

A 'Patriotic Heretic' Favoring Renewal of U.S.-Russian Détente

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"We are probably closer to actual war with Russia today than ever before in history" (p. 109).

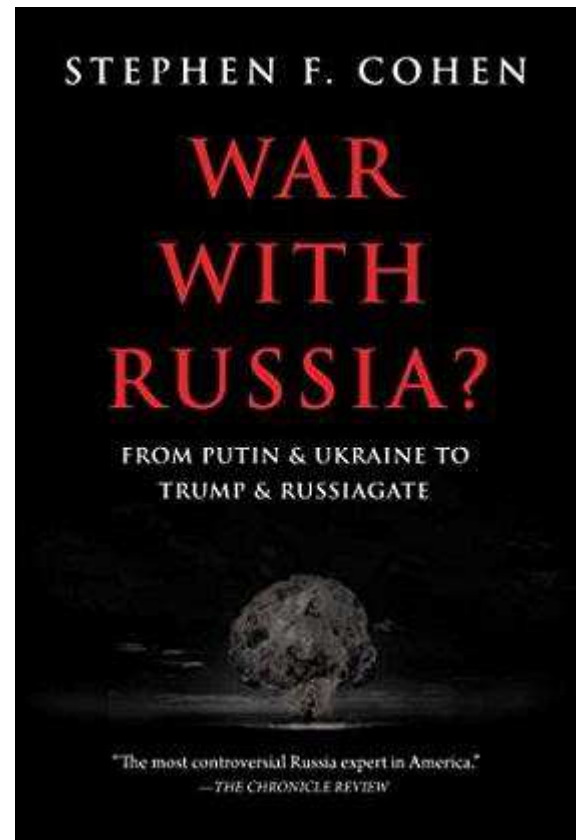
So wrote the American expert on Russia Stephen F. Cohen—who passed away on 18 September 2020 in New York—in his last published book [1]. For over a dozen years, Cohen had been warning of a "new Cold War," no longer between two capitalist and communist blocs, but between the U.S. and the post-communist Russia. A number of other prominent scholars and institutions, such as the left-leaning Noam Chomsky [2], and the right-leaning Council of Foreign Relations, known as the "most important [American] non-governmental foreign policy organization," concur on the reality of a new Cold War (p. 148). Cohen also quotes the UN Secretary-General António Guterres who said: "The Cold War is back—with a vengeance but with a difference. The mechanisms ... to manage the risks of escalation that existed in the past no longer seem to be present" (pp. 188-189) [3]. Cohen cautions that the new Cold War is "more fraught with the possibility of a hot war"—on three fronts: Ukraine, Syria, and the Baltics (p. 67)—and that the only way to avert a hot war or "another prolonged Cold War" is through a new U.S.-Russia "détente," i.e. the expansion of cooperation and radical reduction in the possibility of violent and potentially nuclear conflict (p. 26).

Cohen claims that today's U.S. dealings with Russia, as opposed to the détente talks between U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s, lack the essential component of the "parity principle"—a term Cohen had coined in 1981, referring to "political (not military) parity" [4]—where the Russian side would ideally be treated as a "co-equal great power"—though not implying "moral equivalence." In the post-World War II era, he writes, the parity principle, "like sex in Victorian England," was not publicly endorsed and yet "amply practiced" by every U.S. president in the ensuing Cold War, from Dwight Eisenhower to Reagan (p. 27). Given his heterodox views on U.S. relations with Russia, Cohen counted himself among a minority of American "patriotic heretics" (p. 17).

How did we get here?

A few weeks after the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991, President George H.W. Bush told the American people that "[b]y the grace of God, America won the Cold War." Cohen claims Russia had resembled a defeated nation in the eyes of Washington, "analogous to Germany and Japan after World War II," a "nation without legitimate rights and interests" (p. 29). Bush's words were the first indication that the parity principle was out. After Bush, Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama dealt similarly with Russia via a misconceived "triumphalism," which reversed much of the progress of the two decades of détente. Such a posture led to an expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to "Russia's borders," building more nuclear bombs, and in 2002 even withdrawing from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty (p. 164)—an accord which had served as "the cornerstone of Russian nuclear security" (p. 137). All this, according to Cohen, was seen by Russia as "a complete betrayal," especially given that Russia had been sympathetic to the U.S. after the September 11th, 2001 terror attacks, sharing intelligence and providing her airspace for the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan [5].

