

## Pro et Contra: Views of the United States in Four Post-Soviet States<sup>1</sup>

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 354  
September 2014

Theodore P. Gerber  
*University of Wisconsin-Madison*  
Jane Zavisca  
*University of Arizona*

Rising tensions between Russia and the West make public perceptions of the United States in the post-Soviet region an important policy issue. Positive perceptions of the United States could counter Kremlin efforts to blame Washington for conflicts in Ukraine (and elsewhere), while negative perceptions could lead U.S. leaders to reconsider how to project “soft power” in the region.

In order to gauge perceptions of the United States, we held focus groups in Russia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Kyrgyzstan in 2014. Two common themes emerged: 1) widespread hostility toward U.S. foreign policy and conduct; 2) respect for U.S. institutions, living standards, and culture.

One of the main conclusions is that the reputation of the United States faces a major challenge in restoring and reinforcing positive views of itself, not only in Russia but throughout the region. U.S. public relations strategy should emphasize the American “way of life” as a potential model rather than attempt to directly influence internal politics or develop civil society abroad.

### **Methodology**

While not necessarily representative of public opinion, focus groups provide qualitative insight into the reasoning that informs peoples’ attitudes and the language they use to express their opinions. Comparing views expressed across groups within and between

---

<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by the Minerva Research Initiative and the Army Research Office via grant #W911NF-13-1-0303. The views, opinions, and findings herein are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as representing official views or policies, either expressed or implied, of the Army Research Office or the Department of Defense.

states can give a sense of whether specific logics and narratives represent common themes or idiosyncratic expressions. Local researchers in each state recruited participants (18-49 years old) and moderated the groups, which we observed (except for two groups in Sabirabad, Azerbaijan). The main findings are presented below.

**Table 1. Timing, Location, and Composition of the Focus Groups**

Country	Dates	Locations and Composition
Russia	August 2014	Moscow: <i>university educated; less educated</i> Kazan: <i>ethnic Tatar; ethnic Russian</i>
Ukraine	May 2014	Lviv: <i>ages 18-30; ages 31-49</i> Kyiv: <i>Russian speakers; Ukrainian speakers</i>
Azerbaijan	April-June 2014	Baku: <i>male; female</i> Sabirabad: <i>male; female</i>
Kyrgyzstan	June 2014	Bishkek: <i>university educated; less educated</i> Osh: <i>ethnic Kyrgyz; ethnic Uzbek</i> Village near Osh: <i>male; female</i>

## Russia

Anti-American themes were most pronounced in the groups from Russia. This is not surprising in light of the barrage of government propaganda criticizing the United States since the onset of the Ukraine conflict. With near unanimity, Russian participants echoed official characterizations of the United States as an aggressive and arrogant superpower that seeks to impose its will on the world and on Russia.

– Americans want to be lords of the world, and Russia now stands in their way.

*Moderator: Does Russia also want to be lord of the world?*

– Not in the same way. But America is afraid that Russia also wants to become lord of the world.

(Moscow, university educated group)

– It's as if America doesn't like us very much. I don't like that, their disrespect.

(Kazan, ethnic Russian group)

In particular, many blamed the United States for the Ukraine conflict:

– [The fighting in Ukraine] is the result of, I think, someone's political order....America's. [Because] who benefits from it?....They benefit from any war....It's good for business.

– Maybe they want to get closer to the Russian border, to install their [military] technology there.  
(Kazan, ethnic Tatars)

Several participants believe that American soldiers are fighting on the Ukrainian government side, and one insisted that the Americans shot down flight MH17 in a botched attempt to hit Russian President Vladimir Putin's plane.

