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Public Opinion Polls Across the Arctic, 2007 – 2021: Dataset, Methodology, and Takeaways on Post-2014 and the Arctic

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Introduction

Despite the well-publicized limitations of public opinion polls—for instance, in the ability to fully predict the outcomes of the 2016 and 2020 United States (US) national elections—they still matter for the collection and study of data on how the public feels about key social and political issues. Public opinion polls are important for various reasons. First, they help regular people be heard and give individuals the opportunity to share their opinion on important questions of war, foreign policy, and other important issues.¹ Second, they help scholars and researchers think more concretely about the mood of a population on issues that can help inform policymaking and implementation.

Understanding polling numbers helps scholars consider the formation of foreign policy. From a domestic side, elections may determine who wins, but they don't explain why or what specific issues people supported. Decisions on why a particular candidate was selected comes down to individual policies or choices from voters. So how do we know why voters think the way they do and what matters to them? This is where public opinion polls play an important role in figuring out what people think.² This policy primer introduces a North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN) dataset that looks at public opinion polls from the eight Arctic states (Canada, Norway, Sweden, Finland, the US, Russia, Iceland, and Denmark) between 2007-2021, outlines the methodology behind the data collection and coding, and highlights some main takeaways of interest. While the dataset considers data from 2007-2021, particular interest is given to the year of 2014 as a turning point. In 2014, Crimea was annexed by Russia, which vastly changed the international system, how people thought about themselves, and what policies were proposed. Thus, this primer will think about 2014 as an important year regarding great power status and Arctic security, and what sort of research questions could be addressed using this data. Importantly, this primer is just a first effort at operationalizing the dataset and many other themes, types of questions, and analysis are possible going forward.

Methodology

This research began with the goal of gathering public opinion polls from the eight circumpolar states, hereafter the Arctic 8,³ around three topics: 1) Arctic security, 2) foreign policy and security, and 3) broader security issues such as climate change. From that starting point, we set a time range of 2007-2021 to gather information from a relatively recent set of polls. The selected start date was 2007, because it represented an important year for Arctic politics, including the planting of a Russian flag in the Arctic seabed to stake its claim on the Lomonosov Ridge and the release of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 4th Report. This was followed by 2008, another important year, as it was US President Bush's last year in office and the much-quoted US Geological Survey (USGS) on Arctic hydrocarbons.

I began the data collection by broadly searching for publicly available Arctic public opinion polls or surveys. This resulted in an initial set of seven polls that included Arctic-related questions:

1. Arctic Security in the 21st Century Conference Report [2008] (one poll)
2. Rethinking the Top of the World [2011] (one poll)
3. Rethinking the Top of the World [2015] (one poll)
4. Survey of Alaskan's Opinions on the Arctic [2013] (one poll)
5. Survey of Alaskan's Opinions on the Arctic [2016] (one poll)
6. VCIOM's Single Poll on Greenpeace Activists in the Arctic [2013] (one poll)
7. Angus Reid Institute's Marine Shipping Polls [2016] (one poll)

After this initial search, I expanded my parameters to look for public opinion polls on foreign and security policy issues, including unconventional security issues, such as climate change. I began by searching through normal search engines such as Google, but also reviewed individual state polling and survey databases, government ministries, think tanks, and universities to find additional polls. This second round of searching yielded a total of eighty-four additional polls, bringing the entire dataset to a total of ninety-one polls:

1. Canada's World Survey [2018 and 2008] (two polls)
2. First Foreign and Security Policy Opinion Poll in Greenland [2021] (one poll)
3. Russian Public Opinion Poll from Levada [2018] (one compiled poll set)
4. Greenlandic Perspectives on Climate Change [2019] (one poll)
5. Three Individual Pew Research Center Polls [2018-2019] (three polls)
6. Yale Climate Opinion Maps [2008-2021] (one compiled poll set)
7. Politics and Global Warming [2008-2021] (twenty-two polls)
8. Four Individual Gallup Polls [2011, 2015, 2016] (four polls)
9. Six Individual Levada Polls [2019-2020] (six polls)
10. Chicago Council Surveys [2010-2020] (nine polls)
11. Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Survey [2007-2020] (fourteen polls)
12. Fifteen Trip Snap Polls [2014-2020] (fifteen polls)
13. Trip Faculty Surveys [2004-2014] (four polls)

14. University of Iceland Poll [2020] (one poll)

During the initial collection of polls, I gathered basic information including the name of the poll; its country of origin; the publisher, whether it was private, public or a collaboration; the number of respondents (N#); the date of publication; the URL; the margin of error; additional methodological details, such as how the surveys were conducted; and any additional information noted in the poll.

