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## Russophobia in the Obama Era Foreign Policy Discourse (2009—2017)

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**Abstract.** Anti-Russian sentiment — what some call “Russophobia” — is subtle, but visible in the American foreign policy discourse since the end of the Cold War. Most recently, it can be found in the Obama-era discourse about Russia, despite the positive bump in relations after the so-called “reset” of 2009. This paper contends that, among the many irritants in Russia — U.S. relations, anti-Russian sentiment among the American foreign policy leadership is an understudied phenomenon. Russophobia matters because it is present even at times of promise in the relationship; it impedes striking a “normal” relationship with Russia, and it influences policy decisions. This paper conceptualizes Russophobia, considers the source of its persistence in the American foreign policy discourse, and identifies examples of anti-Russian sentiment among key members of Barack Obama’s foreign policy team through an examination of memoirs and personal reflections about Russia. The paper asserts that anti-Russian attitudes in the American foreign policy discourse throughout the post-Cold War era must be identified and understood in order to gain a better understanding of why forging stronger, mutually beneficial relations with Russia continues to evade American policy makers. Anti-Russian sentiment undermined the Obama — Medvedev reset and, while it is certainly not alone responsible for deteriorating relations with Russia, it helped to perpetuate the downturn in relations and must be identified and better understood. The arguments made in this paper and in the selected citations herein, are based upon non-partisan scholarly inquiry and are not a consequence of the author’s personal or political views.

**Key words:** International relations, Barack Obama’s policy, post-Cold War, U.S. presidencies, Russophobia

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## Русофобия в дискуссии по вопросам внешней политики во время президентства Б. Обамы (2009—2017 гг.)

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Статья посвящена осмыслению такого явления, как русофобия, рассматриваются причины ее сохранения в контексте внешней политики США, приводятся примеры антироссийских настроений среди ключевых фигур внешнеполитической «команды» Б. Обамы на основе анализа мемуаров и личных размышлений о России. Основной тезис статьи заключается в том, что, хотя русофобские умонастроения в риторике американских политиков и не имеют под собой серьезных оснований, тем не менее, они оказывают существенное влияние на международные отношения со времени окончания холодной войны. Чтобы лучше понять, почему до сих пор установление прочных, взаимовыгодных отношений с Россией является серьезной проблемой для американских политиков, необходимо провести тщательный анализ их антироссийских высказываний. Это является важным еще и потому, что данная тенденция подорвала «перезагрузку» взаимоотношений

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между Б. Обамой и Д.А. Медведевым. И хотя в этом виновата не только и не столько русофобия Б. Обамы и его администрации — она вместе с тем является одним из серьезных камней преткновения во внешнеполитическом дискурсе.

Аргументы, приводимые в настоящей статье и в избранных цитатах из нее, основаны на беспристрастном научном исследовании и не являются следствием личных или политических взглядов автора.

**Ключевые слова:** международные отношения, политика Барака Обамы, эпоха после холодной войны, русофобия

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## Introduction

Russophobia has influenced the American foreign policy discourse about Russia since the end of the Cold War. It is visible within all three post-Cold War American presidencies, most recently under the administration of Barack Obama, despite the 2009 “reset” of relations. This paper contends that anti-Russian sentiment among the American foreign policy leadership is underappreciated. Although Barack Obama’s is not the only administration in which this discourse about Russia persisted, his legacy is crucial, as he presided over an unprecedented souring of Russia — U.S. relations that preceded Russia’s current “information war” with the West, including its interference with American democracy. Neither his administration, nor the American foreign policy establishment more widely, are solely responsible for how bad things have gotten; but this paper posits that a discourse of Russophobia is among the many irritants in the relationship.

Unfortunately, President Vladimir Putin’s cries of “Russophobia!” at the slightest criticism of Russia do not help to legitimize the contention that a mistrust of Russia has permeated the foreign policy discourse in Washington. Even during periods of warmer relations, mistrust of Russia is visible among members of Barack Obama’s foreign policy team, despite efforts to improve relations. It is uncomfortable to concede the persistence of Russophobia in the American foreign policy discourse, especially at a time when relations with Russia have sunk to their lowest point since the end of the Cold War and evidence of Russian efforts to sow disinformation and disunity, and undermine Western democracies, is overwhelming. It is easy

to allow Vladimir Putin’s so-called “information war” with the West to legitimize and affirm the long-standing suspicions that have pervaded the discourse about Russia. But this paper argues that Russophobia has persisted even in times of cooperation, and that it may have been an obstacle to building a “normal” relationship with Russia, and may even have enabled the current state of malaise in U.S. — Russia relations.

This paper identifies the presence of Russophobia in the discourse about Russia within the executive branch. Because the president bears a significant responsibility for foreign policy, those most likely to influence the discourse about Russia are considered here. A review of their attitudes about Russia reveals a discourse of Russophobia present among influential advisors. This is done against the backdrop of the body of scholarship that privileges discourse as an essential tool of foreign policy analysis. Attitudes about Russia are expressed in public statements and memoirs of foreign policy actors. Memoirs allow the author to ascertain “the dominant discourses of the time” and are therefore useful texts to interpret [Tatum 2018: 11].

While it is true that memoirs can be a difficult medium, notably because they can be seen as attempts by principals to re-write the past, or to legitimize past decisions, they are also an opportunity for reflecting on relationships that were less easily expressed during an individual’s time in public office. While there is a risk of “spin” after the fact, there may also be a more honest narrative of their public life, backroom conversations, and influences on policy decisions. Without these reflections, it becomes difficult to fully understand the context of meetings and discussions about Russia, and it

may be challenging to determine the predispositions of key actors toward Russia and its leadership. The actors themselves offer an important account of the ideas held at the time. Therefore, the paper relies upon memoirs of key Obama administration officials to interpret the discourse among them, and it employs public statements and third-party accounts where possible to substantiate the presence of a Russophobic discourse among them. Before this can begin, it is first necessary to conceptualize Russophobia and to discuss why its presence in the foreign policy discourse matters from an analytical perspective.