U.S. sanctions against Russia and its supposed efforts to turn its allies against Russia met with considerable criticism:

– America serves up to the world a particular point of view, and therefore a lot of other countries don't understand what's really going on here. They hate us...in their opinion Putin is an aggressor, yes, and he did a bad deed, seized Crimea. The West thinks he is a jerk who stuck a knife in its back, that he took Crimea when the country was weak. (Moscow, less educated)

Many cited the United States' fears of Russia as a competitor or intentions to seize Russia's resources as the motives behind its aggressive actions toward Russia:

– It's as if we are helping ourselves to a lot [by taking Crimea], and the Americans think that they are the only ones who can do that...as if Russia showed her teeth, that's why [they imposed sanctions]. They don't want Russia to develop in that direction...If we took a piece of Ukraine, maybe we will take something else, right?

– [They see us as] a tasty morsel, which they want to seize and divide among themselves. We have enormous territory, one sixth of the earth's mass, and 140 million people. And so they're sharpening their knives for our untold riches. They want to turn us into cattle and seize our territory. And whatever we do, sooner or later they will attack. Whatever we do, there will be war.  
(Kazan, ethnic Russians)

Participants singled out the United States' purported efforts to undermine Russia by sponsoring nongovernmental organizations that work on political issues (i.e., those targeted by Russia's recent laws compelling some foreign-funded NGOs to declare themselves "foreign agents"):

– I heard that [America] sends people here, supplies them with money in order to cause an uprising. Like in Syria, where Americans purposely sent in people under false pretenses, as if they were going to work there, and those people encouraged a coup. (Kazan, Tatars)

–[Foreign-funded NGOs] simply play the role of a fifth column. They are all Western-supported. (Moscow, less educated)

Russian participants had little positive to say about the United States, but when prompted they enumerated economic and cultural achievements: “high living standards,” “single-family houses,” “high quality of consumer goods,” “the best movies,” and “all kinds of music.”

The breadth of anti-American sentiment in the groups is consistent with survey evidence of strong support for Putin’s policies and hostility toward the United States. But there were also hints that Russians’ views are more complex than pure condemnation. First, many expressed the sentiment that “I have nothing against the American people, only against the American government.” Second, participants recognized that both sides distort information about the other:

–They brainwash people there too, just like here. After all...where do we learn about the political situation? From newspapers, from television. That is, we believe the information that is served up to us. (Moscow, less educated)

Such statements, as well as those like the one quoted above that imply familiarity with the “Western” narrative about the Ukraine conflict, suggest that the conviction with which participants often repeated Russian government information may conceal underlying unease about its reliability.

## **Ukraine**

If U.S. policymakers expect Ukrainian popular support due to their efforts to counter Russian actions in Ukraine, they will be disappointed. While nowhere near as hostile as the Russians, Ukrainian participants were skeptical of the United States’ motives and disappointed in the extent of U.S. support:

–[America] is just another empire. We don’t know much about either the Russian empire or the U.S., but they chose Ukraine as a point of conflict where they can fight it out to show who is cooler, in a word.

– For this whole period [America] gave us no help...[T]hey gave us something but it was too little too late...Even those sanctions took so much time and were only implemented after so many people were killed – that all shows that they just don’t need us.

(Lviv, 30 and under)

–I feel neutral toward the United States. In essence they haven’t done anything special for Ukraine.

- Their basic policy is to make money. [They]....pretend to help Ukraine, but above all they only look at their own interests.
- They deceived Ukraine, let's say, abandoned [us].  
(Lviv, over 30)

On the other hand, the Ukrainian groups discussed at length the second overarching theme: admiration for various aspects of the American way of life, for example, respect for laws and human rights:

- If you are a citizen of the United States then you truly have rights, and they are respected, not like in Ukraine. (Lviv, over 30)
- People who have lived there...tell me how the police behave there. For example, they will give directions, help you find things....Here when you see a police uniform you immediately try to hide. (Kyiv, Russian-speakers)

Social protections are highly developed:

- I have very close friends who live there and they are ecstatic about life there. They even went driving in the desert and their car broke down, in the naked, empty desert. They made one phone call and in five to ten minutes a tow truck showed up. They have massively high taxes...but they get something in return – social protections, plus work. That means the chance to travel, rent housing. They rent and buy, they are confident in tomorrow.
- Medical care, education, the legal system – everything is on a high level there. (Kyiv, Russian-speakers)

