
SPECIAL REPORT

THE GEOPOLITICS OF RUSSIA



Table of Contents

The Geopolitics of Russia	3
Geography, or the Dangers of the West.....	4
A Concentration of Wealth	6
All Politics Is Local.....	9
The Focus of Its Foreign Policy.....	12

The Geopolitics of Russia

Russian President Vladimir Putin described the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991 as “the greatest political catastrophe” of the 20th century. To those outside of Russia it may sound like hyperbole, but to those who lived there it’s a different story. In short order, they witnessed their government in Moscow, a power on par with the United States for nearly five decades,

lose its footing and never fully recover. Russia became destitute, even aimless. So traumatic was the union’s collapse that it continues to define Russia’s identity today. And though the country remained formidable in its near abroad, it is less capable than it once was of securing its national interests farther afield. To understand why this is so, we need to begin by looking at a map.



Geography, or the Dangers of the West

Indeed, Russia’s most fundamental and strategic challenge – which has both international and domestic dimensions – stems from the country’s geography. The vast majority of Russian territory sits between 50 degrees and 70 degrees latitude. For perspective, London’s latitude is about 51 degrees, Berlin’s is 52 and Ottawa’s is 45. Russia’s climate is generally cool, and vegetation and human life tend to inhabit areas that are below 60 degrees latitude. The heartland of Russian agriculture is in the southwest, along its borders with Ukraine, the Caucasus and Kazakhstan.

Climate and agriculture go a long way to explain why three-quarters of the population lives in the area between Russia’s border with Europe and the Ural Mountains. The country’s most critical cities, including the seat of its government, moreover, are all close to Europe. Russia has few rivers, and those it does have flow mostly west, making it difficult to transport goods domestically. Russia offsets these natural disadvantages by relying on railways, which further highlight the importance of the western and southern regions. And so it is that Russia is

North European Plain



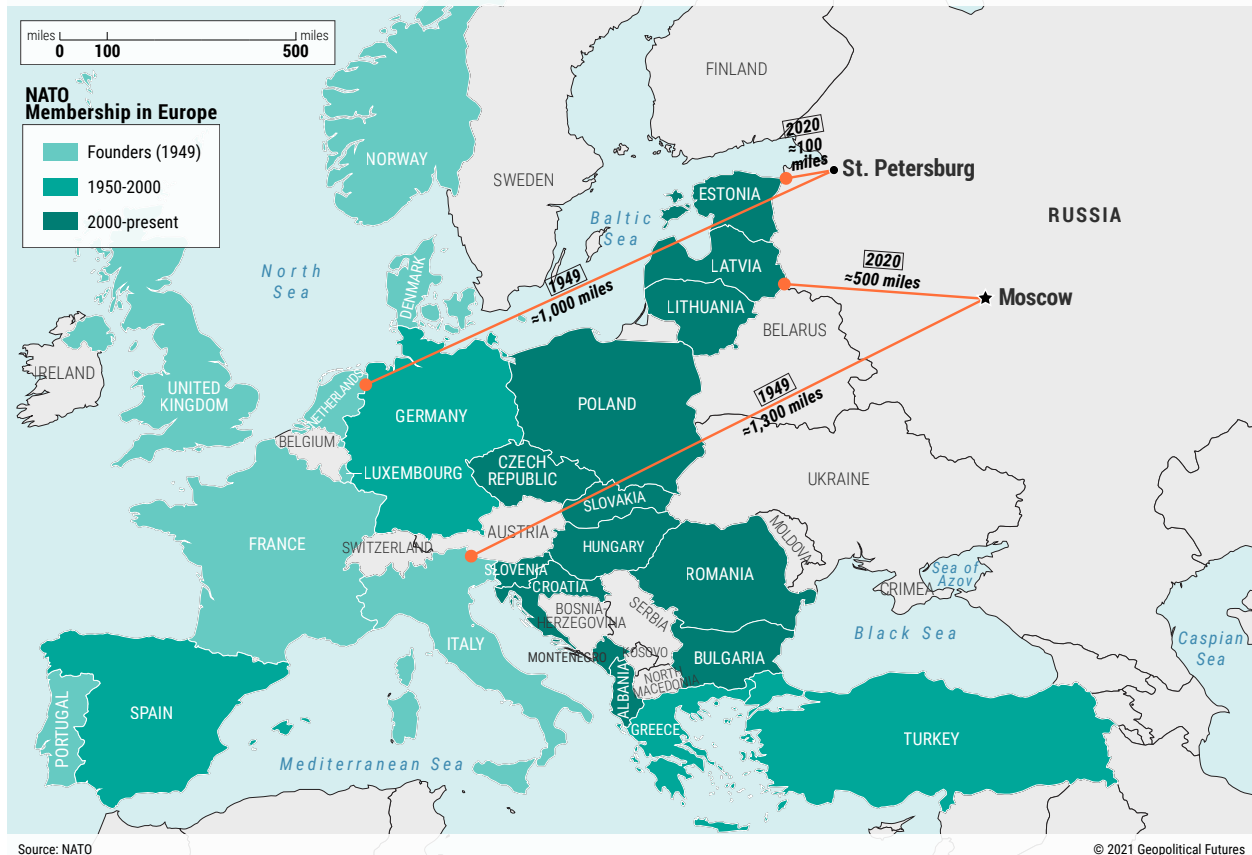
disproportionately preoccupied – and imperiled – by its western reaches.

