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Are We Reading Russia Right?

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Are We Reading Russia Right?¹

NICOLAI N. PETRO

ABSTRACT:

Despite the passage of time, Cold War patterns of thinking about Russia show no sign of weakening in America. To avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, we need to look at Russian society in a fundamentally different light. We must learn to appreciate it as a democracy that shares key similarities, as well as differences, with the West.

Since the lion's share of attention is devoted to Russia's democratic shortcomings, I would like to draw attention to Vladimir Putin's accomplishment in this area.

I am not arguing that the mainstream view of Russia is entirely wrong, but rather that it is incomplete. It cannot help but be incomplete when the story of an entire nation is boiled down to just one person. While there is far more to Russia than Putin, it is also true Putin has become the avatar of Russia's post-Soviet identity. I will therefore discuss the scope of Russia's political and legal transformation under Putin, then ask why some of his most notable accomplishments have been largely overlooked by the

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media. I will conclude with some suggestions on how to promote a more balanced view of Russia.

For many Americans, the phrase Russian democracy is an oxymoron. While we tend to believe that most people are capable of democracy, in practice, generations of hostility—first toward the Russia Empire, then toward the Soviet Union—have firmly established Russia in the public mind as a nation incapable of democracy. As the late historian Martin Malia wrote, our antagonism toward Russia did not arise with communism, so there was no reason for it to disappear with communism's collapse.²

So entrenched is this animosity that when candidate Donald Trump naively asked, "Wouldn't it be nice if we actually got along with Russia and China?"³ America's foreign policy establishment treated the idea as bordering on treason.⁴

One does not have to look far for the reasons. As noted social critic Paul Berman observed, "Hostility to Russia is the oldest continuous foreign-policy tradition in the United States." Although Americans like to think of our conflict as a product of the Cold War, "it is in fact eternal" says Berman. "The struggle of democracy versus czarism, even if for a few years czarism called itself Communism." That is what makes the notion of friendship with Putin, or any Russia leader, so offensive. Berman asserts, "the whole of American history would seem to say that such an about-face is impossible."⁵

If Berman is right, it helps to explain why, when Vladimir Putin became the first global leader to publicly stand with the United States after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, America's political and intellectual elite did not quite know how to respond.

Influential columnist William Safire warned, "We should not forget that once up on its hind legs, the Russian bear will growl again."⁶ Dr. Richard Pipes, Professor of History at Harvard University, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, reminded readers how quickly we were disillusioned at the end of World War II. "Given the shallowness of the domestic base for Mr. Putin's pro-Western policy," he pointed out, "the latter can quickly reverse itself."⁷

But the prize for casting Putin's gesture of friendship in its most sinister light must surely go to *Washington Post* journalist Anne Applebaum, who wrote, "Putin's commitment to America's war on terrorism was made so abruptly, and is so clearly personal, that I suspect it comes from something deeper: his racism."⁸

A quarter century has passed since the fall of the Soviet Union, and little has changed. When president Putin invited the children of U.S.

diplomatic personnel in Moscow to celebrate Christmas at the Kremlin, after Russian diplomats and their families had been expelled from the U.S., the *Guardian's* Luke Harding explained that this was a veiled threat on their lives, "for those who were able to decode it."⁹

It often seems that the further we distance ourselves from the end of the Cold War, the closer we come to its revival. How can this be, when Russia now officially embraces a market economy, and most of the political and social values of the West? Wasn't the Cold War a fight against communism, for Western values?

The answer has much to do with the media's obsession with one man—Vladimir Putin—an obsession that media critic Stephen Boykewich in 2009 called "a national affliction in the US, [helping to] create a perfect storm of anti-Russian sentiment in the Western media."¹⁰

I am hardly the first to point this out. Stephen Cohen, professor emeritus of Russian studies at both Princeton and New York University, has long challenged journalists to stop what he calls "the pointless demonization" of Putin. His colleague at Columbia University, Padma Desai, calls this "Putinphobia."¹¹ These calls have been echoed by Henry Kissinger and Jack Matlock, as well as Tony Brenton and Roderic Braithwaite, two of Britain's former ambassadors to Russia. Former British diplomat and intelligence analyst Alastair Crooke recently observed that "The compulsive hatred of President Putin in elite western circles has surpassed anything witnessed during the Cold War."¹² Canada's former ambassador to Russia Christopher Westdal says that the "standard portrait [of Putin] is so wrong that it's hard to keep one's balance taking swings at such a straw man."¹³

Ambassador Westdal has a point.

