

# After the Thaw

by Yuri Levada

When Russia began emerging from decades of international isolation and confrontation with the West in the years after Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* (1985–1991), many Russians hoped for the quick establishment of friendly ties with the Western nations. Ten years of disappointment lay ahead of them.

Russians overestimated how much Western assistance would be available to help bring about their country's rebirth. They did not foresee the obstacles to effective cooperation that would arise within Russia: the lack of comprehensive economic reforms, the absence of full legal protections for foreign investments, and the growth of corruption. And many were disappointed when the spirit of great-power confrontation lingered, despite the end of the Cold War, dashing hopes for normal relations with the West. Today, after several years of political and economic turmoil, there is growing nostalgia in Russia for the Soviet era, when the Soviet Union was perceived as a great power, with a host of dependent states under its domination.

Yet Russian attitudes toward the United States have followed a far more complicated path than this simple narrative would suggest. In public opinion surveys, positive evaluations of the United States peaked between 1991 and 1993, a time of relative optimism about the possibilities of reform within Russia. In 1993, Russians gave positive evaluations of the United States 10 times more often than they offered negative ones. (See the "index" number in table I on page 78.)

Between 1995 and 1998, however, Russian views of the United States became more negative as a result of frustration with worsening conditions in Russia, disappointment with the volume of Western assistance, conflicts related to the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and other irritants. Even so, positive opinions still predominated.

The nadir of Russian attitudes toward the United States came in the first half of 1999. The cause was the dramatic confrontation between Russia and the United States over Kosovo—in particular, over the bombing of Yugoslavia by NATO forces. Russians have long seen Yugoslavia (without much justification) as an area of special interest and the Serbs as their traditional allies, linked to Russia in part by their adherence to Orthodox Christianity. Propaganda further inflamed popular feelings. Russian public opinion turned sharply negative, and for the first time since measurements began, negative views of the United States outweighed positive ones.

Yet even during the worst weeks of the conflict, Russians saw their country's disagreements with the United States as temporary. Thus, in August 1999, only 17 percent of survey respondents considered it possible for relations with the United States to return to the way they were during the Cold War; 52 per-

cent said that relations between the two countries would return to normal after the crisis in Kosovo ended. Indeed, by early 2000, positive evaluations of the United States had returned to their immediate precrisis level.

Earlier this year, there was another drop in positive assessments of the United States, albeit a slight one. The change probably reflected popular reaction to the Borodin affair (in which a Russian official facing charges in Switzerland was detained by U.S. authorities) and to the harsher accents intro-

**I. Russian Attitudes Toward the United States**  
(Percentage of Respondents)

	'91	'92	'93	'95	'97	'98	1999			2000			'01 Feb.
							Mar.	May	Dec.	Mar.	May	Jul.	
Very favorable	18	20	27	17	12	13	3	2	7	10	12	8	10
Mostly favorable	52	50	45	48	59	54	36	30	48	56	56	62	47
Mostly unfavorable	6	5	5	10	12	17	30	30	23	18	15	16	17
Very unfavorable	2	3	2	3	7	6	19	24	8	4	6	7	8
Not sure	21	23	22	21	10	10	13	15	15	12	11	8	17
Index*	8.8	8.8	10.3	5.0	3.7	2.9	0.8	0.6	1.8	3.0	3.2	3.0	2.3

\*Ratio of "very" and "mostly" favorable responses to "very" and "mostly" unfavorable responses.  
Source: VTsIOM surveys.

**II. American Attitudes Toward Russia**  
(Percentage of Respondents)

	'94	'95	'96	'97	1999			2000	
					Feb.	May	Nov.	Mar.	Nov.
Very favorable	8	5	6	7	6	4	4	5	5
Mostly favorable	48	44	46	49	38	42	34	35	35
Mostly unfavorable	28	32	29	29	34	36	44	39	39
Very unfavorable	11	12	10	7	10	13	14	12	14
Not sure	5	7	9	8	12	5	4	9	7
Index*	1.4	1.1	1.3	1.6	1.0	0.9	0.7	0.8	0.8

\*Ratio of "very" and "mostly" favorable responses to "very" and "mostly" unfavorable responses.  
Source: Gallup Organization, *Perceptions of Foreign Countries*, Nov. 17, 2000.

duced into Russian-American relations by the Bush administration's position on antimissile defenses and other issues.

It is worth comparing these views with American attitudes toward Russia. A certain similarity can be seen between the dynamics of public opinion in the two countries, although, on the whole, the attitude of Americans toward Russia is markedly more reserved (see table II above). Despite many changes in their attitudes over the years, Russians evince an underlying respect for the United States as a great and rich country. (In an October 2000 poll, the United States was rated a great country by 70 percent of Russians surveyed; Japan, by 44 percent; Russia, by 39 percent.) American opinions of Russia, however, seem to be strongly influenced by fear and by critical views of Russian policies and practices (e.g., the conflict in Chechnya,

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corruption). Until 1999, most Americans held positive views about Russia. During the Yugoslavian crisis, the ratio of positive to negative views deteriorated, much as it did in Russia. But while positive sentiment subsequently grew in Russia, there was almost no change for the better in the United States.