Once the polls were collected and initial information was inputted into a spreadsheet, I went back and collected themes from each poll. For example, if a poll talked about cybersecurity or human rights, I would include that on a separate sheet. I would also note if a poll asked about a specific event or issue, such as the Syrian Civil War or EU membership. While some shorter polls only had one to three themes, other longer polls such as the Canada World Survey and the Pew Global Attitudes Survey, had twenty or more themes per poll.

After each poll was thematized, I manually inputted the polling data into a separate database, as many were only available in PDF form. While doing this, I also tagged questions with the themes that were already noted for each poll.

Once all the polls were separately imported into the database, I summarized the large number of themes into eleven categories:

1. Questions on the European Union
2. Questions on Russia
3. Global Power and Relationships
4. Environment and Climate
5. Terrorism and Conflict
6. International Organizations
7. Trade, Globalization, Democracy, and COVID
8. Questions on China
9. Security and Foreign Policy
10. Questions on the Arctic
11. Perceptions of Leaders and Countries

A few sets of polls did not lend themselves well to these comparisons with other national public opinion polls and thus were coded separately into separate sheets. For example, the TRIP Snap Polls and Faculty Surveys were by design expert surveys and for many, had different types of questions, which didn't really compare well with public opinions. The Greenlandic Perspectives on Climate Change poll had many specific questions about sea ice and broke down polling data per region that similarly did not compare well across other polls. Canada's World Survey similarly allowed respondents to rank answers in some cases and further was broken down by region, making comparison difficult. The list below covers the polls that were coded separately for the reasons outlined above.

1. Canada's World Survey 2008 and 2018⁴
2. Greenlandic Perspectives on Climate Change 2018-2019
3. TRIP's Snap Polls and Faculty Survey 2014-2020

With these eleven categories, I went back through the polls and, based on the question, I organized questions into their respective categories. Whenever one question was relatively similar to another, I also compared answers across polls. However, some questions did not compare well but were still included in the database. For example, one poll asked specifically about which events were the most significant in Russia's recent historical record from 2017-2019. While there was no comparable question across other polls, the information was still useful and thus it was included. As mentioned above, three poll sets (a total of twenty-two polls) were included separately as they had very specific questions having to do with, for example, sea ice confidence, or information came from experts and members of academia rather than the public. In the final dataset, each category has questions listed, the poll from which the question was sourced, as well as the year and country that poll indicates.

High Level Takeaways

Thinking about high-level takeaways, some key dates and themes were chosen to think more clearly about the data. For the purpose of this primer, 2014 was chosen as an important date for Arctic security, great power competition, and specifically for the relationship between the West and Russia. The annex provides some other key results from the dataset.

Great Power Competition & Rivalry

The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea was a key geopolitical marker that indicates changes in the way that states and their citizens see the world. During the final days of the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the execution of military drills at Russia's Black Sea base near to Crimea as well as on the Ukrainian border. As these exercises took place, armed men began to seize airports and buildings around Crimea. On March 16, 2014, the Crimean government voted in pro-Russian politicians who held a referendum on the independence of Crimea. Four days later, Putin signed legislation annexing Crimea into Russia formally.⁵ Not only did this moment mark the resurgence of Russia on the world stage, but it also set the stage for a return to great power competition.⁶ Russians saw the annexation of Crimea as a turning point in not only others respecting Russia as a great power, but also whether they themselves saw Russia as a great power, and the extent to which they see the US as a threat.

- In 2012, only 16% of Russians agreed that Russia was respected as it should be. By 2017, that number almost doubled to 34%. Despite the resurgence in great power competition, only 40% of Russians in 2014 thought that Russia's relationship with the West would lead to a new Cold War. Four years later in 2018, that number had dropped to 34%.