American institutions effectively encourage business and hard work:

- I know a programmer who lived there for two years. He said that it is the only country in the world where a person's talent is truly valued....[I]f a person is talented and hardworking then the state in no way interferes with their self-realization. (Kyiv, Ukrainian speakers)
- It is heaven on earth there – except you have to work hard.
- Conditions for doing business are much easier.  
(Lviv, 30 and under)

Not everyone agreed, but some Ukrainians also touted the American “mentality”:

- More than anything, [I admire] their humanity, the fact that they never just walk by [someone in need]. If you have a misfortune or some bad luck, they will

help you; they will even take someone into their home and help them get set up; that's how they are.

–I actually think it's not like that; it's 'everyone for themselves' there.  
(Kyiv, Ukrainian speakers)

–[I like their] tolerance and their mentality. There, every American is a patriot in the depths of his soul. Even black drug dealers from the ghetto will take up arms to fight for America. They are patriotic. (Kyiv, Russian speakers)

Altogether, the Ukrainian participants were more inclined to endorse American institutions than its foreign policies. By implication, the most potent weapons in the U.S. soft power arsenal are not efforts to counter Russian aggression or spread democracy, but American political, economic, and cultural institutions. The logical conclusion: the United States can build a positive image more effectively spreading knowledge of its internal institutions and culture rather than by its foreign policies. The latter include democracy promotion programs. Ukrainians expressed concern that the United States not get involved in domestic Ukrainian politics:

–You know, in principle Ukraine needs a strong partner because we are completely defenseless. But the main thing is that this partner who helps us doesn't then try to interfere in our personal internal affairs. That they don't, you know, say 'we paid for you, so now dance with us.' If they are helping us only out of pure goodwill, then thanks. But if it is only under certain conditions, then we have to be careful. (Kyiv, Russian speakers)

Accordingly, when the dust finally settles from the military conflict in Ukraine and U.S. policymakers turn to strategies for stabilizing the country's troubled economy and tenuous democracy, programs that look like political meddling should be avoided.

## **Azerbaijan**

The Azerbaijani groups expressed widespread admiration for the American way of life, from cinema to civil society. This was the only theme touched on by women, who said little about foreign policy. The male groups coupled praise for some American institutions with skepticism about the United States' foreign policy aims. They also saw various institutions as potential models for Azerbaijan:

–America is a superpower state, ruling the world. America is also a well-developed country. Everything is developed in the right direction and it is a democratic country.

–The United States is a big country with a strong army and politics. We should learn lessons from their army.

–If our education and health care systems were similar to American systems, it would be really good for our country. At least people there know very well their rights, police know very well their rights and duties....If our citizens were aware of their rights like Americans, it could lead to progress in democratic development.

(Baku, men)

American efforts to promote democracy abroad were framed as self-interested and disingenuous:

–The U.S. states that it is a democracy and defends human rights....[I]t is not true. The U.S. only protects its own democracy, its own citizens' rights. America devastates the wealth of other countries. America's policy is to diminish and devastate all small nations of the world so American people and Zionists live well. (Baku, men).

The United States cannot and should not export democracy, which must be developed locally:

–There is democracy there, unlike in many Muslim countries. A historical moment in America was they elected a black president. Of course it is an indicator of a high level of democracy. But the U.S. is democratic only for itself, not for other countries. It is all words; in reality they will never do what local people are supposed to do for themselves. They will not build democracy. (Baku, men)

Similar themes prevailed in the Sabirabad groups, which included internally-displaced persons: praise for aspects of the American way of life like advanced technology, high living standards, and strong education, but criticism of the United States "interfering in the internal affairs of many countries." Overall, Azerbaijanis had less to say about the United States than about Russia and Turkey, other countries we asked about that are, of course, closer to home. Still, they mixed reservations about the United States' foreign policies with admiration for U.S. institutions.

