U.S. Is Immoral and Racist, Russians Say in Poll

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Russians' overall attitude toward the U.S. has been broadly negative for 1 1/2 years now, according to polls conducted by independent Levada Center.

Russians believe the United States is an immoral and unequal country where people are not warm to each other or are openly racist, a survey by the state-owned Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM) reported on Monday.

Analysts interviewed by The Moscow Times said the majority of Russians genuinely see the U.S. as an enemy, an attitude that cannot be completely explained by the influence of state-run media.

"On the one hand, people repeat what they are told by television — either because they genuinely believe it, or because they want to be part of the majority," said Ivan Kurilla, a professor at the European University in St. Petersburg.

"On the other, there is a demand in society to construct an enemy that would explain the worsening living conditions and also boost people's self-esteem," Kurilla said in written comments.

The respondents were asked to name things that characterize the U.S. for them: 15 percent said "It is a country of moral decay and widespread crime," another 15 percent said "It is a country where there is no warmth in people's relations," and 12 percent said "It is a country with a high standard of living."

A further 11 percent said it is a country "with a wide gap between the rich and poor," and 9 percent said that racial discrimination is a feature that defines the U.S. for them.

The poll was conducted in July among 1,600 respondents with the margin of error not exceeding 3.5 percent.

In 1990, the results of the same poll were radically different. Russians saw the U.S. primarily as a country with a high standard of living, where success depended on people's own efforts, and as a country with highly developed science and technology.

In a confirmation of changing attitudes, foreign-produced cars with labels saying "Obama is a schmuck" glued on them have become visible on the streets of Moscow and other Russian cities in the past year.

"In the 1970s-80s people distrusted the Soviet system and they liked the U.S. as the main alternative to it, but in the 1990s people faced the reality that the U.S. is a self-interested state with its own faults," said VTsIOM's general director Valery Fyodorov.

"Already by the end of the 1990s, following the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, there was a sense of disillusionment about the U.S.," Fyodorov said in a phone interview.

In 1990, the U.S. was seen as an ideal state system that was to be emulated. Everything American was widely regarded as superior to Russian and many Russians dreamt of leaving for the U.S. permanently.

With time, these views have shifted dramatically. Russians have become broadly negative toward the U.S. following the 1998 financial default, then after the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia, in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and after the 2008 five-day war with Georgia.

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During both the Georgia and Ukraine crises, Russians saw the U.S. as manipulating local governments or opposition in these countries in order to diminish Russia's influence in the area. The difference is that the Ukraine crisis has been raging for almost two years now.

According to Alexei Grazhdankin, Levada Center's deputy director, given that the current downward trend in peoples' attitude toward the U.S. has been steady for so long, Russians have also adopted a negative image of the internal situation in the U.S.

"Most Russians want to feel part of a greater whole, so if they see that their country is currently in confrontation with another one, they will unify behind a common cause," said Grazhdankin.

"This gives them a sense of mission in life," he said in a phone interview.

In January, 81 percent of Russians were negative toward the U.S. Since then, this figure has dropped to 70 percent in July, but is still higher than at any point during any other crisis between Russia and the U.S.

The polls were conducted among 1,600 people with the margin of error not exceeding 3.4 percent.

According to Fyodorov, these attitudes are not derived from television's coverage of the U.S. Russians do not just repeat what the state-run media tells them, he said.

"In Soviet times, propaganda couldn't convince people that everything is bad in the U.S., and it cannot do it now" Fyodorov said in a phone interview.

"Today, propaganda simply coincides with the public mood," he said.

Vladislav Inozemtsev, director of the Moscow-based Center for Post-Industrial Studies, disagreed. He believes that state propaganda is still the primary reason for negative attitudes toward the U.S.

"Apart from propaganda, it reflects people's wishful thinking — instinctively, Russians want to portray the U.S. as weak and pitiful," Inozemtsev said.

"We are not at a real war with the U.S., so people want to feel superior to it at least in symbolic terms," he said.

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