President Donald Trump, in turn, despite what initially had been expectations of improving U.S.-Russian relations, in 2018 withdrew the U.S. from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), a landmark agreement come about in the last decade of the Cold War through negotiations between Reagan and Gorbachev [6]. Despite Trump's exiting of the U.S. from the INF Treaty, many observers had "a sigh of relief" when in 2021 the new American administration headed by President Joseph Biden reached agreement with the Kremlin to extend what is now the only remaining nuclear arms agreement between the two countries: the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. At about the same time of signing the New START, however, in force until February 2026 [7], the U.S. began deploying B-1 bombers to Norway, along with 200 military personnel, to deter potential "Russian aggression" in what has become an



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increasingly strategic Arctic [8]. Worrisome is also the “probability of accident or miscalculation by either side” in places like the Black Sea where both NATO and Russia have military presence and conduct exercises [9], or in the Baltics—aka “the Achilles’ heel of the NATO alliance.” [10]

NATO expansion and the Ukraine crisis

The Ukraine crisis and accompanying civil war has taken over 13,000 lives in seven years, a quarter of them civilians [11], in addition to witnessing the first major territorial change in Europe in the post-Cold War era. Back in 1998, George Kennan, the U.S. diplomat who in 1947 penned the lauded “The sources of Soviet conduct” and was later referred to as the “architect of America’s successful containment [strategy],” [12] had described NATO’s planned expansion as “a tragic blunder of potentially epic proportions,” [13] and “the beginning of a new cold war.” [14] Political realist John Mearsheimer, too, writes that “the tap root of the trouble [in Ukraine] is NATO expansion, the central element in a larger strategy to move all of Eastern Europe, including Ukraine, out of Russia’s orbit and integrate it into the West.” [15]

For his part, Cohen writes that in February 1990, in reaction to an unexpected Soviet flexibility a year earlier in allowing for self-determination in East Europe—aka the “Sinatra Doctrine” [16] —James Baker, the U.S. Secretary of State under George H.W. Bush, told Gorbachev:

not only for the Soviet Union but for other European countries as well it is important to have guarantees that if the United States keeps its presence in [a unified] Germany within the framework of NATO, *not an inch of NATO’s present military jurisdiction will spread in an eastern direction* [emphasis added] [17].

Gorbachev has since been critical of NATO’s enlargement, calling it “a violation of the spirit of the assurances” of the Moscow 1990 discussions [18]. And former German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, in turn, has labeled NATO’s build-up as “war-mongering” (p. 47).

Academic Charles Kupchan has equated “treating Russia as a strategic pariah” by the West as “a historic mistake.” [19] As told by Baker, throughout the negotiations in 1990, Gorbachev had on three occasions raised the possibility of the Soviet Union, itself, joining NATO [20] —an idea which appears not to have been taken seriously by the U.S. given the American leadership’s frozen Cold War mentality. As late as 2002, claims Dimitri Trenin of the Carnegie Moscow Center, even President Vladimir Putin was “publicly hinting” and “privately seeking” Russian membership in NATO [21]. According to Trenin, although “Russian democrats” considered NATO expansion “a breach of faith” *vis-à-vis* the promises made by the West, they nevertheless “believed Russia should be the first country in the former East to join [the alliance].” For many Russians, an expanding NATO without Russia meant that Central Europe was “being taken over by the victorious West as both war booty and a possible bulwark against a future resurgent Russia” and “would inevitably lead to the reincarnation of NATO’s enemy image in Russia.” Given no “alliance with the West,” writes Trenin, “the only tangible positive result of Gorbachev’s foreign policy was [*de facto* ensuring] a wide buffer zone between Russia and NATO.” [22]

Cohen, in turn, asks whether the more than doubling of NATO’s membership since the late-1990s (from 13 to 30 states today) has actually made the international community safer. He equates NATO’s growth to expansion of the “U.S. sphere of influence” creeping to the borders of Russia (p. 120)—not dissimilar to a hypothetical “Russian-Chinese ‘sphere’ in Canada or Mexico” (p. 124). Cohen says that plans for the

alliance's expansion have been viewed by Russia as a potential "military encirclement" of her borders "from the Baltics to Ukraine to Georgia" (p. 45). He thus asks: Who's "provoking" and "aggressing" against whom (p. 43)?

