



In response to international sanctions, a Russian supporter of Vladimir Putin shows off a T-shirt that reads, "Our nuclear missiles are not afraid of sanctions."

RUSSIA

Why Study This Case?

For decades, Russia stood out from all other countries in the world. Established in 1917, the Soviet Union (which included present-day Russia and many of its neighbors) was the world's first Communist state. The Soviet Union served as a beacon for Communists everywhere, a symbol of how freedom and equality could be transformed if the working class could truly gain power. It provoked equally strong responses among its opponents, who saw it as a violent, dangerous, and power-hungry dictatorship. The rapid growth of Soviet power from the 1930s onward only exacerbated this tension, which eventually culminated in a Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union following World War II. Armed with thousands of nuclear weapons, these two ideologically hostile states struggled to maintain a balance of power and to avoid a nuclear holocaust. Until the 1980s, many observers believed that humanity would eventually face a final, violent conflict between these two systems.

Yet when the Soviet Union's end finally came, it was not with a bang but with a whimper. In the 1980s, the Soviet Union saw the rise of a new generation of leaders who realized that their system was no longer primed to overtake the West, economically or otherwise. The general secretary of the Soviet Union's Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev, attempted to inject limited political and economic reforms into the system. His reforms, however, seemed only to exacerbate domestic problems and polarize the leadership and the public. Gorbachev's actions resulted in the actual dissolution of the Soviet Union and the formation of 15 independent countries, one of which is Russia.

How would Russia be reconstructed from the ruins? Like many of the other postcommunist countries, it had to confront the twin tasks of forging democracy and establishing capitalism in a land that had little

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historical experience with either process. How does a nation go about creating a market economy after communism? How does it go about building democracy? Russia proves a fascinating study of the quest to build new institutions that reconcile freedom and equality in a manner far different from that of the previous regime. We can learn a lot from Russia's attempt at meeting this awesome challenge.

A quarter century on, the prospects for Russian democracy and development appear to be poor. After an initial decade of incomplete and chaotic political and economic reform, the country began moving away from a liberal economic system and liberal democracy. Under the leadership of President **Vladimir Putin**, Russia has seen the effective end to democratic institutions, as ever-greater authority is concentrated in the hands of the president and those around him. Limitations on federalism, elections, and other changes have all been directed at reducing political power beyond the presidency. Additionally, steps have been taken to restrict civil society: the state has brought the mass media under federal control and increasingly is preventing independent political parties and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from functioning. Today, an incipient democratic ideology has been replaced by a focus on Russian nationalism and militarism, reflecting a sense of humiliation that the country has lost its authoritative role in the international system. Russia's seizure of the Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and accusations of Russian meddling in American and European elections have only further increased hostility. Relations between Russia and the West are now at their worst since the Cold War.

Similarly, the economy, which in the 1990s experienced a drastic and incomplete shift to private property and market forces, has seen both increasingly curtailed. Powerful economic leaders whose fortunes rose during that period, the **oligarchs**, have now been largely divested of their wealth, driven from the country, or imprisoned. Assets, particularly natural resources, have been renationalized or transferred to individuals close to Putin. Economic growth has been inconsistent and largely propelled by oil and gas prices. In economics and politics, the country has fallen under the control of the **siloviki** ("men of power"), individuals who, like Putin, have their origins in the security agencies. And yet Putin's consolidation of power and his limitations on democracy and the market have garnered public support. Tired of the chaos of market reforms, cynical about postcommunist politics, and angry about Russia's loss of power in the world, most Russians have appreciated Putin's promise to restore order and Russian pride. To a large extent, he has succeeded.

In 2008, President Putin stepped down from power, having served the two-term limit on the office. His handpicked successor, Dimitri Medvedev, easily won the presidential election and promptly appointed Putin to be his prime minister. Given Medvedev's non-*siloviki* background and the power inherent in the presidential office, some expected that this transfer of power could represent a break with the Putin era. Instead, as prime minister, Putin still called the shots; then he returned to the presidency in 2012, appointing Medvedev as prime minister. Because he is able to serve another two 6-year terms, it appears that Putin will remain in office until 2024. At that point, he will have governed Russia for a quarter of a century.

In many ways, Russia has become as opaque and resistant to change as it was under communism—a worrying sign for that country and the rest of the world. In this chapter, we will look at the past, the promise, and the present of Russian politics and political change, with an eye to where this country may be headed.

Major Geographic and Demographic Features

As we study Russia's geography, the first thing we notice is the country's vast size. Even when viewed separately from the various republics that made up the Soviet Union, Russia is nearly four times the size of the United States and covers 11 time zones. Yet much of this land is relatively unpopulated. With some 144 million people, Russia's population is far smaller than that of either the United States or the European Union (total populations around 300 million and 500 million, respectively). Much of the Russian population is concentrated in the western, geographically European part of the country.

Russia's east, Siberia, is a flat region largely uninhabited because of its bitterly cold climate. Siberia represents an interesting comparison to the American frontier experience. While Americans moved westward toward the Pacific Ocean in the nineteenth century to find new lands to settle, Russians moved eastward toward the same ocean. Alaska was part of the Russian Empire until it was sold to the United States in 1867. But Russian and American experiences of the frontier were quite different. In America, the amenability of the climate and soil helped spread the population across the country and reinforce a sense of pioneer individualism. In contrast, the harsh conditions of Siberia meant that only the state could function effectively in much of the region, where it developed infrastructure and

created populated communities. Many of the people who settled Siberia, before and after 1917, were political prisoners sent into exile.

Because of Russia's enormous size and location, the country has many neighbors. Unlike the relative isolation of North America, Russia shares borders with no fewer than 14 countries. Many of these countries were part of the Soviet Union and are considered by Russians to remain in their sphere of influence. But Russia also shares a long border with China, a neighbor with whom it has often had troubled relations. Russia also controls a series of islands in the Pacific that belonged to Japan until 1945, and this situation remains a source of friction between the two countries. Russia has long felt uneasy about its neighborhood. Over the centuries, unable to rely on oceans or mountains as natural defenses, it has been subject to countless invasions from Europe and Asia. Physical isolation has never been an option, and Russian territorial expansion has a long history.

Russia may suffer from some intemperate climates and uneasy borders, but it benefits in other areas. The country is rich in natural resources, among them wood, oil, natural gas, gold, nickel, and diamonds. Many of these resources are concentrated in Siberia and are thus not easy to extract, yet they remain important and have been central to the Russian economy.

Historical Development of the State

Religion, Foreign Invasion, and the Emergence of a Russian State

Any understanding of present-day Russia and its political struggles must begin with an understanding of how the state developed over time. Though ethnically Slavic peoples have lived in European Russia for centuries, these peoples are not credited with founding the first Russian state. Rather, credit is usually given to Scandinavians (Vikings) who expanded into the region in the ninth century C.E., forming a capital in the city of Kiev. Nonetheless, the true origins of the Russian state remain open to debate. This issue is highly politicized, because many Russians reject the notion that foreigners were first responsible for the genesis of the Russian people. The dispute even involves the very name of the country. Scholars who believe in the Viking origin of the Russian state argue that the name Russia (or **Rus**) comes from the Finnish word for the Swedes, *Ruotsi*, which derives from a Swedish word meaning "rowers." Those who dispute this claim argue that the name is of a tribal or geographic origin that can be traced to the native Slav inhabitants.¹

Whatever its origins, by the late tenth century the Kievan state had emerged as a major force, stretching from Scandinavia to Central Europe. It had also adopted **Orthodox Christianity**, centered in Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul). Orthodoxy developed distinctly from Roman Catholicism in a number of practical and theological ways, among them the perception of the relationship between church and state. Roman Catholics came to see the pope as the central leader of the faith, separate from the political power of Europe's kings. Orthodoxy, however, did not draw such a line between political and religious authority. This situation, some argue, stunted the idea of a society functioning independently of the state.

Another important development was the Mongol invasion of Russia in the thirteenth century. The Mongols, a nomadic Asian people, first united under Genghis Khan and controlled Russia (along with much of China and the Middle East) for over two centuries. During that time, Russians suffered from widespread economic destruction, massacres, enslavement, urban depopulation, and the extraction of resources. Some scholars view this occupation as the central event that set Russia on a historical path separate from that of the West—one leading to greater despotism and isolation. Cut off from European intellectual and economic influences, Russia did not participate in the Renaissance, feel the impact of the Protestant Reformation, or develop a strong middle class.

Not all scholars agree with this assessment, however. For some, the move toward despotism had its impetus not in religion or foreign invasion but in domestic leadership. Specifically, they point to the rule of Ivan the Terrible (1547–84), who came to power in the decades following Russia's final independence from Mongol control. Consolidating power in Moscow rather than Kiev, Ivan began to assert Russia's authority over that of foreign rulers and began to destroy any government institutions that obstructed his consolidation of personal power. In a precursor to the Soviet experience, he created a personal police force that terrorized his political opponents. Though Ivan is viewed in much of Russian history as the unifier of the country, many historians see in him the seeds of repressive and capricious rule.² Whatever his legacy, in Ivan's rule we see the emergence of a single Russian emperor, or **tsar** (or *czar*, from the Latin word *Caesar*), who exercised sovereignty over the nation's lands and aristocrats.

We might argue that no one factor led to Russia's unique growth of state power and its dearth of democratic institutions. Religion may have shaped political culture in a way that influenced how Russians viewed the relationship between the individual and the state. Historic catastrophes such as Mongol rule may have stunted economic growth and cut the country off from the developments that

TIMELINE OF POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

YEAR	EVENT
1552–56	Ivan the Terrible conquers the Tatar khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan; establishes Russian rule over the lower and middle Volga River.
1689–1725	Peter the Great introduces reforms, including the subordination of the church, the creation of a regular conscript army and navy, and new government structures.
1793–1814	Russia intervenes in the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars.
1861	Edict of Emancipation ends serfdom.
1917	Monarchy is overthrown and a provisional government established; Bolsheviks in turn overthrow the provisional government.
1918–20	Civil war takes place between the Red Army and the White Russians, or anticommunists.
1938	Joseph Stalin consolidates power; purges begin.
1953	Stalin dies.
1985	Mikhail Gorbachev becomes general secretary and initiates economic and political reforms.
1991	Failed coup against Gorbachev leads to the collapse of the Soviet Union; Boris Yeltsin becomes president of independent Russia.
1993	Yeltsin suspends the parliament and calls for new elections; legislators barricade themselves inside the parliament building, and Yeltsin orders the army to attack parliament; Russians approve a new constitution, which gives the president numerous powers.
1994–96	In a war between Russia and the breakaway republic of Chechnya, Chechnya is invaded, and a cease-fire is declared.
1999	Yeltsin appoints Vladimir Putin prime minister and resigns from office; Putin becomes acting president.
1999	Russia reinvades Chechnya following a series of bomb explosions blamed on Chechen extremists.
2000	Putin is first elected as president.
2008	Dimitri Medvedev becomes president; Putin becomes prime minister.
2012	Putin returns to presidency.
2014	Russian armed conflict with Ukraine and annexation of Crimea.

occurred elsewhere in Europe. Political leadership might also have solidified certain authoritarian institutions. None of these conditions, individually, may have had a defining influence on the country's development. But taken together, they served to pull Russia away from the West. This interpretation of events has been deemphasized of late in Russian politics.