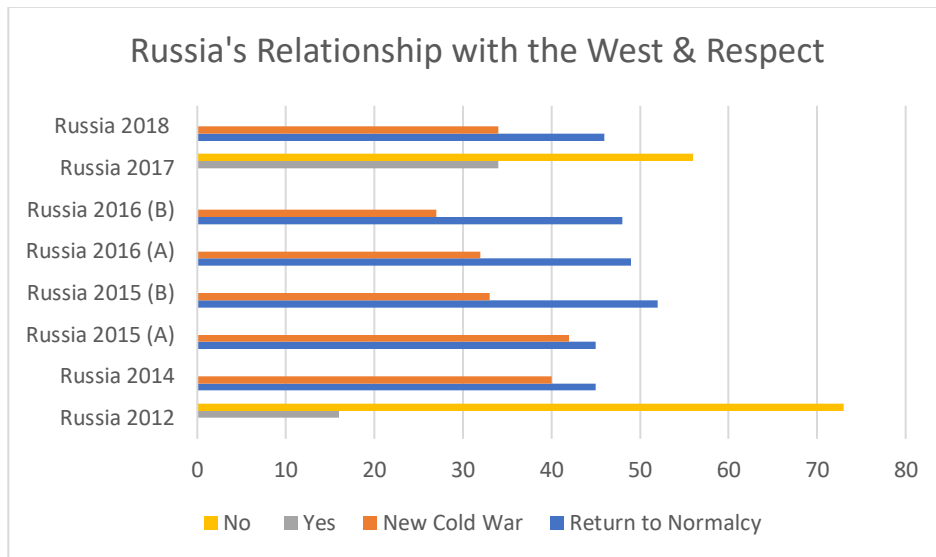


Figure 1: Questions: 1) Is Russia respected around the world as it should be?⁷ (Source: Pew Global Attitudes 2012, 2017) And 2) How do you think the relationship will develop between Russia and the West after the current conflict over Ukraine and Crimea? (Source: Levada 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018)

- Similarly, in 2011, 47% of Russians either definitely or mostly believed that Russia was a great power. In 2015, that number jumped to 68% and by 2018, 75% of Russians saw their country as a great power.

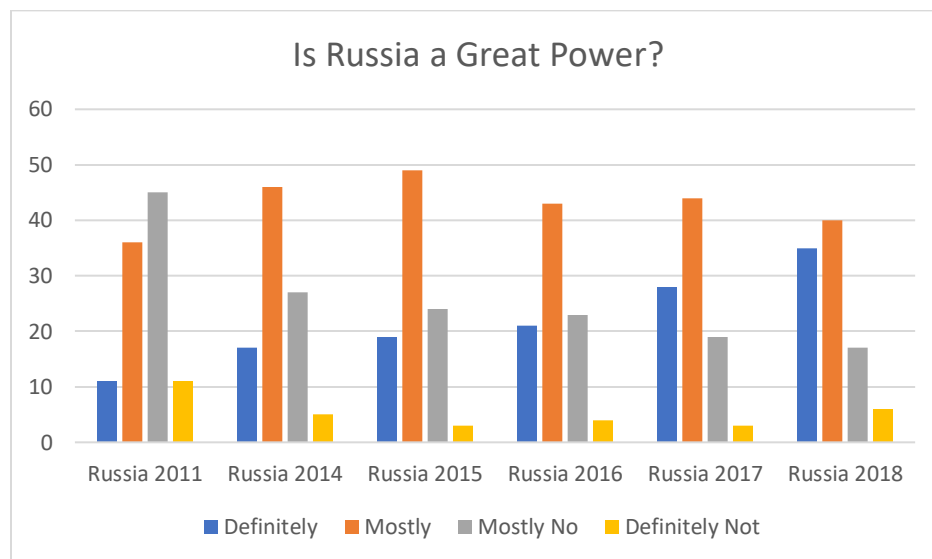


Figure 2: Is Russia currently a great power? (Source: Levada 2011, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018)

- Although Russians did not see a Cold War as imminent, only 27% of Russians saw Putin’s handling of the Ukraine situation as leading people to have a favorable view of Russia.

