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[Conflicting Views: How the Russian Public Perceives Relations with America](#)

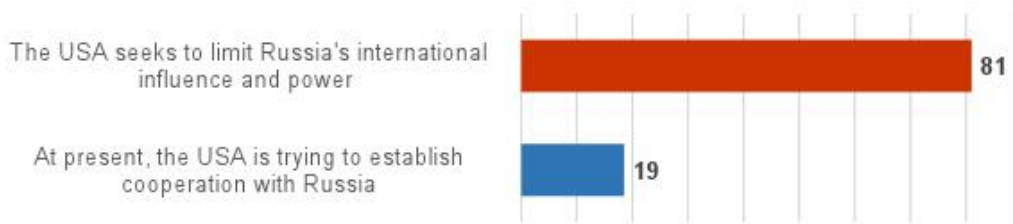


Why has the West's sanctions policy so far failed to change the Kremlin's foreign policy orientation? Which lines of cooperation could help de-escalate tensions and restore workable relations? Such questions have been asked by Russian and Western journalists repeatedly for the past three or four years. The answers might be found in a close look at various trends in Russian public opinion.

In the eyes of the Russian public, according to our recent set of Levada Center surveys, Russian-American relations are perceived as complex, and certainly not built only on hatred and suspicion. Any glimmer of cooperation instantly becomes breaking news in Russia and is watched with interest. For example, this is exactly what happened when President Vladimir Putin thanked Donald Trump for helping to prevent ISIS attacks. At the same time, the most dominant news coverage of America comes with a negative and accusatory tone — which plays a decisive role in shaping public opinion.

Do you think that...?

(Data by Levada Center and Chicago Council, December 2017)

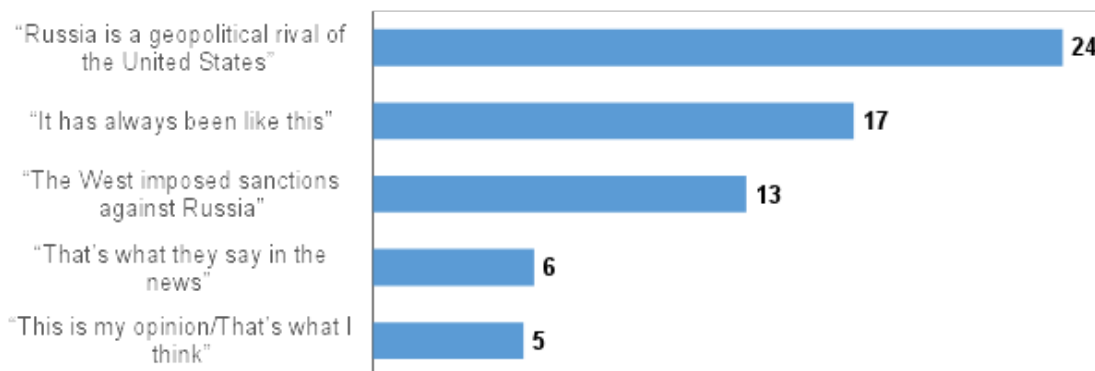


Levada Center and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs conducted a joint study of the mass attitudes of the population of Russia and the United States. According to polls, four in five Russians believe that the United States is trying to damage Russia's geopolitical interests. The media have undoubtedly played a decisive role in the formation of this view, tapping into a whole set of fears and traumas inflicted on Russian society after the collapse of the Soviet Union. New reasons were added to old wounds: personal sanctions against politicians, presented by the media as an insult to the whole country; numerous diplomatic pokes; even cultural and sports events, such as the Eurovision or the Olympics, which have acquired a political dimension in the eyes of the public.

According to the Russians surveyed, the following reasons determine today's opposition between Russia and the United States (the remaining options gained less than 5%): "Russia is a geopolitical rival of the United States" (24%); "It has always been like this" (17%); "The West imposed sanctions against Russia" (13%); "That's what they say in the news" (6%); "This is my opinion" (5%).