Ivan's death left Russia with an identity crisis. Did it belong to Europe, one of numerous rival states with a common history and culture? Or did differences in history, religion, and location mean that Russia was separate from the West? Even today, Russia continues to confront this question. Some rulers, most notably Peter the Great (1689–1725), saw Westernization as a major goal. This view was typified in the relocation of the country's capital from Moscow to St. Petersburg, to place it closer to Europe (it was moved back to Moscow after the Russian Revolution of 1917). Peter consulted with numerous foreign advisers in his quest to modernize the country (particularly the military) and carry out administrative and educational reforms. In contrast, reactionaries such as Nicholas I (1825–55) were hostile to reforms. In Nicholas's case, this hostility was so great that in the last years of his reign even foreign travel was forbidden. Reforms, such as the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, proceeded over time but lagged behind the pace of changes in Europe. As Russia vacillated between reform and reaction, there was continuity in the growth of a centralized state and a weak middle class. Industrialization came late, emerging in the 1880s and relying heavily on state intervention. This inconsistent modernization caused Russia to fall behind its international rivals.

The Seeds of Revolution

The growing disjunction between a largely agrarian and aristocratic society and a highly autonomous state and traditional monarchy would soon foster revolution. As Russia engaged in the great power struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was battered by the cost of war, and national discontent grew. In 1904, Russia and Japan came into conflict as each sought to gain control over portions of China. To Russia's surprise, Japan asserted its military strength and quickly proved itself the more modern power, defeating Russia. In 1905, Russia experienced a series of domestic shocks in the form of protests by members of the growing working class, who had migrated to the cities during the rapid industrialization of the previous two decades. The Revolution of 1905 forced Nicholas II to institute a series of limited reforms, including the creation of a legislature (the

Duma). Although these reforms did quell the revolt, they were not revolutionary (the changes themselves were limited), nor did they bring stability to Russia. Shortly thereafter, the tsar began to weaken the very rights and institutions to which he had agreed. Meanwhile, many radical political leaders refused to participate in these new institutions and sought the removal of the tsar himself.

World War I was the final straw. The overwhelming financial and human costs of the war exacerbated domestic tensions, weakening rather than strengthening national unity. As the war ground on, Russia faced food shortages, public disturbances, and eventually a widespread military revolt. The tsar was forced to step down in March of 1917, and a noncommunist, republican leadership took control, unwisely choosing to remain in the war. This provisional government had little success asserting its authority. As disorder and public confusion grew, Communist revolutionaries, led by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870–1924), staged a coup d'état. This was no mass rebellion but rather an overthrow of those in power by a small, disciplined force. After a subsequent civil war against anticommunist forces, Lenin began transforming Russia, which was renamed the Soviet Union, the first Communist state in world history.³

The Russian Revolution under Lenin

In many aspects, Lenin's takeover was a radical, revolutionary event, but in other ways, the new Communist government fell back on the conservative institutions of traditional Russian rule. Under Lenin, local revolutionary authority (in the form of **soviets**, or workers' councils) was pushed aside, though it was given superficial recognition in the new name of the country: the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Similarly, although the Communist Party embraced Russia's multinational character by creating a federal system around its major ethnic groups, the new republics had little power. Authority was vested solely in the Communist Party, which controlled all government and state activity. Alternative political parties and private media were banned. A secret-police force, the **Cheka**, was formed to root out opposition; it later became the **KGB**, the body that would control domestic dissent and supervise overseas surveillance. The "commanding heights" of industry were nationalized—seized by the state in the name of the people. Managing all of this newfound power was a growing bureaucratic system composed of the *nomenklatura*—the select list or class of Communist Party members to whom politically influential jobs in the state, society, or economy were given. The Communist state took on the enormous task of managing the

basic economic and social life of the country. Such tasks necessitated the state's high degree of capacity and autonomy.

Yet even under Lenin's harsh leadership, the Soviet state did not reach its zenith. For the Soviet leadership, 1917 was intended simply as a first step in a worldwide process. One historian writes evocatively of Soviet telephone operators ready to receive the call that revolution had broken out elsewhere in the world in response to their triumph.⁴

As the years passed without other successful revolutions, the Soviet Union had to confront the possibility that it alone might have to serve as the vanguard of world revolution. Its focus had to shift so that domestic politics, not spreading revolution, would be paramount. Yet many old revolutionaries (those who had taken part in the 1917 events) had little interest in the day-to-day affairs of the party and state. One exception was Joseph Stalin (1879–1953), whose power over the party grew after Lenin died. By appointing loyal followers to positions of power and slowly consolidating his control over party and state institutions through increasingly brutal means, Stalin was able to force out other revolutionary leaders. One by one, those who had fought alongside Lenin in the revolution were removed from power, demoted, exiled, imprisoned, and/or executed.

Stalinism, Terror, and the Totalitarian State

By the late 1930s, Stalin had consolidated control over the Soviet party-state and was thus free to construct a totalitarian regime that reached across politics, economics, and society. When a central planning bureaucracy was created to allocate resources and distribute goods, the last vestiges of private property were wiped away. The impact of this change was particularly dramatic in agriculture, which was forcibly collectivized. Farmers often destroyed their livestock and crops rather than surrender them to the state, and many wealthy peasants were executed. Agricultural production collapsed, and as many as 7 million lives were lost in the resulting famine. In industry, the government embarked on a policy of crash industrialization in an attempt to catch up with and overtake the capitalist countries.

Power was thus centralized to a degree unknown before Soviet rule.⁵ This growing power of the bureaucratic elite was enforced by the secret police, who turned their attention to anyone suspected of opposing Stalin's rule, whether outside the party or within. Estimates are that more than a million people were imprisoned in the 1930s, and nearly 1 million were executed. Terror became a central feature of

control, and the innocence or guilt of those arrested was often largely irrelevant. Finally, Stalin's power was solidified through a cult of personality that portrayed him as godlike, incapable of error, and infinitely wise.

Stability and Stagnation after Stalin

With Stalin's death in 1953, the Soviet leadership moved away from its uses of unbridled terror and centralized power, and Stalin's excesses were publicly criticized to a certain extent. The basic features of the Soviet system, however, remained in place. Power was vested in the **Politburo**, the ruling cabinet of the Communist Party. At its head was the general secretary, the de facto leader of the country. Government positions, such as national legislators, the head of the government, and the head of state, were controlled and staffed by the Communist Party and simply implemented the decisions of the Politburo. The economy also remained under the control of a central planning bureaucracy, and although Russians were no longer terrorized, security forces continued to suppress public dissent through arrest and harassment. All basic aspects of Soviet life were decided by the *nomenklatura*. The party elite became, in essence, a new ruling class.

For a time, this system worked. The state was able to industrialize rapidly by controlling and directing all resources and labor. Moreover, in its infancy, Soviet rule enjoyed a high degree of legitimacy among the public. Even in the darkest years of Stalin's terror, citizens saw the creation of roads, railways, massive factories, homes, and schools, as well as the installation of electricity, where none had existed before. If individual freedom was restricted, the system was more equal than at any time in Russian history. Many people were given education, jobs, health care, and retirement benefits, often for the first time. The Soviet people saw their standard of living increase dramatically.

But by the 1960s, some party leaders had begun to realize that a system so controlled by a central bureaucracy was becoming too institutionalized and conservative to allow for necessary change or innovation. General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev, who took office in 1953 after Stalin's death, made an initial attempt at reform. But Khrushchev was thwarted by the party-state bureaucracy and forced from his position by the Politburo in 1964. He was replaced by Leonid Brezhnev (1964–82), who rejected further reform and placated the *nomenklatura* by assuring them that their power and privileges were protected. Under these conditions, economic growth slowed. Those in power became increasingly corrupt and detached, using their positions to gain access to scarce resources.

Public cynicism grew as economic development declined. In the 1960s, it was still possible to believe that Soviet development might match or even surpass that of the West. But by the 1980s, it was clear that, in many areas, the Soviet Union was in fact stagnating or falling behind.

The Failure of Reform and the Collapse of the Soviet State

Upon Brezhnev's death in 1982, a new generation of political thinkers emerged from the wings seeking to transform the Soviet state. Among its members was Mikhail Gorbachev, who became general secretary in 1985. Unconnected to the Stalinist period, Gorbachev believed that the Soviet state could be revitalized through the dual policies of **glasnost** ("political openness") and **perestroika** ("economic restructuring"). Gorbachev believed that a limited rollback of the state from public life would encourage citizen participation and weaken the *nomenklatura's* powerful grip. Similarly, it was thought that economic reforms would increase incentives (like better pay) and reduce the role of central planning, thus improving the quality and quantity of goods. Overall, the ruling bodies expected that the Soviet people would be better off and that the legitimacy of the Communist Party would be restored.

In hindsight, we can see that the attack on state power was disastrous for the Soviet system. Gorbachev unleashed forces he could not control, which led to divisive struggles inside and outside the party. Nationalism grew among the many ethnic groups in the various republics, and some went so far as to demand independence. Critics attacked the corruption and incompetence of the party, calling for greater democracy, and others demanded a greater role for market forces and private property. Still others were disoriented by the changes and upset by the implication that the Soviet past had in fact been a historical dead end.⁶

Party leaders became polarized over the pace and scope of reform. Among them was **Boris Yeltsin** (1931–2007), an early protégé of Gorbachev's who was sidelined as his calls for change grew more radical. Though ejected from the Politburo, Yeltsin was elected president of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic (the largest republic in the ostensibly federal Soviet system). The moderate Gorbachev was now under attack from two sides: by Yeltsin and other reformers who faulted Gorbachev's unwillingness to embrace radical change, and by conservatives and reactionaries who condemned his betrayal of communism. The very institutions

of the party-state, unresponsive and unchanged for decades, began to unravel. In some ways, the Soviet Union began to resemble the chaotic Russia of pre-1917, and the tensions eventually came to a head. In August 1991, a group of anti-reform conservatives sought to stop the disintegration of Soviet institutions by mounting a coup d'état against Gorbachev, hoping that the party-state and the military would join their ranks. After the conspirators placed Gorbachev under arrest, Yeltsin led the resistance, famously denouncing the takeover while standing atop a tank. The army refused to back the coup, and it unraveled within two days.

As the coup collapsed, so did Gorbachev's political authority. The public blamed him for the chaos that had led up to the takeover (in fact, the conspirators were members of his cabinet, appointed to solidify his power). Moreover, Gorbachev was eclipsed by Yeltsin, whose authority was bolstered by his heroic stance against the coup. Yeltsin seized the opportunity to ban the Communist Party, effectively destroying what remained of Gorbachev's political base. In December 1991, Yeltsin and the leaders of the various Soviet republics dissolved the Soviet Union, and Yeltsin became president of a new, independent Russia. He held this position until 1999, when he named his prime minister, the otherwise unknown Vladimir Putin, acting president. Putin won the presidential elections in 2000 and again in 2004; he stepped down due to term limits in 2008. However, he retained power as prime minister and was reelected as president in 2012. Much of Russia's post-Soviet regime has thus been under the rule of one man.

Political Regime

Any sense that Russia could be considered a democracy has come to a definitive end. Certainly the country enjoys a much higher degree of individual freedom than did its Soviet predecessor, in such areas as the right to travel or own property. But while a number of ostensibly democratic structures have been built since 1991, under Putin they have been restricted or ignored.

