while support for aggressive measures to rein in the other is substantial, the share of people who generally want to treat the other country in a more friendly manner is significantly greater than the share of people who think the other country treats them badly.

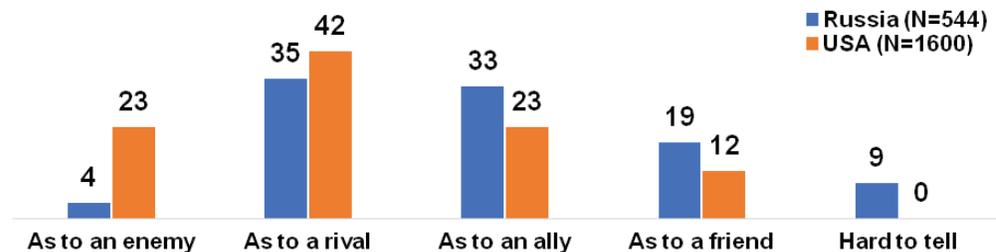


Figure 17. There are various opinions about what relations should be like between Russia and the United States. What do you think, should Russia [the United States] relate to the United States [Russia]? (% of total respondents, one answer)\*  
\* In Russia there were three subsamples. The one reported here concerns the United States, while the other subsamples were asked about the European Union and the West (not reported here, but available upon request).

This is clearest among Russians: While 37 percent think the United States considers Russia an enemy and 41 percent consider it a rival, with only 2 percent thinking that America is friendly to it, only 4 percent want Russia to respond by treating the United States as an enemy, and a majority (52 percent) thinks the Kremlin should relate to the United States as an ally or friend, with a surprising 19 percent wanting friendship. Among Americans, only 12 percent favor a friendly foreign policy, and 23 percent back treating Russia as an ally, but these figures are still higher than the shares thinking that Russia treats the United States the same way. The majority of Americans, however, think Russia should be treated as an enemy (23 percent) or rival (46 percent). There would thus seem to be more public opinion incentive for the Kremlin to soften on the United States than for U.S. leaders to soften on Russia.

In the cyber sphere, it is perhaps hopeful that we find rather strong support for defensive but not offensive responses to perceived threats from the other country.

# Where Do the U.S. and Russian Publics See Room for Improving Relations?

Those who frame U.S.-Russian relations as a new Cold War, therefore, may be wittingly or unwittingly promoting support for hostile policy positions among American audiences, though not among Russians.

The general tendency to support moderation does translate into backing for certain conciliatory policy preferences. Surprisingly, both Americans and Russians actually reject the “sphere of influence” thinking that has been a major source of tension in mutual relations. Not only do Americans broadly think “Ukraine should be free to join NATO if its people vote to do so, regardless of Russian interests” (82 percent), but more Russians also agree than disagree (48 percent to 44 percent). Turning the geopolitical tables, not only do 74 percent of Russians generally agree that “Mexico has the right to become a Russian ally if its population votes for it, regardless of US interests,” but 59 percent of Americans also agree (only 16 percent oppose).

We also find a broad willingness on both sides to make some compromises for the sake of good relations. Generally sharing this view are 65 percent of Russians and 53 percent of Americans (Figure 18). But when we ask about compromising on the most important points of conflict, majorities are against (Figure 19). Just 29 percent of Russians agree on balance that their country should stop supporting the pro-Russian insurgency in eastern Ukraine for the sake of relations with the United States, with 60 percent opposing. Similarly, only 40 percent of Americans think improving U.S.-Russian relations for its own sake is worth lifting economic sanctions, a proposition that meets with 60 percent disapproval. This indicates that compromise is likely most possible where it would matter least—at least in the short run.

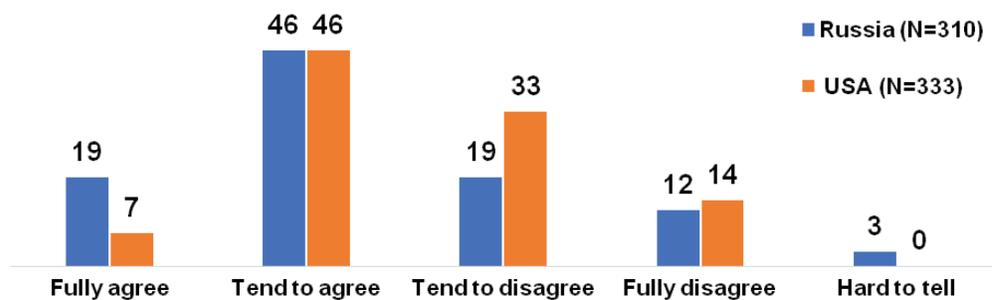


Figure 18. Do you fully agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree, or fully disagree that Russia [the United States] should make some compromises with the United States [Russia] in order to restore good relations?

