

RUSSIAN ANTI-AMERICAN SENTIMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper will seek to look at current Russian Anti-Americanism, the drivers and root causes, and best ways to deal with it through looking at statistics and surveys of the Russian population to identify sources of this sentiment. Additionally, policy recommendations will be put forth to counteract this backsliding of Russian opinion of Americans and look to history to find times when Russian opinion of America was much better. A review of the data finds that deep ideological divides have formed, and the use of Putinism ideology along with the Orthodox Church and elitist sentiment tend to be driving this trend.

INTRODUCTION

Russia and the United States have a long and complicated relationship, and actually have two islands that virtually make the US and Russia neighboring countries. However, despite these shared cultural and historic ties, the relationship between Russia, and then the Soviet Union, and Russia again, with the United States has been tense, often fraught with disagreements, threats, and even nuclear saber rattling that continues to this day.

The history of these two countries, and the anti-American bias demonstrated by Russia to this day, shows a history that is complex. Numerous authors have looked into this and cite factors as varied as elite opinions, the ideology of the Orthodox church, and even plain and simple factors like nationalism and economic interests. Today, Russian Anti-American sentiment is at some of its highest levels as the Russian invasion of Ukraine continues to incur western sanctions that no doubt invoke a harsh response from the average Russian.

Russian criticism of the United States and its foreign policy as it relates to Russia has been varied over the last 30 years since the fall of the Soviet Union. They have ranged from topics as wide as failure to invest more in Russia, the perceived undercutting of Russian national identity and importance, and the encroachment on Russian territories and sovereignty by NATO,

spearheaded by US leadership, along with color revolutions in former Soviet states. These have resulted in a growing distrust and unease in Russia towards the US and western interests, viewing them as out to get Russia, and keep Russia from becoming a truly global superpower.

METHODOLOGY

Various studies have been conducted over the years, looking at factors as varied as militarism and church involvement to the influences of elitist opinions. Researchers have found that Russian elitist opinions have been gradually filtering down to wider society and influencing them.¹ This on top of Russian State-controlled media broadcasting anti-American sentiment and emphasizing conspiracy theories claiming activities like funding biolabs in Ukraine and Nazis has made the problem even worse. The data reflected from these studies indicates a wide acceptance of messaging from sources like state-controlled media, the government, and church officials.

COMMUNISM GIVES WAY TO PUTINISM

The theology of Putinism is a new concept that some authors have highlighted as the nationalistic, machismo culture and branding of Russia's President, Vladimir Putin. A few things are worth mentioning, to get into the headspace of Putin and understand some of where this ideology and theology may be coming from.

Prior to assuming the leadership of Russia, Putin spent his career as a KGB agent under the USSR. He also practiced martial arts, was a lawyer, and no doubt was raised on a strict diet of distrust for the West. His anti-Western communist training found itself without meaning one morning in the 1990s when the USSR stopped existing. Suddenly, the Soviet Union collapsed, and the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the Cold War had no home and was replaced by the new

¹ Werning Rivera, Sharon, and James D. Bryan. "Understanding the sources of anti-Americanism in the Russian elite." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 5-6 (2019): 376-392.

Russia. Putin has replaced this absence of Communism with his own brand of theology, dubbed “Putinism.” As one author highlights:

Unlike Marxism-Leninism, which was an explicit ideology, Taylor describes Putinism as a mentality, or code, consisting of not just ideas (such as great-power statism, anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism, and conservatism or anti-liberalism) but also habits (such as control, order, unity or anti-pluralism, loyalty, and hypermasculinity) and even emotions (including desiring respect but feeling humiliated by the West, resentment, and vulnerability or fear).²

The last two habits highlighted, loyalty and hypermasculinity, are not difficult to guess where those came from. Intelligence career fields, especially those trading in secrets, rely heavily on trust and loyalty. Absolute, supreme loyalty is required. It is no wonder then why Putinism has also been met with severe consequences for disloyalty. The string of poisonings across Europe targeting the likes of Colonel Skirpal, Alexander Litvineko, and the shootdown of Yevgeny Prigozhin’s plane last summer, just weeks after his failed mutiny, make it clear that disloyalty has a guaranteed price under Putinism.