It is hard to speak of Russia as even an illiberal democracy, since it has few elements of democracy that in fact function to any meaningful degree. Whereas in the 1990s, democratic institutions and civic organizations were weak and poorly institutionalized, in the Putin era they have been effectively stifled. An illiberal regime presumes the existence of democratic institutions whose power and legitimacy are uncertain. In Russia now, it is difficult to point to any institutions among state or society that are allowed to contribute to democratic activity in a substantive way. As we consider Russia's political regime, therefore, we need to

keep in mind the extent to which any of the powers or responsibilities elucidated by the constitution match politics in reality.

Political Institutions

THE CONSTITUTION

The Russian constitution is a document born of violent conflict. Independent Russia emerged in the aftermath of a failed coup d'état by opponents of radical reform. This history is different from the recent history of most other Eastern European Communist countries, where Communist leaders were removed from power through public protest and elections. Although the Soviet state was dissolved, many elements of the old regime, including its political leaders, remained intact and in power. Boris Yeltsin thus faced a set of political institutions that were largely unchanged from those of the previous era. This carryover led to conflict. Most problematic was the battle between President Yeltsin and the existing parliament. At first, the parliament was a bicameral body consisting of the Congress of People's Deputies and the Supreme Soviet, both of which remained packed with former party members. The parliament initially supported Yeltsin but soon clashed with him over the speed and scope of his economic reforms.

As Yeltsin sought increased reform, the parliament grew so hostile that it sought to block his policies (including constitutional reform) and impeach him. In September 1993, Yeltsin responded by dissolving the parliament. His parliamentary

opponents barricaded themselves in their offices, attempted to seize control of the national television station, and called for the army to depose the president. The army sided with Yeltsin, however, containing his opposition and suppressing the uprising with force. This support paved the way for Yeltsin to write a new constitution, which was ratified in 1993. Though the new constitution formally swept away the old legislative order, it could hardly be described as an auspicious beginning for democracy because it facilitated the development of a system that emphasized presidential power.

The Branches of Government

THE KREMLIN: THE PRESIDENT AND THE PRIME MINISTER

For centuries, Russians have referred to executive power, whether in the form of the tsar or the general secretary, as the **Kremlin**. Dating back to the eleventh century, the physical structure known as the Kremlin is a fortress in the heart of Moscow that has historically been the seat of state power. Today, much of the Kremlin's power is vested in the hands of the presidency, as elaborated in the 1993 constitution. That constitution created a powerful office through which the president could press for economic and political changes despite parliamentary opposition. Under Yeltsin and Putin, the result has been a semi-presidential system in which the president served as head of state while a prime minister served as head of government. Power is divided between the two offices, but the president has held an overwhelming amount of executive power. Since 2012, the president is directly elected to serve a six-year term (before then, presidential terms were only four years). The president may serve no more than two consecutive terms and can be removed only through impeachment. Vladimir Putin was elected in 2000 after serving as Boris Yeltsin's last prime minister, and he was reelected in 2004 after facing little serious competition for the office. His successor, Dimitri Medvedev, was similarly selected by Putin to run for the office in 2008. Medvedev won easily, since other candidates were effectively barred from running for the office. Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, following an election against a set of weak opposition candidates. Putin's return came as a surprise to many who hoped that he would remain in a secondary position of power, and it is widely assumed that Medvedev stepped down at Putin's instruction.

On paper, the president's powers are numerous. The president, not parliament, chooses and dismisses the prime minister and other members of the cabinet. The

ESSENTIAL POLITICAL FEATURES

- **Legislative-executive system:** Semi-presidential
- **Legislature:** Federal Assembly
 - **Lower house:** State Duma
 - **Upper house:** Federation Council
- **Unitary or federal division of power:** Federal
- **Main geographic subunits:** Republics, provinces, territories, autonomous districts, federal cities (Moscow and St. Petersburg)
- **Electoral system for lower house:** Proportional representation
- **Electoral system for upper house:** Appointed by local executive and legislature
- **Chief judicial body:** Constitutional Court

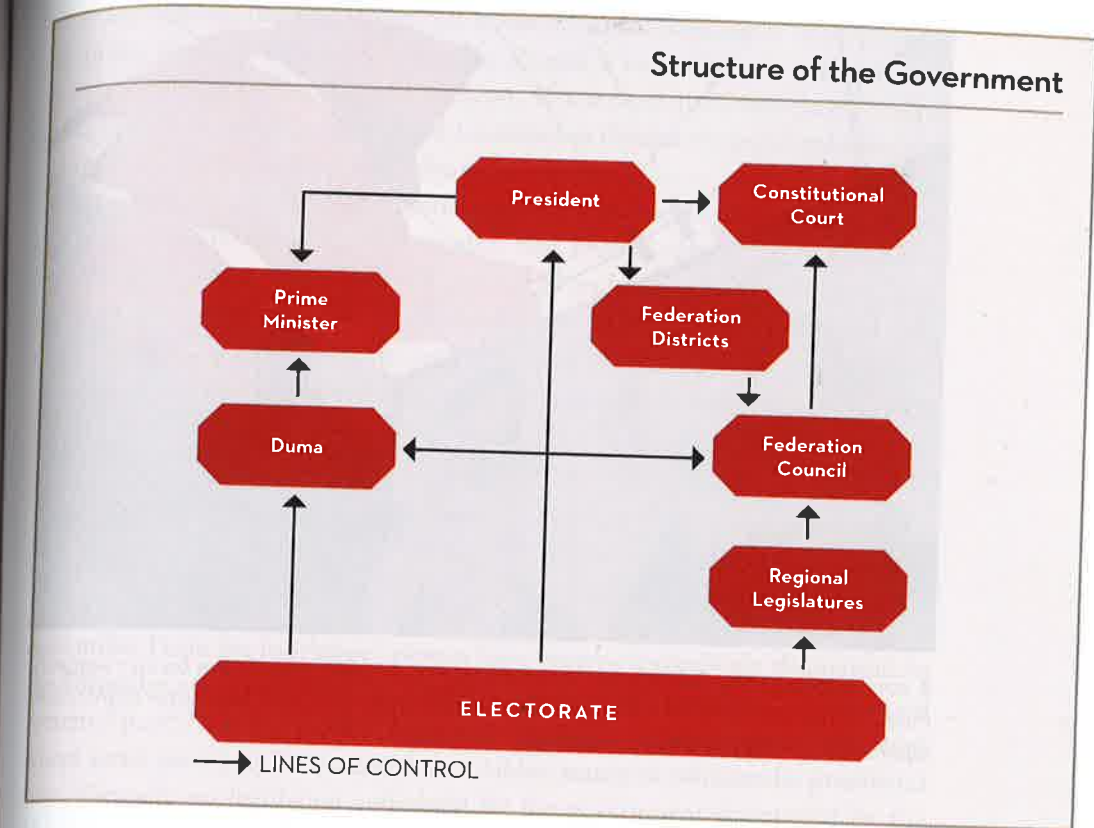
lower house of parliament, the State Duma, may reject the president's nominee, but if it does so three times, the president must dissolve the Duma and call for new elections. The president cannot, however, dissolve the Duma either in the year following parliamentary elections or in the last six months of his term. The president also appoints leaders to eight federal districts that constitute all of Russia, which allows him to oversee the work of local authorities.

The president may propose and veto bills, and, just as important, he can issue decrees—laws that do not require legislative approval, are often not made public, and may not be challenged by citizens in the courts. President Yeltsin frequently relied on decrees to bypass his obstreperous legislature. Even with a more compliant body, Putin has often used the power of the decree to directly conduct foreign or domestic policy, such as withdrawing from the International Criminal Court or to reorganize federal districts (both of which occurred in 2016).⁷

Another source of power lies in the president's control of important segments of the state. The president has direct control over the Foreign Ministry, the Defense Ministry, and the Interior Ministry (which handles the police and domestic security), as well as over the armed forces. He also controls the successor to the KGB, the **Federal Security Service (FSB)**, which manages domestic intelligence and is viewed by many as the main political actor in Russia, alongside Putin. Presidential control over these ministries and services allows the office a great deal of influence in foreign affairs and domestic security, and reinforces the power of Putin's core supporters, the *siloviki*.

As in the United States and other presidential or semi-presidential systems, it is difficult to remove the Russian president; impeachment is possible only on a charge of high treason or another grave crime. The impeachment process must first be approved by the high courts, after which two-thirds of both houses of parliament must vote in support of the president's removal. In 1999, the parliament attempted to impeach President Yeltsin on various charges, including his 1993 conflict with the legislature, economic reform, and the war in **Chechnya**. None of the charges passed.

In contrast to that of the president, the prime minister's role is to supervise those ministries not under presidential control and propose legislation to parliament that upholds the president's policy goals. The prime minister also promulgates the national budget. The Russian prime minister and other members of the cabinet, unlike their counterparts in many other parliamentary systems, are not appointed from and need not reflect the relative powers of the various parties in parliament. Because of the president's ability to choose the prime minister and other members of the cabinet, there is less need to form a government



that represents the largest parties in parliament. During Putin's first tenure as president, Russian prime ministers were largely career bureaucrats chosen for their technical expertise or loyalty to the president rather than party leaders who had climbed the ranks in parliament.

The appointment of Putin to be prime minister "under" Medvedev raised many questions about the nature of the semi-presidential system in Russia. In advance of the 2008 presidential elections, Putin made it clear that he expected to become prime minister in return for his selection of Medvedev to run for president, and he continued to dominate politics from what was ostensibly the weaker office. This led to a great deal of confusion about where executive power really lay, and Medvedev's decision to step down after one term only reinforced the sense that power is more vested in an individual than any particular office. Putin's personal authority has trumped institutional authority, rendering problematic our understanding of Russian politics based on formal institutions like the constitution.



A 2012 protest by the Communist Party against Putin's reelection. As the banner suggests, Putin (on the left) will hold office another 12 years, when an elderly Medvedev (right) could again return to the presidency until 2030.

THE LEGISLATURE

Given the power of the Russian presidency, does the national legislature have any real role? Its lack of effectiveness is certainly consistent with the Soviet past. Under Communist rule, the legislature served as little more than a rubber stamp, meeting for a few days each year simply to pass legislation drafted by party leaders. Today, Russia's parliament has little direct influence over the course of government, but it would be an exaggeration to say that nothing has changed since Soviet times.

Russia's bicameral parliament is known officially as the Federal Assembly. It comprises a lower house, the 450-seat State Duma, and an upper house, the 170-seat Federation Council. Members of the Duma, the more powerful of the two houses, serve five-year terms, while members of the Federation Council serve varied terms depending on the rules of federal territory they represent. The Duma has the right to initiate and accept or reject legislation and may override the president's veto with a two-thirds vote. The Duma also approves the appointment of the prime minister, though repeated rejections can lead to its dissolution. As in

other legislatures, the Duma can call a vote of no confidence in opposition to the prime minister and his government. Should a no-confidence vote pass, the president may simply ignore the decision. If a second such vote passes within three months, however, the president is obliged to dismiss the prime minister and cabinet or call for new Duma elections.