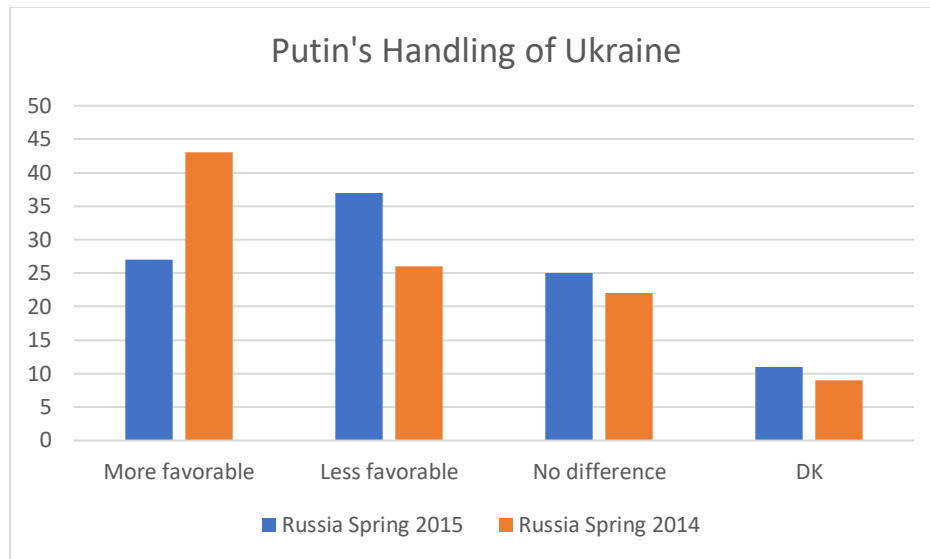


Figure 3: Has President Putin’s handling of the situation in Ukraine led people in other countries to have a more favorable opinion of Russia, a less favorable opinion, or has it made no difference? (Source: Pew Global Attitudes 2014, 2015)

- In response, countries like the United States have seen cooperation with Russia as less important. In 2017, 43% of Americans thought the US should cooperate more with Russia. By 2019, only 35% of Americans agreed. When asked if their country should use military force to defend a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally neighbor should Russia get into a serious military confrontation, Canadians and Americans had similar views. In 2015, 56% of Americans and 53% of Canadians agreed to defend their ally, and by 2019, that number rose to 60% of Americans and 56% of Canadians.

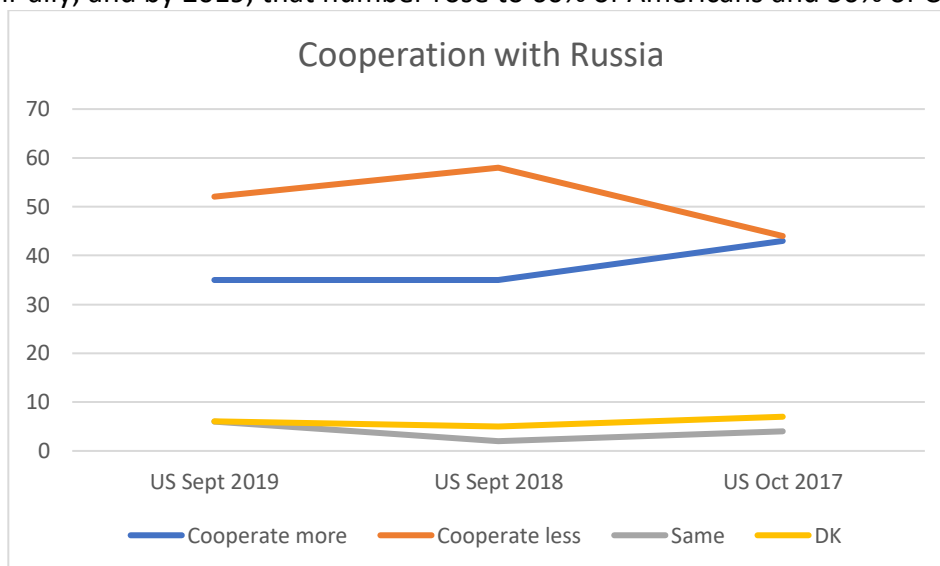


Figure 4: Please tell me if the United States, in the future, should cooperate more or less with Russia? (Source: Pew Global Attitudes 2017, 2018, 2019)

