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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Kurilla, I. (2021). Mutual Images of Russia and America as Part of Their Domestic Culture Wars. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 274, 5-7. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000516393>

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ANALYSIS

Mutual Images of Russia and America as Part of Their Domestic Culture Wars

By Ivan Kurilla (European University at St. Petersburg)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000516393

Abstract

Conflicts over national identity in both Russia and the US have helped to fuel the deterioration in relations between the two countries. Understanding the nature of these conflicts improves our understanding of how each side views the other and highlights the nature of the obstacles standing in the way of improved relations.

Conflictual Domestic Politics

Over the past few years, U.S.–Russian relations have cooled almost to freezing, putting them at a level comparable to the worst days of the Cold War. Indeed, “new Cold War” has become a popular descriptor in books and articles analyzing contemporary international politics. The two most popular explanations for the deterioration of relations between the two countries are rooted in (1) foreign policy, where one side reacts to the actions of the other; and (2) domestic politics, where politicians mobilize support and justify their actions by inflating the foreign threat. Without rejecting these explanations altogether, I suggest shifting our attention to the processes of social change that have altered the context of U.S.–Russian relations.

During these years of rising tensions with each other, both Russia and the United States have seen their domestic politics overwhelmed by conflicts that reflect competing approaches to their respective national histories.

In the United States, the removal of monuments to the leaders of the Confederacy started in 2017 and had developed by 2020 into a wave of iconoclasm against historical figures expressed in everything from vandalism against statues to the *New York Times*’ “1619 Project,” an ambitious effort to rewrite national history. Russia, meanwhile, has seen the passage of a series of “memory laws” that began with the 2014 law prohibiting the “rehabilitation of Nazism” and continued through the 2020 constitutional amendment that requires the state to defend “historical truth.” Different state actors have increasingly come to interfere in the domain of history, while the largest social movement of the epoch is the Immortal Regiment, an annual mass rally to commemorate Russian war veterans.

In my view, the simultaneous rise of these two conflicts is no coincidence. They represent two sides of the same culture war—or domestic fight for identity—that has been particularly acute in the second decade of this century.

What Is the Identity Struggle?

Any group of people—or indeed, any individual—defines itself by drawing lines between “us” and “them.” In the age of nation-states, the search for national identity and the effort to redefine national identity during crises have become an important part of the political struggle. National identity can be understood as the answer to the question “What are we (who are we)?” that is shared by the majority of people in the nation. Whereas in the 19th century identities seemed stable and universally accepted, by the early 21st century nations found themselves split between multiple identities. The constant fight for redefinition reflects the shifting balance of power between different social groups within the nation.

There are two main ways of answering the question “What are we?” The first is to describe one’s group by reference to its past: what the people did together, what they achieved, and what shared sufferings created their social cohesion. The second is to define the group as distinctively different from another: “we are not they,” “we are not like our neighbors,” “Canadians are not Americans,” “Ukrainians are not Russians,” and so on. When using this second variant, the nation needs to construct not only an image of itself, but also an image of its “constitutive Other,” because the nation we habitually use to define ourselves must possess the features we do not.

Scholars know that the United States has served as Russia’s “constitutive Other” since at least the end of the 19th century. Russia played a similar role for the US during the Cold War (and arguably from the late 19th century onward) and has reemerged in that role over the last few years.

Identity Crises in Russia and in the United States

The Russian identity crisis began with the fall of the Soviet Union. During the 1990s, Russians struggled to redefine their national identity in a context in which history was being rewritten and the old Others-foes seemingly turned into Others-friends. The first decade of the new century saw a nascent Russian identity start to emerge: the symbolic universe of the Russian state was recreated (a national anthem, emblem, and flag, each representing different periods of the Russian past, were adopted), a new hierarchy of national heroes replaced Soviet ones, and the United States was restored as Russia’s Other (even if Russia itself returned to international politics as a European power). In the middle of the second decade, however, the Kremlin smashed that fledgling identity and forcefully began to promote a new one based on “traditional values,” anti-liberalism, and opposition to the West. To the surprise of Russia’s intellectuals, the authorities began to describe Russia’s rather urban and contemporary European society as the parochial stronghold of the anti-liberal social order. This

changed identity was definitely linked to the anti-Putin protests of 2011–2012, the annexation of Crimea, and Putin’s plans to prolong his presidency indefinitely. My goal here is not to analyze this connection, but to underline the fact that Russia was plunged into a new identity crisis before it had fully recovered from the previous one.

America’s own identity crisis developed over the last decade, though its foundations were arguably laid much earlier, when the end of the Cold War eliminated at a stroke the foreign threat (what constructivists call domestic usage of the constitutive Other). Throughout the “triumphant” years of Bill Clinton’s administration, the anxious “War on Terror” presided over by George W. Bush, and the almost post-racial period inaugurated by Barack Obama, the country steadily and rapidly entrenched liberal values: tolerance, freedom, and minority rights. As we now know, this did not meet with universal approval among Americans. Donald Trump’s 2016 victory in the presidential elections laid bare the split in U.S. society. Under President Trump, America’s liberal identity was called into question, reigniting old “culture wars” not only along the familiar lines of race and gender, but also about attitudes toward the nation’s past.