In the instances of prime ministerial approval and votes of no confidence, then, the Duma wields unpredictable weapons. The Duma's opposition to the prime minister (and, by extension, the president) could lead to its own dissolution. Under the right circumstances, however, this could lead to elections that strengthen the position of parties that oppose the current leadership. Of course, the exact opposite could also occur. Thus far, the Duma has not put this power to use, though in 1998 the Yeltsin administration was forced to withdraw a candidate for prime minister after he was rejected twice. In that case, the president feared new elections would only bring more anti-Yeltsin representatives into the Duma.

Another area in which the Duma can theoretically wield power is in the drafting of legislation. During the Yeltsin administration, the majority of legislation originated in the Duma, much of it dealing with substantial public issues. However, under Putin the legislature's powers have become increasingly theoretical. As the Duma became dominated by a single party loyal to Putin (see "The Electoral System," p. 357), it has receded from any significant political role, to the point where some view it as little more than a rubber stamp to validate the president's rule. Virtually no legislation submitted by the government is opposed by the Duma, and vice versa. This does not mean that the Duma is inactive, however, as it remains a forum for legislators to lobby for their own preferences and also for the government to provide the appearance of democracy. In fact, the Duma has been described as a "mad printer" for the speed at which it produces legislation, much of which is ambiguous and/or focused on limiting personal freedoms.⁸

As the upper house, the **Federation Council** holds even less power than the Duma. The Federation Council primarily serves to represent local interests and act as a guarantor of the constitution. The body represents all of the 85 federal administrative units, and each unit has two representatives. Since 2002, one representative has been selected by the governor of each region and another by the regional legislature (see the discussion of "Local Government," p. 358). Although the Federation Council does not produce legislation, it must approve bills that deal with certain issues, including taxation and the budget. If the Federation Council rejects legislation (which rarely occurs), the Duma may override the upper house with a two-thirds vote. The Federation Council also theoretically has the ability to impeach the president as well as to approve or reject presidential

appointments to the Constitutional Court, declarations of war and martial law, and international treaties.

As with the Duma, the Federation Council does not serve as a particularly powerful institution inside the Russian state. Even when legislation goes against the interest of the regions, representatives rarely oppose it.

THE JUDICIARY

One of many tasks Russia faces in the coming decades is the establishment of the rule of law. By this, we mean a system in which the law is applied equally and predictably, and no individual is exempt from its strictures. Before Communist rule, Russia did not develop any real traditions of a law-bound state: the tsar acted above the law, viewing the state, society, and economy as his subjects and property. This situation continued into the Soviet era.

Under Stalin, any legitimate legal structures were undermined by the arbitrary use of terror and the vast secret-police force, which maintained its own courts and jails. While these excesses were curbed after Stalin's death, the legal system remained an important means of blocking opposition to the Communist regime. Moreover, no constitutional court existed until 1991. By definition, the party claimed to represent the true expression of the people's will and therefore could not be accused of unconstitutional acts. In reality, the party was not representative of the people's interests. The lack of legal safeguards served only to undermine public confidence in the political order.

Given the history of weak legal institutions, it has been difficult to generate the rule of law in the postcommunist era. Since 1991, Russia has faced an explosion in corruption. Economic and political change have created opportunities to generate fortunes and have allowed those with political power to gain access to new sources of wealth. Organized crime remains a serious problem. At the same time, surveys show that the public mistrusts law enforcement agencies such as the police.

At the top of the Russian legal structure lies the **Constitutional Court**. First developed under Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms in the late-Soviet era, the court has 19 members, nominated by the president and confirmed by the Federation Council. As in other countries, the court is empowered to rule on such matters as international treaties, relations between branches of government, violations of civil rights, and impeachment of the president. It has the power of both abstract review (the ability to rule on constitutional issues even when a case has not been brought before it) and concrete review (the ability to rule on specific

cases). One role the Constitutional Court does *not* play is that of a court of last appeal for criminal cases; this is the responsibility of the Supreme Court. As in the case of the legislature, the court has not played an activist role. In 2014, following Russia's invasion of the Ukrainian region of Crimea, the court quickly recognized Crimea's annexation. It similarly approved legislation that requires nonprofit organizations that engage in influencing public policy (such as environmental and LGBTQ issues) and receive foreign funding to be registered as "foreign agents."⁹

At the start of the Putin administration, the president promised to implement what he called a dictatorship of law, though the result has tended to be more dictatorship than law. The country remains mired in what Prime Minister Medvedev evocatively termed "legal nihilism," wherein legal codes are not respected and the state frequently uses the courts to settle political vendettas or target political opposition. The Rule of Law Index, which looks at such things as constraints on government, regulatory enforcement, and criminal justice, ranked Russia 92nd out of 113 countries surveyed. This is below China (80) and Iran (86).¹⁰

The Electoral System

Like Russia's other institutions, its electoral structure has changed dramatically over the past 20 years. In the late-Soviet period, the president of Russia was indirectly elected by the republic's Congress of People's Deputies. Just before the 1991 coup, the presidency was made a directly elected office; Yeltsin won the election and retained the office when Russia became an independent country. Since that time, Russians have continued to elect their president directly. Elections as an independent country were first held in 1996, when Yeltsin was reelected; since then, they have been held in 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012.

Candidates for president must be nominated by a party represented in the Duma. If they are independent candidates, they must collect 2 million signatures in support of their candidacy. This is a formidable task that eliminates many potential contenders. Presidential elections are relatively straightforward: if no candidate wins a majority in the first round, the top two candidates compete against each other in a second round. A president can serve no more than two consecutive terms, though as we've seen in the case of Putin, this can mean simply stepping aside for one term and then running again. In 2000 and 2004, Putin won a majority (over 70 percent in 2004), eliminating the need for a runoff. In 2012, when he returned to office, he won 63 percent of the vote (amid numerous accusations of voter fraud).

The Duma has also held regular elections. Between 1990 and 1993, these were conducted using a plurality system of single-member districts (SMDs), as in the United Kingdom and the United States. With the 1993 constitution, however, Russia adopted a mixed system similar to that found in Japan and Germany. That is, half the seats in the Duma were elected through a plurality system, and the other half were selected in multimember districts (MMDs) using proportional representation (PR), in which the share of the vote given to a party roughly matches the percentage of seats it is allotted.

Under Putin, this system was again changed to consolidate political power. In 2007, Duma elections were held solely under PR to eliminate individual candidates not under party control. Electoral reforms also prevented parties from forming an electoral bloc to compete as a single group to overcome the threshold (a minimum percentage of the vote to gain seats in the legislature). All of these changes had the effect of eliminating independent candidates and small parties. Interestingly, 2016 Duma elections returned to a mixed system. Why? Some suggest that a return to single-member districts was intended to provide to the public a greater sense of direct influence over the Duma (though as we noted, it remains a weak body). Perhaps more importantly, reducing PR limits the ability of rival parties to gain a large foothold in the legislature. These explanations suggest that Putin and his ruling party, United Russia, do not take their hold over the Duma for granted.

Local Government

One of the greatest battles within the institutional framework of Russia over the past 15 years has been between the central government and local authorities. Just as tensions between Soviet central power and the republics contributed to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, so, too, centrifugal tendencies have beset Russia since 1991. Like the Soviet Union that preceded it, Russia is a federal system with a bewildering array of more than 80 different regional bodies: 21 republics (22 if we include Crimea, seized from Ukraine in 2014), 46 *oblasts* ("provinces"), 9 *krays* ("territories"), 4 autonomous *okrugs* ("districts"), and the 2 federal cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg (3 if we include Sevastopol, the capital of Crimea).

Each of these bodies has different rights. The 21 republics, for example, represent particular non-Russian ethnic groups and enjoy greater rights, such as to have their own constitution and a state language alongside Russian. In the early 1990s, several republics went so far as to make claims of sovereignty that amounted to near or complete independence; in Chechnya, the result was outright war against the central authorities, which was brought under control only after years of

warfare and terrorism. In contrast, many other federal bodies are much weaker. This difference is commonly termed **asymmetric federalism**—a system in which power is devolved unequally across the country and its constituent regions, often because of specific laws negotiated between a region and the central government. Each of the territories, regardless of its size or power, has its own governor and local Duma; as described earlier, the governor appoints one representative to the Federation Council, and the Duma appoints the other.

As in other areas, the Putin administration took several steps to reduce regional power and make the territories comply with national laws and legislation. First, a number of regional laws and agreements between the central and local governments were changed or annulled, compelling the regions to revise their laws and agreements in accordance with the Putin administration. In some cases, these local laws were clearly unconstitutional, but in many other cases the changes simply aimed to reduce local power. Moreover, in 2000 the government created federal districts (now eight in total) that encompass all of Russia and its constituent territories. Each district is headed by a presidential appointee, who serves to bring the local authorities more directly under presidential control.

Below the federal districts are governors for the different regional bodies. Since 2012, these governors are directly elected, which, as with the electoral reforms for the Duma, was presented as a way for the public to have more direct control over those in power. In reality, as with the Duma the governorships are nominated by the Kremlin and filled by pro-Putin figures who often have little to no connection to the region they rule. The positions can be attractive to candidates since they provide an opportunity for individuals to enrich themselves, while for the Kremlin they allow the government to maintain greater control over the regions and those it has placed in these offices.

These frequent changes have severely curtailed federalism in Russia, though local offices continue to have power. Many local mayors remain directly elected, and in large cities (such as Moscow and St. Petersburg), they can exercise a great deal of political clout. In 2013, prominent opposition figure Alexei Navalny ran for mayor of Moscow and won nearly 30 percent of the vote (perhaps more, depending on the degree of fraud). Navalny was subsequently arrested on charges of embezzlement and was again briefly detained in March 2017 due to his role in promoting anticorruption protests across the country. Clearly, Putin and his allies realize that local authority could reemerge as a significant threat to those in power. This possibility explains recent proposals to eliminate the direct election of most mayors in favor of their appointment by city councils (this has already occurred in some cases). To sum up, there have been numerous changes that have in some cases allowed direct elections to local offices while restricting them in others.

This apparent inconsistency is a function of whether the regime sees that change as a means to co-opt the public and political elites, or as a way to block political opposition. In the end, the role of the Kremlin in directing political elites from the executive down to the local level is indicative of what Putin termed “the power vertical,” a centralized, top-down form of political control.¹¹

Political Conflict and Competition

The Party System and Elections

Russia has yet to see the formation of political parties with clear ideologies and political platforms. In most democracies, parties serve to articulate and aggregate preferences and hold elected officials accountable. It is hard to say that such a system exists in Russia. For most of the past 25 years, multiple parties have risen and disappeared between elections, for a number of reasons. The relative weakness of ideology among the public (see “Society,” p. 367) contributes to some extent. A second factor is the power of the presidency. Largely divorced from the legislature and its party politics and standing alongside a weak prime ministerial office, the presidency has contributed to the creation of parties that largely serve one individual’s presidential ambitions. Making clear distinctions between the parties is thus difficult. But given Putin’s consolidation of political power, it might be tempting to argue that the country has largely become once again a one-party state, controlled by the pro-Putin United Russia. In fact, following the 2007 Duma elections, the other three parties in parliament (the Communist Party, A Just Russia, and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia) combined held less than a third of the total seats. However, the 2011 Duma elections proved a surprise. Despite United Russia’s overwhelming control over the media and state, the three parties just mentioned captured nearly half of the seats in the Duma. This result challenges the view that United Russia or any one party is impervious, as well as the idea that Russian society is unable or unwilling to challenge those in power.¹²

THE PARTY OF POWER: UNITED RUSSIA

Although so-called **parties of power** have since 1991 consistently represented the largest segment of parties in the Duma, they cannot be described in ideological terms. Russia’s parties of power can be defined as those parties created by

political elites to support those elites’ political aspirations. Typically, these parties are highly personalized, lack specific ideologies or clear organizational qualities, and have been created by political elites during or following their time in office. For example, the Our Home Is Russia Party was created in advance of the 1995 Duma elections as a way to bolster support for Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and President Yeltsin. Subsequently, in the 1999 elections, two contending parties of power emerged. Fatherland–All Russia was formed to advance the presidential aspirations of former prime minister Yevgeny Primakov and Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov. Meanwhile, Unity was created to bolster Putin’s campaign. After Unity beat Fatherland–All Russia handily in the Duma elections, Primakov and Luzhkov withdrew from the presidential campaign, and in 2001 the two parties merged to form **United Russia**, essentially climbing on the bandwagon of power. Drawing on Putin’s popularity and the government’s increased control over the electoral process, United Russia swept the 2003 elections and has won a majority of seats ever since (as well as extending its reach over local government). As of the 2016 elections, United Russia holds 344 of 450 Duma seats—a supermajority that gives it the ability to change the constitution without needing the support of any other party.