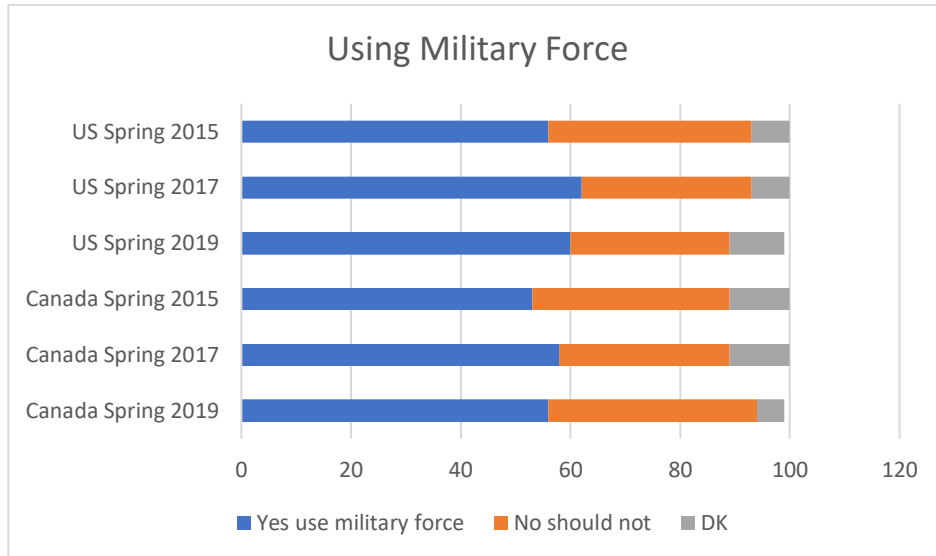


Figure 5: If Russia got into a serious military conflict with one of our neighbors (NATO ally), should we use military force to defend them? (Source: Pew Global Attitudes 2017, 2018, 2019)

Arctic Security

Many of the changes in the Arctic today are influenced by outside geopolitical forces. Consider the election and campaign of Mr. Donald Trump in 2015/2016 or how the increase in the rate of climate change has radically changed how people see the Arctic. So too has the renewal of great power rivalry changed how states see the threat of military conflict in the Arctic rising.

- In 2015, when asked if they thought the threat of military conflict in the Arctic was increasing, only 50% of three states agreed: Russia (50%), Finland (51%), and Iceland (58%). The respondents in other Arctic states disagreed: Sweden (33.3%), Norway (35%), Denmark (29%), US South (24%), Alaska (34%), Canada South (36%), and Canada North (30%).

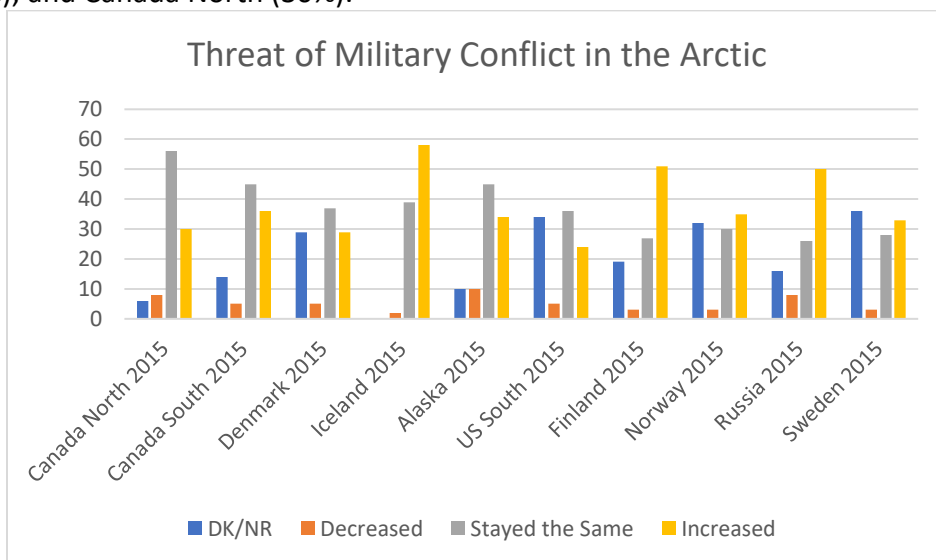


Figure 6: Do you feel the threat of military conflict in the Arctic over the last year has.... (Source: Rethinking the Top of the World 2015)

- When asked whether they thought the Arctic should be a nuclear free zone, all Arctic states increased their agreement from 2011 to 2015. For example, from 2011-2015, 56 to 68% of Russians agreed and 78 to 81% of Southern Canadians agreed.