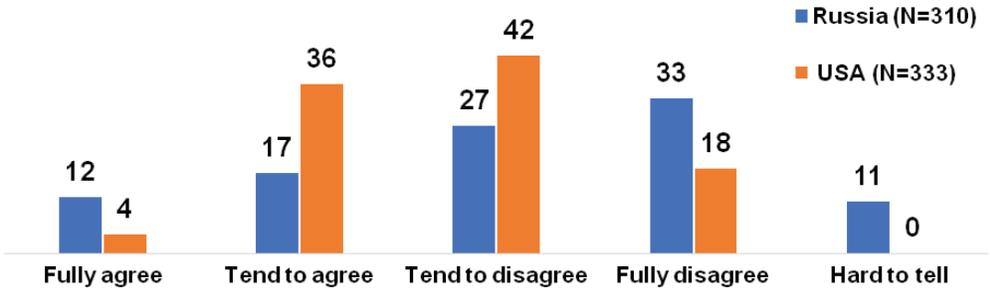


Figure 19. Do you fully agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree, or fully disagree that Russia should consider ending its support for the rebels in eastern Ukraine [that the United States should consider lifting economic sanctions on Russia] in order to restore good relations with the United States [Russia]?

One concrete step that majorities in each country do favor is regular meetings between the Russian and American presidents (85 percent in Russia, 64 percent in the United States). The lower figure in the United States supporting summits is driven to a large extent by Democrats, whose party leadership expressed outrage at President Trump’s seeming praise of Putin at their first major summit, in Helsinki in 2018.

In the cyber sphere, it is perhaps hopeful that we find rather strong support for defensive but not offensive responses to perceived threats from the other country. This is evident in Figure 20: While more than half of both Russians and Americans favor censorship of badly behaving foreign media and even separating their own Internet infrastructure from the global web, large majorities (67 percent in Russia, 69 percent in the United States) oppose “fighting fire with fire” by spreading “fake news” or promoting hacking in the other country.

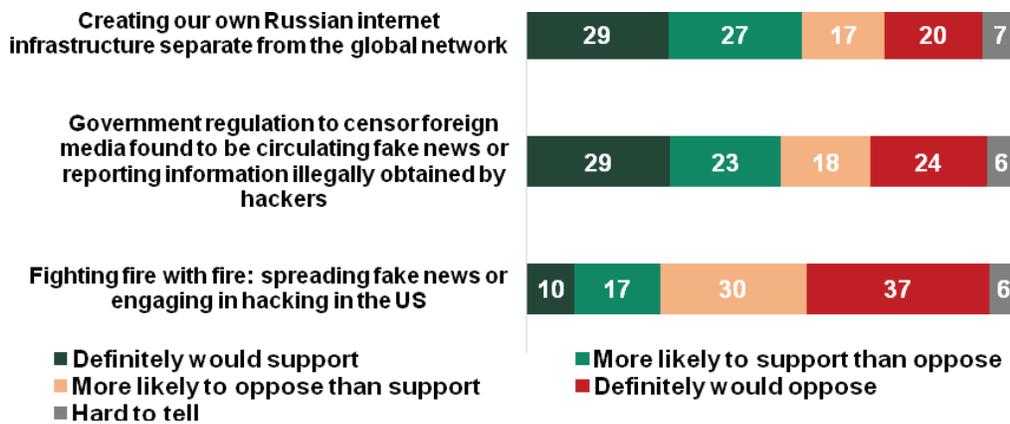


Figure 20A. Russia. Would you likely support any of the following measures that some have proposed might counter one or more of these threats? (% of total respondents, one answer per position)

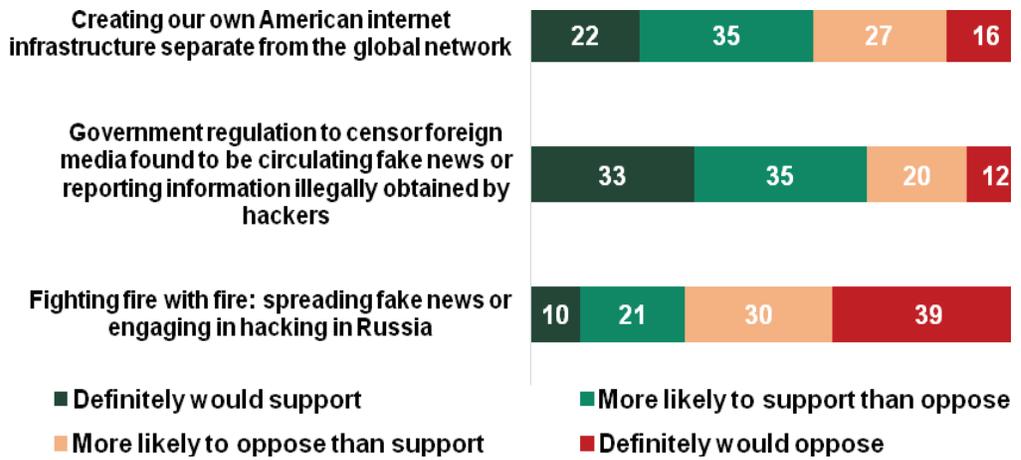


Figure 20B. United States  
 Would you likely support any of the following measures that some have proposed might counter one or more of these threats? (% of total respondents, one answer per position)