PUTINISM EMBRACES THE CHURCH, UNLIKE COMMUNISM

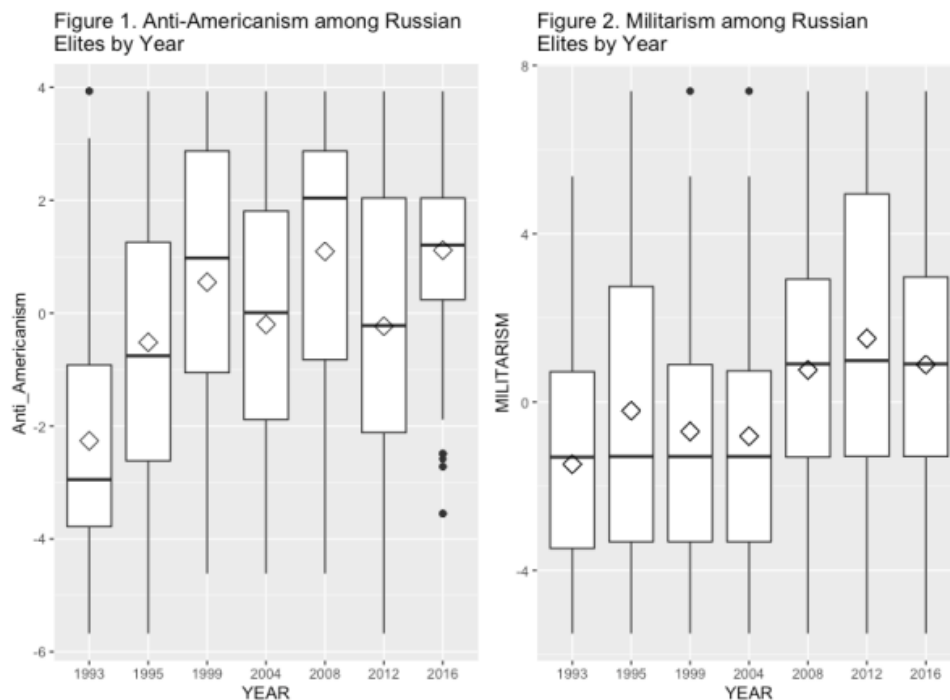
Questions remain about what will happen after Putin, and if the Putinist ideology will outlast Putin. Katz suggests this could be carried out by the elite. However, here, we see another interesting twist in the ideology of Putinism: the influence, or use of, the Orthodox Church. Although Communist ideology under the Soviet Union was famously anti-religious, secular, and atheist, the Orthodox Church was allowed to persist, and survived the reign of Communism.

² Katz, Mark N. “Where Is Putinism Leading Russia?” *Asia policy* 14.2 (2019): 90–92. Print.

Today it seems the use of Communism to fight the influence of the west has been replaced by the Orthodox Church. The Patriarch of the Orthodox Church has been a key supporter of Putin.

Although Islam and Russian Orthodoxy are very different religions, Putin and Kirill “the Patriarch of Moscow and all of Rus” have been involved in a campaign to reinvigorate the Russian Orthodox Church’s role in galvanizing a larger culture and (trans) national identity not unlike efforts of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hezbollah, Al Qaeda and similar versions of political Islam. Patriarch Kirill has also been increasingly critical of Western secularism, advocating a more religious society in opposition to trends on the Continent and in the U.S.³

There is also some correlation to Putinism among the elite of Russian society having overlap with Anti-Americanism and a belief in God. Blasco’s research found that Anti-Americanism and militarism in Russian elites and a belief in God correlated to Kirill’s appointment in 2009.



(Blasco, 2022)

³ Blasco, Nicholas J. 2022. “Russian Orthodoxy, Militant Internationalism, and Anti-Americanism in Post-Soviet Russia in Advance.” *Journal of Religion and Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.5840/jrv202242091>.

The correlation between Anti-Americanism, militarism, and religious preference seems to be one that Blasco points to as one of the driving and guiding undercurrents that keeps Anti-Americanism, or at least a strong sense of militaristic tendencies, as a chief concern. The expansion of NATO, the American support of color revolutions, and the lack of meaningful reforms to the relationship under President Obama also points to the lack of rapprochement with the United States since the mid-2000's. One need look no further than the infamous moment that Obama and Medvedev shared a burger during Medvedev's trip to the United States, and Radio Free Europe heralding "Obama, Medvedev Seal Successful Reset with Burgers".⁴ Three days later on June 27, 2010, the FBI arrested 10 undercover Russian intelligence agents as part of the Operation Ghost Stories investigation.⁵ Less of a reset, and more of a repeat of the old times.