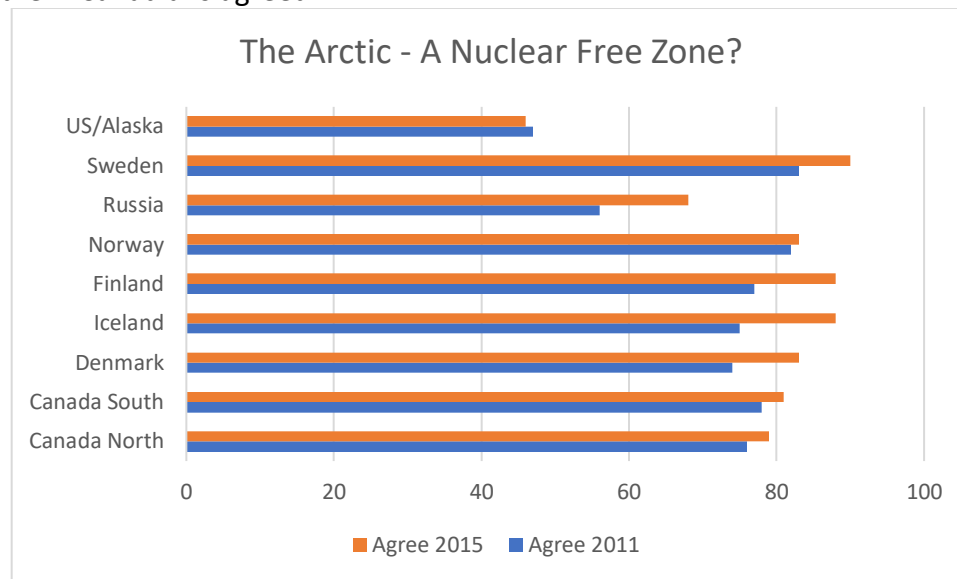


Figure 7: The Arctic should be a nuclear weapons free zone just like Antarctica is, and the United States and Russia should remove their nuclear weapons from the Arctic. (Agree 4-5 (Source: Rethinking the Top of the World 2011, 2015)

Conclusion

This primer provides a preliminary analysis of how public opinion polls can be used to think broadly about what individuals think about security and foreign policy issues across the Arctic. While this primer just looked at great power status and the perception of security in the Arctic, there are many other aspects that this data can be instrumentalized for. Using specific dates, such as 2014, acts as an interesting point in time to see change. More work can be done thinking about particular events, such as natural disasters across different states to see the impact of opinions on climate change. Some research questions could think more about how 2014 was a turning point and changed how the Arctic was or wasn't seen as a theater of great power competition; the extent to which the Arctic can be seen as an exceptional geography separate from traditional geopolitics; or the role that 2014 played and continues to play domestically in how the Russian populace sees themselves.

From the Arctic perspective, further research could think about the role of threat perception in the broader scheme of geopolitics. While media stories often suggest that tensions run high between Arctic states, the relative threat perceptions appear to be low—which begs the question of the role of media in threat perception and securitization.

There are clear trends in considering how states reevaluate their own sense of power based on exogenous events as well as relatively low rates of concerns over the threat of military conflict in the Arctic despite rising tensions. While this primer just introduces the dataset, the variety of cross-national themes across Arctic states regarding climate change, great power competition, and conflict—just to name a few—provide good opportunities to explore how public opinion is influential in the creation of foreign policy.

Looking forward, this information can be used to think more thoroughly about what actual people think about key issues—of not only Arctic security issues—but questions of foreign policy and climate change writ large, rather than what the policies of governments propose. As new polls emerge, it will be interesting to see the development of how people think and the extent to which cross-national comparisons can be utilized.

Annex

Great Power Status

Q: How do you think the relationship will develop between Russia and the West after the current conflict over Ukraine and Crimea?

	An increase in tensions, a new round of the 'Cold War'	The relationship will gradually return to what it was before these incidents	Difficult to say
Russia 2014	40	45	15
Russia 2015 (A)	42	45	13
Russia 2015 (B)	33	52	15
Russia 2016 (A)	32	49	19
Russia 2016 (B)	27	48	25
Russia 2018	34	46	20

Source: Levada 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018

Q: Which statement comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right? Russia is as respected around the world as it should be OR Russia should be more respected around the world than it is?