It's important to put Russian opinion in a larger perspective. A survey of attitudes toward a variety of countries (see table III below) suggests that Russians give negative assessments of countries they see as a source of conflict. Thus, in Russian eyes, the United States fares about the same as its rival Iran and Russia's friendly but troubled neighbor Ukraine. Yet the attitude in Russia toward Americans as a people almost invariably remains very favorable, with 90 percent offering a positive view in one recent survey. Only the Japanese, who are favorably regarded by 95 percent of Russians, fared better.

The Russian perspective on the United States is also shaped by overall attitudes toward the West. One-third of Russians think that the majority of their countrymen have a "respectful" attitude toward the countries of the West, while another third say that the majority are neutral, with no "special feelings." Fear of the West, or contempt for it, is absolutely not characteristic of the majority of Russians, in the opinion of the respondents. Only nine percent say that attitudes toward the West are colored by "uneasiness."

By contrast, few of these same respondents (only 19 percent) think that people in the West have a neutral attitude toward Russia. Russians believe that a cluster of words such as "uneasiness" and "contempt" best describes how the West relates to Russia. (However, no one-word characterization of Western attitudes was chosen more often than "sympathy," which almost one-quarter of respondents picked.) Only eight percent suppose that people in the West regard Russians with respect.

### III. Russian Attitudes Toward Other Countries (Percentage of Respondents)

	Very Favorable	Quite Favorable	Quite Unfavorable	Very Unfavorable	Index*
France	15	69	5	1	13.6
Japan	10	72	6	1	11.7
India	11	72	5	3	11.7
Cuba	9	69	7	2	9.2
Belarus	25	58	9	2	7.5
Germany	11	70	9	2	7.4
North Korea	7	62	9	2	6.3
Poland	9	67	11	2	5.9
Yugoslavia	9	64	17	6	5.6
China	9	66	12	2	5.4
Ukraine	14	59	17	6	3.2
<b>United States</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3.1</b>
Iran	5	57	15	5	3.1
Baltic countries	5	47	26	1	1.4

\*Ratio of "very" and "quite" favorable responses to "very" and "quite" unfavorable responses.  
Source: VTSIOM survey, 2000. Table does not include data from respondents who were "not sure."

In the last few years, the number of Russians who believe that other countries are ill disposed or hostile toward Russia has increased noticeably. In a November 1994 survey, 42 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that "Russia has always aroused hostile feelings in other states." By April 2000, this opinion was shared by 66 percent of respondents. Many Russians believe that foreign investment, the efforts of Western banks, and even humanitarian assistance are designed to denigrate and enslave Russia and to plunder its wealth.

**R**ussians remain suspicious of NATO. In a survey last August, 44 percent of respondents said they thought Russia's fears with regard to the NATO countries were well founded. (Only 32 percent denied that this was so.) At the same time, only 28 percent acknowledged that the NATO states have reason to fear Russia. The prospect of Russia's entry into NATO was viewed with approval by no more than nine percent of Russians. Twenty-two percent endorsed the creation of a defensive union as a counterbalance to NATO (in the spirit of creating a "multipolar world"). Russian cooperation with NATO was favored by 27 percent, while 23 percent did not want Russia to participate in any military blocs.

Much more popular was the idea of joining the European Union at some time in the future. More than half (54 percent) of Russians in the August survey supported this idea to some extent, while 25 percent did not.

Despite the sometimes troubled nature of Russia's relations with the West and the reservations many Russians have about Western intentions, a significant majority of Russians believe that links should be expanded. When asked "How should Russia act in relation to the countries of the West?" in the survey last August, 74 percent agreed with the proposition that it should "strengthen mutually beneficial connections." Only 14 percent said that Russia should "distance itself." (The rest were not sure.) These numbers represent an increase in favorable attitudes: in September 1999, the same questions elicited response rates of 61 and 17 percent, respectively.

Attitudes toward the United States in Russian society have always been complicated. They continue to be influenced by fears and prejudices that remain from the Cold War era, and by current conflicts and misunderstandings between the two countries and between Russia and the West as a whole. Russia's painful domestic problems have exacerbated fears of the West and suspicion of its motives, but because of Russia's national inferiority complex, these sentiments have spawned a defensive rather than offensive approach to the world. Isolationist sentiment has grown.

Given its current weakened industrial and military potential, Russia cannot return to a policy of great-power confrontation. But it is also significant that a positive attitude toward the United States and the West as a whole still prevails in Russian public opinion. In the aftermath of the Yugoslavian crisis of 1999, and with President Vladimir Putin's rise to power, many observers feared a return to confrontation. Yet, although the military and the military-industrial elite have increased their influence, this has not occurred. Despite many complications and contradictions, the prevailing trend is still toward rapprochement with the West and the United States. □