One cannot hope to understand Russia properly when it is presented to us in monotone fragments: Russian submarines in Swedish waters; Russian aggression in Ukraine; and now, of course, Russian propaganda, which, much like the Holy Spirit, "is everywhere present, and filleth all things."¹⁴

The problem is that these fragments represent only a small fraction of reality. A fitting comparison would be media coverage of America

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focusing on soaring murder rates, the collapsing middle class, race hatred, and Donald Trump. These are all parts of America, but the full picture is more complicated. In the brief space allotted to me, therefore, I'd like to complicate our picture of Russia.

Under the Obama administration, much hope was attached to the "reset." From its inception, however, the reset rested on a flawed assumption—namely that there was a rift between the values of the Kremlin and the Russian people that the United States could exploit. As Michael McFaul, the policy's architect explained, the purpose of the reset was "to establish a direct relationship with the Russian people" over the Kremlin's head.¹⁵ As a result, a golden opportunity to alter the course of Russian-American relations was lost to political expediency.

I believe that things might have been very different, had President Obama been advised to say a few kind words about Russian democracy, instead of trying to use it as a Trojan Horse.

He might have noted, for example, that for about a decade now, more than a dozen political parties regularly compete in Russian elections, with an average of between twelve and fifteen candidates vying for a single seat.¹⁶ Or, that popular gubernatorial elections, abolished by Putin in the aftermath of the 2004 terrorist attacks in Beslan, were reinstated in 2012. Or, that the bar for party representation in Russia's national parliament, the Duma, has been repeatedly been lowered and that the number of nationally registered political parties has now risen to more than seventy.¹⁷

One result of this expansion of political life, as the *Washington Post* recently noted, is that candidates opposed to Putin are running—and winning. Simply by automating the online registration process, anti-Putin candidates were able to win 266 city council seats in Moscow, and take control of nearly two-dozen city districts.¹⁸ According to Yulia Galiamina, one of the coordinators of this movement, the same thing has been taking place in Pskov and "in many unnoticed Russian towns and villages"¹⁹ for two whole election cycles, right under Putin's nose.²⁰

Of course, this civic activism did not arise from nowhere. Through what became known in the mid-2000s as "the Putin Plan," president Putin laid the groundwork for a dramatic expansion of civic initiative during his first two terms as president.²¹ During this period the number of non-governmental organizations expanded from 100,000 to more than 600,000, with at least another 600,000 active unofficially.²² The latest surveys suggest that the more than ten million Russians are involved in some form organized volunteer activity, roughly ten percent of the adult population.²³ Such a high level of civic activity, on a par per capita with

France, is, as NGO researchers Deborah Javeline and Sarah Lindemann-Komarova point out, sustained by multiple funding sources—government, businesses, and private individuals. Foreign funding, even at its height back in 2009, never accounted for more than 7% of the total.²⁴

One wonders how different our view of Russia would be today, if it were more widely known that several of Russia's largest daily newspapers, like *Vedomosti*, *Kommersant*, and *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, are staunchly anti-Putin and reach tens of millions of readers. *Novaya gazeta's* web site alone garners more than twenty million views a month.²⁵ As Konstantin Sonin, formerly a columnist for *Vedomosti* and now a professor at the University of Chicago, once explained, "Any newspaper that wants to gain a broad readership in Moscow needs to take an anti-Putin and anti-United Russia stance... Otherwise, it will lose subscribers, newsstand sales, and advertisers."²⁶