United Russia boasts a cult of personality around Putin, a youth wing that advances the cause of the party, and party membership as a means for individual access to important jobs in the state and economy. In that sense, Russia resembles a one-party state like Mexico prior to its democratization in the 1990s.¹³ Less clear is United Russia’s ideology. Given the tight linkage between Putin and the party, its ideology is less important than its role in reinforcing executive rule as a “transmission belt” for elites into power. United Russia’s campaign platforms have emphasized stability and conservatism, economic development (though this has receded as economic difficulties have mounted), and increasingly the restoration of the country as a “great power” in international politics. National pride and stability are the main selling points of United Russia, and Putin is positioned as the individual who can achieve this goal. To contrast the country with what is portrayed as the immorality of the West (such as its support for LGBTQ rights), United Russia has also increasingly positioned itself as the defender of traditional values.

The 2007 Duma elections were widely regarded as evidence that Russia could no longer be considered democratic, even in the most generous definition of the term. The media, largely in the hands of the state, gave overwhelming support to United Russia. Observers concluded that the elections were not fair, did not meet basic standards for democratic procedures, and have become only more fraudulent over time.¹⁴ And yet, in 2011, United Russia suffered a major upset when

over half of the popular vote went to several opposition parties (though none represents significant opposition to the Kremlin). In 2016, United Russia managed to reclaim its dominant role in the Duma through a mixture of media control and harassment, but also public disenchantment with elections. Turnout was a record low, at less than 50 percent. Whether this reflects the strength or weakness of United Russia is an open question.

COMMUNIST AND LEFTIST PARTIES

Before the rise of United Russia, the strongest and most institutionalized party was the **Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF)**, successor of the Soviet-era organization. Though banned by Yeltsin in 1991, the party was allowed to reorganize in 1993 and draws support from a portion of the population that is ambivalent about or hostile to the political and economic changes that have taken place since the 1980s. In the 1995 elections, the CPRF reached its peak, becoming the largest single party in the Duma and raising the fear among many that the country would return to Communist rule. However, since that time, its vote share has declined to less than 15 percent. Even at that small level, it remains the second-largest party in the Duma. The CPRF's head, Gennady Zyuganov, has come in second place in every presidential election since 1996 (though in recent years this has meant gaining less than 20 percent of the vote).

The CPRF differs from most other postcommunist parties in Eastern Europe, many of which broke decisively from their Communist past in the 1990s and successfully recast themselves as social-democratic organizations. In contrast, the CPRF remains close to its Communist ideology and rejects Western capitalism and globalization. It also embraces the Stalinist period and has called for the return of the country to Stalinist ideals. The CPRF criticizes the government but is careful not to attack Putin. To some extent, this is a matter of self-preservation, because a direct confrontation with the Kremlin would surely result in the destruction of the party. A more cynical interpretation is that the CPRF serves Putin as a way to maintain a semblance of political diversity and to co-opt opposition forces. As the Russian population ages, the CPRF is losing its traditional base. However, as the second-largest party, it enjoys protest votes from those opposed to United Russia, particularly those who have suffered from the economic changes (especially the high levels of inequality) that have emerged since the end of the Soviet Union. There are some suggestions that the CPRF may find a new base of support among Russians born after 1991, who have struggled economically. If so, the party could

reemerge as a real force in the future. For now, it runs a distant second behind United Russia, with just 13 percent of the vote in 2016 and 42 seats.

A much newer party, **A Just Russia**, can also be placed in the leftist camp. Founded in 2006 as a merger of several smaller parties, A Just Russia defines itself as a social-democratic party along European lines. Its platform emphasizes social justice and reducing inequality, and in general its ideological profile is perhaps clearer than any other party in the Duma. Unlike the CPRF, A Just Russia has been considered by many to be little more than a façade, supported (if not created) by the Kremlin to provide a veneer of multiparty democracy. But again, the 2011 Duma elections confounded many assumptions. A Just Russia came in third, with approximately 13 percent of the vote, and its more confrontational tone suggested that it might become a force in its own right. However, the party quickly resumed its loyalty to the Kremlin, expelling party members who had taken part in public demonstrations against Putin during the 2011 elections. In the 2016 elections, A Just Russia slipped to the smallest party in the Duma, with only 6 percent of the vote and 29 seats.

NATIONALIST PARTIES

During the 1990s, one of the most infamous aspects of the Russian party spectrum was the strength of extreme nationalism. That faction is manifested by the ill-named **Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR)**, headed by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. Neither liberal nor democratic, the LDPR espouses a rhetoric of nationalism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism, calling for such things as the reconstitution of the Soviet Union (perhaps by force) and exhibiting general hostility toward the West.

In the 1993 elections, many observers were shocked by the LDPR's electoral strength and its gain of 14 percent of the seats in the Duma. Subsequently, the LDPR's fortunes waned to the point where it barely met the 5 percent PR threshold in the 1999 elections. In recent elections, however, it has staged something of a comeback and is now the third-largest party in the Duma, with 39 seats. The survival of the party can be attributed in part to the LDPR's consistent support for Putin and his government: indeed, many observers suspect that the LDPR was created and is supported by the government to serve as a pseudo-opposition that can be controlled.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the LDPR is able to tap into a strong current of Russian nationalism, especially among those lower-class individuals for whom the Putin era has not translated into an improved standard of living.

LIBERAL PARTIES

Despite Russia's move toward capitalism, liberalism has made relatively few inroads into political life, and even these have declined of late. During the 1990s, liberalism's standard bearer in Russia was the party **Yabloko**, whose pro-Western and pro-market economy stance drew support from white-collar workers and urban residents in the major cities. Never a major force, Yabloko has seen its electoral fortunes decline to such an extent that in recent Duma elections, it has failed to gain a single seat in the legislature. In 2016, the party won less than 2 percent of the vote in the proportional representation portion of the ballot. It currently holds only a few seats in regional legislatures.

Why has liberalism found such rocky soil in Russia? Several factors are at work. First, given the historically statist and collectivist nature of Russian politics, a liberal political ideology is not likely to find a wide range of popular support. A large percentage of the population continues to support an active role for the state in the economy, a stance that runs counter to liberal political platforms. A 2011 survey, for example, showed that half of those questioned favored an increased role for government ownership of the economy; such views were not just among older Russians, but also those under age 29 as well as those with a university education (both of whom might be expected to do better in a private economy).¹⁶ Infighting and a lack of strong leadership within liberal parties have not helped. Finally, worsening relations between Russia and the West have also served to tarnish liberalism as a foreign ideology associated with Russian subservience.

Civil Society

As with political parties, civil society in Russia developed in fits and starts. Before the 1917 Russian Revolution, civil society was weak, constrained by authoritarianism, feudalism, and low economic development. With the revolution, what little civil society did exist quickly came under control of the Soviet authorities, who argued that only the party could and should represent the "correct" interests of the population. The state created a wide range of institutions to link the people to the party, through the workplace, media, culture, and even leisure activities. The few remnants of independent organized life, such as religion, were brought under tight control. With the advent of glasnost in the 1980s, however, civil society slowly began to reemerge. The first independent group that resulted from liberalization may have been the fan club of a Moscow soccer team, established in

1987. By late 1989, tens of thousands of groups had appeared and were playing an important role in eroding Soviet rule.

After 1991, civil society grew dramatically in Russia. An array of movements and organizations filled the gaps left in the aftermath of one-party rule. However, during the Putin administration civil society came under state pressure and control, especially those groups that openly criticized the government. Tools to control civil society include the tax code, used to investigate sources of income; the process of registering with authorities, which can be made difficult; and police harassment and arrest on various charges ranging from tax evasion to divulging state secrets. In 2006, the government passed its toughest measures against non-governmental organizations (NGOs), requiring all of them to be approved by the government, restricting their funding from foreign sources, and making them subject to regular inspections and preapproval for any activity. Russian authorities forcibly closed a number of foreign NGOs. Still, antigovernment protests in Russia in 2011, 2012, and again in 2017 suggested that there remained a current of social activism that could translate into a revived civil society. Not surprisingly, Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 ushered in a new wave of restrictions. As noted earlier, all organizations that receive foreign funding must now be registered as "foreign agents," allowing for a high degree of state oversight and control and the possibility of fines and arrest for failing to follow state regulations. A corresponding new law on treason has further intimidated civic organization.¹⁷

Another notable effect of the restrictions on civil society is in the area of religion. Historically, Russians have been overwhelmingly, if nominally, Orthodox Christians, and smaller numbers have belonged to other faiths. Although Soviet-imposed atheism seriously weakened the role of religion, in recent years Orthodox Christianity has begun to reclaim a role in public life. Other religious movements, ranging from Islam and Buddhism to evangelical Christianity, also have emerged or reemerged.

As the Russian government has turned more toward nationalism as a source of legitimacy, it has also emphasized Orthodox Christianity as a central part of what makes Russia unique (and distinct from the West and Western liberalism). In turn, the Russian government has increasingly restricted the ability of many religious groups to proselytize, build seminaries, publish their literature, or run educational programs and has relied on anti-extremism legislation to justify these actions. Much of this effort is directed toward Islam, though similar restrictions have been directed toward religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Christian groups considered foreign imports. The return of Orthodox Christianity as a quasi-state religion has been accompanied by attacks on liberal

activism, such as the arrest of members of the punk band Pussy Riot, several of whose members were jailed in 2012 for two years on charges of religious hatred.¹⁸

Civil society has been restricted in Russia not just through direct government control but also through the means of expressing itself—specifically, the media. The collapse of communism saw the emergence of private Russian media that for the first time were able to speak critically on an array of issues. This is not to say that the media were truly independent; the most powerful segments of the media, such as radio and television, remained in the hands of the state or came under the control of oligarchs with ties to Yeltsin. Indeed, Yeltsin's victory in the 1996 elections was attributed in part to the strong support he received from media outlets whose owners feared the repercussions should the Communist candidate come to power. Similarly, the media came to support Putin during his consolidation of power, viewing him as the successor to Yeltsin who would preserve the power of the oligarchs. Despite this support, Putin soon put strong economic pressure on much of the independent media, employing economic and legal tactics to acquire them and curb their editorial independence.