### **Russophobia in the Foreign Policy Discourse**

The dominant scholarship on Russia — U.S. relations points to structural influences or Vladimir Putin’s illiberal tendencies as causes for the rocky relationship. This paper does not challenge those explanations directly but takes the view that influences on American policy are also deserving of focus if we are to truly understand the relationship. Inadequate attention is paid to an enemy image of Russia held by American decision-makers who shape, and are shaped by, an anti-Russian discourse that is predisposed to historical determinism (what was once believed to be true about Russia and its leaders will be forever true), rendering new approaches to Russia unlikely. Russophobia in the foreign policy discourse influences calculations of the national interest, and therefore should be considered an influence on Russia — U.S. relations.

This approach requires the resistance of a generic conception of the “national interest” as a guide to predicting rational foreign policy outcomes and instead views national interest as a fluid concept — the constructed result of a shared cultural and historical narrative that is interpreted by individual actors themselves and finds consequence in foreign policy decisions. The author takes the view that foreign policy results from perceptions of the national interest, but also that the “national interest” is a social construction. As such, the paper finds a home alongside scholarship that privileges the impact

of socio-cultural values and identity upon foreign policy, notably Campbell, Pouliot, and Waever and Hansen [Campbell 1992; Pouliot 2010; Hansen, Waever 2002]. Leaders shape, and are shaped by, social constructions of the national interest derived from their “interpretation of history and perception of events” [Jervis 1976: 276—277].

For Weldes, decision-makers “engage in a process of interpretation in order to understand both what situation the state faces and how they should respond to it” [Weldes 1996: 276—277]. Policymakers construct and foster the idea of national interest [Gilmore 2014: 541—557], which is the result of structures of meaning which “explain and elucidate foreign policies” [Hansen, Waever 2002: 27]. The social context in which history is interpreted and meaning is ascribed influences a discourse that finds consequence in foreign policy outcomes. Analyzing this discourse can inform our understanding of foreign policy [Hansen, Waever 2002: 21].

Discourse herein refers to the broad system in which individuals make sense of things, interact with others, and which gives meaning to actions [Tatum 2018: 3]. Identifying this discourse, and interpreting its influence, and its *genealogy* [Tatum 2018: 3] helps us to appreciate the force of ideas and their impact upon policy. The discourse about Russia has been shaped over time within the foreign policy community. In 2020 a fear of Russia may seem more legitimate given the nature of U.S. — Russia relations at present; but, the genealogy of this discourse about Russia matters. Fear and mistrust of Russia outlived the Cold War and flavoured the discourse even during the Clinton years when relations were at their best. Over time, a negative discourse about Russia has shaped the context within which foreign policy elites handled the Russia file.

Discourse analysis does not propose to reveal the hidden motives of actors, but instead looks at public texts to signify the presence of these ideas in the discourse [Hansen, Waever 2002: 27]. The goal is not to explain what individual decision makers *actually* believe (this cannot really be known for certain), but rather to

ascertain what beliefs *appear* to be shared across a population [Hansen, Waever 2002: 27]. Through an interpretation of memoirs and reflections of Obama-era foreign policy actors it is possible to get a sense of these shared beliefs about Russia.

It must be acknowledged that this approach has its limitations. After all, we can never truly know for sure that actors mean what they say; it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between rhetoric and genuinely held beliefs. Nonetheless, the discourse is valuable because policy choices cannot ever fully diverge from the discursive structures that exist alongside them [Hansen, Waever 2002: 29] and the actors themselves, and their interpretations of past events, are influenced by them. At some point we must consider the words of actors at face value in order to derive meaning from them within the context of the environments they operate within because “subjects, objects and concepts cannot be seen as existing independent of discourse” [Hansen, Waever 2002: 29].

An interpretative review of the reflections of Barack Obama’s foreign policy team reveals that a discourse of Russia-as-threat was present in the administration’s foreign policy discourse; although, it cannot be characterized as *aggressively* anti-Russian. Before this is illustrated, a conceptualization of anti-Russian sentiment — Russophobia — will be elaborated.

### Defining Russophobia

In 2007, Vladimir Putin captured the American view of Russians as “a little bit savage”, having “climbed down from the trees”, and needing “their hair brushed or their beards trimmed”, and the dirt washed out of their beards and hair”<sup>1</sup>. Images of Russian savagery date back to Lord Palmerston, who once described a Russian colleague as “‘civil and courteous’ but with ‘all the cunning of a half-educated savage’” [Benn 2014: 1320]. This reflects a special disdain for the Russian people that is easily

hidden in criticisms about contemporary Russia [Benn 2014: 1320]. Andrei Tsygankov observes in the United States a “fear of Russia’s political system on the grounds that it is incompatible with the interests and values of the West”, which generates an unbalanced and distorted perception about Russia that delegitimizes its national interests [Tsygankov 2009a: 66].

These attitudes result in a persistent need to contain Russia’s influence, even in times of relative peace, and animated the decision to expand NATO long before the reversal of expectations for Russia’s democratic consolidation. Russia is viewed as an expansionist state refusing to abide by “acceptable rules of international behavior”, which must be “contained or fundamentally transformed” [Tsygankov 2009b: 10—11]. Russia is cast as an autocratic empire that perpetually oppresses nationalities, denies its citizens basic rights, “concentrates economic and military resources in the hands of the state”, and doggedly pursues its inherent and illegitimate expansionist national interests [Tsygankov 2009b: 15]. As such, Russia is not accorded the courtesy of being seen to possess legitimate national interests, owing to the above assumptions about its nature and motivations. Tsygankov notes that, “even during the 1990s, when Russia looked more like a failing state than one capable of projecting power, some members of the American political class were worried about the future revival of the Eurasian giant as a revisionist power” [Tsygankov 2009b: 22]. He attributes the rampant post-Cold War triumphalism in the US to this fear of Russia, noting it reached its zenith in the mid-1990s when the Clinton administration “entrenched the rhetoric of victorious thinking by drawing the analogy between Russia and the defeat of Germany and Japan in World War II” [Tsygankov 2009b: 50]. This triumphalism implied something inherently inferior about Russia.