Anti-Putinism has long been the norm on Russia's most popular radio station, *Ekho Moskvy*, and on opposition television channels like *Rain TV* and *RBC*. But these are not the only venues for opposition voices. As presidential candidate Ksenia Sobchak's campaign advisor recently pointed out to *CNN*, opposition candidates now "speak freely on Kremlin-owned state television about Russia's internal problems and their ideas for how to fix entrenched systems of corruption.... Today, political candidates' appearances form a more regular part of the TV schedule, and they have the freedom to say quite a lot."²⁷

No one who follows the mainstream media in Russia is therefore surprised to read articles accusing the Russian army of having shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, linking Putin to various money laundering schemes, opposing Russian support for the government of Syria, referring to the rebels in Ukraine as "criminals," or abandoning Russian mercenaries in the field.²⁸

Yet, instead of noting these accomplishments, we in the West routinely hear that three-quarters of Russians watch "state-controlled television," usually without mentioning that only three percent of Russia's hundred thousand media outlets are actually state-owned, or that the most common source of news for persons under thirty-four is not television, but the internet.²⁹ As Russian media scholar Stephen Hutchings puts it, in today's Russian internet domain, which has more socially active internet users than any other country in Europe, a paradoxical situation has emerged where "arch Putin-opponent, Alexei Navalny, co-exists with government trolls, and the full spectrum of political opinion is accessible at the click of a mouse."³⁰

Russia's media ecology is thus much more complex than is commonly

assumed, Hutchings argues. It “is a product both of the digital age and of neoliberal economics... shaped as much by commercial as by political imperatives. Deviant meanings are therefore sometimes generated not at the peripheries of Russia’s media landscape but at its centre.”³¹

Such diversity apparently now reaches well beyond such liberal bastions as Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Ekaterinburg, as *Christian Science Monitor* correspondent Fred Weir found on a recent trip to Voronezh. Even in this famously conservative region in Russia’s ‘Red Belt’ he found a remarkable diversity of opinion in the local media, fueled in part by some 70 internet news sites in Voronezh, “only one of which is state-funded, and several of which self-identify as “opposition.”³²

We can begin to glimpse how much of Russia’s civic progress we have missed, if we examine a critical aspect of any democracy—the rule of law.

Let us start by noting that it was Vladimir Putin who introduced several key elements of modern criminal justice to Russia. These include *habeus corpus*, a juvenile justice system, trial by jury, bailiffs, and justices of the peace—institutions that have taken other countries decades, if not centuries, to put in place. And that was just his first term.

During Putin’s second term, courts struck down compensation limits for government negligence, strengthened the rights of defendants to exculpatory evidence, provided clearer guidelines on secrecy, and ruled that compensation must be paid to persons who are arrested without merit.³³ Closed judicial proceedings and pretrial detention centers have been all but eliminated, privacy protections for individuals expanded, and 24,000 free legal aid centers created.³⁴

In December 2016, Putin signed into law a significant expansion of judicial review. The unwillingness of local officials to implement new, liberal legislation has been a long-standing problem in Russia. The Constitutional Court has now been given the authority to preemptively provide direct guidance to local officials on how to interpret laws that, in the Court’s judgment, are not being properly implemented.³⁵

It is a sign of growing public confidence in the judicial system that the number of persons turning to courts for redress of civil grievances has gone from one million in 1998, to six million in 2004, to ten million in 2012,³⁶ to more than seventeen million in 2016.³⁷

And foreign investors seem to be taking note. Since 2014, the number of suits brought on behalf of foreign companies has tripled, while judgments in their favor have risen from fifty-nine percent to eighty-three percent of the total.³⁸ This may help to explain Russia’s dramatic rise in the World Bank’s “Ease of Doing Business Index,” from 124th place in 2012 to