	Russia is respected around the world as it should be. (Yes)	Russia should be more respected around the world than it is. (No)
Russia 2012	16	73
Russia 2017	34	56

Source: Pew Global Attitudes 2012, 2017

Q: Is Russia currently a great power?

	Net Yes	Definitely	Mostly	Net No	Mostly No	Definitely Not
Russia 2011	47	11	36	46	45	11
Russia 2014	63	17	46	32	27	5
Russia 2015	68	19	49	27	24	3
Russia 2016	64	21	43	27	23	4
Russia 2017	72	28	44	22	19	3
Russia 2018	75	35	40	23	17	6

Source: Levada 2011, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018

Q: Has Putin's handling of Ukraine situation led people to have a more favorable opinion of Russia, a less favorable opinion, or has it made no difference?

	Yes, Favorable	No	No Difference
Russia 2014	49	26	22
Russia 2015	27	37	25

Source: Pew Global Attitudes 2014, 2015

Q: Please tell me if the United States, in the future, should cooperate more or less with Russia?

	Cooperate More	Cooperate Less	The Same
US 2017	43	44	4
US 2018	35	58	2
US 2019	35	52	6

Source: Pew Global Attitudes 2017, 2018, 2019

Q: If Russia got into serious military conflict with NATO ally neighbor, should we use military force to defend them?

	Yes	No
US 2015	56	37
US 2017	62	31
US 2019	60	29
Canada 2015	53	36
Canada 2017	58	31
Canada 2019	56	38

Source: Pew Global Attitudes 2015, 2017, 2019

Arctic Security

*Q: Do you feel that the threat of military conflict in the Arctic over the last year has...?
(Increased/Decreased/Stayed the Same)*

	Increased	Stayed the same	Decreased
Russia 2015	50	26	8
Finland 2015	51	27	3
Iceland 2015	58	39	2
Sweden 2015	33.3	28	3
Norway 2015	35	30	5
Denmark 2015	29	37	5
US South 2015	24	36	5
Alaska 2015	34	45	10
Canada South 2015	36	45	5
Canada North 2015	30	56	8

Source: Rethinking the Top of the World 2015

Q: The Arctic should be a nuclear weapons free zone just like Antarctica is, and the United States and Russia should remove their nuclear weapons from the Arctic. (Agree 4-5)

	Yes		Yes
Russia 2011	56	Russia 2015	68
Finland 2011	77	Finland 2015	88
Iceland 2011	75	Iceland 2015	88
Sweden 2011	83	Sweden 2015	90
Norway 2011	82	Norway 2015	83
Denmark 2011	74	Denmark 2015	83
US 2011	47	US South 2015	67
Alaska 2011	(No data)	Alaska 2015	46
Canada South 2011	78	Canada South 2015	81
Canada North 2011	76	Canada North 2015	79

Source: Rethinking the Top of the World 2011, 2015

Notes

¹ “What is Public Opinion Polling and Why is it important?” Gallup World Poll, 2007, <http://media.gallup.com/muslimwestfacts/pdf/pollingandhowtouseitr1dreveng.pdf>.

² Joshua Clinton, “Polling Problems and Why We Should Still Trust (Some) Polls,” The Vanderbilt Project on Unity and American Democracy, January 11, 2021 <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/unity/2021/01/11/polling-problems-and-why-we-should-still-trust-some-polls/>.

³ The United States, Canada, Russia, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark/Greenland, Iceland.

⁴ These polls were compared from 2008-2018 and many questions on these polls remained the same giving the comparison explanatory value.

⁵ Adam Withnall, “Crimeans overwhelmingly vote to leave Ukraine and join Russia in contentious referendum,” *The Guardian*, March 16, 2014, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/crimea-referendum-how-why-and-where-next-for-soon-to-be-divided-ukraine-9195310.html>.

⁶ Paul Miller, “Crimea Proves that Great Power Rivalry Never Left Us,” *Foreign Policy*, March 21, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/21/crimea-proves-that-great-power-rivalry-never-left-us/>.

⁷ Full question formulation in annex.