However, the divide between east and west remains internally in modern day Russia. While the Orthodox Church may hold the political mainline at the moment, there are the "old ways" or the "Old Belief" system which still tends to hold a viewpoint more in line with liberal western political systems. This results in a clash where traditionalists (Orthodox believers) view the modern/Catholic method with suspicion. As one author states, highlighting the sources of modern political thought being borne out of Orthodoxy: "One of the sources of contemporary policies of the Russian authorities toward the West is the antiquity of Orthodoxy, which is rooted in the collective and unconscious suspicion toward Catholicism. It is owing to this ideological heritage that the image of Russia surrounded by enemies imposed by some politicians still has a hold over some parts of the Russian population."⁶

⁴ Maher, Heather. June 24, 2010. "Obama, Medvedev Seal Successful 'Reset' with Burgers and Fries." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty.

https://www.rferl.org/a/Obama_And_Medvedev_Seal_Successful_Reset_With_Burgers_And_Fries/2081904.html.

⁵ Federal Bureau of Investigation. 2011. "Operation Ghost Stories: Inside the Russian Spy Case | Federal Bureau of Investigation." Federal Bureau of Investigation. October 31, 2011. <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/operation-ghost-stories-inside-the-russian-spy-case>.

⁶ Stanzhevskiy, Fedor, and Dmitry Goncharko. "Pluralism and Conflict: The Debate about 'Russian Values' and Politics of Identity." *Journal of nationalism, memory & language politics* 13.2 (2019): 251–273. Web.

HEGEMONY – THE MAIN COMPLAINT

Many writings have emphasized that the United States being seen as the global “hegemon” in the 1990’s and 2000’s lead to a resentment of Russia’s fall from global prestige. Russia, being a proud country that has contributed to the arts and global culture, continues to feel as though it is looked down upon by the Western world. This lead to a resentment and as Mykola stated, “Putin ascribes ‘Western hegemony’ to be particularly evil.”⁷ This resistance to hegemony also is representative in the research of Sokolov who tracked Anti-American opinions by Russian elites compared to the “masses” over the years, and found that Russian elitist opinions tended to take a sharper turn against the United States much faster than that of the masses.⁸



(Sokolov, 2018)

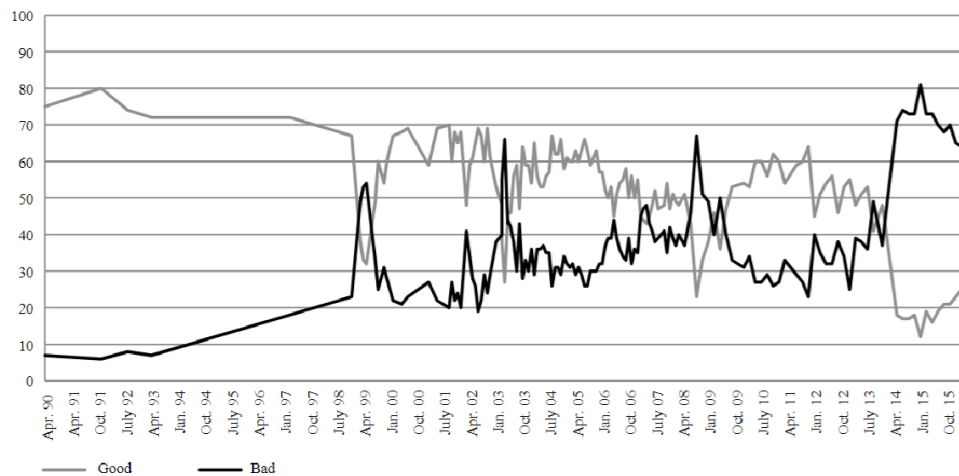
⁷ Kyryliuk, Mykola. "Weaponizing anti-americanism: the concept of" hegemony" in Russian rhetoric policy." (2023).

⁸ Sokolov, Boris, Ronald F. Inglehart, Eduard Ponarin, Irina Vartanova, and William Zimmerman. "Disillusionment and anti-americanism in Russia: From pro-american to anti-american attitudes, 1993–2009." *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2018): 534-547.

Mykola points out that the anti-globalization movement of the 1990's still points to western hegemony being based on greed and capitalism.