Tsygankov labels American Russophobia as a political phenomenon, leaving room for its willful reversal [Tsygankov 2009b: 29]; however, he claims that the infusion of fear into elite and popular attitudes about Russia is the result of a willful construction of an anti-Russian lobby,

<sup>1</sup> Time Person of the Year: Putin Q+A // Time Magazine. 2007. URL: [http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/personoftheyear/article/0,28804,1690753\\_1690757\\_1695787-6,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/personoftheyear/article/0,28804,1690753_1690757_1695787-6,00.html) (accessed: 11.03.2016).

which he defines as deliberate cabal of anti-Russian hawks who presume that American liberal and geopolitical hegemony can best be achieved by the military defeat of Russia [Tsygankov 2009b: 66]. This lobby fosters anti-Russian sentiment to support a “global power struggle” against a potentially “resurgent” and “neo-colonial” Russia [Tsygankov 2009b: 67, 71]. While Tsygankov considers this anti-Russian lobby as *purposefully* distorting Russia’s history and interests to advance an anti-Russia agenda, this is not the case made herein.

While there does appear to be a culture of anti-Russianism present in the foreign policy discourse, it may not be intentional. The goal here is not to reveal malevolence toward Russia, but rather to name this Russophobia, discuss its genesis, and observe its influential presence in the foreign policy discourse.

Anti-Russian sentiment may be rooted in America’s myth of exceptionalism, which bestows upon U.S. leaders a propensity to make objective observations about other states’ motives, a dangerous feature that renders them “incapable of understanding the opposition of other nations” to U.S. policies [Lieven 2000: 25]. This is arguably exemplified by their perpetual inability to comprehend Russian opposition to NATO expansion. This, combined with the embrace of longstanding stereotypes and assumptions about Russia, shapes a Cold War “hangover” of sorts that perpetuates an image of Russia-as-threat, and situates Russophobia in the foreign policy discourse.

Russophobia presents itself as a crude form of cultural determinism that assumes that what was once considered true about a nation and its peoples shall be forever true, even in the absence of supporting evidence. This denies both a nuanced appreciation for cultural evolution and the potential for American leaders to view post-Soviet Russia’s disappointing struggles with democracy for what they are. Instead, they have been viewed against the backdrop of Russia’s Tsarist and Communist experiences [Lieven 2000: 27]. To view conduct as a product of culture or “national DNA” of sorts, comes perilously close to racism [Lieven 2000: 27]. There is a certain essentialism in the American

discourse on Russia that equates wickedness with “Russianness”.

Tsygankov and Lieven believe that demonizing Russia helped to justify American Cold War strategies of military build-up and containment. Yet, as Lieven importantly notes, even those who demonize Russia for its past seem to have little problem embracing Communist China [Lieven 2000: 28], so perhaps it is not communism in Russia’s past that Western leaders fear, but rather something innately “Russian”.

Russophobia is said to be self-reinforcing, owing to America’s “need for enemies” [Lieven 2000: 28] as an instrumental component of its own mythology of exceptionalism. America’s destiny is to be a cultural hegemon atop the global hierarchy of nations. The perception of American superiority requires an “other” to assume a position of inferiority. Russia has long represented a new cultural frontier and a divergent history, one that was assumed to be far less “exceptional” than the American experience. Challenges to the presumption of American hegemony have often been met with not simply disagreement, but a de-legitimizing of the very existence of the “other”. Russia is not itself immune from ideas of exceptionalism and the two nations have perpetuated a soft rivalry that possesses “nationalist phobias” [Tsygankov 2009b] that can be mutually reinforcing. It cannot be overlooked that Russophobia is matched by vigorous anti-American sentiment in Russia, which Putin seems only too happy to enflame.

Dijkink situates this “gross distinction between East and West as opposite cultures” in the U.S. discourse on Russia [Dijkink 1996: 2]; though not expressed explicitly, it has become “naturalized”. He notes that experience and discourse create an “imaginative geography of the outside world, which contributes to the construction of visions of the world [Dijkink 1996: 2—3]”. American foreign policy “perpetuates and affirms” the American way of life, and so any alternative presents a challenge [Dijkink 1996: 3]. Myths shape identity and the foreign policy discourse [Loffmann 2015: 308—332]. Put simply, American exceptionalism

influences Russophobia. If the American identity is considered exceptional, and superior, and should Russia challenge this understanding, then fear of what motivates this challenge — Russia's very identity — may be a consequence.

U.S. leaders have been reluctant to accept Russia as an equal [Sakwa 2012: 21]. Russia does not see itself as a defeated power and conducts itself accordingly, a view in opposition to the prevailing Washington narrative. Until recently, Russian foreign policy has been unthreatening, and could even be characterized as collaborative, but it was not universally viewed this way because of the geopolitical threat it was perceived to present [Sakwa 2012: 21]. Sakwa notes that anti-Russianism is rooted in history because Russia has never really been considered to be a part of Europe. Its very presence has motivated its neighbors to integrate a post WWII European identity based upon Russian exclusion, a reality later confirmed by decades of Cold War. That a derivative fear of Russia persists is problematic but not surprising [Sakwa 2012: 35].

Perhaps the consequence of viewing Russia as the enemy for so long is that it has now become one [Sakwa 2015: 566]. Russian leaders anticipate anti-Russianism in their dealings with the West and this shapes Russian expectations for how foreign nations will engage with them [Feklyunina 2013: 92]. This perpetuates an “us vs. them” discourse among Russian decision makers that may be reinforcing the narrative of fear in Washington.

To be clear, Russophobia is not simply criticism of Russia. Instead, it is the construction of an enemy image of Russia as evil and illegitimate; during the Cold War Russia was seen as morally bankrupt and therefore an inherent threat to western values, all of which justified a harsh response [Luostarinen 1989: 125]. Externalizing a common threat can be essential to legitimizing a collective identity and historical experience — a powerful nationalism that makes room for behaviours that might otherwise be difficult to rationalize [Luostarinen 1989: 125].

The construction of an enemy image of Russia stems largely from the fact that, for

centuries, Russia has embraced values that the West opposed: “autocracy, national repression, and conservatism” and later “radicalism and social revolution” [Luostarinen 1989: 128]. These differences shaped a view of Russians as inferior, violent, and untrustworthy, thereby rendering peaceful coexistence an impossibility; mistrust of the Russian leadership transformed into a cultural loathing of Russians themselves [Luostarinen 1989: 128]. It may be a natural inclination to fear that which we know the least, which could help to explain the presence of Russophobia in earlier periods when connection with cultures across the globe was a rare occurrence [Gleason 1971: 1]. But it is harder to explain the persistence of Russophobia in a globalized era in which the convergence of diverse cultures is believed by some to prompt cultural awareness and acceptance. This does not appear to be the case with American views of Russia, which remain imbued with an air of repugnance in which even minor differences take on elevated significance. Despite efforts to “reset” relations under Barack Obama, anti-Russian sentiment can be seen in the discourse about Russia. This does not mean that these views trumped all others, but their presence must be identified.