Despite NATO's expansion, former U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul writes that cooperation between the U.S. and Russia was taking place up until the early 2010s. The two signed the New START, cooperated on the imposition of sanctions on Iran, "arranged a vast expansion of network used to transport U.S. soldiers and supplies to Afghanistan through Russia," "coordinated to [possibly] diffuse violence in Kyrgyzstan" in 2010, and even "managed Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization." [23]

Cohen claims, however, that NATO overtures to Georgia and to "the political epicenter of the new Cold War" (p. 32), Ukraine, brought about the 2008 Georgia-Russia war; inadvertently encouraged the 2014 Crimean secession; and led to the violent conflict in eastern Ukraine's Donbass province, what Cohen labels as a "U.S.-Russian proxy war" (p. 41)—a dangerous confrontation, he claims, only second worse to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.



Cohen reminds us that the Western narrative of a Ukraine wishing to join the European Union and NATO is not "yearned for throughout [that] country" (p. 18), but that Ukraine is deeply divided—on an East-West basis. He also writes that

Putin's initial proposal of an EU-Ukraine-Russia trade pact was ignored by EU politicians. Cohen further writes that the Maidan Square protests (aka 'Euromaidan') were under sway of hyper-nationalists and "semi-fascist street forces [such as the Svoboda Party]" (p. 16), a fact largely neglected by Western observers. A leaked telephone conversation between high-level U.S. diplomats Victoria Nuland and Geoffrey Pyatt also seems to point a "plotting to 'midwife' ... an anti-Russian" government in Ukraine (p. 22)—a conversation wherein Nuland, among other things, infamously used an expletive in reference to the EU [24]. For these reasons, Cohen questions whether the Euromaidan was a "democratic revolution," presumes it as more of a "coup," and finds it not surprising that the post-Euromaidan government turned out to be "intensely unpopular" and "pervasively corrupt" (p. 142)—(note: Cohen completed his book prior to the April 2019 election of the "wildly popular" Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky who subsequently [is said to have] put together an "inner circle ... untarnished by association with oligarchs and largely immune to corruption") [25].

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On the Crimea issue, Cohen highlights three points: one, the peninsula had been part of Russia (up until 1954) for two centuries. Scholars John O'Loughlin and Gerard Toal remind us that Crimea had the "distinctive demography [of] the only ethnic Russian majority region in Ukraine." [26] Second, writes Cohen, the rebellion in Donbass broke out when the "legally elected president in Kiev," Viktor Yanukovich, was overthrown (p. 79). Also, per O'Loughlin and Toal, although public opinion in Crimea prior to the Euromaidan protests "was not secessionist," it was heavily "in flux" and the "majority sentiment" in Crimea toward the Euromaidan "was overwhelmingly negative," while "separatist feelings rose as the Euromaidan protests endured and radicalized"; that, however, with the all-so-popular Russian media playing a "decisive influence" on Crimean public opinion. Although most Western observers rightly

consider that the “March 2014 referendum on Crimea’s status was a flawed exercise in democracy,” two Western institutions (Pew Research Center and German market analysis, GfK) each found that over 80% of Crimeans were in “complete agreement” with the decision to become part of the Russian Federation, while the Pew survey also found a great majority (91%) agreed that the 2014 referendum was “free and fair.” [27]

The third factor on the Crimea issue and the protracted conflict in eastern Ukraine, writes Cohen, is that they were a “direct reaction” to Washington and Brussels “bring[ing] Ukraine into NATO’s ‘sphere of influence’” (p. 79). The Crimean secession and rejoining with Russia, in turn, seems to have heightened NATO’s ambitions of expanding its membership to the borders of Russia. In its April 2018 Bucharest Declaration, members concurred that the alliance “welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership ... [and] these countries will become members of NATO.” [28]