What makes you think so?

(Data by Levada Center and Chicago Council, December 2017)



In fact, we can talk about three groups of answers that represent the most common patterns of public opinion. The first pattern is when Russia and the United States are described as ontological opponents because, as the proponents of this claim, the very nature of international relations presupposes belligerent rivalry. This idea is the most common one (it is held by more than 40% of Russians) and apparently also the most stable one. It relies on the widespread stereotype that the current conflict between Russia and the United States is not new but, instead, just a new stage in the global confrontation that began in the twentieth century.

The second group of answers includes rational explanations. In addition to the most frequently mentioned option, i.e. the anti-Russian sanctions, the respondents recall various U.S. interventions in other countries' affairs, the scandal with the 'eviction' of diplomats, as well as now the Olympic scandal (the survey was conducted before the final ban on the participation of Russia's team). Altogether, these reasons were mentioned by 30% of Russians. Possibly, the rationalisation of the negative attitude to the other country conceals an assessment of the conflict based on the 'myth' mentioned earlier.

The third group of reasons refers to external authoritative opinions (approx. 10% of the respondents). On the one hand, this is how the respondents may express their lack of interest in this topic ("it does not concern me

directly, I am satisfied with the views I hear on TV”). On the other hand, this is a statement confirming one’s own incompetence, and an inability to understand complex issues, inaccessible through everyday experience.

Sanctions as an unavoidable stumbling block?

The schematic structure of public consciousness, as described above, indicates the boundaries of change in the short term, as well as specific problems which, if solved, may contribute to a large-scale improvement in attitudes towards the United States. Although the relations with the West [are now](#) far from excellent, about half of Russians want a departure from the policy of containment and would be open to developing cooperation with the United States.

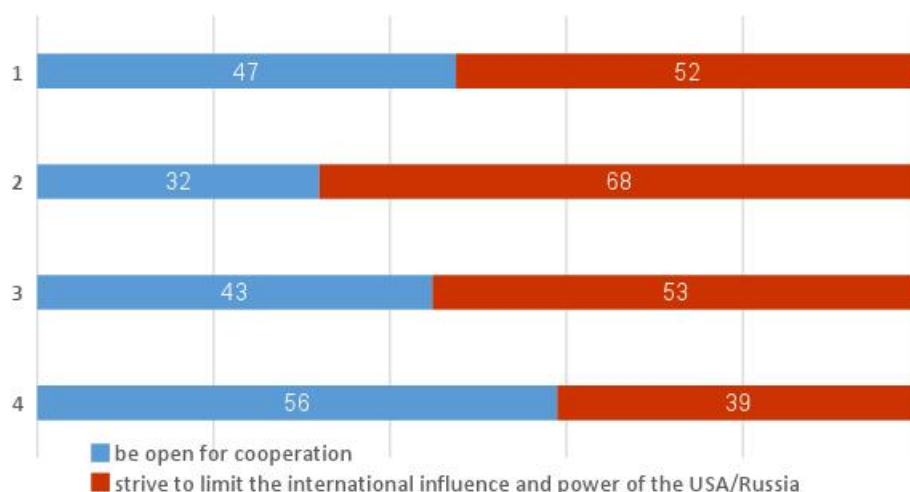
In the summer of 2016, only one third of Russians thought so.

In America, on the contrary, openness to cooperation has decreased since last year. The growing scepticism in the US is logical: the Trump administration has seen a number of scandals and accusations of links with the Kremlin, and Trump’s electoral victory has been attributed to the intervention of ‘Russian hackers’. 69% of Americans believe that Russia largely interferes in the internal affairs of their country.

However, this growing hysteria has not yet reached the Russian scale: in Russia, the USA are accused of the same by 78% of survey respondents.

In your opinion, should our country...?