### **Kyrgyzstan**

Kyrgyzstan has had more direct engagement with the United States due to the (recently closed) Manas airbase and the activities of American NGOs. But even more than the Azerbaijanis, Kyrgyz participants view the United States as remote and meddling. All six of the Kyrgyz groups strongly endorsed cooperation with Russia, some favored China or Central Asian neighbors like Kazakhstan, and none the United States. Specifically pressed about possibly cooperating with the United States, they were uniformly negative and skeptical:

- We do not need here [the American] political system.
  - What the American system comes to is evident in Syria, Ukraine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon.
  - America has contributed to the depletion of the world's resources....So America has a plan to gradually capture everything; they keep everything in their country, crude oil and everything, and use up other people's.
- (Bishkek, highly educated)

Apart from such ideas, similar to the views expressed in the Russian groups, Kyrgyz participants decried American culture as too permissive toward children and lacking respect for elders (Bishkek, less educated); emphasized how far away America is compared to Russia and the wastefulness of U.S. humanitarian spending in Kyrgyzstan (Osh, ethnic Kyrgyz); and worried that the United States uses aid to interfere in Kyrgyzstan's internal affairs (village near Osh, women). A single respondent noted a possible lesson from the United States: "The only thing we can learn from America is how to learn and protect our rights." (Osh, ethnic Uzbeks).

The only other positive statement was tempered by negative sentiments about the United States' role in the world:

- It is one of the greatest empires. I think they have a very strong economy with greatly developed technologies....But America does not respect Muslim people. From this perspective, I am against [America]. Because look at what has happened in Syria, Afghanistan, Iran—they came there and started internal conflicts, then left. And what is happening now in Ukraine...is their fault. Because they are really jealous of Russia, and we support Russia. (Village near Osh, women)

These negative views of the United States are linked to Kyrgyzstan's dependence on Russia, the influence of Russian mass media, and the perception of a growing conflict between Russia and the United States.

## **Conclusion**

The degree of consistency and uniformity within and between these four states suggests that major themes in the groups correspond to widespread views. If these themes are, indeed, typical of popular attitudes toward the United States, then policymakers who wish to promote positive relations with these states face formidable challenges. Arguments made by Russian officials regarding the United States' ambition, arrogance, self-interestedness, and penchant for meddling in others' affairs resonate, even in Ukraine. Creating a positive image of the United States is hardly the sole objective of foreign policy. But policymakers should bear in mind that the actions of the United

States may confirm the worst stereotypes of U.S. interests and motives propagated by Kremlin spin doctors.

One area where a fundamental reorientation of approach might be warranted is that of democracy assistance. Given the evident concerns that U.S. support for domestic NGOs and other civil society institutions is really just a cover for American interference in internal affairs, it makes sense to consider alternative strategies for promoting American institutions. By providing positive institutional models, the United States might eventually encourage organic movements for change within these states that would not be tarnished by the stain of foreign interference. Policymakers should leverage existing positive perceptions of American institutions, economic and technological achievements, and high living standards, and devise strategies to increase exposure to those aspects of life in the United States. This could be pursued by bolstering exchange programs and trade, facilitating travel between the United States and former Soviet states, and promoting programs that expose citizens in the region to concrete examples of how American institutions work.

---

**PONARS** ● NEW APPROACHES  
● TO RESEARCH AND  
E U R A S I A ● SECURITY IN EURASIA

**Elliott School of  
International Affairs**

**THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY**

© PONARS Eurasia 2014. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author. PONARS Eurasia is an international network of academics that advances new policy approaches to research and security in Russia and Eurasia. PONARS Eurasia is based at the [Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies \(IERES\)](#) at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. This publication was made possible by grants from Carnegie Corporation of New York and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. [www.ponarseurasia.org](http://www.ponarseurasia.org)