On war in Syria, regime change in Libya, and Kosovo’s independence

Cohen writes that a U.S.-Russia détente also died in Syria, where the two largely failed to cooperate to defeat Islamist extremist forces. And while some American politicians (such as Hillary Clinton) were promoting a logical “no fly zone” in Syria, Cohen thinks such a plan, if implemented without collaboration with Russia, “would almost certainly lead to war with Russia” (p. 62). And with all of Obama’s rhetoric of not tolerating violations of “redlines” by the Syrian dictator Asad’s use of chemical weapons, his avowed intention of defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and his calling for regime change in Damascus, it was in the end not Washington, but the Kremlin’s intervention that led to the destruction of ISIS’s “entrenched grip on Syria” (p. 178).

‘Winning’ in Syria has not been pretty, however. Human Rights Watch quotes a source accusing the “Russian-Syrian coalition” of “recklessly indiscriminate” bombings of anti-Asad opposition-held territories in Aleppo in 2016, which may have led to hundreds of civilian casualties [29]. Amnesty International, in turn, refers to “compelling evidence” of Russian and Syrian “deliberate attacks [and] targeting health facilities in ... Syria,” which, if true, amounts to “war crimes.” [30] While Cohen does not address such allegations, he is critical of double standards by Western media in covering Russian vs. American military engagements. He writes that in

November 2016 when both the Russian and American air forces were fighting ISIS terrorists, the U.S. media labeled Russia’s inadvertent killing of civilians in Aleppo as “war crimes,” while far worse disregard to civilian casualties in Mosul by American forces were mere “collateral damage” (p. 72).

In 2011, assuming that a Libyan Arab Spring was in the making, the U.S. and France “whipped the world into afrenzy” about the “possibility of genocide” by President Muammar Gaddafi [31]. Consequently, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution which assumed the existence of “widespread and systematic attacks” by Libyan government forces against civilians, what it said “may amount to crimes against humanity.” The Security Council also authorized intervention towards the “protection of civilians”



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and “delivery of humanitarian assistance.” [32] Cohen writes that among the oral agreements with Russia that were violated was the promise “not to pursue regime change in Libya.” Subsequently, Gaddafi’s removal the same year and his ensuing lynching by NATO allies, Libya’s National Transition Council forces, ultimately led to Libya’s transformation into what Cohen labels as a “terrorist-ridden failed state” (p. 33). Academic Alan Kuperman also questions the wisdom of the Libyan intervention. He writes that the “[c]onventional [w]isdom” of the 2011 Libya crisis “is wrong” and that the “[anti-Gaddafi] uprising was never peaceful, but armed and violent from the start” and that Gaddafi “did not target civilians or resort to indiscriminate force” as alleged by Western powers [33]. A 2016 British House of Commons investigation also states that “the threat to civilians was overstated” [34] by the U.S., UK and France when attempting to persuade the international community to support the Libya intervention, and that the “UK strategy was founded on erroneous assumptions and an incomplete understanding of the evidence.” [35]

NATO’s intervention in Libya had far-reaching consequences. Weeks prior to his death, Gaddafi had said that NATO is “bombing a wall which stood in the way of ... migration to Europe.” [36] According to British sociologist William Outhwaite, the 2016 referendum in the UK voting in favor of leaving the EU (aka ‘Brexit’) “was substantially due to a campaign ... focused on a perceived migration crisis” ... and that the “[m]igration panic” in both Europe and the U.S. led to a “reservoir for nativists” and the “twin disasters” of Brexit and the election of Trump [37].

An issue for which Cohen can be criticized is his unfair reference to an “annexation” of Kosovo by the West (p. 135). NATO’s 1999 military operations, in defense of Kosovar Albanians facing potential ethnic cleansing orchestrated by Serbia’s Slobodan Milošević, may have prevented a repeat of a Srebrenica-like 1995 war crime, where over 8,000 Muslim Bosniaks were murdered by the Bosnian Serb military. As opposed to NATO’s operations in Bosnia, the UN Security Council had not approved the Kosovo campaign. However, an International Court of Justice (ICJ) “advisory opinion” issued in 2010 states that “the declaration of independence of Kosovo adopted on 17 February 2008 did not violate international law.” [38] Despite its flaws, including regrettable civilian lives lost, it can be argued that NATO stood on the right side of history *vis-à-vis* Kosovo.