During the past decade, all of the largest private television stations have come under direct state ownership or have become indirect state-controlled firms. As we noted earlier, these were hardly objective stations to begin with, and most of them served as mouthpieces for their oligarch owners. But with nationalization, the Russian media have become even less diverse and are clearly oriented toward supporting those in power. Although a few open media outlets remain, particularly newspapers, their audience pales in comparison with radio and TV audiences, and the outlets are often under pressure from the Kremlin to provide a pro-government slant or not to cover subjects that the government dislikes. The domestic media have become a consistent purveyor of conspiracy theories that tend to center around the efforts of the United States and the European Union to destroy Russia. Such arguments were especially pronounced during Russia's war with Ukraine. Russia denied the presence of its own troops in Crimea and eastern Ukraine while arguing that U.S. troops were on the ground. Russia even claimed that the Malaysian Airline flight destroyed over Ukraine had been shot down by the CIA.

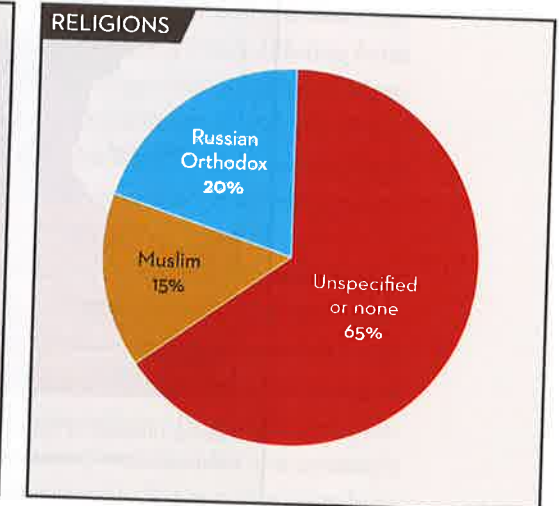
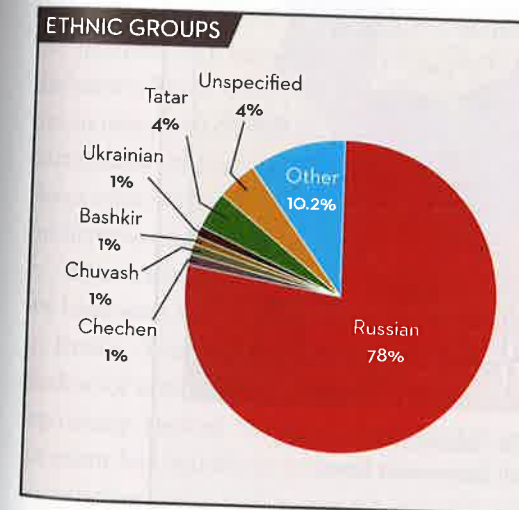
Those who continue to openly oppose the government find that their livelihoods and even their lives can be at stake. Alexei Navalny, who as we mentioned earlier ran for Moscow mayor, was arrested in 2012 on embezzlement charges and held under house arrest for a year. Boris Nemtsov, a former deputy prime minister under Yeltsin and an outspoken critic of Putin, was assassinated near the Kremlin in 2015. Since 1992, more than 50 journalists have been killed in Russia. In terms of press freedom, Russia is ranked 148 out of 180 countries by the organization Reporters without Borders.¹⁹

Society

Ethnic and National Identity

The Soviet Union, like the Russian Empire before it, was an ethnically diverse country made up of a number of republics, each representing a particular ethnic group. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, however, eliminated much of this ethnic diversity. Today, Russia is overwhelmingly composed of ethnic Russians, part of a larger family of Slavic peoples in Eastern Europe who are linked by similarities in language (and, to a lesser extent, culture and religion). Inside and outside the borders of the former Soviet Union, there are Slavic peoples, such as Ukrainians and Belarusians. In some areas, there is a strong affinity among the Slavs; in others, animosity is more the norm.

Nearly 80 percent of the Russian population is ethnically Russian, and although there are scores of minority groups, none represents more than 4 percent of the population. These minorities include other Slavic peoples, indigenous Siberians who are related to the Inuit of North America, and many others whose communities were absorbed into Russia as part of its imperial expansion over time. And as we mentioned earlier, Russia is historically dominated by a single religious faith, Orthodox Christianity, a branch of Christianity that is separate from the Roman Catholicism and Protestantism that dominate Europe.



NATIONAL IDENTITY AND CITIZENSHIP

Russia's relative homogeneity has not helped it avoid ethnic conflict. As in many other countries, some of Russia's ethnic groups have developed nationalist aspirations and seek greater autonomy from the central authorities, even to the point of outright independence. Serious ethnic conflicts have been most prominent among non-Russian populations in the mountainous region known as the **Caucasus**, in southwestern Russia, near the Black Sea and Turkey. This area is home to a diverse mixture of non-Slavic peoples with distinct languages, customs, and religious faiths. Whereas only about 15 percent of the Russian population is Muslim, Islam is the dominant faith in many parts of the Caucasus.

Most notable is the case of Chechnya. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the various republics broke off to form independent states. Chechnya, however, was not a republic in its own right, but rather part of now-independent Russia. Many Chechens believed that they, too, should have the right of independence and so began to agitate for an independent state. The conflict eventually led to outright war between Russian military forces and Chechen rebels, during which much of the Chechen capital was demolished and tens of thousands of

civilians were killed or left homeless. During the mid-1990s, an uneasy peace allowed Chechnya to function as a de facto independent country; in 1999, however, Russian forces reinvaded Chechnya in the aftermath of a series of apartment house bombings in Russia attributed to Chechen rebels. Indeed, it was the second invasion of Chechnya, during Putin's tenure as acting president, that helped pave the way for Putin's 2000 presidential victory. Subsequent terror attacks, most notably the hostage taking at an elementary school in Beslan during which more than 300 died, have served as justification for the further centralization of state power. Domestic terrorism has declined over the past five years, facilitated by an extremely repressive rule in Chechnya. The current leader of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, is thought by many to be connected to the assassination of Boris Nemtsov, a former deputy prime minister under Yeltsin, opposition politician, and outspoken critic of Putin. In the meantime, the government has tacitly encouraged radical Islamists to join jihadist forces in Iraq and Syria, hoping to divert them from fomenting domestic terrorism. There is, however, the threat that these individuals may eventually return and reignite the still simmering conflicts in the Caucasus.

Ideology and Political Culture

As mentioned earlier in our discussion of political parties, ideology is ill-defined in Russia. Following the Russian Revolution, essentially only one ideological viewpoint was legally tolerated: communism. Alternative views on the relationship between freedom and equality were suppressed. People could read Marx but not Jefferson, nor any other political thinker who expounded views differing from the state's. Since 1991, Russia has experienced a much greater diversity of ideas, but in many ways those ideas have not made a deep impact on political life. This is particularly true in the case of democratic values. The World Values Survey finds that a majority of citizens are uninterested in politics, would never attend a peaceful demonstration, and show low levels of social trust.

What values, then, can we speak of in Russia today? During the past decade, we have seen the growing importance of nationalism as a central political value in Russia. This is not surprising; in a number of postcommunist countries, the decline of communism has meant that leaders have attempted to recast political legitimacy around the idea of patriotism and nationalism. In Russia, the government has actively promoted this trend by evoking nostalgia for the country's superpower status and by asserting that Russia is not truly Western but somehow



different (and thus not subject to such Western notions as pluralism). This sense of restoring a “great Russia” has found an eager audience among many Russians. Most obvious in this regard was Russian involvement in the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, which led to open warfare in the east along the Russia border and the Russian invasion and annexation of Ukrainian Crimea. Similar motives are at work regarding Russia’s involvement in the Syrian civil war. Both actions have led to increased international suspicions of Russia and largely unfavorable views by publics around the world. However, for many Russians these actions are evidence that the country has restored itself to the status of a great world power after the humiliation of the collapse of the Soviet Union. While international sanctions (due to Russia’s role in Ukraine) and other economic challenges have weakened the country’s standard of living, support for Putin’s domestic and foreign policies remains high. Is this a function of a highly institutionalized political culture, or the government’s control over the media? Some suggest it is the latter, rather than the former.²⁰

Political Economy

How is it possible to build capitalism, with its private property and open markets, in a country that historically has had little of either? This was the challenge Russia faced as it moved away from communism, and as in other areas, the results have been very mixed: the new economic system is no longer communist, nor is it liberal. Russia’s economy has improved from the chaos of the 1990s, but what this portends for the future development of the country is uncertain and increasingly worrisome.

Like other former communist countries, Russia undertook a series of dramatic reforms in the 1990s to privatize state assets and free up market forces. Looking to the lessons of Poland and acting on the advice of Western economic advisers, Russia opted for a course of **shock therapy**, rapidly dismantling central planning and freeing up prices with the hope that these actions would stimulate competition and the creation of new businesses. The immediate result was a wave of hyperinflation: in 1992 alone, the inflation rate was over 2,000 percent. Savings were wiped out, the economy sank into recession, and tensions between President Boris Yeltsin and the parliament deepened, helping to foster the violent clash between the two branches of government in 1993. The gross domestic product (GDP) contracted dramatically; only in the late 1990s did it begin to grow again.

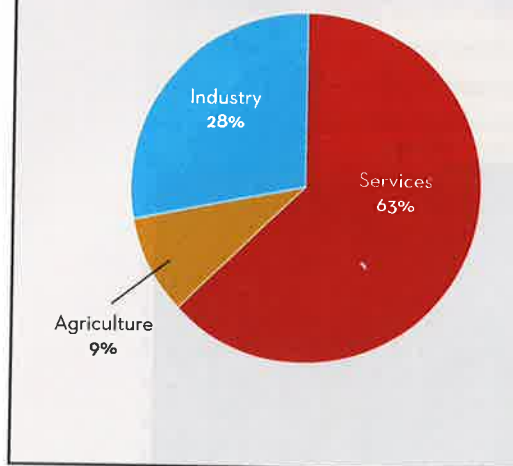


The Moscow skyline. In the foreground is the Kremlin. In the background is the Moscow International Business Center, whose growth reflects the influx of oil revenues over the past decades.

During the late 1990s, Russia began the process of privatization, which was equally problematic. Privatization started with the distribution of vouchers to the public so that Russians could purchase shares that would give them ownership in formerly state-owned businesses. In many cases, however, businesses were not sold off to a large number of shareholders but became subject to **insider privatization**, which enabled the former directors of these firms to acquire the largest number of shares. Therefore, wealth was not dispersed but was concentrated in the hands of those who had strong economic and political connections. Despite the power of this old *nomenklatura* elite, however, a small number of new businessmen quickly emerged from various ranks of society. Taking advantage of the economic environment to start new businesses and buy old ones, they amassed an enormous amount of wealth in the process. This group of businessmen, who came to be known as the *oligarchs*, were noted for their control of large amounts of the Russian economy (including the media), their close ties to the Yeltsin administration, and the accusations of corruption surrounding their rise to power.

The problem of the oligarchs was compounded in 1996, when the government instituted the loans-for-shares program. Strapped for cash (and fearful of a

LABOR FORCE BY OCCUPATION



Communist Party victory in the 1996 presidential elections), the Yeltsin administration chose to borrow funds from the oligarchs in return for shares in those businesses that had not yet been sold off by the state—in particular, the lucrative natural resources industry and the energy sector. Overall, foreign investment played a very small role in the Russian privatization process.