As a land power, Russia is inherently vulnerable. Its border with Europe is extremely susceptible to invasion, situated as it is on the North European Plain. This flat expanse of land begins in Germany and, just east of the Carpathian Mountains, pivots southward, opening up right on Russia’s doorstep. Historically, it has been a major thoroughfare of western military encroachment.

Because Russia’s enemies have so often used this invasion route, Moscow has tried

to make it more difficult for invaders to reach its territory by pushing Russia’s borders as far west as possible. When national borders could not be extended, Moscow established buffer zones between Russia’s core and Europe. At the height of the Soviet Union, Moscow enjoyed an extensive buffer zone that stretched well into Central Europe. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, Russia lost most of these territories and has been on the defensive ever since. Consider that in 1989, St. Petersburg was about 1,000 miles from NATO troops. Today, that distance is about 200 miles.

A Shrinking Buffer



A Concentration of Wealth

Russian geography presents an obvious challenge: Whoever governs the country must manage the largest country in the world, comprising vastly different peoples, climates, natural resources and infrastructure networks. The Russian Federation consists of 85 federal subjects that range in structure from autonomous regions and republics to individual cities. As a result, Russia is home to highly regionalized economies in which wealth and prosperity are unevenly distributed.

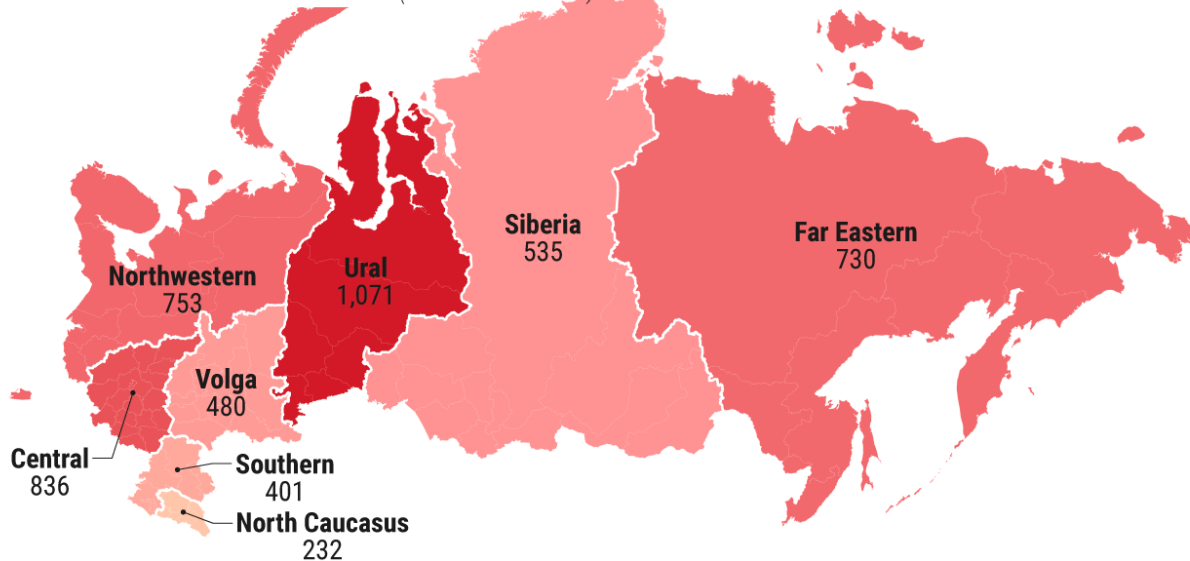
Wealth is concentrated in the west, particularly in Moscow and the Central Federal District. In times of prosperity, economic disparities can be papered over, and the pressure

on high-earning districts is fairly easily relieved. But in times of economic duress, as was the case when oil prices dropped in late 2014, the central government faces added social pressure from the poorer districts in the interior.

It's little wonder, then, that Russia's economic development since the end of the Cold War has been similarly uneven. The 1990s were meant for survival, not economic growth. The reforms of the decade were aimed at one thing: preventing Russia from reverting to communist rule. Most Russians lived in or near poverty while most state enterprises were privatized – at a discount. The 1998 Russian financial crisis and the associated protests brought about a major

Russia's Gross Regional Product by District | 2019

GRP PER CAPITA BY FEDERAL DISTRICT (THOUSAND RUBLES)



Source: Russian Federation Federal State Statistics Service

© 2022 Geopolitical Futures

change. The people were ready for stronger government and so welcomed a stronger ruler. Enter Vladimir Putin, who endeavored to fix the economy and then rebuild the government. Since then, Russia’s development has been predicated on energy exports, which in turn have fueled budget spending and consumption.