### **Russophobia in the Obama Administration (2009—2017)**

Below is a survey of reflections about Russia from key Obama administration officials. Despite efforts to foster better relations with Russia, these individuals operated within, and shaped, a discourse about Russia that reflects elements of the Russophobia discussed above. Nonetheless, there was a noticeable interest in engaging with Russia on a handful of files. In other words, while anti-Russian sentiment may have been present, it did not always roar.

#### ***President Barack Obama (2009—2017)***

Obama inherited a difficult relationship with Russia and directed his officials to prioritize a “reset” of relations. In the absence of a published presidential memoir, it is not yet possible to use memoirs as a guide to Barack Obama's views about Russia, during or after his time in office;

instead, the recollections of discussions and meetings with B. Obama from former members of his administration are utilized.

While B. Obama chided Mitt Romney in 2012 with, “the 1980s are now calling to ask for their foreign policy back because the Cold War’s been over for 20 years”, it was not long before relations with Russia soured and the optimism of the reset waned. Whiffs of Cold War posturing returned, visible in Barack Obama’s deliberate reference to Russia as a regional power [Stent 2014: 293], a jab likely aimed at Vladimir Putin’s desire to restore Russian greatness on the world stage.

Hillary Clinton recalls that in 2013 B. Obama compared V. Putin to a “bored kid at the back of the classroom. He’s got that kind of slouch”<sup>2</sup>. Amid frustrations with Vladimir Putin, Barack Obama belittled Russia, suggesting it “didn’t manufacture anything and that no one wanted to immigrate there” [Stent 2014: 302]. B. Obama presided over some successes with Russia, but divisions over Ukraine and Syria triggered a worsening of relations not seen since the Cold War. President Obama relied heavily upon his team of advisors when it came to relations with Russia, especially after the transfer of power from Dmitry Medvedev to Vladimir Putin, because he was unable to strike a comparable relationship with Vladimir Putin to that which he enjoyed with Dmitry Medvedev. Known to keep his cards close to his chest, it is challenging to ascertain more at this stage about Barack Obama’s feelings about Russia, attitudes that will likely be revealed in his forthcoming memoir. For now, the reflections of his most influential advisors are considered.

#### ***Vice President Joe Biden (2009—2017)***

Owing to his decades fighting the Cold War in the U.S. Senate, his friendship with the president, and that he was asked to deliver tough messages to Vladimir Putin during the 2014 Crimea crisis, Joe Biden’s views are important in interpreting the discourse on Russia. Ben Rhodes observes that, in the administration, J. Biden

<sup>2</sup> Clinton H. *What Happened*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017. P. 327.

occupied “a unique space, somewhere above everyone else and below Obama”<sup>3</sup>. J. Biden chronicles his efforts to support Ukraine in the face of Russia’s “menacing” behavior as a consequence of “Putin’s cynical push” for territory<sup>4</sup>.

Joe Biden shares Barack Obama’s commitment to finding common ground with Russian leaders<sup>5</sup>; however, a tone of cynicism and mistrust pervades his narrative. He cynically refers to Dmitry Medvedev as a “temporary placeholder in the presidency”, leaving room for Vladimir Putin’s return. While it is understood that the tandem presidency from 2008—2012 enabled V. Putin’s return to power, J. Biden reveals a mild cynicism in his dealings with the Russian government. He links the tandem presidency and the reset’s failure to Russia’s bad faith partnership. Former Ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul confirms the administration’s collective assessment that the Russians never meaningfully committed to the reset<sup>6</sup>. Recalling a trip to Moscow to assuage D. Medvedev’s concerns about NATO missiles in Poland and Romania, Joe Biden notes that he “just wasn’t sure what I was walking into”, but he was fairly certain that it was really Putin pulling the strings who needed convincing<sup>7</sup>. Despite some optimism about progress on the nuclear treaty, Joe Biden saw Vladimir Putin as “unworthy of our trust”, having done nothing to “dispel that notion” noting that V. Putin was “ice cold calm throughout but argumentative from start to finish”<sup>8</sup>. He also joked about Putin not having a soul<sup>9</sup>.

Joe Biden recalls a “reckoning” with Vladimir Putin at a Munich Security Conference

<sup>3</sup> Biden J. *Promise Me, Dad: A Year of Hope, Hardship, and Purpose*. New York: Flatiron Books, 2017. P. 65.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* P. 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* P. 93.

<sup>6</sup> McFaul M. *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin’s Russia*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. P. 409–428.

<sup>7</sup> Biden J. *Promise Me, Dad: A Year of Hope, Hardship, and Purpose*. New York: Flatiron Books, 2017. P. 94.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

at which he asserted to the Russian President that their relationship did not need to be zero-sum — that Russia's strength is not NATO's weakness<sup>10</sup>, all the while denying Russia its sphere of interest — an entitlement he told Vladimir Putin that no nation enjoys. It appears as if Joe Biden communicated this message with no sense of irony or hypocrisy, failing to appreciate that, for Russia, NATO represents the American sphere of interest. While Joe Biden's comments are not hostile to Russia, they do suggest an unwillingness to legitimize Russia's interests in its borderlands, and a propensity to view Russian interests through the prism of Vladimir Putin's "evil" agenda. J. Biden recalls trumpeting the US goal of extending the liberal order, across Europe, referring to Russian efforts to restore relations with its neighbors as "bullying"<sup>11</sup>. It is evident that Russian interests are considered illegitimate if they conflict with America's. When Russia pursues its interests, it is a menacing bully: J. Biden refers to V. Putin's efforts to influence Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich as "tightening the screws"<sup>12</sup> to resist European influence.