Demonization of Putin

Henry Kissinger is known to have said that, “[t]he demonization of Vladimir Putin is not a policy. It is an alibi for not having one” (p. 1). Soviet era philosopher Alexander Zinoviev, in turn, had said that Westerners “were shooting at Communism, but [in reality] they were aiming at Russia” (p. 115). Today, “[v]ilifying Russia’s leader has become a canon in the orthodox U.S. narrative of the new Cold War,” writes Cohen (p. 2). He claims that a reason for such demonization is the fact that among foreign leaders, Putin stands out in opposing America’s “neocon/liberal interventionist aspiration,” to which a “resurgent Russia” is anathema (p. 60).

On allegations of Russian intervention in the U.S. presidential elections that led to the surprise win of Trump, Cohen writes that any Russian “meddling” that may have occurred prior to the 2016 U.S. elections is like “jaywalking compared to the Clinton administration’s highly intrusive political and financial intervention on behalf of Russian President Boris Yeltsin’s reelection campaign” in 1996 (p. 201), which led to an era of “oligarchic looting of essential state assets” (p. 18) rather than a democratic transition in Russia.

Making sense of and overcoming the ‘new Cold War’

As to why, shortly after the demise of the Soviet Union, the “U.S. elites” engaged in a new Cold War instead of “partnership with Russia,” Cohen suggests that the answer could be found in the need to conjure up an “enemy” due to “ideological,” “habitual” or “budgetary” reasons (pp. 213-214). He labels NATO not only as the “world’s largest military alliance,” but a “powerful political-ideological-lobbying institution” with links to the immensely lucrative American military-industrial complex (p. 120). As opposed to the claim of McFaul, however, that “[t]he more that United States can do without Russia, the better,” [39] for Cohen, cooperation with Russia is an existential necessity:

The road to American national security runs through Moscow.

There is not a single major regional or issue-related [U.S.] national security problem we can solve without the full cooperation of whoever sits in the Kremlin, period, end of story. Name your poison: We’re talking the Middle East, we’re talking Afghanistan, we’re talking energy, we’re talking climate, we’re talking nuclear proliferation, [or] terrorism ... [40]

A 2020 Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) report describes relations between the U.S. and Russia at being “at their worst since the Cold War” and “with a lingering risk of escalation.” [41] And according to Trenin, although “[the U.S.-Russia] relationship is no longer the most important element of global politics, ... it could turn out to be the most dangerous one.” [42]

For the sake of the American and Russian publics and the world community at large, one hopes that cooler heads will prevail in 2021 and beyond and a U.S.-Russian détente as cogently advocated by Cohen—and not a new Cold War—will triumph.