Russia’s Anti-Americanism as Part of the Russian Identity Crisis

The Putin regime monopolized the process of constructing a new Russian identity. Its goal was to unify the nation behind the current rulers while marginalizing the opposition. Starting in the protest winter of 2011–12, state propaganda became fiercely anti-American. Simultaneously, it began to depict opposition leaders as somehow connected with the United States, thus creating an image of the opposition as being part of an alien anti-Russian force. From this perspective, the invention of “traditional values” rhetoric was the result of the regime’s efforts to present Russia as the absolute opposite of the U.S. liberal empire. This juxtaposition was intended to recreate the old bipolar world, although this time substituting opposite value systems for opposing political ideologies. When the Kremlin learned that the vast majority of urban Russians opposed the policy, it adopted a worldview that painted whole strata of educated and active citizens as American pawns. To make this view crystal clear, the Kremlin introduced the label of “foreign agent,” which it continues to apply to independent NGOs, media, and select individuals.

The election of Donald Trump was greeted warmly by many Russians, but at the same time, it damaged the idea of two polar-opposite value systems: Trump’s America looked much more familiar to Russians than its liberal Obama-era counterpart.

The Russian past was also redefined during this period. The regime overwhelmingly used the Second

World War as the source of its legitimacy and of the very political language it used when speaking about contemporary issues. From 2014, a series of laws and regulations made it illegal to take any critical approach to the history of the war—and, by extension, to the role of the USSR in Europe in the mid-20th century. However, such overuse of memory of the war provoked a popular reaction: starting in 2012, a grassroots initiative to commemorate the war dead through a Victory Day procession carrying portraits of veterans became extremely popular. By 2019, some ten million people were taking part in the Immortal Regiment nationwide and in other countries. The state and grassroots organizers' fight for control over the movement constitutes part of Russian historical politics, along with the never-ending disputes about the Soviet past, including commemoration of Stalin and memory of Stalin's victims. It seems that the Kremlin deliberately turns political struggle into arguments about the past; however many reasons there may be to criticize it for its current policies, taking up the position of the "defenders of the sacred past" makes history a commanding eminence controlled by the ruling group.

The simultaneous escalation of arguments about the United States (the constitutive Other) and Russian history reflects an identity crisis. What is distinctive about the Russian case is that these crises were provoked from the top down: the Kremlin created these crises instead of healing them. Thus, the ruling group are perhaps better presented as challengers who seek to overturn Russian identity than as defenders of it.

The US' "Russian Meddling" Obsession as Part of the American Identity Crisis

Let me start with a disclaimer: this section is not about Russian meddling, and I have no intention either of denying it or of arguing that it happened. My point here is that in a different time, or with a different country involved, similar evidence would not have produced such an emotional and long-lasting discussion in the U.S. media and among American politicians.

However, the news that Russian hackers had somehow helped Donald Trump to get elected President of the United States found fertile ground in a context of mass Democratic refusal to accept Trump. In the eyes of anti-Trump Democratic activists, his election reopened a side door for the domestic culture wars that had seemingly been defeated. In their attempts to undermine the president's legitimacy, the Democrats turned to a strategy similar to that used by the Kremlin against its domestic foes. Trump was un-American and a "Russian asset,"

leading journalists wrote, thus "exporting" him to Russia. Making Trump's alleged Russian connection really toxic necessitated making Russia appear like a real threat to the United States, prompting the immediate demonization of Putin's Russia, which followed the same logic as the demonization of the US on Russian television.

Russia as a traditional threat and presumed Trump ally thus once again served as a constitutive Other in U.S. political discourse. Discussions about the Other are always a form of discussion about the Self: the Russian meddling campaign signaled Americans' demand to refresh their visions of who they are. Another such sign was the conflict over how to understand the past.

American clashes around historical monuments in 2017 and 2020 were part of the country's culture wars. The balance established after the Civil War between Northern and Southern narratives has come to an end, with the result that even the place of the war in U.S. history is now being called into question. More than that, a whole line of traditional heroes, starting with Christopher Columbus, has been problematized. In the U.S. case, it is less obvious than in the Russian case what political force provoked the crisis. However, the Trump presidency rendered previously silent tensions acute and led to the removal and vandalizing of many statues around the country.

The Future of U.S.–Russian Relations

The ongoing discursive conflict between Russia and the United States is amplified by the domestic identity crises in the two countries, for both of which the other country's distorted image is an essential part. We can expect that when the identity crises are resolved, relations between Russia and the United States will start to improve. Until this happens, we should learn to distinguish between domestic use of the Other and the real problems and opportunities of U.S.–Russian relations.

In a more distant future, we may expect that another country will take on the role of constitutive Other for one or both of the US and Russia (in the case of the US, China is the first country that springs to mind, but this is not yet predetermined). If this happens, bilateral relations as a whole may take on a different character, as happened with U.S.–English relations once Americans stopped looking at their former ruler as the Other.

The United States will maintain its role as Russia's Other for longer. Of course, history testifies that Russian "othering" of the United States has not always been hostile: during every cycle of Russian reforms, the country has turned to America as a source of innovations.

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