Joe Biden recalls feeling a *moral duty* to defend Ukraine against an untrustworthy Russia. This moral authority argument is compelling. The Russian leadership is not simply disagreed with, but vilified. J. Biden implies that V. Putin will lie and bully his way through Europe, possibly annexing more territory; he does not say this directly, but explains that this is what the Baltic countries are worried about and he makes no effort to dispel this fear, thereby tacitly giving it weight. Noting "Putin's aggressive campaign to split Ukraine" in "flagrant violations of agreements he has signed", Joe Biden suggests Vladimir Putin is a "demagogue and a revisionist"<sup>13</sup>. In recalling a 2015 speech to the Brookings Institution, Joe Biden warns, "Putin's vision has very little to offer the people of Europe — or, for that matter, the people

of Russia — other than myths and illusions, the false promise of returning to a past that, when examined, was not too good to begin with"<sup>14</sup>. Joe Biden softly exhibits an untrustworthy, adversarial image of Russia, as well as a preparedness to deny Russia its legitimate sphere of interest.

#### *Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton (2009—2013) and John Kerry (2013—2017)*

A presidential candidate, senator, and first lady, Secretary Clinton held clear ideas about U.S. — Russia relations. Her two memoirs offer tremendous insight into her views about Russia and its leadership. Somewhat hawkish on Russia, despite an awkward attempt to gift a "reset button" to Sergei Lavrov, it is telling that a chapter in her 2017 memoir contains a subsection entitled, "there's a bear in the woods"<sup>15</sup> a pejorative phrase from Ronald Reagan's 1984 presidential campaign which characterized Russia as the greatest threat to global stability. In *Hard Choices*, Clinton justifies the Clinton administration's prioritization of NATO expansion as "hedging" against a resurgent Russia<sup>16</sup>. She calls Vladimir Putin a "hard man", with a worldview "shaped by his admiration for the powerful czars of Russian history", and with an "appetite for more power, territory and influence"<sup>17</sup>. She asserts that V. Putin sees geopolitics as "zero sum", that he "cut his teeth in the KGB", and that these shaped the "ultimate Cold War resume"<sup>18</sup>. Hillary Clinton shares her optimism about a fresh start with Russia, but then conveys that she had reservations about Vladimir Putin right from the start. It seems her optimism was short-lived.

H. Clinton views V. Putin through the lens of his past, reflecting an historical determinism often assumed about Russians. This is visible in

<sup>10</sup> Biden J. *Promise Me, Dad: A Year of Hope, Hardship, and Purpose*. New York: Flatiron Books, 2017. P. 95—96.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* P. 97.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* P. 185—187.

<sup>14</sup> Biden J. *Promise Me, Dad: A Year of Hope, Hardship, and Purpose*. New York: Flatiron Books, 2017. P. 187.

<sup>15</sup> Clinton H. *What Happened*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017. P. 330.

<sup>16</sup> Clinton H. *Hard Choices*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014. P. 195.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* P. 201.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* P. 205.



her assertions that a “cold wind was blowing from the east”, that Vladimir Putin is looking to “rebuild a lost empire”, and “re-Sovietize Russia’s periphery”<sup>19</sup>. She believes V. Putin adopts an air of intimidation because “the KGB taught Putin to be suspicious of everyone”<sup>20</sup>; she notes, “He’s always testing you, always pushing the boundaries”<sup>21</sup>. On the many disagreements with Vladimir Putin over Syria, H. Clinton expresses mistrust, saying, “I did not trust Russia’s actions or words”<sup>22</sup>. She wrote a 2013 memo to Barack Obama warning that relations with Russia would deteriorate because Putin was a threat both to his neighbors and to global order [Stent 2014: 276].

In her 2017 book, H. Clinton calls Putin a man-spreader, “one of those guys on the subway who imperiously spread their legs wide, encroaching on everyone else’s space, as if to say, ‘I take what I want’”<sup>23</sup>. Hillary Clinton minces no words when she reduces him to an evil caricature — the “arch-villain straight out of a James Bond movie” and a “former KGB spy with a taste for over-the-top macho theatrics and baroque violence”<sup>24</sup>. She believes that he “still smolders over what he views as the humiliations of the 1990s, when Russia lost its old Soviet dominions”<sup>25</sup>, and that his attempts to cultivate an image of himself as a strong leader are connected to the need to project an “image of traditional masculinity”<sup>26</sup>, in order to re-assert Russian power for those who regret its weakness and want to challenge the inconveniences of liberalism.

Hillary Clinton views Russian influence as a *disease* that affected America’s 2016 presidential

<sup>19</sup> Clinton H. *Hard Choices*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014. P. 209—210, 215.

<sup>20</sup> Clinton H. *What Happened*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017. P. 329.

<sup>21</sup> Clinton H. *Hard Choices*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014. P. 215.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* P. 384.

<sup>23</sup> Clinton H. *What Happened*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017. P. 327.

<sup>24</sup> Clinton H. *Hard Choices*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014. P. 327.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* P. 328.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* P. 332.

election<sup>27</sup>, asserting that Vladimir Putin targeted her because of a deep resentment toward the United States<sup>28</sup>. She views Russia’s 2016 election meddling as an attempt by Russia to attack America and all it stands for. Perhaps there is something to this, but it strikes this author as an exaggeration of the threat posed to the United States, reflecting the pervasive fear about Russia and about Vladimir Putin himself. There is a tendency to amplify the Putin-as-evil-mastermind narrative in which he is credited with stage managing the Trump victory, rather than simply enjoying the fruits of his opportunistic attempts to disrupt the election. To be fair, much remains unknown; however, it is doubtful that V. Putin orchestrated the precise outcome of the election. Russophobia appears to have reached a fever pitch — an overblown sense of hysteria — which, worryingly, may assign Vladimir Putin far more credit than he deserves.

President Obama’s second Secretary of State, John Kerry, served in Vietnam, and, like Joe Biden, fought the Cold War in the U.S. Senate. In his memoir, he recalls a trip to Moscow 1989 at which time he recalls entering an impressive room with multiple phones, none of which could be linked, and he recalls joking at the time: “And these were the guys who were going to March across Europe?”<sup>29</sup>. John Kerry also toured KGB headquarters under Lubyanka Square, displaying “reams of files sitting on shelves and desks” prompting him to wonder: “How many moments of horror — sheer terror — were recorded in those files” — the “worst of human behavior”<sup>30</sup>. He was also taken to meet Evgeny Primakov after a “harrowing” drive to an “imposing, secluded compound”<sup>31</sup>. It appears this trip made an impression on John Kerry, and his old assumptions about the Soviets are on display in his recollection of events.

