

Images of the United States in Putin's Russia, from Obama to Trump

Victoria I. Zhuravleva

Abstract: *This article focuses on the evolution of the United States' image in Putin's Russia before and after the 2016 presidential election. It examines this evolution (through to February 2018, the time of writing) in correlation with both the Russian and American contexts, as well as within the context of the changing climate of Russia-US relations. The article applies a social constructivist approach with a view to deepening our understanding of the role played by the American Other in the Russian official and popular identity discourse. The author argues that the Russian Self-American Other opposition has retained its constitutive role in the interplay of meanings that defines Russian nationalism. This key opposition remains at the core of the public and political debates shaped by texts on the US, including speeches, cartoons, published articles, and opinion pieces.*

The author identifies a set of long-lived verbal and visual communicative strategies that have been integrated into the Russian discourse about America. First, American presidents are constructed in relation to the Russian leader (Putin)—either as Putin's antithesis (Obama), or as a kind of weak analogue of Putin (Trump). Second, American liberal-universalist values are contrasted with Russian traditional-conservative values. Third, crises and thorny issues in US politics and history are used in order to discredit and mock the American desire to school Russia in democracy and international law. Finally, the imagined reality of international relations is constructed through the universal language of popular culture with the aim of making patriotic discourse attractive to the younger generations.

The author argues that the periods of rapprochement between Russia and the US and, accordingly, the rejection of simplified schemes of mutual understanding have as a rule taken place in times

of expansion of the Russian–American agenda out of a need to face a common enemy and address global challenges. Such rapprochement has also taken place during times of political reform and/or economic modernization in Russia.

Key words: Russia–US relations, anti-Americanism in Russia, Obama’s presidency, the 2016 presidential election, Putin’s Russia, Donald Trump’s administration, Russian Self–American Other dichotomy

Introduction

During the Obama presidency (2009–2017), Russian–American relations changed dramatically, from the “reset” of the Medvedev era to the deepest crisis since the end of the Cold War. Bilateral cooperation was frozen in most spheres, and all the factors (both mutable and constant) that influence the process of mutual perception (the climate of Russian–US relations, the national sociocultural and political context, the historical legacy of past relations) worked against a clear-eyed view. This formed the basis for the “war of images” that was and still is one of the main characteristics of the crisis in bilateral relations during this period. In Russia, a demonic image of Obama was used to promote Putin’s brand. Russian government and state-controlled outlets pinned their principal hopes on the presidency of Donald Trump, who became immensely popular after he announced his readiness to cooperate with Russia and began extolling the talents of Putin as a statesman and a political leader while devaluing Obama’s abilities. For a while a positive attitude toward Trump in Russia was even a sort of marker of patriotism. But in the summer of 2017, after the US Congress imposed new sanctions on Russia for meddling in the 2016 presidential election and Donald Trump signed this legislation into being, the situation changed radically. The romantic image of Trump disappeared from Russian public and political discourse, especially in the context of the tit-for-tat expulsion of embassy personnel by the two sides that began in December 2016. This disappointment of previous hopes gave additional