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1. A professor emeritus at Princeton University and New York University, Stephen F. Cohen passed away from lung cancer at age 81. A historian of Russia and the Soviet Union, Cohen's interest in the region had come about as a fluke when as an undergraduate in the late-1950s on a study abroad program in England, he changed his plans on a side trip to "Pamplona to run with the bulls" in Spain in favor of a 30-day US\$300 organized tour to the USSR, instead. By 1962 Cohen had completed a master's in Russian studies from Indiana University and by 1969 a doctorate in Russian history from Columbia University (McFadden, "Stephen F. Cohen, influential historian ...," 2020). Upon the passing of Cohen, Mikhail Gorbachev wrote: "He was one of the closest people to me in his views and understanding of the enormous events that occurred in the late 80s in Russia and changed the world. Steve was a brilliant historian and a man of democratic convictions. He loved Russia, the Russian intelligentsia and believed in our country's future" (quoted in Steele, "Stephen Cohen obituary," 2020).
2. Chomsky. "... We're facing ...," 2015.
3. Eric Engle argues that "[the] U.S. did not win the cold war: Russia lost it." He further claims that "Russia and the West are unlikely to "enter into a new cold war, but most likely will enter [a] new era of 'cold peace' [due to the fact that] Russian ideology, [though] domestically popular ..., lacks global appeal (Engle, "A new cold war? ...," 2014, p. 1).
4. Cohen, "The parity principle ...," 1981.
5. Quoted in Smith, "Architects of American policy ...," 2015.
6. In November 2020, the U.S. also withdrew from the 1992 Open Skies Treaty, which allowed for its once 34 signatories to fly "unarmed, reconnaissance flights" over other states' for the purpose of collecting "data on military forces and activities" (Arms Control Association, "Fact sheets and briefs," 2020). Washington's unilateral withdrawal of this treaty led in January 2021 for Moscow to announce similar plans, and thus a potential escalation of a new arms competition with the West. (Troinovski and Sanger, "Russia to exit Open Skies Treaty," 2020).
7. Critics claim that although the New START extension, which "limits the deployed nuclear weapons" by the U.S. and Russia to 1,550 each, is "a sigh of relief" for the arms control community, the treaty is nonetheless conceptually obsolete given that both sides are "pursuing high-precision long-range conventional weapons and cyber and artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities ... weapons whose stealthy and destructive potential matters far more than quantity" (Rumer and Sokolsky, "Why the New START ...," 2021).
8. Starr, "U.S. deploying B-1 bombers to Norway ...," 2021.
9. Newlin *et al.*, "U.S.-Russia relations ...," 2020, p. 7.
10. Allison and Simes, "Russia and America: stumbling to war ...," 2015.
11. Roth, "Thousands march ...," 2019.
12. Upon hearing that the U.S. Senate had ratified the expansion of NATO, Kennan reportedly remarked: "This expansion would make the Founding Fathers of this country [America] turn over in their graves. We have [given NATO's Article 5] signed up to protect a whole series of countries, even though we have neither the resources nor the intention to do so in any serious way" (Friedman, "Foreign Affairs ...," 1998).
13. Quoted in Schwarz, "It's time to disrupt NATO ...," 2018.
14. Quoted in Friedman, "Foreign Affairs ...," 1998.
15. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion ...*, 2018, p. 143.
16. A term coined by the then Soviet foreign ministry spokesperson Gennadi Gerasimov (taken from the popular 1975 Frank Sinatra song "I did it my way") in reference to Gorbachev's non-intervention policy in affairs of fellow Warsaw Pact members (*Los Angeles Times*, "'Sinatra Doctrine' ...," 1989).
17. Bacevich, "When Washington assured ...," 2017.

18. Pifer, "Did NATO promise ...," 2014.
 19. Kupchan, "NATO's final frontier ...," 2010, p. 100.
 20. Baker, "Russia in NATO?," 2010.
 21. Trenin, *Post-Imperium...*, 2011, p. 104.
 22. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
 23. McFaul, "Russia as it is ...," 2018, p. 85.
 24. BBC, "Ukraine crisis ...," 2014.
 25. Karatnycky & Motyl, "The end of Voldymyr Zelensky's honeymoon," 2020.
 26. O'Loughlin & Toal, "The Crimea conundrum ...," 2019, p. 9.
 27. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-15.
 28. NATO, "Bucharest Summit Declaration," 2008.
 29. HRW, "Russia/Syria...," 2016.
 30. Amnesty International, "Syrian and Russian...," 2016.
 31. Prashad, *Washington Bullets*, 2020, p. 138.
 32. UN, "Security Council approves 'No-Fly Zone' over Libya ...," 2011.
 33. Kuperman, "Lessons from Libya ...," 2013.
 34. House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (UK), "Libya: examination...," 2016, p. 3.
 35. *Ibid.*
 36. Quoted in Blum, "Bombing Libya...," 2018.
 37. Outhwaite, "Migration crisis and Brexit," 2018.
 38. ICJ, "Accordance with international law ...," 2010.
 39. McFaul, "Russia as it is ...," p. 91.
 40. Quoted in Smith, "Architects of American policy ...," 2015.
 41. Newlin *et al.*, "U.S.-Russia relations ...," 2020, p. 1.
 42. Trenin, *Russia*. 2020, p. 96.
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