# Does Talk of a New Cold War Help or Hurt?

It has become increasingly common to hear the current state of relations between the United States and Russia characterized as a “new Cold War.” We wondered whether this was helpful. By evoking images of the Cold War, are we subtly influencing the kinds of policies people advocate with respect to the other country, and if so, in what way?

One possibility is that invoking images of the Cold War will call to mind images of global hostilities and thereby increase the probability that people will support policies of containment, leading to a hypothesis that calling current relations a “new Cold War” will strengthen preferences for containment. From a different perspective, one might suspect that reminding people of the Cold War will call to mind the dangers of nuclear war and the need to cooperate to avoid it, as the superpowers did with *détente*. This yields a hypothesis that calling current relations a “new Cold War” will increase preferences for the two countries’ working together despite deep ideological differences and conflicting geopolitical goals. A related hypothesis is that the effects will vary by country, with a pro-containment effect more likely in the United States and a pro-cooperation effect more likely in Russia, because of the ways in which the Cold War is widely remembered in the two countries today.

To investigate, we conducted a small experiment. First, we asked respondents whether they agreed with two basic policy positions: first, that “Russia [the United States] should contain U.S. [Russian] influence around the world using all means available, including military means”; and, second, that “Russia [the United States] should be willing to work with the United States [Russia] despite our disagreements.” Just prior to posing these questions, however, we randomly divided our respondents into two groups in each country. One group in each country was read a statement that the two countries are in “a new Cold War,” while the control group was not “primed” in this way to have the Cold War in mind. If talking about mutual relations using Cold War imagery influences how people think about these relations, we would expect the group reminded of the Cold War to voice different opinions on containment and cooperation from those of the control group even though they were divided completely arbitrarily.

Figure 21 summarizes the findings. In short, Cold War framing shifts policy opinions only in the United States, and it does so by increasing support for containment, not cooperation. When Americans are primed to think of the Cold War, they become about 5 percentage points more likely to support (on balance) an aggressive—including military—effort to

contain Russia globally. This finding is statistically significant by conventional standards.<sup>5</sup> The average American receiving the Cold War prime is also more likely than the control group to “work with Russia despite our disagreements,” though the difference is not strong enough for us to rule out “no effect” with common levels of statistical confidence. In Russia, we find that Cold War framing has no clear effect at all on either support for containing the United States worldwide or support for cooperating with the United States despite differences. Those who frame U.S.-Russian relations as a new Cold War, therefore, may be wittingly or unwittingly promoting support for hostile policy positions among American audiences, though not among Russians.

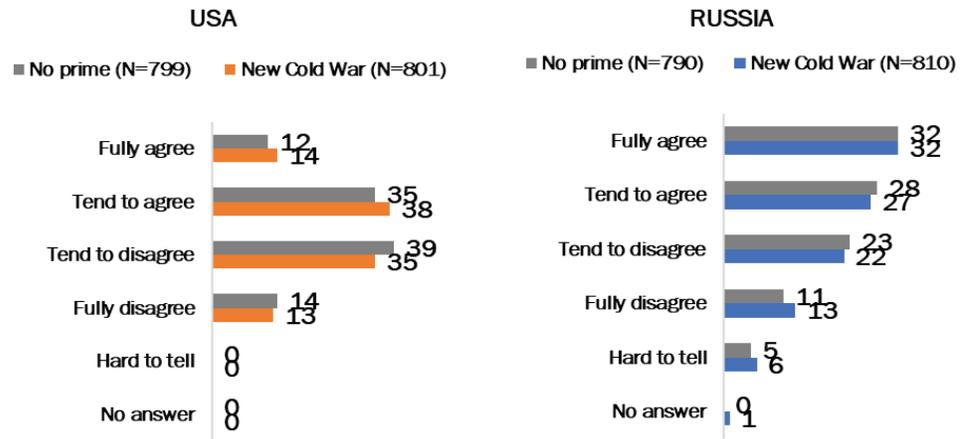


Figure 21A. Russia [the United States] should contain American [Russian] influence around the world using all means available, including military means.