To be fair, Russia's ongoing economic problems are not simply the result of the economic reform policies of the 1990s. Many of these problems are a function and legacy of a Soviet order that had reached a crisis stage, a condition that any set of policies would have had difficulty confronting. Still, the economic reforms of the 1990s left Russia in a tough

situation as Putin came to power. The government faced high rates of poverty, a great deal of inequality, the disproportionate power of the oligarchs, widespread corruption and organized crime, and an inefficient state. During the 1990s, the country's GDP declined by around 40 percent.

What has changed in the Russian economy since the 1990s? One of Putin's first steps was to act against the oligarchs and divest them of power. Using a variety of tools, he stripped them of their assets, many of which they had gained under the loans-for-shares scheme. A number of the most prominent oligarchs left the country to avoid imprisonment; others wound up in jail under dubious charges. Best known among these oligarchs is **Mikhail Khodorkovsky**, who grew rich following the opening up of the Soviet economy in the 1980s by investing in such ventures as computer imports. Later, he took advantage of the state sale of natural resources, gaining control over a large portion of the oil and gas sector. However, under the Putin administration, Khodorkovsky came under pressure, in part for his increasingly political activity. In 2003, he was arrested and charged with tax evasion; his firms were liquidated and in many cases nationalized. He was sentenced to prison and was not pardoned until 2013, after which he was sent into exile.

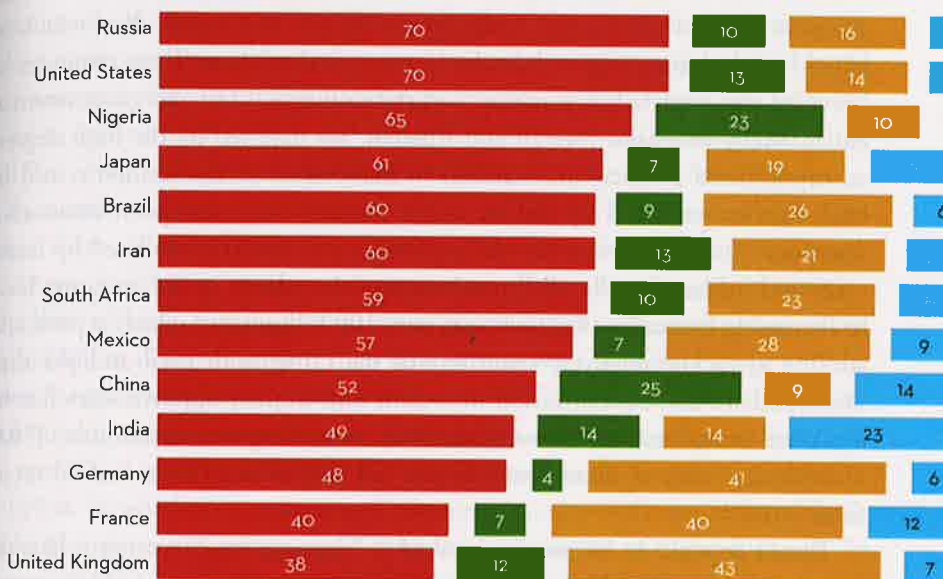
The destruction of the oligarchs was extremely popular among the Russian public, but their elimination did not lead to greater economic transparency. Many assets were renationalized and brought under state control, while in other cases,

IN COMPARISON

Priorities

What should your country's top priority be over the next 10 years?

- A high level of economic growth
- Making sure this country has strong defense forces
- Seeing that people have more say about how things are done at their jobs and in their communities
- Trying to make our cities and countryside more beautiful



Source: Data for Brazil, France, India, Iran, South Africa, and Great Britain from World Values Survey 2005–09. All other data from World Values Survey 2010–14.

ownership is murky, hidden behind an array of shell corporations, or firms whose owners are unknown. A large portion of state firms have been partly or entirely redistributed among the *siloviki*, forming a new economic elite around the security services. These “state oligarchs,” as one scholar calls them, include such individuals as Putin's former judo partner (and now a construction billionaire). The economic system can be viewed as dominated by a set of factions composed of *siloviki* and other elites who support Putin while competing with one another.

If anything, the Russian political economy has become highly patrimonial, and Putin uses his position to provide economic access to his inner circle in return for their loyalty.

When Putin returned to the presidency following his earlier terms as president and his stint as prime minister, he could point to a number of economic successes. The country has enjoyed several years of economic growth after many years of stagnation. As per capita GDP rose and poverty declined, Russia also saw the emergence of a new middle and upper class. Its per capita income at purchasing power parity (PPP) is now similar to Chile's and Argentina's.

However, we should be clear about the sources and fragility of this economic progress: most of the country's exports are oil, gas, and metal, all of which benefited from a dramatic growth in the international markets. These resources have provided the overwhelming majority of the country's GDP and government revenues. Many investors, foreign and Russian, are deterred by the high degree of corruption and political intervention in many areas of the economy, and have been further scared off by the war with Ukraine and subsequent international sanctions. Small and medium-size businesses are similarly hindered by bureaucracy and bribery. Finally, the prominence of the *siloviki* in the economy has led to increasing inequality. Russia boasts over 100 billionaires, which is particularly striking given the relatively small size of the GDP, both total and per capita. One result of the concentration of wealth and limited opportunities has been a marked emigration of the well-educated. According to one account, 350,000 individuals, many of them professionals, left Russia in 2015, a tenfold increase from 2010.²¹

Russia appears to be moving toward a "resource trap" economy like those found in Iran and Saudi Arabia. The argument is that where natural resources are a major part of the economy and owned by the state, they run the risk of giving the state and government too much economic power while stifling other forms of economic development.²² Declining natural resources or declining demand for those resources could eventually undermine Russia's economic progress. In recent years, a drop in prices for oil and other natural resources, combined with international sanctions, have reversed the country's steady economic rise during Putin's time in power. Weakening exports have led to a declining gross domestic product since 2015. This, in turn, has restricted government spending and reduced the public's standard of living. This, in turn, appears to have increased rivalry among the *siloviki*, who are fighting over a shrinking pie. A series of purges among Putin's long-standing allies suggests that the president questions their loyalty should economic difficulties continue.

Foreign Relations and the World

Like the United Kingdom, Russia has struggled to deal with its position as a former superpower.²³ Yet unlike the United Kingdom, it has been forced to confront this change suddenly and dramatically. Not long ago, the Soviet Union was one of the world's most powerful countries, boasting an impressive military, a nuclear arsenal, and a network of allies around the world. One of Gorbachev's reforms was to reduce hostility between the Soviet Union and the West, to foster greater cooperation between the superpowers. Little did he (or others) suspect that this reconciliation would create such turmoil. The collapse of the Soviet Union has left Russia in an odd situation as it considers its role in the international community. Russian pride was dealt a blow when the Soviet Union splintered and the United States emerged as an unequaled international power. In recent years, this situation has led to international tension and military conflict not seen since the end of the Cold War. Why has reconciliation between Russia and the West failed?

The answer includes several elements. One factor was the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union. NATO was founded in 1949 as an international alliance that stood in opposition to the Soviet Union, but since 1989 many postcommunist countries have gained membership in order to cement their relationship with Western Europe and the United States. Russia initially cooperated with NATO to some extent, but under Putin quickly came to view it as an organization opposed to Russian interests. One specific source of tension was the series of wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, in which Russia expressed greater sympathy with the Serbs, a Slavic people who share the culture and Orthodox Christianity of many Russians. In contrast, NATO eventually intervened on behalf of the Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo. Russia also saw NATO's eastward expansion, incorporating a number of former Communist countries, as an incursion into its traditional sphere of influence and territory. Despite Russian pressure, from 1999 on, a number of former Soviet satellites and even former republics of the Soviet Union itself have joined NATO, thus bringing the organization to the border of Russia.

Just as Russia has had to confront an ever-larger NATO alliance on its border, it has also had to contend with the enlargement of the European Union. In May 2004, the European Union accepted 10 new countries into its ranks, including three (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) that had once been part of the Soviet Union. As with NATO, its increased membership brings the European Union to the borders of Russia. The expansion of NATO and the European Union has made Russia feel as if its traditional sphere of influence were being chipped away.

The U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and intervention in places ranging from the former Yugoslavia to Libya, have also been seen by Russia as examples of the United States' willingness to depose any government it dislikes. This view goes to the heart of the sense of loss Russians feel over the collapse of the Soviet Union and what they perceive as their humiliation by Western countries that once feared their military might.

These complicated and dangerous relations are best seen in the recent war in Ukraine. One of the former republics of the Soviet Union, Ukraine is a mix of Ukrainian and Russian speakers, the latter concentrated along the Russian border in industrial regions that have fared poorly after communism. In contrast, many western Ukrainians strongly identify with western Europe, favoring membership in the European Union and even NATO as a bulwark against Russian influence. Since 1991, presidential elections have shifted power back and forth between western and eastern Ukraine. In 2013, President Viktor Yanukovych, following pressure from Putin, abruptly rejected plans that would have brought Ukraine into a free-trade agreement with the European Union. Thousands protested in the capital, Kiev, leading to violent clashes in which nearly a hundred protesters were killed. As unrest spread, Yanukovych fled to Russia, and then Russia intervened militarily, taking advantage of the chaos to seize and annex Crimea (an act not recognized by the vast majority of countries). Armed militias began to appear in eastern Ukraine as well, seizing control of cities and supported by Russians who claimed to be volunteers but were clearly backed by the Russian government with training and weapons.

Russian territorial expansion raises a danger in Europe that most people thought had disappeared. Resurgent nationalism in Russia has justified the use of force to "correct" the mistakes that resulted from the humiliating collapse of communism, suggesting the danger of future military conflict. Such conflicts in turn reinforce Putin's authoritarianism as a charismatic leader who can confront the West.

Consistent with its role in Ukraine, as Russia's relationship with the West has soured it has sought to rebuild its own sphere of influence. In 1991, it helped create the **Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)**, a loose integrationist body that incorporated many former Soviet republics. While the CIS has had little formal power, Russia has used it to coordinate its relationship with a number of former Soviet republics, particularly in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Russia has also pursued the goal of more formal integration with other former Soviet republics, a move that would bring them under greater Russian influence. In particular, over the past few years Russia has been deeply



Vladimir Putin (right), Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev (middle), and Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko (left) shake hands after signing an agreement to establish the Eurasian Economic Union in May 2014.

involved in strengthening its ties to former Soviet republics in Central Asia such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which by and large remain undemocratic and controlled by former members of the Soviet *nomenklatura*. In one of his first announcements coinciding with his campaign to return to the presidency, Putin called for the creation of a **Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)** for economic and political integration (see the following section, "Current Issues in Russia"). This goal has developed alongside the increased promotion of the idea that Russia has a distinct national destiny, unconnected to European or liberal cultural and political traditions.