35th place in 2018.³⁹

Alas, you will not find such information commonly cited in mainstream Western media outlets. There, the narrative seems to be stuck on a handful of celebrity cases, like that of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the former head of Russia's largest private oil company, Yukos. Despite Khodorkovsky's conviction on multiple counts of fraud and tax evasion, it is still common to see his trial described as politically motivated, even though in September 2011, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled unanimously that Russia had not misused the legal process to destroy Yukos and seize its assets.⁴⁰ It should also be noted that the number of complaints filed by Russian citizens before the ECHR has fallen by 61 percent since 2010, and is now lower than that of many Western European countries.⁴¹

However, the most impressive aspect of Russia's legal reforms is that, in the face of threats of terrorism and secession, not only has Russia created a modern legal system, it has also deliberately enhanced its more humane aspects.⁴²

For example, since Putin introduced the new code of criminal procedures, acquittal rates by judges have more than doubled, and are now at a level comparable to that of the United States. Acquittal rates in jury trials are three times higher, which has resulted in roughly a quarter of those indicted being acquitted.⁴³ As a result, the number of persons incarcerated in Russia has fallen by almost forty percent since 2001, and the number of minors in prison has fallen from 19,000 to just 1,000.⁴⁴

Another sign of Russia's progress toward an independent judiciary was overturning the conviction of Ildar Dadin, the only person convicted to a prison term for repeated violations of the law on illegal public protests. In its ruling the Constitutional Court firmly established the principle that the right to public protest may only be denied to preserve essential public services.⁴⁵ No other criteria, the court underscored, may be applied.⁴⁶

Thus, while conventional wisdom scoffs at the independence of the Russian judiciary, if one measures independence by the number of times that courts rule against the government, and in favor of private plaintiffs in civil cases, then Russian courts are independent more than seventy percent of the time.⁴⁷

By no means am I suggesting that Russia's legal system is perfect. No legal system is. But perhaps we should also consider how much has been accomplished in the last two decades, as legendary human rights activist Ludmila Alekseyeva did when she was honored last December with the National Award for Outstanding Lifetime Achievements in Human Rights Activity:

The USSR disappeared 25 years ago and we now live in the Russian Federation that has a different Constitution. It recognises human rights as a supreme value and compels the state to protect them. The human rights movement is no longer a handful of dissidents as it was half a century ago.... The institution of Human Rights Commissioner...is a real step towards the observance and protection of human rights by the state, the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights is also an important human rights institution... These are joint steps our society and state are taking towards building a truly democratic, legal and social state in Russia...the obstacles short-sighted politicians set on the path of civil society... [can] slow this process down, but they cannot stop it.... One such generation has already grown up...and we will not need another 25 years for our civil society to ripen.⁴⁸

So, why are these accomplishments not better known in the West? One reason is the persistence of a peculiar standard when it comes to reporting about Russia.

A few years ago, two leading German newspapers, *FAZ* and *Die Zeit*, announced they would no longer maintain full-time correspondents in Moscow. They explained their decision to *Deutsche Welle* as follows: "The list of mandatory topics for German journalists working in Russia is predictable: suppression of dissent, the adoption of antidemocratic laws, economic hardships. Not the sort of topics that automatically guarantee reader's interest."⁴⁹ Reading this list, one wonders if German readers might not be better off without the kind of reporting that knows *a priori* which topics are mandatory, and how they are to be presented.

Apparently, it is not at all uncommon for Western press outlets to have a list of this sort when it comes to Russia. Early in 2018, the *Wall Street Journal* began to search for a new Moscow Bureau Chief. Their ad said they were looking for someone to describe "Putin's role as a champion of so-called illiberal democracy who has become a beacon for right-wing politicians across Europe and even in the U.S. His traditional conservatism of blood and religion resonates amid economic uncertainty."⁵⁰ The advertisement did not describe these as issues to be explored, but as dogmas to be affirmed.

Another perennial problem that makes objective reporting about Russia difficult is the tendency to omit information that conflicts with the negative storyline. For example, stories about penalties for illegal public gatherings, rarely found it necessary to mention that the Constitutional Court had struck down portions of the law, and mandated that the fines associated with it be lowered.⁵¹

Another example is reporting about legislation that requires Russian NGOs that receive foreign funding and engage in political activity to register as foreign agents, but that fails to mention that since 2016, the number of NGOs registered as foreign agents has shrunk by almost two-thirds. These types of NGOs comprise less than one half a percent of all registered NGOs in the country.⁵² Some see malice at work here, but social psychology offers a time-tested explanation—paradigm blindness.

