

Improving Russia's Image in the U.S.

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Modern U.S.-Russian relations rest on rich historical experience. Those relations were interrupted in 1917 but re-established in 1933. Since then, bilateral relations have withstood a Cold War, detente, perestroika and positive-negative fluctuations in U.S. and Russian public opinion about the other country.

Recent radio and television debates on U.S.-Russian relations reveal some of those changes. For example, 57 percent of Mayak radio station listeners polled have a negative attitude - toward the U.S., 18 percent hold a positive attitude and 26 percent did not express an opinion either way.

Gallup has surveyed U.S. public opinion toward Russia every year since 1989, ranking attitudes on a scale from "very positive" to "very negative." The number of those listing their attitude as "very positive" has remained stable at about 7 percent over that period, whereas those with a "very negative" attitude have risen from 25 percent to 36 percent. But when asked if they view Russia as an ally, enemy or friend, only 2 percent of respondents chose "ally" in 1991, whereas that number grew significantly to 13 percent in 2013. What's more, 25 percent

of those questioned now say they have a high awareness of events in Russia, while only 14 percent list that awareness as low.

Both countries have greatly underestimated the potential that Russia's Far East holds for helping to develop bilateral relations, and it is essential that this attitude change. Following its major westward migration, the U.S. established powerful financial, business and scientific centers on the West coast, such as Silicon Valley, and also developed extensive trade and economic relations. I believe that Russia is fully capable of doing the same in its Far East.

To be sure, there are plenty of irritants in U.S.-Russian relations, especially concerning U.S. military and political expansion near Russia's borders. Officials have discussed this subject at a host of conferences, including those sponsored by the Kennan Institute in the U.S. For example, many speakers at those forums expressed concern over Washington's heightened interest in events in Ukraine.

Interestingly, former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union George F. Kennan, who had strongly criticized the Soviet Union in his famous "Long Telegram" in 1946, altered his position in the 1990s. He felt that it was a mistake for NATO to expand its membership to include countries located on Russia's borders. That thinking is worth considering now, especially in light of the way Ukraine is literally split between advocates and opponents of European integration.

Understanding the common history that Russia and the U.S. share is the surest means for developing a positive image of each other. Both countries greatly underestimated this factor. They began to appreciate it only when former President Dmitry Medvedev visited California in 2009 and signed an agreement with then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger establishing Fort Ross as one of the most important centers for promoting cooperation between the two countries. At present, Russia's image varies widely from one major U.S. city to the next, but developing cultural, historical and scientific cooperation between the two countries would greatly improve it.

There are no fundamental disagreements in U.S.-Russian relations, and the fundamental nature of those relations does not depend on whether there is a Democratic or Republican administration in the White House. Russia and the U.S. will always share common ground, and one of the tasks before scholars and politicians is to identify, maintain and develop these good relations.

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