(Data by Levada Center and Chicago Council, December 2017)



Why, then, is the openness of ordinary Russians to cooperation growing? Despite the efforts undertaken by state-controlled television channels to portray the deterioration of living standards in Russia as a result of the wrecking activities of Western rivals, America cannot remain a target of hatred indefinitely. The intensity of emotions will inevitably subside, although their tonality will remain negative and alert. Against the backdrop of the previous few years, which the Russians themselves described as ‘wartime’, today’s relations do not seem openly hostile. In contrast, for the first time in many years, American society is experiencing a witch hunt, and there are serious fears that anti-Russian sentiment will only aggravate.

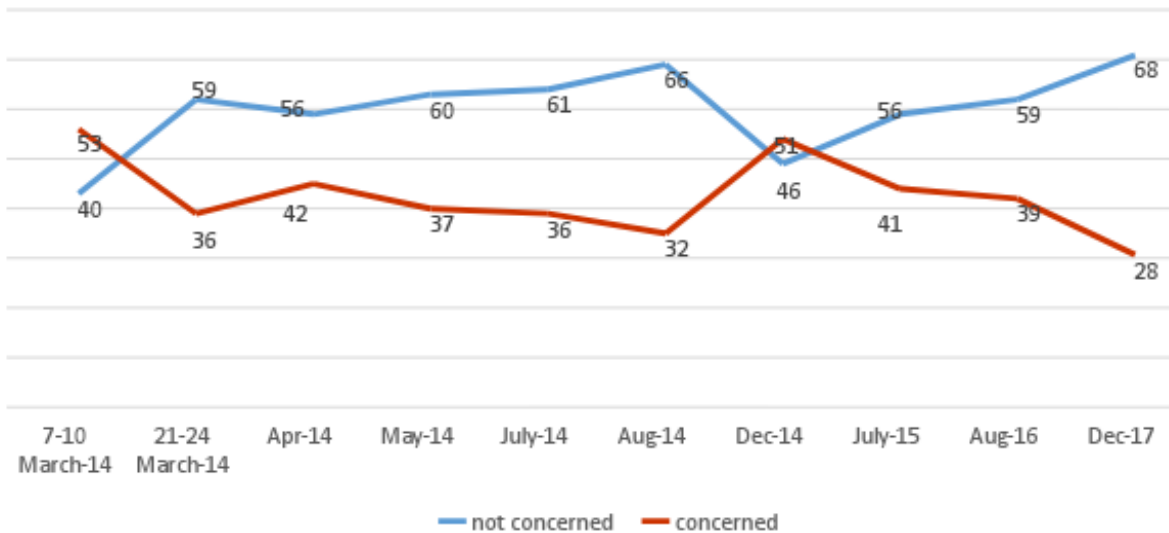
Openness to cooperation is largely determined by the status of things in the country’s economy. As noted above, the imposition of sanctions is perceived as a crucial piece of evidence of American pressure on Russia. The joke saying that the broken light bulbs in the corridor are the responsibility of the American president does contain a considerable part of the truth of Russian life. The public media take every opportunity to imply that the trouble of the national economy can be traced to Transatlantic influences. However, to recognise that Russia’s economy depends on the interference of other countries means to recognise one’s own impotence, which is why the country’s leadership [has to use](#) evasive phrases and imply that the sanctions have affected

the situation, but perhaps not so much.

Russians read this signal and conclude that the restrictive measures introduced by the West have been ineffective. The rising exchange rates of other currencies and the price spikes that occurred in 2014 are losing their colour and have become more of a routine, and the official forecasts do not give any reasons to panic. The social sentiment index calculated by the Levada Center has been [growing throughout the year](#). In this context, the concern about sanctions has gradually dwindled. Undoubtedly, the sanctions continue to be an obstacle to an improvement in the relations with the USA, even if their severity is reduced.

Are you concerned about the Western political and economic sanctions against Russia?