Paradigm blindness occurs when an event remains invisible because the observer has no context or expression for naming it. Simply put, Americans cannot talk about Russia as a democracy because there is no frame of reference for Russian democracy in their minds.

Journalists are no exception to paradigm blindness. Indeed, they are its first victims. A journalist's desire to report accurately provides no special preparation for the uncomfortable task of constructing fresh intellectual frameworks. Since there is no social or media

context for describing Russia as a democracy, journalists rely on existing stereotypes to describe rapidly changing realities. Behavioral researchers call such reliance "availability bias."⁵³

Some media researchers, like Murray Edelman, W. Lance Bennett, and John D. Klockner, argue that such reliance produces "category mistakes."⁵⁴ Such a mistake can occur when people continue to think in rhetorical categories that perpetuate the very problem they are trying to resolve—in this case, the problem of how to describe a Russia that is becoming more like the West, within rhetorical categories that define Russia as the West's antithesis.

We see the damage that is being done by persistent paradigm blindness and the resulting category mistakes in three important social trends that distinguish Russia from the West. In each of these trends, our focus on the differences actually distracts us from recognizing significant similarities.

One such trend is the vastly different perceptions of Putin's legacy in Russia and in the West.

Many in the West seem quite confident of Russia's imminent economic collapse.⁵⁵ The optimists in this group believe that, after the

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collapse, the Russian people will blame Putin and reject his policies.⁵⁶ The pessimists feel that Russians must be forced, even at the risk of war, “into developing a new national identity.” But confounding these analysts, Putin has responded to fluctuations in global oil prices, the devaluation of the ruble, and Western economic sanctions by expanding social programs and investing in the Russian economy. Pensions have risen tenfold since 2000, and women can still retire with full pensions at fifty-five, men at sixty—even as average life expectancy has increased by more than six years, to 72.6.⁵⁷

In addition, Russia provides maternity payments, which were at one-point worth as much as \$13,000, tax-free to new families, single parents, and those who adopt children. This year, in an ambitious move to help the working poor enter the middle class, the government plans to raise the minimum wage to the living wage.⁵⁸ To give you a sense of what this means, if this were done for a family of three with one employed parent, living in the Boston-Cambridge-Newton area of Massachusetts, it would result in an hourly wage rate of \$25.25, which is more than double the state’s minimum wage.⁵⁹

The combination of a robust social safety net, official unemployment of 5.2 percent, and an annual inflation rate at 2.5 percent, suggests that anyone running against Putin’s legacy is bound to have an uphill battle.⁶⁰ What Western analysts who call for more toughness with Russia seem unable to grasp is that Putin’s true power base lies not with the oligarchs, but with the Russian people.⁶¹ Any approach to Russia that overlooks this is simply out of touch with reality.

A second divergence with the West involves multiculturalism. In recent years the political leaders of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom have all explicitly repudiated multiculturalism and suggested that they no longer regard their minority ethnic and religious communities as distinct political stakeholders in their societies.⁶² Some would say that the United States has now joined them.

Meanwhile, however, both presidents Medvedev and Putin have reaffirmed Russia’s multicultural national identity.⁶³ But, whereas Western governments promote a global order that is largely acultural and secular, Russia has embraced a brand of multiculturalism that prizes cultural and religious diversity among nations as much as it prizes diversity within nations.

Culturally, Russia’s elite has always identified itself with Western culture. Increasingly, however, it sees itself as that part of the West that comprehends the futility of what British philosopher John Gray calls “hyper-liberalism.”⁶⁴

Having experienced the Bolshevik Revolution, it now seeks to establish a political consensus around the values that the West shares with non-Western states. This approach can best be described not as opposition to liberalism, but as a different form of liberalism, one divorced from Western hegemony and open to non-western traditions and influences.⁶⁵

Russian political theorist Boris Mezhuev calls this approach “civilizational realism.”⁶⁶ It differs from classical realism in that it recognizes the importance of values in international affairs; and it differs from classical liberalism in that it sees value in the diversity of cultural communities, as well as individuals.