Finally, in addition to formal means to expand or reassert its power, Russia has returned to an array of other tools in pursuit of its foreign policy. Most noteworthy of late has been Russia's use of disinformation and cyberattacks to influence domestic politics in the United States and Europe. Such tactics are not new; propaganda was an important part of the Soviet foreign policy, including disinformation to sow confusion abroad. Globalization has given the Russian government new tools. These include RT, a Russian state broadcasting network that takes an anti-American and often conspiracy theory-based view of international relations; fake news and "troll factories" supported by Russia's security agencies, and direct

cyberattacks on various organizations worldwide, from political parties to government infrastructure. How do democratic societies, where news is increasingly decentralized, fight back against policies intended to sow mistrust?

Russia has historically vacillated between the poles of internationalism and nationalism, engagement and isolationism. Russians have long argued about whether their country is somehow separate from Europe and the West: different in culture, religion, and historical traditions. During the 1980s and 1990s, Russia began to move into the European and liberal-democratic orbit, albeit chaotically. Under Putin, the Russian state and government have become less engaged with Europe and other developed democracies. It was once said about the United Kingdom that it had lost an empire and not yet found a role in the international system. The same could be said about Russia—and for now, at least, it seeks to recapture the glory of the past while pressing questions about the future remain unresolved.

CURRENT ISSUES IN RUSSIA

Russia and Central Asia: A New “Silk Road” or the Old “Great Game”?

In the early nineteenth century, both Russia and the United Kingdom expanded their power into the Caucasus and Central Asia. The case of the United Kingdom is more familiar to us, because we recall Britain's control over India and its largely unsuccessful attempt to conquer Afghanistan (in which large numbers of British soldiers died). What fewer people (at least non-Russians) recall is Russia's expanding, and relatively late, role in this region during that same period. The contest between these two powers was called in the West, somewhat glibly, the “Great Game.” This conflict intensified further as both Russia and the United Kingdom gained direct and indirect control over the fragmenting Persian empire (the ensuing contest would later come to influence the 1979 Iranian Revolution). Although the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the decline of the British Empire after World War II limited the conflict between these two powers, the notion of a contest between superpowers for this region never really came to an end.

More specifically, the United States usurped Britain's role as a player in the region, and the conflict shifted to one between Russia and the United States. Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979 led to the American arming of anti-Soviet guerrillas and the rise of Al Qaeda. The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 fostered conflicts, fueled by ethnic and religious divisions, across the newly independent states in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The September 11, 2001, attacks brought the United States directly into the region through its occupation of Afghanistan and its increased role in Central Asia.

The United States' role in the Great Game, however, is on the wane. Military forces in Afghanistan have drawn down, and the locus of conflict has shifted westward to Iraq and Syria. The constant actor remains Russia, which since 1991 has sought to retain or regain influence over its lost republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The new map of the Great Game appears to have moved east, to the countries of Central Asia (such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan). These countries share a number of similarities. First, they have had little success in democratization since 1991, and power has remained directly in the hands of the Soviet-era leaders. Second, many of them are ethnically diverse, have weak national identities, and have faced serious violent conflict as a result. Most Central Asian states are nominally Islamic, and though religion was suppressed under Soviet rule, Islam—and sometimes, radical variants of it—has surfaced. Finally, the region contains significant deposits of oil and gas.

Now other, new players are entering this game. Since 1991, China has become a major economic actor in the region, in some ways overshadowing the Russian presence. As China has grown, it has looked for energy to fuel this development, and accordingly invested billions of dollars in developing oil, gas, and hydropower across the region, and in transmission and pipelines to carry this energy to China. It has also invested in mining projects to work deposits of gold, uranium, and other metals. China has become a major exporter of finished goods and consumer products to much of Central Asia. Some speak of a “New Silk Road,” with the historical analogy of pathways between East and West.

One of the first statements of Putin's new administration articulated Russia's ambitions in the struggle over Central Asia. Putin called for a “Eurasian union” that would remove all barriers to trade, capital, and labor movements among its members. He asserted that this integration was “not about re-creating the USSR,” but rather about seeking “a powerful supranational union that can become one of the poles of today's world.”²⁴ The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) came into force in 2015, and its charter members were Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan followed shortly thereafter. Ukraine's decision not to

join the union in favor of closer ties with the European Union was a central factor in the 2014 war. Given the Ukrainian crisis, the Eurasian Economic Union might seem to be an attempt to project Russian power in competition with Europe. However, its effects may well be felt in Asia instead.

How has the EAEU fared to date? A single tariff barrier has eased trade between members, though this has largely benefited Russia. As Chinese imports have become more expensive, other EAEU members have turned to Russian alternatives. Freedom of movement has increased, allowing members from poorer EAEU states to move to Russia for work. One area where regional integration has been weaker is in the creation of a common EAEU foreign policy. Members continue to pursue their own preferences, with some refusing to back Russia's role in the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea. Nor do other former Soviet republics appear interested in joining in the near future. For now, Russia's hope to develop a regional bloc, loosely built around the idea of a "Eurasian" identity that is neither Asian nor Western, seems premature. However, future political reforms among its members could provide the opportunity for greater integration, just as in Europe after World War II.

Russia's Demographic Future

One issue that plagues Russia—and worries its leaders—is the country's demographics. This concern is nothing new—it dates back to the Soviet era and takes several forms.

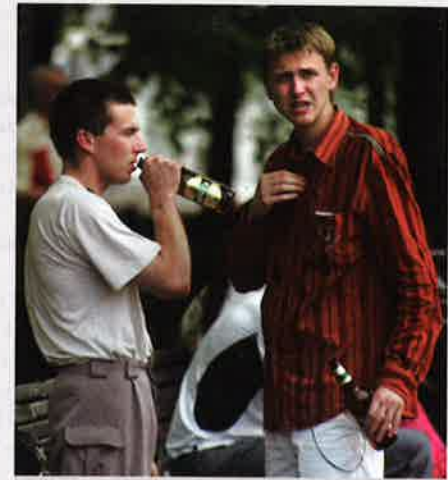
The first worrisome demographic trend is the general level of Russian health: Russian life expectancy at birth is approximately 70 years: 75 for women and 64 for men. This figure is shockingly low, given the overall level of development of the country. Russia's life expectancy ranks 110th out of 193 countries and is worse than that in Egypt or Guatemala. Why? Some of the problem may be due to the erosion of Russia's health care system following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transition to capitalism, though the erosion in fact began to emerge in the 1960s. It is not a function of a high infant mortality rate, which in Russia is roughly similar to rates in other countries within the same economic range. Rather, Russia shows an unusually high level of *adult* mortality, especially among men, whose life expectancy is about that of men in India. The primary explanation appears to be a relatively simple one: alcohol. Russian alcohol consumption, particularly among men, is extremely high, by some estimates among the top five in the world. Russia is also by far the highest consumer of hard liquor as opposed

to beer or wine. This pattern leads to two results: first, a high level of death by circulatory diseases, and second (and perhaps more striking), a very high level of death by accidents, suicides, and homicides—three times higher than in advanced democracies. The abuse of alcohol in Russia has a long history, and it could be argued that it is ingrained in Russian culture, something not easily dislodged. In fact, one of Gorbachev's first reform policies in the 1980s was an anti-alcohol campaign, which provoked public discontent (though brief, the campaign appeared to have a positive health effect).

A second demographic trend worrying Russian leaders is the country's low birth rate. Just as Russia has a low life

expectancy rate, it also has an extremely low rate of fertility, even when compared with other European countries where such rates also tend to be low. Again, this issue dates back to the 1960s and is marked by the high rate of abortion, a result of limited access to birth control (Russia's abortion rates are double the European average). The high participation of women in the workforce, as well as economic stresses, creates disincentives to having larger families. When combined with low life expectancy, the result is a shrinking population. By 2050, Russia may lose more than 20 million people. Ongoing migration from Central Asia may mitigate this decline, but it will also increase the Muslim share of the population, which has a tense relationship with the government.

Russia is struggling with how to respond to its demographic troubles. In recent years, the government has sought to crack down on alcohol abuse by relying in part on increased taxes on alcohol as a way to deter consumption. It has also offered cash bonuses for women who have more than two children. Consistent public health and pro-family policies could certainly alleviate many of these demographic concerns, and some suggest that Russian fertility will soon show steady improvement as a result of economic growth. An aging, unhealthy population is not a positive sign for the future.²⁵



Two young men drinking beer in Moscow. The high level of alcohol consumption in Russia, especially among men, is a major factor in the country's demographic and health concerns.

NOTES

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KEY TERMS

- A Just Russia** A small party in the Russian Duma with a social-democratic orientation
- asymmetric federalism** A system where power is devolved unequally across the country and its constituent regions, often the result of specific laws negotiated between the region and the central government
- Caucasus** Southwest Russia, near the Black Sea and Turkey, where there is a diverse mixture of non-Slavic peoples with distinct languages and customs as well as a much stronger historical presence of Islam than Orthodox Christianity
- Chechnya** Russian republic that has been a source of military conflict since 1991
- Cheka** Soviet secret police created by Lenin; precursor to the KGB
- Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)** A loose integrationist body that incorporates many former Soviet republics
- Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF)** Successor party in Russia to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union
- Constitutional Court** Highest body in the Russian legal system; responsible for constitutional review
- Duma** Lower house of the Russian legislature
- Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)** Economic and political union among several former Soviet states
- Federal Security Service (FSB)** Successor to the KGB, the Russian intelligence agency
- Federation Council** Upper house of the Russian legislature
- glasnost** Literally, "openness"; the policy of political liberalization implemented in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s
- insider privatization** A process in Russia whereby the former *nomenklatura* directors of firms were able to acquire the largest share when those firms were privatized

KGB Soviet secret-police agency charged with domestic and foreign intelligence

Khodorkovsky, Mikhail Oligarch arrested and imprisoned for his opposition to the Putin administration

Kremlin Eleventh-century fortress in the heart of Moscow that has been the historical seat of Russian state power

Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) Political party in Russia with a nationalist and antidemocratic orientation

nomenklatura Politically sensitive or influential jobs in the state, society, or economy that were staffed by people chosen or approved by the Communist Party

oligarchs Russian people noted for their control of large amounts of the Russian economy (including the media), their close ties to the government, and the accusations of corruption surrounding their rise to power

Orthodox Christianity A variant of Christianity separate from Roman Catholicism and Protestantism; originally centered in Byzantium (now roughly modern-day Turkey)

parties of power Russian parties created by political elites to support their political aspirations; typically lacking any ideological orientation

perestroika Literally, “restructuring”; the policy of economic liberalization implemented in the Soviet Union in the 1980s

Politburo Top policy-making and executive body of the Communist Party

Putin, Vladimir Current president of Russia, as of 2012; also president of Russia from 1999 to 2008; prime minister from 2008 to 2012

Rus Origin of the word *Russia*, thought to refer to Vikings who settled the region in the ninth century C.E.

shock therapy A process of rapid marketization

siloviki “Men of power” who have their origins in the security agencies and are close to President Putin

soviets Name given to workers’ councils that sprang up in 1917

tsar Russian word for emperor (also *czar*, from Latin *Caesar*)

United Russia Main political party in Russia and supporter of Vladimir Putin

Yabloko Small party in Russia that advocates democracy and a liberal political-economic system

Yeltsin, Boris President of Russia from 1991 to 1999

WEB LINKS

- Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Russian and Eurasian Program (www.carnegieendowment.org)
- *Moscow Times* (www.moscowtimes.ru)
- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (www.rferl.org)
- Russia Today (<http://rt.com/>)
- Transitions Online (www.tol.org)