J. Kerry believes V. Putin remembers the Soviet Union with “great fondness and

<sup>27</sup> Clinton H. *Hard Choices*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014. P. 326.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* P. 333.

<sup>29</sup> Kerry J. *Every Day Is Extra*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018. P. 195.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* P. 196.

sentimentality”<sup>32</sup>, proclaiming him “a complicated figure... in one meeting he could be a charming interlocutor, opening bottles of wine and offering bowls of caviar. At other moments he could employ petty tactics: keeping us waiting for hours just to prove that we were on his turf”<sup>33</sup>. He acknowledges it is a mistake to see Russia through either “rose colored glasses or Cold War lenses”<sup>34</sup>, noting that engagement is the best way to make progress, though it must be done with a readiness to “call Russia on their malicious activities”<sup>35</sup>. J. Kerry displays a desire to meet Russian leaders on common ground; in fact, even after Russia and Syria were suspected to be responsible for a 2016 aerial attack on a humanitarian convoy near Aleppo, and after his own rebuke of this assault in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), he remained open to engaging with Russia at the bargaining table; he expresses regret that, by 2017, they had “reached the end of the road” because Russians spoke from a “script of alternative facts”, a behavior he characterizes as “Orwellian doublespeak”<sup>36</sup>. Here John Kerry implies a Russian preference for a dystopian world order.

J. Kerry describes his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, as “clever, calculating, and idiosyncratic. He’s also famous for little stunts and mind games to seek some small advantage at the bargaining table”<sup>37</sup>. J. Kerry recalls a moment during tense negotiations on Syria that the Russians had placed their luggage out in the hallway to demonstrate that they were prepared to walk out at any moment, actions John Kerry calls “ham handed”, and “typical Russian tactics”, and “lay(ing) traps”<sup>38</sup>. He laments Russia’s decision to send troops into Syria the day *after* B. Obama and V. Putin met in New York, failing to notify the U.S. of their impeding actions, a move J. Kerry implies was dark and calculating.

<sup>32</sup> Kerry J. *Every Day Is Extra*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018. P. 438.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* P. 439.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* P. 554—555.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* P. 538.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Understandably, John Kerry exhibits frustration over the intractable differences with Russia regarding Syria and Ukraine, and anger over election meddling and disinformation campaigns. The concern there is not disagreement, or even outrage at Russian actions; instead, it is an underlying tone, though not always roaring, of a nod to assumptions about Russia as a backward, sneaky, and malevolent force, as being no different from its dark Soviet past, as possessing innate qualities that immediately render Russian interests illegitimate and its tactics extraordinary. This is captured in a small but impactful remark J. Kerry makes in his summary lamentations about Ukraine in which he regrets Russia’s efforts to “thwart Ukraine’s determination to embrace *modernity*”<sup>39</sup>. Hints of condescension and illegitimacy imbue John Kerry’s reflections on Russia, and this appears to exist across his administration’s discourse on Russia.

*Secretaries of Defense Robert Gates (2009—2011), Leon Panetta (2011—2013), Chuck Hagel (2013—2015), and Ash Carter (2015—2017)*

The Obama Administration initiated significant cuts to military spending, and prioritized political advice over that of defense department officials, empowering the National Security Council in defense decisions [Nasr 2013] which were often made by an insular group of political aides. Secretaries Gates and Panetta diverged from Barack Obama’s agenda, and left their posts in relatively short order, penning memoirs critical of the White House’s overreach. Similarly, Chuck Hagel unceremoniously resigned after Obama’s reversal on the chemical weapons “red line” in Syria. Due to the rapid succession of defense secretaries, and to their diminished influence, there is less to report about their attitudes toward Russia.

Former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Secretary of Defense for both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, R. Gates recalls that he “looked into Putin’s eyes and, just

<sup>39</sup> Kerry J. *Every Day Is Extra*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018. P. 438.

as I expected, had seen a stone-cold killer”<sup>40</sup>. He goes on to lament the illiberal, oligarchy governing Russia, led by a man “haunted by lost empire, lost glory, and lost power”<sup>41</sup>. Cautiously optimistic about the end of the Cold War [Stent 2014: 5], he warned against overreacting to a declining power that was not meaningfully capable of major force projection<sup>42</sup>.

Images of Cold War loom large for former CIA Director Leon Panetta. He reflects on the 2010 arrest of Russian spies in the U.S., a moment that could have been accompanied by the theme song from the movie *The Third Man*<sup>43</sup>. L. Panetta suspects Russian efforts to strike joint working groups between the SVR and the CIA were simply a guise for getting close to CIA operatives to recruit them as spies<sup>44</sup>. There is a predominantly negative tone to his discussion of Russia: “Horrible food, unless you like boiled fish and vodka”. He also recalls visiting the former KGB offices and joking with a colleague about still being able to hear the “screams from the basement” (because this site allegedly housed the infamous KGB prisons)<sup>45</sup>. After leaving office in 2016, Leon Panetta warned that Vladimir Putin was driven by a desire to restore the Soviet Union<sup>46</sup>.

There is little evidence of Secretary Hagel and Ash Carter’s views on Russia, though Hagel did appear to warn of the risks of Cold War style military buildups if the U.S. failed to re-engage Russia, taking care to avoid “new Cold War” rhetoric. John Kerry recalls A. Carter’s rigid mistrust of Russia, and eagerness to avoid the

appearance of working with Russia “on any issue”<sup>47</sup>.

*National Security Advisors Jim Jones (2009—2010), Tom Donilon (2010—2013), and Susan Rice (2013—2017), Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes (2009—2017), and Michael McFaul (Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director of Russian and European Affairs (2009—2012)) and Ambassador to Russia (2012—2014)*

Barack Obama relied upon a handful of trusted foreign policy advisors in the National Security Council (NSC), all of whom shaped the discourse on Russia. National Security Advisor Jim Jones was an asset to the Russia file<sup>48</sup>, willing to commit to the nuclear treaty in ways that Gates had been unprepared to do<sup>49</sup>. His ability to engage with his counterpart, Sergei Prikhodko (Dmitry Medvedev’s advisor), was likely aided by his experience as former commandant of the Marine Corps<sup>50</sup>. Jones’ role was usurped by T. Donilon, who had a closer relationship with Obama, and took up the NSA role in short order.