This brings me to the most widely misunderstood difference between Russia and the West—the public’s attitude toward religion politics. According to a 2011 Ipsos survey of 23 European countries, Russia has become the most religious country in Europe.⁶⁷ Since the fall of communism, public attitudes toward religion in the Eastern and Western halves of Europe have in a way flipped. This became apparent in the vastly different Russian and Western reactions to the church invasion organized by the punk band “Pussy Riot.”⁶⁸ Now, it is no longer the West’s sole purview to complain of a “values gap” with Russia, referring primarily to human rights. Russian elites also complain of a values gap with the West, referring to the latter’s lack of respect for religious traditions.

These three trends in Russian society—a broad social consensus, multiculturalism, and desecularization—are also very much a part of Europe’s cultural identity. They span from East to West, sharing a common vision of traditional values.

Former president Dmitry Medvedev reminded Europeans of this common heritage during a state visit to Germany in 2008. “Russian and European democracy,” he pointed out, “share common roots. We share the same set of values and the same sources of law: Roman, Germanic and French law.... We have a common history and we share the same humanitarian values. This common thinking is the foundation that enables us to speak not just the same legal or business language today but, I hope, also the same political language.”⁶⁹

Medvedev’s words reveal a simple and straightforward path to preventing a new Cold War: remembering our common heritage. There is a need to reflect upon parts of European history that we in the West all too often forget—the inheritance of the Eastern Roman Empire—so that the full legacy of Greece and Rome can become part of our cultural discourse and inform our politics.

For centuries, a stunted version of European identity that sees little

of value in the thousand-year history of Byzantium has prevented many Western Europeans from fully embracing their Slavic and Orthodox neighbors. The maligning of Byzantium, as the former Librarian of Congress, James H. Billington once aptly observed, is “a fixture of all the mistaken conventional wisdom” about Russia and Eastern Europe.⁷⁰

The importance of re-establishing this bond cannot be overstated. Its fragility should highlight the importance of dialogue, and joint endeavors that draw attention to our similarities rather than our differences. It is these shared identities, as J.H. Adam Watson, one of the founders of The English School of international relations, used to say, that teach us to eschew self-aggrandizement, to act with self-restraint, and to avoid tragedy.⁷¹

But there is a more immediate threat to comity among nations that education about our common heritage alone cannot fix. It stems from inces-

Russia's exclusion from “civilization” allows it to be cast in a dark light that, intentionally or not, heightens the threat of serious conflict.

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sant popular portrayals of Russia as “a space of incompetence... a country not yet ready to take care of its people or to join the ranks of the ‘civilized’ world.”⁷² Russia’s exclusion from “civilization” allows it to be cast in a dark light that, intentionally or not, heightens the threat of serious conflict.⁷³

..... This demonization appears clearly in U.S. government officials casually comparing Russia’s president to Mussolini and Hitler,⁷⁴ and when Putin is described by a former secretary of state as “truly evil.”⁷⁵ It then seems quite reasonable for another to add that he “by definition doesn’t have a soul” and is a “killer.”⁷⁶ Worst of all, the criminalization of Putin has occasionally been used, by extension, to criminalize all Russians. Consider, for example, the request by April Doss, the Democrats’ Senior Counsel for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on the Russia investigation, for information on anyone believed to be “of Russian nationality or descent.”⁷⁷

We should hardly be surprised that it has come to this, when prominent figures like James Clapper, the former Director of National Intelligence,⁷⁸ and Bob Corker, the chairman of the Senate’s Committee on Foreign Relations,⁷⁹ refer to Russian behavior as genetically coded. As Jonathan Turley, a law professor at George Washington University, writes, the search for evidence of Russian intervention has moved inexorably from moneylines, to codelines, to bloodlines.⁸⁰