However, Sokolov contends there are four kinds of Anti-Americanism: “: issue-oriented, ideological, instrumental, and revolutionary.” (Sokolov, 2018) The chief issue today tends to be centered around American foreign policy, or issue-oriented, although as the use of the Orthodox Church to counter western-influences ramps up (for example, the LGBTQ movement) this is leading to more fundamental and ideological reasons for Anti-Americanism. Hegemony may have served a purpose for the longest time as the main complaint against the West and against the United States, but we are starting to see more ideologically-driven issues that make the driving anti-American forces less issues-based and more fundamental, creating a more persistent divide between the West and Russia.

In 2014, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, the Russian opinion against the United States took one of its most profound turns, and has not returned since.⁹



⁹ Volkov, Denis. “Anti-American Sentiment in Post-Soviet Russia: Dynamics and Contemporary Characteristics.” Russian social science review 61.3–4 (2020): 132–160. Web

(Volkov, 2020)

Volkov points out that Russian Anti-Americanism took its most staggering turn in 2014, rising to over 70% negative, and remaining consistent since that time.

THEORIES AND SOURCES OF ANTI-AMERICANISM

Russian political thought and elitist opinion today tends to have a number of sources for their thoughts on the issue of Anti-Americanism. Several, including the elitist opinions, Putinism, and the Orthodox church tend to remain in vogue at the moment. However, the question of economic impact from the west, or lack thereof in the 1990s in post-Soviet Russia, is also of paramount question and debate.

At this time, the debate seems to range around western hegemonic power and the unipolar world that was fought against in the 1990s and early 2000s. The self-image of Russia tends to resent this power turnabout, and the insistence of being a great power and returning to prominence in global affairs remains a key initiative of Putin, as demonstrated by his forays in Syria among other locales. This, coupled with the anti-Western rhetoric of the Orthodox church, results in a persistent and enduring anti-American cultural thread that seems to run deep.

THEORY: LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC REFORMS

One of the main cultural criticisms of western and American policy and culture comes from the Orthodox church.¹⁰ These criticisms are more foundational and not necessarily symbolic or targeted towards American policy, but American culture and way of life. These criticisms and complaints are profound differences, and lead to a realization that some policy changes are unlikely to be substantive or effective since these are ideological and not issues-based criticisms. This creates an inherent difference where anti-Americanism is likely to be

¹⁰ Blasco, Nicholas J. 2022. "Russian Orthodoxy, Militant Internationalism, and Anti-Americanism in Post-Soviet Russia in Advance." *Journal of Religion and Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.5840/jrv202242091>.

enduring, regardless of foreign policy. Research from Blasco (2022) found significant overlap between a belief in God and anti-Americanism.

THEORY: NATO EXPANSION/DEFENSE ACTIVITIES

Another key area of criticism has been that of NATO expansion. (Volkov, 2020) NATO grew significantly under President Bush and this led to a feeling of being “pinned down” and surrounded by NATO, despite the claims and appearances of the end of the Cold War. The argument was essentially, if the Cold War is over, why is NATO still growing? Putin has assured us all since then, the Cold War was certainly not over, and NATO’s expansion was not in error.

Unfortunately, any policy that would tend to limit the use of force or limit defenses, in the efforts of curbing Anti-American sentiment, is unlikely to do anything other than placate Putin, and create even more negative second order effects. Russia has already been significantly emboldened and has conducted increasingly reckless and brazen hybrid warfare against western countries including poisonings and suspected sabotage.¹¹

THEORY: HEGEMONY

Finally, and probably most universally, the main complaint Russian opinion focuses on centers around American and Western Hegemony. As one author pointed out, “Putin ascribes ‘Western hegemony’ to be particularly evil.” (Kyryliuk, 2023) Following the breakup of the Soviet Union and the United States becoming the sole superpower globally, the 1990’s saw an “anti-globalist” movement take hold, and this still prevails today as the United States is seen as a too-powerful global hegemon intent on not letting Russia stand up and keeping her constrained.

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

¹¹ “Russia Is Ramping up Sabotage across Europe.” May 12, 2024. The Economist.
<https://www.economist.com/europe/2024/05/12/russia-is-ramping-up-sabotage-across-europe>.