(Levada Center, September 2017)



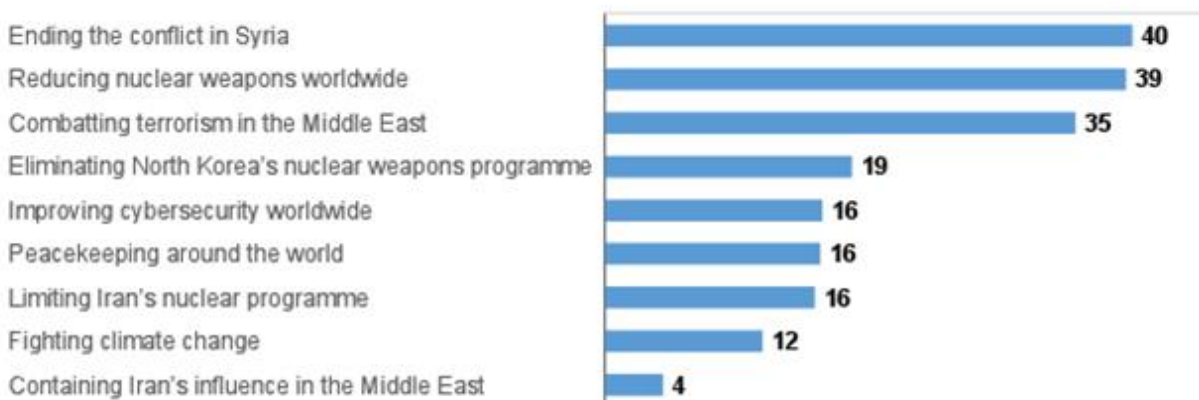
At the same time, the number of possible options for resolving the conflict situation have been shrinking. On the one hand, the Russian leaders are obviously not inclined to make large-scale concessions in the Ukrainian conflict, and the emergence of new evidence of Russian interference in the American domestic politics will add new reasons for increasing pressure on Russia through sanctions. On the other hand, Russian society does not perceive existing restrictions as a serious problem that they would like to resolve by making any sacrifices.

New opportunities for cooperation

If we wonder where the potential for developing relations can be found, it is a good idea to notice the following options, selected by a significant proportion of Russians

Which of the international issues should be solved jointly by Russia and the Western countries?

(Data by Levada Center and Chicago Council, September 2017)



First, ending the conflict in Syria is the most important issue — 40%. Initially, military actions did not enjoy broad public support. After the officially announced withdrawal of Russian troops, this area of cooperation may cease to be important for Russians. Secondly, the reduction of nuclear weapons in the world is considered important. Russians are frightened by the prospect of losing control over the conflict between Russia and the United States, which could result in armed confrontation in the territories of third countries (as it could have happened in Syria). In the worst case scenario, which, albeit with difficulty, is imaginable by the surveyed public, the conflict could evolve into a nuclear war. The most reliable way to reach security is to follow the path of nuclear disarmament, although the mutuality and simultaneity of this process in the world remains an extremely sensitive issue.

In the social mythology, nuclear weapons appear as a radical remedy and its renunciation can bear profound military-political as well as also social consequences. Finally, the third line of cooperation is determined by the need to combat international terrorism. The causes of terrorism are not easily understood by the broad public and its fear-spreading tactics turn this phenomenon into a synonym for absolute evil that all 'civilised humanity' must fight as a common cause.

The lack of progress in the relations between the two countries indicates that it is impossible to find commonalities. Russian elites do not intend to make concessions on issues related to Ukraine, which won them incredible success among the citizens. At the same time, Trump's political opponents use the 'Russian trace' to pressure the president and his administration. At the same time, we see a crisis of leadership in the international arena and a blurred role of the United States as a global leader. This provides opportunities for new alliances and coalitions that can solve problems that pose a threat to global security. However, for this to happen, both parties need to view foreign policy as a zone of global responsibility and cooperation rather than a means for playing domestic political games.

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