In this context, the exasperation of people like Robert D. Kaplan—a self-professed lover of Russian literature, art, and music—seems perfectly

understandable. Not long ago, Kaplan lamented in *The National Interest*, that all those who love Russia eventually wind up “realizing the utter impossibility of any good ever coming out of Russia...and throw up their hands at the beastly unchangeableness of Russia.”⁸¹ I suggest that America’s inability to come up with anything better than containment,⁸² a policy designed for the USSR, a country that has not existed for more than a quarter century, is rooted in this very perception of Russians as “beastly.”

As if to confirm this view, the *Washington Post* recently quoted Michel Sulick, a former head of the CIA’s National Clandestine Service and a former Moscow station chief, as saying “The Russians only understand one thing — when the boot is on their neck, and you keep pressing down.”⁸³ Meanwhile, his CIA colleague John Sipher, a former Station Chief in Russia, asked, “How can one not be a Russophobe? Russian soft power is political warfare. Hard power is invading neighbors, hiding the death of civilians with chemical weapons and threatening with doomsday nuclear weapons. And they kill the opposition at home. Name something positive.”⁸⁴

I have tried to show that there are quite a few positive things one could talk about. The persistent failure to do so, moreover, feeds the periodic binges of political hysteria that, Richard Hofstadter described in his classic essay, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.”⁸⁵

A productive response requires a sober diagnosis. Russophobia is a chronic condition for American elites, because it allows us to see ourselves as we would most like to be seen — as valiantly engaged in a global struggle against evil.⁸⁶ It is now so much a part of America’s identity that it is unlikely to ever be cured. It can, however, be managed. It needs to be managed so that the U.S. can get through its periodic bouts of paranoia without doing irreparable damage to America’s interests overseas.

Eventually, the current wave paranoia will subside, if it does not lead to war. Its current virulence, however, may yet serve a useful purpose, if it forces a candid conversation about historical Russophobia, and how it burdens American foreign policy.

At this point, even readers willing to concede that Russia is not always portrayed fairly by the media might object, “But what about Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections? What about the hacking of emails and manipulation of social media? Surely, we must respond forcefully to such brazenly hostile acts.”

These are indeed very serious allegations, and it is in everyone’s interest to get to the bottom of what actually took place.⁸⁷ But my point from the outset has been that we rarely, if ever, get to see the full picture in a timely

manner. How political leaders respond to crises, therefore, depends largely on their preconceptions about whom they are dealing with, and these are driven not by facts, but by narratives.⁸⁸

Two radically different narratives have driven interpretations of the available facts in all our recent confrontations with Russia.

In one narrative, Russia is presumed guilty. This presumption makes the search for specific proof of Russian government involvement largely superfluous. This was displayed with exceptional clarity in the Skripal poisoning case, when Boris Johnson, Britain's foreign secretary, insisted that only Russia could have produced the presumed nerve agent Novichok, even though the head of Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) disagrees.⁸⁹ As Johnson put it, "the obvious Russian-ness of the weapon" suffices to indicate the culprit.⁹⁰

In the other narrative, there is no presumption of Russian guilt. In its absence, skeptics typically do not see enough evidence to blame Russia. These competing narratives serve to frame competing policy options.

The former leaves no option but conflict with Russia. In this narrative, Russia cannot become a full member of the global community, until it rejects its past and embraces Western values. This "will have nothing to do with the United States," says *Vanity Fair* author Peter Savodnik, "it will have everything to do with Russia transcending Russia."⁹¹

By contrast, the latter narrative prioritizes conflict resolution and the achievement of a *modus vivendi* with Russia. It assumes that nations cannot reasonably be expected to abandon their core beliefs and traditions, and

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Russophobia is thus a by-product of American exceptionalism, and unless we contain both, in the coming years we are likely to see conflicts similar to the ones we now have with Russia, multiplied the world over.

therefore follows George F. Kennan's advice, "to let Russians be Russians, and not try to substitute our conscience for theirs."⁹²

The former deems it natural to instruct Russians on how to behave, and to demand that they confess to their crimes and accept their punishment.⁹³ The latter listens to Russia's point of view because it is convinced that no truly global agenda can exist without Russia's voice being a part of it.