The problems that lie at the heart of what is driving anti-American opinion in Russia tend to stem from the Putin government and Russian state-controlled media. Much of this messaging relies on the internet to make it beyond Russian borders, and internally it is likely to continue with this messaging from a strategic level, which means attacking the lies of Russian state media in the domains where the United States can control it is of paramount importance.

Additionally, targeting conspiracy theories, deepfakes, lies, and manipulations on western social media platforms could be a significant opportunity to limit the damage and proliferation of Russian disinformation, and the accompanying Anti-American sentiment, beyond Russian borders.

In 2021, the Keir Giles of the Chatham House released recommendations for deterrence involving Russia that crossover into understanding the policy of how to maintain relations going into the future. Giles emphasizes the balance that must be maintained of engaging with Russia but not being misled into thinking they have any intent of actually enacting meaningful reforms, or seriously adhering to any agreements. Russia has a long and steadfast history of violating treaties and agreements at this time.

Another key policy recommendation from Giles, that it appears the White House has taken quite seriously and is acting upon, is the recommendation to “Name and Shame.” Giles states, “Concealing the true nature, volume and intent of Russia’s irresponsible behaviour cedes the information space to Moscow instead of properly educating Western publics about the brinkmanship practiced by Russia and the restraint required from NATO partners.”¹² Since 2022, the United States and NATO allies have lead an unprecedented campaign of outing Russian activity, sometimes preemptively, in an effort to deter Russian behavior. This course of action,

¹² Giles, Keir. "Outlook and Policy Recommendations." In *What Deters Russia?*, Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank, September 23, 2021. Accessed May 25, 2024. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/what-deters-russia/04-outlook-and-policy-recommendations>.

commonly referred to as “Strategic Declassification,”¹³ has the potential to create the information space and operations favorable to NATO and Europe by offering a counter-narrative to the Russian elite opinion that tends to trend anti-American. By highlighting and broadcasting the lies of Russian activity, this can create an opportunity for more information to influence the sentiment of Russians on the street, academia, and elsewhere.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Find Ways to Alienate Putin from the Russian Elite

Continued pressure from economic sanctions and making it difficult to maintain business ties when associated with Putin can create a rift. This creates an opportunity to alienate him from the Russian elite by making him dangerous to do business with. Highlighting ways he is weak or has made mistakes, like the Prigozhin incident from last summer, can also provide opportunity to demonstrate he is not infallible and should be distanced.

Be Judicious with Potential “Hegemon” Activity – Action with Non-NATO Partners

One of the main criticisms is that the United States tends to act as the global hegemon, and NATO is part of a gang bullying Russia. Recognizing continued deterrence activities are essential, also find opportunities to act with non-NATO partners. For example, in summer of 2023 the BRICS summit in South Africa due to an arrest warrant out of the International Criminal Court.¹⁴ This highlighted the ability to use non-NATO partners and a global community response to impose cost but not incur more rebukes about American hegemony.

Enhance Cultural Exchange Opportunities, Religious Organization Openness

¹³ Burns, William J. 2024. “Spycraft and Statecraft.” Foreign Affairs. January 30, 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/cia-spycraft-and-statecraft-william-burns>. <https://archive.is/Gmuzh>

¹⁴ Bartlett, Kate. July 19, 2023. “Putin won’t attend a South Africa summit next month, avoiding possible arrest.” NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2023/07/19/1188568761/russia-putin-south-africa-brics-summit>

Given the resurgence of church affiliation Russia is experiencing, while church attendance in the United States tends to be dwindling, finding opportunities to enable more exchange via this path could also create opportunities to influence potential influential individuals in the Russian Orthodox Church.

Be Strong at Home, Be Strong Abroad

The United States, for decades, enjoyed a reputation as cultural, religious, industrial, and academic beacon the world aspired to. Domestic political infighting and divisive rhetoric has shattered that image the last 10 years and has created the opportunity for our enemies to attack us. Restoring a more civil and homogenous internal civil culture would result in fewer opportunities for adversaries to attack.

CONCLUSIONS

The Russian Anti-Americanism sentiment that we have seen growing over the last several years shows no sign of abating on the current course. However, we have seen times when it was reversed. When the United States was perceived as a haven of thought and freedom, Russian anti-Americanism was some of its lowest rates ever recorded. (Volkov, 2020) Enhancing America's reputation, restoring trust globally, and imposing cost on adversaries is essential to reversing these trends.

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