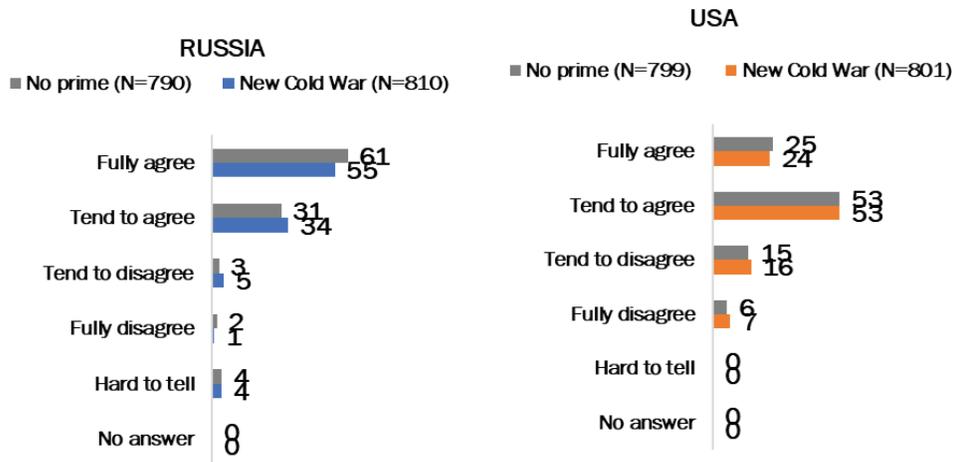


Figure 21B. Russia [the United States] should be willing to work with the United States [Russia] despite our disagreements.

<sup>5</sup> If we regress the binary dependent variable on the binary treatment variable using an OLS model,  $p=.029$ . If we instead use logit,  $p=.030$ . If one substitutes a 4-point scale for the binary measure (which focuses specifically on the distinction between relative support and relative opposition) using OLS,  $p=.084$ .

# Conclusion

We have proceeded here from the premise that improving U.S.-Russian relations is a good thing. Some in each country may disagree, or at least may posit that hostile policies should be pursued until the other side is defeated or changes its goals. And this raises the thorny issue of the “terms of the peace.” Both countries’ leaderships and populations may indeed want peace but also insist that it be on their terms. For many Russians, this might mean recognizing Crimea as part of their country, not Ukraine, and credibly committing not to undermine the stability of Putin’s regime. For many Americans, this might mean Russia’s giving up Crimea, cutting off support for insurgents in eastern Ukraine, or perhaps becoming a democracy and somehow credibly committing not to interfere in foreign elections.

At the same time, we recognize people’s views can be powerfully shaped by their media environments and political attachments. As we have shown, with a partial exception for younger people Russians rely overwhelmingly on television for their news, and televised messages are well known to be tightly controlled by the Kremlin.<sup>6</sup> It is just as well known that Americans’ views are shaped heavily by their partisan loyalties, with people frequently looking to their party leaders for cues on what they should think on a whole range of issues—even the severity of the COVID-19 virus threat.<sup>7</sup> Surely Russians who share attachment to Putin react similarly to the cues he issues through state media.<sup>8</sup>

Public opinion is not infinitely manipulable, however, and exploring the range of views at any given time does give us a sense of what incentives each country’s leadership may be facing in considering different possible directions in foreign policy. Thus while we let readers themselves draw conclusions about which side is right on any of the points of disagreement we document here, and for many this will seem obvious, we find the following pattern to be striking: Despite the prevalence of hostile discourse (coverage of threats and problems linked to the other country) in both peoples’ media environments, there is considerable support for finding ways out of the current crisis of relations.

Without asking anyone to give up core principles, we think this should encourage both sides to step up efforts to talk to each other, seek whatever opportunities there are now for productive cooperation, and work toward trying to achieve a just and lasting solution to the major issues that divide us. This may be a long process, but it is one we believe will find broad support in both the United States and Russia.

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<sup>6</sup> Arturas Rozenas and Denis Stukal, “How Autocrats Manipulate Economic News: Evidence from Russia’s State-Controlled Television,” *Journal of Politics*, Forthcoming, <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3023254>.

<sup>7</sup> Adriana Belmonte, “Democrats and Republicans Are Divided on Coronavirus, Polls Say,” Yahoo Finance, March 10, 2020, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/coronavirus-democrats-republicans-193930241.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel A. Greene and Graeme B. Robertson, *Putin v. the People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

The Working Group on the Future of U.S.-Russia Relations convenes rising experts from leading American and Russian institutions to tackle the thorniest issues in the bilateral relationship. By engaging the latest generation of scholars in face-to-face discussion and debate, we aim to generate innovative analysis and policy recommendations that better reflect the common ground between the United States and Russia that is so often obscured by mistrust. We believe our unique, truly bilateral approach offers the best potential for breakthroughs in mutual understanding and reconciliation between our countries.



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