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## Knowledge, Values, or Pragmatism HOW TO BUILD TRUST IN U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS

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A state's resources, strength, and policies help define the place it occupies in the world, but so do decisions that others in the international system make about it. These can include political decisions, such as inclusion into international organizations or the imposition of sanctions. States make other less obvious decisions, however, even before extending an invitation to join a club or considering sanctions. Such decisions concern how to treat another state, or which opinions to promote about it. Public opinion about other states is often filled with stereotypes and clichés that no democratic decision-maker can ignore. International relations theorists do not reflect much upon this sphere, subordinating image construction to "hard security" issues. If we apply tools of constructivist methodology to U.S.-Russia relations, however, we can evaluate the current situation in different terms and possibly find a way to improve upon it.

### **Three Axes of Relations to the "Other"**

In his seminal work *The Conquest of America* (1984), French-Bulgarian scholar Tsvetan Todorov proposed a scheme for understanding relations between different cultures. According to his scheme, three independent "axes" define one's attitude toward the "other": epistemic, or knowledge-based; axiological, or values-based; and praxeological, or practice-based (a desire to change oneself or the "other"). Todorov stressed the independence of all three variables. An increase in knowledge, for instance, does not necessarily make the other's values more attractive or alter one's wish to change it: "Knowledge does not imply love, nor the converse; and neither of the two implies, nor is implied by, identification with the other" (Todorov, 186).

Let us look at how Todorov's "axes" apply to U.S. views on Russia. On the epistemic axis, several groups in the United States provide expert knowledge on Russia. These are mainly professional Russianists, with subgroups in academia and think tanks, government, and, to a lesser extent, business. Among these groups openly flow a variety of people, opinions, and ideas. There is also Russian state propaganda, including the

television network *Russia Today* (RT), newspaper ads, and the output of some Russian diplomats and government-supported “nongovernmental” organizations like the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation. As long as the major expert battles are waged along this axis – throwing pieces of information about Russia into the American media – any major change in the existing balance of opinions is unlikely.

When we turn to the axiological (values-based) axis, we find a corps of influential moral critics who see Russia as a country that rejects notions like liberty, democracy, and human rights. For now, unfortunately, Russia’s governing elites do not appear to share Western values, despite the fact that the country’s educated population demands liberty and democracy. However, history does not support the idea that common values are a prerequisite to rapprochement.

Finally, there are two major approaches to Russia in the United States on the praxeological axis. The first may be defined as the “democracy-promotion complex” (to borrow from Dimitri Simes). The second approach is to “leave Russia as is” and refrain from interference. Although Russians view the American choice between “interfere” or “not interfere” with great apprehension, neither approach makes the United States an entirely friendly power: “interference” makes the Russian government and “patriots” indignant, while Russian “Westerners” see “non-interference” as a betrayal. (As for changing the United States itself as a result of interaction with Russia, the prospects are minimal; the last time this was countenanced was after the 1957 Sputnik launch).

### **Possible Ways to Improve Russia’s Image and Bilateral Relations**

Presumably, it is possible for Americans to find many “worse” nations on the globe than Russia. However, Russia’s image in the United States is more negative than that of many others. What explains this, and how can one influence the image of another country?

In order to answer these questions, we should add to Todorov’s scheme the notion of an agenda. The image of another country does not comprise a stable set of ideas but evolves out of a process of constant self-identification vis-à-vis that country. The political and social agenda of a society determines the choices its public makes from the broad set of references available to apply to the other country. When Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney called Russia the main “geopolitical foe” of the United States, this was not about Russia; the attack was a political one that was part of his electioneering discourse with [Democratic] President Barack Obama. But such use of Russia in public rhetoric – especially when it has nothing to do with any particular policies – affirms its unfriendly image.

One tried-and-true way to change attitudes is to strengthen the perception of a “common enemy.” In the past, this has helped bring the United States and Russia together. Great Britain played such a role in the middle of the nineteenth century. A common enemy was also successfully invoked during World War II and, again, after September 11 (and the April 2013 Boston Marathon attack has led to yet another attempt).

