



Nicolai Petro
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Deep Connection

RUSSIA'S POLITICS AND CULTURE

written by Zoe Comingore '18

As a professor of international politics, focusing on Russia and the United States, University of Rhode Island (URI) political science Professor Nicolai Petro is studying the interactions and changing dynamics between these two countries at a tense time in world history.

Petro's extensive research on the deep connection between Russia's modern government and its culture warranted him invitations to attend summits with world leaders in both Russia and the Ukraine. He is a regular guest at the Valdai Discussion Club, where he has had the opportunity to discuss international politics with diplomats, academics, and journalists who specialize on Russian culture, and meet with Russia's president and foreign minister.

Before coming to URI, Petro was an international affairs fellow on the Council of Foreign Relations, and served as both special assistant for policy for the U.S. Department of State and political attaché in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. He has been published in media outlets throughout the world, and his commentary on foreign affairs has been translated into more than a dozen languages.

Petro's work originally focused on the influence of culture on politics. Cultural rituals and symbols, he points out, reinforce social unity. Even negative rituals, such as witch hunts and impeachments, can forge solidarity in communities by identifying a common enemy.

"However, to use rituals in social transformation they

Petro points out that despite having completely opposing points of view on politics, the two governments often find that they need to cooperate in areas such as the exploration of space.

must be 'wrapped in a web of symbolism,'" Petro says. "If successful, initial attempts to employ symbols for dramatic effect are followed by more structured rites, which become our political institutions."

After writing a book on Russian political culture and a book on Russian local politics, Petro began to look at how dramatic political transitions in post-Communist Russia were shaped by the rituals and symbols of the Orthodox Church. This popular religious institution provides a way to unite public and political sentiment, building back some of the trust that was lost under communist rule between the state and its people. Petro is currently working on a book that compares and contrasts Russian and American values, examining the reasons behind the tension between the two countries.

His research proposal, "Beyond the Values Gap," was recently nominated by URI President David M. Dooley for the 2016 Andrew Carnegie Fellowship, funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. In his fellowship proposal he reminds readers that ideological confrontation was supposed to end with the Cold War. One reason it did not end is the "values gap" between Russia and the West. Petro argues that this "values gap" has now become a "values trap" for American foreign policy, severely

Inside the church of St. Paraskeva Pyatnitsa at the Pirogovo National Museum, near Kiev.

photos by Nicolai Petro





Interior of a traditional Ukrainian restaurant in Odessa with Nicolai Petro's mother, Edith Petro.

limiting the United State's options in respect to Russia. Envisioning Russia as an integral part of Western culture, he argues, would allow the United States to break free of containment, and fundamentally transform the international system.

"I don't believe our tensions with Russia revolve around differences of interest or differences of ideology," Petro says. "They're basically rooted in cultural stereotypes about who Russians are and why, 'We really need to not be like them.'"

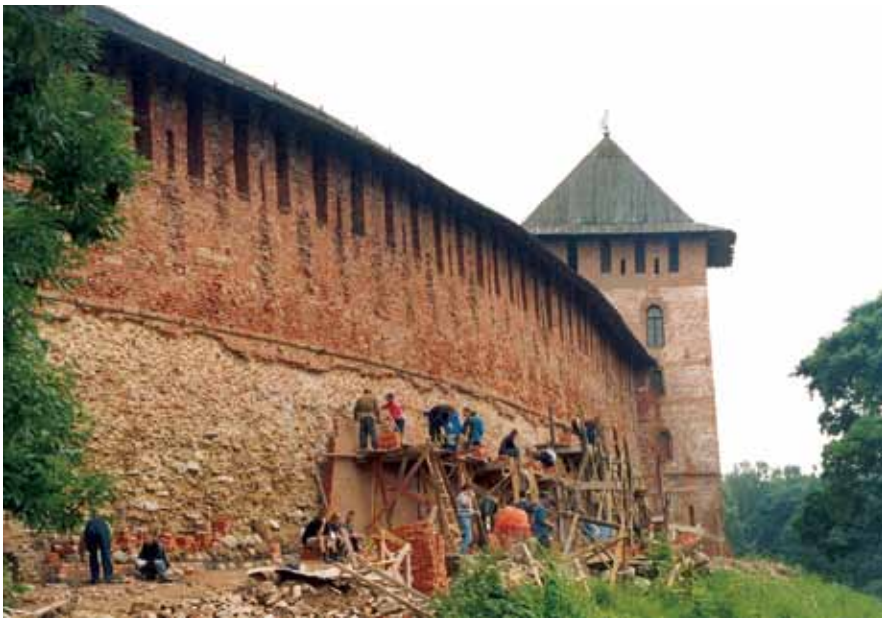
As Russia modernized and became more competitive in the global economy, the change had an important impact on Russian identity that most Americans are unaware of. According to Petro, Russia has settled into a more politically-stable era, characterized by the popularity of Putin and his policies. The friction between Russia and other countries caused by this newfound stability is Petro's most recent area of study.

"Today no one argues that Russian policy is driven by a global ideology," Petro says. "Conflicts now arise not in the Third World, but within the former Soviet Union, an area where the United States has begun to define new interests since the end of the Cold War, since NATO expanded into the former Soviet Union in the 1990s. And Russia has been pushing back."

Petro maintains that the current political debate is about whether to risk a fight with Russia to press America's geopolitical advantage, and thus decisively break the post Cold War truce, or to accommodate vital Russian interests



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Rebuilding the wall surrounding the city fortress of Novgorod the Great in Russia.



Statue of Armand-Emmanuel de Vignerot du Plessis, Duc de Richelieu, first governor of Odessa.

in order to obtain a more stable postwar settlement.

A large part of this debate in the West is about whether or not to listen to Russia's arguments.

"During the Cold War, we used to be concerned that Western ideas were not getting through to Russia, and they were jamming our radio broadcast signals," Petro says. "Now the reverse is true. Western governments are alarmed that state-supported news outlets like RT (formerly Russia Today) have developed such a large global audience – more than two billion hits on YouTube. And we are telling the western public, 'You shouldn't be listening to that. It's Russian propaganda.'"

Petro points out that despite having completely opposing points of view on politics, the two governments often find that they need to cooperate in areas such as the exploration of space, where the U.S. relies on Russian rocket engines to put its people into orbit, and the exploitation of the resources of the Arctic.

More mainstream communication between Russia and the U.S. will probably have to come through Europe, according to Petro. Since both countries have historical ties

to Europe, this region can bridge the gap. However, Petro says opening up mainstream discourse between Russia and parts of Western Europe involves changing the United States' idea of who belongs to Europe.

That is why the process of opening up to Russia, and creating mainstream exposure for modern Russian values and ideas, is so complicated and difficult. Petro hopes to ease the pain through open-mindedness and understanding. He is working to identify commonalities between Russia and Europe, and illustrate how these can provide a common foundation for meaningful international discourse.

"My argument is that this common ground exists," Petro says. "It's not taught, so we're not aware of it, but it goes back more than a thousand years. Everything that lies at the basis of European politics, economics, cultural thought, also lies at the basis of the Russian politics, economics, and culture. It is my contention that once we all become more aware of this, we will have a much easier time talking to each other."

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Statue of Bulat Okudzhava, famous Soviet poet, Arbat Street, Moscow.