T. Donilon worked for Presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton and had a close relationship with Barack Obama’s Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, which enabled him to “control the levers of national security decision making”<sup>51</sup>. T. Donilon operationalized the resumption of high level meetings between US and Russian presidents [Stent 2014: 250]; however, it was really J. Kerry, owing to his long standing relationship with S. Lavrov (from his Senate days), who took on the Russia file [Stent 2014: 250]. M. McFaul recalls that T. Donilon advocated engaging Russia and favored inviting Vladimir Putin to a “working visit” in Washington to keep the lines of communication

<sup>40</sup> Gates R. *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*. New York: Vintage Books, 2014. P. 169.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> McFaul M. *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin’s Russia*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. P. 96.

<sup>43</sup> Panetta L. *Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace*. New York: Penguin Books, 2014. P. 284.

<sup>44</sup> McFaul M. *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin’s Russia*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. P. 280.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* P. 281.

<sup>46</sup> Mills C. Panetta: Putin Wants to Restore the Soviet Union // US News. December 1, 2016. URL: <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2016-12-01/vladimir-putin-wants-to-restore-the-soviet-union-former-secretary-of-defense-says> (accessed: 28.02.2019).

<sup>47</sup> Kerry J. *Every Day Is Extra*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018. P. 552.

<sup>48</sup> McFaul M. *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin’s Russia*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. P. 323.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* P. 144.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Rhodes B. *The World As It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*. New York: Random House, 2018. P. 68.

open<sup>52</sup>. T. Donilon met with Vladimir Putin in 2012 to move the arms control agenda forward, and had tremendous influence on foreign policy, so much so that J. Kerry took direction from T. Donilon on occasion, notably during discussions in Russia on Syria<sup>53</sup>. T. Donilon favored engagement, but also sanctions against Russians connected to human rights abuses. Upon leaving office, T. Donilon called V. Putin's agenda for Russia "actively hostile" to the West and implied that Vladimir Putin had been planning this strategy prior to returning to office in 2012 (failing to allow for the possibility that Russia was reacting to perceived western aggression). He chalks up Russian cyber warfare as an extension of Soviet era information warfare, seemingly comfortable drawing few distinctions between Soviet and modern-day Russia, noting that V. Putin is driven to return Russia to its Soviet era greatness<sup>54</sup>.

Susan Rice worked for President Clinton and was foreign policy advisor to Barack Obama's 2008 election campaign. S. Rhodes notes her close relationship with the president<sup>55</sup>, a connection widely noted in the media at the time of her appointment as National Security Advisor (NSA). S. Rice understood the Russian position on many issues and was influential in securing their agreement in the UNSC on Iran sanctions, and their support on Libya (UNSCR 1970), as a consequence of her UN experience and relationship with her Russian counterpart Vitaly Churkin<sup>56</sup>, with whom Rice shared a "love/hate relationship"<sup>57</sup>. S. Rice argued

forcefully for military action in Syria<sup>58</sup>, but remained open to understanding the Russian perspective, appreciating the need to provide them an "off-ramp" on Ukraine. She appeared sensitive to Russian interests, and favored talks that allowed the Russians to save face<sup>59</sup>. Nonetheless, Rice too expresses distaste for Vladimir Putin, noting "here is no such thing as a short phone call" with him, referencing Putin's "tedious monologues"<sup>60</sup>.

As Deputy National Security Advisor, and close friend of the president, Ben Rhodes was chosen by Obama to serve as a backchannel to Cuba during the rapprochement<sup>61</sup>. M. McFaul reports that Rhodes "wrote the first draft of every major foreign policy speech" given by Barack Obama<sup>62</sup>. B. Rhodes was a front row observer and contributor to the administration's foreign policy initiatives. He supported the administration's priority of improving the frosty relationship with Russia they had inherited. Nonetheless, B. Rhodes expresses frustration with the "reset", because the Russian leadership was not unified in its commitment to it; he blames the vagaries of the Medvedev — Putin leadership tandem for this, noting the sharp downturn in relations when Vladimir Putin resumed the presidency in 2012. B. Rhodes attributes the drift that had crept into the relationship by 2011 to "darker forces within Russia, the cruder nationalism that Putin represented"<sup>63</sup>. Reflecting on his 2016 trip to advance the opening up of U.S. — Cuba relations, Rhodes recalls an attack "from a sonic weapon or some sort of toxin" on Americans in the Cuban Embassy for which he believes Russia was responsible. He asserts, "Whoever harmed those Americans clearly wanted to sabotage the

<sup>52</sup> McFaul M. *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. P. 323.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* P. 348.

<sup>54</sup> Glasser S. Tom Donilon Interview: The Full Transcript // *The Global Politico*. July 10, 2017. URL: <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/07/10/tom-donilon-the-full-transcript-215350> (accessed: 28.02.2019).

<sup>55</sup> Rhodes B. *The World As It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*. New York: Random House, 2018. P. 160.

<sup>56</sup> McFaul M. *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. P. 171, 222.

<sup>57</sup> Rice S. *Tough Love: My Story of the Things Worth Fighting For*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019. P. 299.

<sup>58</sup> Kerry J. *Every Day Is Extra*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018. P. 533.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* P. 527.

<sup>60</sup> Rice S. *Tough Love: My Story of the Things Worth Fighting For*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019. P. 398.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* P. 425.

<sup>62</sup> McFaul M. *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. P. 110.

<sup>63</sup> Rhodes B. *The World As It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*. New York: Random House, 2018. P. 152.

opening between our countries, and I wondered whether the Russians... played a role”<sup>64</sup>.

Like H. Clinton, B. Rhodes likens Russia’s campaign of disinformation to a disease: “America’s antibodies to the sickness of Russian disinformation were weak”<sup>65</sup>. While this may appear to be an innocent analogy because he’s talking about internet trolls and disinformation, the choice of invoking a sickness metaphor is interesting. The fear of an infestation of evil, an epidemic that could affect, and sicken, the United States reflects the fear of Russia that this paper seeks to highlight. Ben Rhodes even recalls a moment when he feared an “epidemic of disinformation”; he recalls being afraid to criticize Russia too vociferously, for fear of being targeted by a Russian smear campaign, noting these were “chilling” thoughts to have and, “if I’m thinking this, every public official in a Western democracy is going to think twice before criticizing Russia”<sup>66</sup>.