Another way, however, is to link Russia’s image to “positive” elements of the domestic American agenda. Historically, there have been times when Americans

associated Russia with a positive domestic agenda, such as when the Russian Empire's abolition of serfdom was used as a model for the emancipation of American slaves, or when St. Petersburg invited U.S. engineers to carry out Russia's technological modernization.

Realistically, of course, it is difficult to spontaneously align Russia with America's domestic agenda. Most political and social agendas are beyond the control of any political force. Rapid changes usually occur with great national disasters (like Pearl Harbor or September 11th) or in the aftermath of an event that shakes the country (such as the Civil War or, a century later, the civil rights movement). However, it is important to take note when such domestic changes occur, as they can serve as windows of opportunity to improve the image of another state (as was the case briefly in late 2001 when President Vladimir Putin offered Russia's assistance in the U.S. fight against global terrorism).

The second task is to review the spectrum of references available with regard to Russia. It would be helpful, for instance, if Americans were to greater appreciate something Russians themselves consider important, such as Russia's role in World War II, with its human sacrifice and heroism that ensured common victory. Besides providing general information on Russia's successes (or problems), those who feel the improvement of the country's image is their task should concentrate on promoting Russia's own set of references.

Finally, to create a basis for rapprochement, we need to think seriously about a common agenda. This cannot be based on resolving bilateral problems. Mutual compromises in arms reduction and trade disputes may be necessary, but they do not create a basis for mutual trust. Common challenges must be found elsewhere. The most fruitful cooperation between the United States and Russia is occurring in spheres like space research and Afghanistan. In these cases, both countries are interested in success, and their major goals are close, if not identical. In order to improve relations, the United States and Russia should find similar fields of cooperation and/or further develop those already in existence.

### **What about Russia?**

Although this memo has focused on the U.S. side of the dialogue, many consider that Russia is the party most responsible for a qualitative decrease in relations at this time. This fact, however, is just further proof of the validity of the scheme outlined above. The anti-Americanism of the current Russian regime is determined mainly by internal politics and, specifically, the Kremlin's need to portray civil protesters as "foreign agents."

With such a domestic agenda, rapprochement with the United States is not a priority. No new piece of knowledge about the country can fix the situation. U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul recently launched an attempt to educate Russians through media and the Internet about the United States (the first lecture, published in April 2013,

was devoted to American civil society).<sup>1</sup> Knowledge is better than ignorance, but not because it can help change policy, which it can't. Its importance lies in broadening the available spectrum of the "use" of the United States in domestic politics. If anything Russians learn about the United States can be used as an example in the domestic political struggle, it will be used. This is especially true because Russian society is very fond of comparing itself to American society.

The greater ongoing battle in Russia is about values, however. The axiological axis of Todorov's scheme has become the most important one for Russians. Interestingly, both the Kremlin (with its propaganda machine) and the majority of opposition protesters insist that the core values of Russia and the United States are very close (or even identical). A direct rejection of democracy or liberty is still rare in Russian political rhetoric (even if it comes up more often than before); the issue is whether American democratic and liberal values are authentic or just propaganda. In this sphere, greater efforts may be made to convince the Russian people that in the United States liberty and democracy do exist, even if they are at times imperfect.

What could change the value of all three variables, however, are joint actions that would make the domestic agendas of the two states resonate. The opposite is also true: the absence of policy alignment prevents the changing of attitudes. Thus, the refusal of the United States to accept Russia as an equal partner is one reason for growing anti-American feelings in Russia. Even Vladimir Putin in the early stage of his presidency proposed Russia's greater integration with the West, but he faced distrust.<sup>2</sup> The United States missed an opportunity to help build a better image of itself in Russia as a real partner. However, there are still global problems that Russia and the United States can solve together, from climate change and scientific research to counternarcotic operations and nuclear non-proliferation. Building on these foundations is the best way to change the American image in Russia and to create a basis for rapprochement.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://m-mcfaul.livejournal.com/14454.html>

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the vivid description of Putin's attempts to have Russia join NATO, described in Steve LeVine, "Putin's Labyrinth," *Businessweek*. June 30, 2008 (<http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2008-06-30/putins-labyrinth>).