The former takes the benevolence of American hegemony for granted, and is deeply rooted in the ideology of American exceptionalism.⁹⁴ The latter accepts the possibility of a post-hegemonic world order and agrees,

in some sense, with Vladimir Putin that, “it is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation... We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord’s blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal.”⁹⁵

Russophobia is thus a by-product of American exceptionalism, and unless we contain both, in the coming years we are likely to see conflicts similar to the ones we now have with Russia, multiplied the world over.

We could start by taking the following four steps:

First, highlight the danger of abandoning dialogue in the pursuit of short-term advantages. Richard Ned Lebow, professor at King’s College London, makes the case that, from time immemorial, *hubris*, the arrogance which rises in proportion to power, inexorably leads countries to catastrophe.⁹⁶ The failure to recognize this process as it is unfolding may well be inherent to the tragic nature of politics. Nevertheless, scholars should alert political leaders to the dangers of *hubris*, in the hope that the damage can be limited.

Second, challenge those who peremptorily declare an end to debate about Russia. One former U.S. ambassador to Russia is well known for proclaiming that the “debate is now over,” since as he puts it, “everybody in my world agrees.”⁹⁷

Such statements are a disservice to us all. The suppression of dissent in the name of national unity, or the national interest, is an old practice that should be exposed for what it is—an attempt to narrow the public debate by labeling other points of view as illegitimate.⁹⁸

Third, avoid moralism, so that the search for compromise is not automatically equated with treason. It is instructive to contrast the typical American politician’s response to alleged Russian cyberattacks, with that of French President Emmanuel Macron who, after criticizing Russia for interfering in the French elections, nevertheless asserted:

Having said that, Russia is a partner. We have to work with Russia. It’s impossible to fix the Syrian situation without Russia. It’s very hard to fix the North Korean situation without Russia. And Russia has to be respected given its place, its history and our relationship.... If you want to make this global environment functioning, you have to deal with Russia.⁹⁹

Macron is reminding his audience that disagreements need not be turned into crusades. This would be a very beneficial message for Americans to hear from their political leaders as well.

Finally, humanize our adversaries, so that meaningful dialogue with them becomes possible. Until the recent Skripal poisoning incident, this

view was actually becoming fairly widespread in Europe. Take, for example, the Green Party/Alliance 90 platform during the last German election:

Our stance is to make clear that we feel bound to people in Russia by bonds of friendship.... Our criticism of the Kremlin and of Putin is not a criticism of Russia and its people. Rather, we must intensify our encounters with her.... The old demand to facilitate exchanges between Russia and the EU, and to ease visa rules, is therefore more topical than ever for us.¹⁰⁰

To sum up, a radical re-conceptualization of relations with Russia is long overdue. The Cold War will not simply fade away. It must be unlearned. This will require more contact with Russia, not less.

While Americans have clung tenaciously to the emotional safety blanket of containment, the world has changed. Russia has emerged as the world's six largest economy (PPP). Over the course of the next decade, it is also likely to be, simultaneously, Europe's largest export market, China's largest energy supplier, and India's largest arms supplier.¹⁰¹

We must find a way to escape the mental straight jacket of the Cold War in order to forge the partnerships that America needs to remain an influential global power throughout the twenty-first century. Two decades ago, James H. Billington eloquently spelled out the consequences of failing to do so:

If Americans cannot penetrate into the interior spiritual dialogue of other peoples, they will never be able to understand, let alone anticipate or affect, the discontinuous major changes which are the driving forces in history and which will probably continue to spring unexpected traps in the years ahead. To put it another way, if we cannot learn to listen to others as they whisper their prayers, we may well confront them later on when they howl their war cries.¹⁰² *f*

ENDNOTES

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