Russia scholar Michael McFaul was Barack Obama’s top advisor on Russia. M. McFaul was asked to attend “every Obama meeting with Medvedev and Putin and listen in on every call”<sup>67</sup>. A self-described *Russo-file*, M. McFaul expresses a deep love for Russian culture and history and congratulates himself (rightly) for initially advocating Russian membership in NATO, expressing regret that this idea was outrightly rejected in Washington<sup>68</sup>.

Once briefing President George W. Bush about Vladimir Putin, M. McFaul warned about the perils of trusting V. Putin: “This is a man who was trained to lie”<sup>69</sup>, and had “a chip on his shoulder”<sup>70</sup>.

M. McFaul expresses a strong personal dislike of V. Putin owing, in part, to the animosity that grew between them when M. McFaul was Ambassador to Moscow;

Vladimir Putin falsely accused the ambassador of fomenting unrest in Russia. M. McFaul believes that V. Putin’s years in the KGB have conditioned him to believe that Russia needs an enemy, and to see the U.S. as a competitor<sup>71</sup>. M. McFaul regrets V. Putin’s pivot on the reset, blaming the reversal of relations squarely on the Russian president, failing to acknowledge the role that a divergence of interests between Russia and the U.S. may have played. M. McFaul converges with the prevailing wisdom in Washington that fails to concede the existence of legitimate Russian national interests.

In fact, Michael McFaul exonerates American foreign policy, failing to allow for the possibility that perceived Western intransigence could have prompted this “change of heart” in Russia, and instead attributes it to V. Putin’s cynical need to cast America as the enemy: “Putin’s propaganda machine filled Russian imaginations with sinister ideas about what we were doing in their country and inside our embassy walls”<sup>72</sup>. On this view of the U.S. as enemy, he wonders, “maybe Putin and his KGB comrades had developed an inferiority complex with respect to the CIA over the years because their country had collapsed and ours had not”<sup>73</sup>.

Just prior to Dmitry Medvedev’s transfer of presidential power back to Vladimir Putin, M. McFaul recalls feeling a sense of foreboding, predicting he would “never witness such a warm exchange between our presidents ever again”<sup>74</sup>. In their meetings, M. McFaul describes V. Putin as “disinterested”<sup>75</sup>, “paranoid”<sup>76</sup>, “draconian”, and “repressive”<sup>77</sup>. M. McFaul even channels George Kennan in his advice to policymakers about how to deal with V. Putin<sup>78</sup>. This is an interesting parallel to draw, even though his own memoir resists calling the current state of relations a Cold War.

<sup>64</sup> Rhodes B. *The World As It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*. New York: Random House, 2018. P. 347—348.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* P. 383.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* P. 409.

<sup>67</sup> McFaul M. *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin’s Russia*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. P. 126.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* P. 48—49.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* P. 64.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* P. 131.

<sup>71</sup> McFaul M. *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin’s Russia*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. P. 239, 259.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* P. 280, 287.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* P. 336.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* P. 322.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* P. 325.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* P. 336.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* P. 419.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* P. 407.

There are some hints of cultural determinism in M. McFaul's reflections on the ghosts of Russia's past: "I take solace in continuing to believe that the course of these events over the last thirty years was not all predetermined by Russian history and culture..." and he carefully attributes some of its struggles to individuals and their choices<sup>79</sup>. Nonetheless, the suggestion here is that *some* of this may be predetermined. He worries about a "deep societal demand for this kind of autocratic leader (V. Putin. — *Author's note*), and this kind of antagonistic relationship with the West"<sup>80</sup>. Here he sounds a little less like a *Russophile* and a bit more like a *Russophobe* (despite his own denials). If the Russian people are responsible for Vladimir Putin and his policies, and if this appetite for authoritarian leaders and enemy images of the West are embedded within the society and culture, this sounds like determinism. M. McFaul questions whether Putin represents a "return to the norm in Russian and Soviet history"<sup>81</sup>, which suggests he might believe that Russia has the leadership it deserves and desires.

### Concluding Thoughts

What begins to emerge from the above reflections is that, despite the intention to find common ground with Russia, there is a lingering tone of reservation and suspicion about Russia and Vladimir Putin. It does not always roar — the discourse about Russia may not have been *aggressively* negative — but the case is made here that it is present. Unfortunately, this discourse may have *contributed* to a missed opportunity to improve the relationship. While this paper's goal is not to connect this discourse with outcomes *per se* (it is concerned with identifying the discourse), this raises questions about the consequences of this mistrust.

<sup>79</sup> McFaul M. *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. P. 423.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* P. 425.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* P. 426.

Negative attitudes about Russia take on a certain mythology: "a fiction or constructed narrative that provides a certain interpretation of the evidence" [Sakwa 2017: 11]. Negative views of Russia cast it as an unequal, malevolent actor, anchored to its dark and radical past, rendering it inherently unentitled to its national interests. These myths about Russia are rooted in historical determinism; they "freeze a moment in time", "imbuing it with permanent significance" [Sakwa 2017: 11], and these myths have shaped a discourse about Russia. As Sakwa aptly observes, at the end of the Cold War, there was a narrative about Russia that it was defeated, offered opportunities to engage with the West, but declined them in favor of its imperial ambitions [Sakwa 2017: 11]. These myths have persisted, and have influenced how Russia is viewed and understood among foreign policy makers. As Russia appears to move further away from the West, and acts against the interests of the United States, these myths are then confirmed. A persistent fear and mistrust of Russia — *Russophobia* — has now been solidified because Russia has become the enemy it was softly expected to become all along.

A common response to suggestions of *Russophobia* today is: "Well, it's not a phobia if the threat is real". Russia's present day information war with the West, and its actions in Crimea and Syria, reinforce the notion that concerns about a resurgent Russia may have been justified and that mistrust of Russia is now legitimized; western leaders were right to hedge their bets about Russia after all. Unfortunately, this may have been a self-fulfilling prophecy. A phobia is normally considered an *irrational* fear, prompting a *disproportionate* response, or a loss of perspective. For many years Russia was not an enemy of the West, and yet a subtle discourse of *Russophobia* was present in Washington and appears to have influenced attitudes toward Russia. Whether anti-Russian sentiment constitutes a phobia or not, identifying its presence is useful to those who seek to understand the arc of U.S. — Russia relations in the post-Cold War era.

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