

Walking on Thin Ice
Putin's Rapprochement with the United States on the Background
of the Latent Anti-Americanism in Russia

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The United States—although it attracts many immigrants and students from all over the world and its lifestyle is widely emulated—is also an object of intense and widespread hatred. The apparent paradox, however, is hardly unique and is explainable according to some theories of nationalism. Similar hatreds of various model societies have existed in many countries and historical periods. Resentment of the United States will continue as long as the United States remains a model society for much of the world, and the comparison of the U.S. model with those societies who are emulating it will not be in favor of the emulators. As a result, some societies will undertake a search for an alternative model, which is usually found in local histories. This sentiment is also related to cultural distance between the model society and the emulating society. For instance, countries such as Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand do not register significant bursts of anti-Americanism, whereas those countries that are more culturally distant do, especially if they had historical ambitions to be world or regional leaders. France, for example, although it has long been an ally of the United States, is still struggling with what it perceives as the undue global dominance of the Anglo-Saxon culture.

The situation in Russia with regard to its perception of the United States is not entirely unique, yet it is somewhat peculiar as Russia becomes a U.S. ally against a backdrop of economic hardship and declining international power and prestige. Russia's predicament could be expected to exacerbate anti-American sentiment and thus prevent Russia from becoming an ally of the United States. Mass surveys, however, tell us that apart from two short-lived surges—one during the NATO intervention in Kosovo and the other during the recent Olympic scandals in Salt Lake City—anti-American sentiment in Russia is surprisingly limited. Surveys of Russian elites, however, produce a somewhat different picture. They show that by the mid-1990s, before the Kosovo crisis and the last Olympics, a shift toward anti-Americanism had taken place on the elite level. On the popular level, however, the United States remained a country much admired, which many other countries hoped to emulate. Only in 1999, during the Kosovo crisis, did the

views of the mass public catch up with those of the Russian elites on anti-Americanism. This wave of anti-Americanism, however, soon faded.

The specter of anti-American sentiment taking root in both elite and popular attitudes should be a cause for concern for U.S. policymakers, who must consider the following in their relations with Russia:

- Russia's ruling elite has been cooperative with the United States because it still wants to integrate with the West, not because it always agrees with the United States on particular policy issues.
- There is great potential for anti-American sentiment in Russia and the political mechanisms that prevent its surge are wearing off.
- The United States government has to decide soon if it wants Russia to continue to be cooperative or if Russia does not matter.
- If Russia matters, the United States has to reciprocate Russia's cooperation because otherwise it might lose Russia.
- If the Russian elite feels rewarded, Russia has a good chance of becoming a long-term Western partner.

Apparently, the Russian elite seems to generally believe strongly that its best course of action is to continue efforts to Westernize the country. Thus, cooperation with the United States is vital to achieving their goals (although some elites seriously consider China's experience as an alternative path for Russian development). The Russian elite, including the political leadership and media magnates, normally limits expressions of anti-American sentiment in the media, which accounts for generally low levels of this sentiment on the popular level. Periodically, however, media coverage of events and related commentary takes a decidedly anti-American tone. This occurred during the 1999 Kosovo intervention that followed the August 1998 financial crisis. Those two crises undermined two basic premises of the Russian liberal revolution: that economic liberalism would make Russia and Russians rich, and that with the end of the Cold War, Russia would become an equal partner of the Western democracies. By the mid-1990s, the Russian elite had realized that neither was happening, but the media still maintained pro-Western and pro-U.S. coverage. Yet, so great was the elite's frustration during the Kosovo crisis, the Western-friendly media began—with official sanction—to send quite a different message. A dramatic rise in anti-Americanism at the mass level followed.

Another such outburst occurred during the last Olympics (February 2002) when the Russian public felt its athletes were wrongly denied victory in several incidents. In that case, Russian anger rose over symbolic matters where U.S. involvement was not immediately obvious, unlike in the Kosovo case, where U.S. involvement had been quite real and had graphically shown that Russia had lost very real, not merely symbolic, power. The fact that the second surge of anti-American sentiment rose over a relatively trifling matter suggests that the lid that the Russian elite are able to keep on expressions of anti-American sentiment is wearing thin. Indeed, given the perceived lack of reward for its cooperation with

the West, it is not a great surprise. Moreover, as Russia's post-Soviet identity is still in formation, it is being shaped in part by this perception. Because many Russians feel that they are not welcome in the West, an increasing number of them are developing a non-Western Eurasian identity. This is evidenced by a semiofficial recognition of Aleksandr Dugin (a formerly outcast Eurasianist) who is now occasionally seen on TV, including on the government channel; furthermore, this feeling is trickling down to the public. Calls made by the former prime minister Evgenii Primakov to forge an alliance with China and India and thus offset growing U.S. power not only reflected the elite's frustration, but were also meant to increase his popularity before the last elections.

Against this background, President Putin's rapprochement with the United States is remarkable. It has given Russian Westerners a new hope. Indeed, as a new Russian identity has not yet calcified, a new structure of incentives may reinforce the government's pro-Western orientation. If Russian cooperation with the West is reciprocated this time (for which there may be a better chance now, given Russia's participation in the anti-terror effort), the Russian government can show its public that its pro-Western policies pay off. That may have long-lasting consequences because it can help shape a pro-Western Russian identity. Identities are malleable, but when they do solidify, they have lasting influence. It is not very likely that Russia will turn into another Great Britain any time soon, whatever U.S. policies with respect to Russia might be. But the United States still has a choice in Russia between an occasionally sulky ally like France or a hostile Eurasianist entity. What we see today may be Russia's last attempt to integrate into the community of Western states.

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