This worked well enough when energy prices were high. But when they fall, so too do Russian revenues. This inevitably leads to periodic economic downturns. From 2015 to 2017, for example, citizens protested unemployment, wage arrears, cuts in government programs, lower real wages, bankruptcy and general frustration with reduced standards of living. The protests were small, but they could threaten Putin in the long term. Now it is western sanctions that threaten Russia’s economy and, once

again, Putin must not only maintain control but also show the people that he is responding to their needs.

One way he has done so is to erect a two-tier economic system. He controls one tier through his “inner circle,” which runs state-owned companies, while the other tier is subject to free market laws. These state-run companies constitute about one-fifth of the Russian economy. The Russian people still support Putin – and they may even trust him – but they regard oligarchs and regional administrators as corrupt. The president must weigh the needs of his people against the needs of the companies that sustain his economy. In 2001, he sided with the people, leading a campaign against the oligarchs and then taking control of media and energy companies.

Average Monthly Price of Urals Crude Oil



Source: Statista

© 2022 Geopolitical Futures

He has also reorganized some of the state security agencies that help maintain order. He established the National Guard, which unifies several domestic security forces under the direct control of the president. The troops' stated purpose is to protect the public order, combat extremism, guard government cargo and facilities, help protect the border and control the arms trade. He also installed officials loyal to his government in important places. For instance, between 2017 and 2018, he removed 16 generals

from their posts in the Ministry of Civil Defense, Emergencies and Elimination of Consequences of National Disasters, a body responsible for responding to civil defense, public unrest and protests, and in the Interior Ministry, replacing them with officials he personally selected. The dismissals primarily affected the Caucasus, the Far East and cities within Moscow's reach – cities where, as recently as the end of 2017, there had been reports of increased unrest.

All Politics Is Local

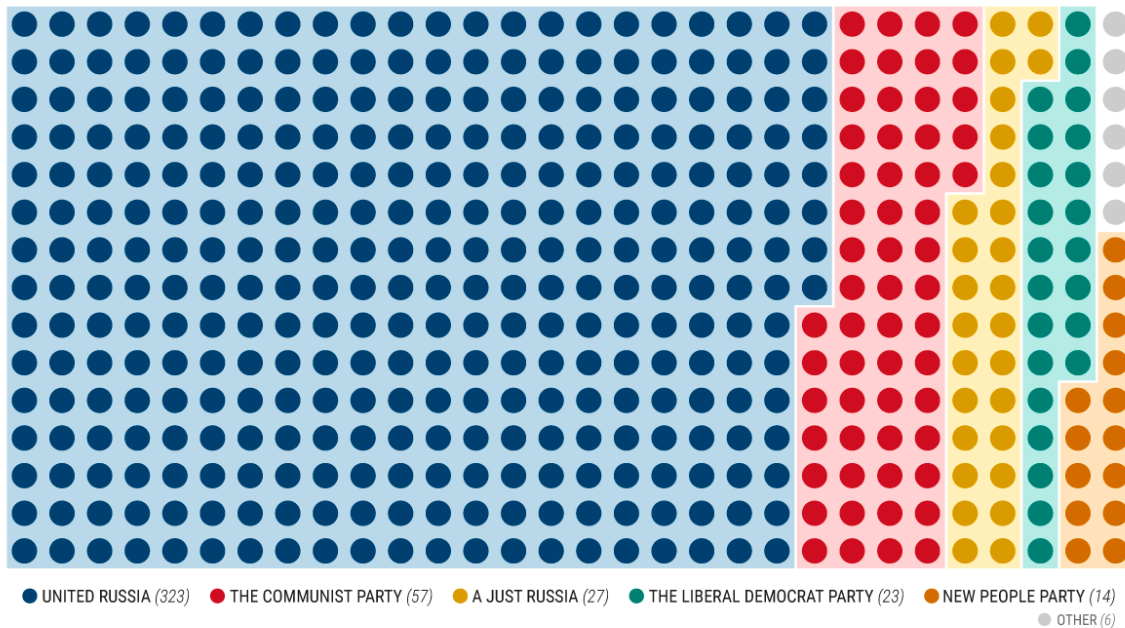
Politically, the Russian government under Putin consolidated its power fairly early on. Under his administration, Russian political parties are relatively unimportant; the system favors pro-Kremlin parties. Parties that do not support the government have little chance of gaining seats in the Duma, the lower house of parliament. In 2000, shortly after assuming his first presidency, Putin actually reduced the number of parties represented in the Duma. In 2012, then-President Dmitri Medvedev appeared to backpedal on this move by passing a law that simplified the registration procedures for political parties. On paper, the new legislation was

meant to open the party system to alternative interest groups. In practice, the system remained closed.

Five political parties, all of them pro-government to a degree, currently dominate the Duma. United Russia, Putin’s party, holds 323 of 450 seats, doing whatever Putin tells it to do. The Communist Party (57), the Liberal Democratic Party (23), A Just Russia (27) and New People Party (14) hold the remaining seats. The latter four parties are not seen as official pro-government parties and therefore at least partly represent the opposition. Notably, the term “opposition” is

Russia’s State Duma

DUMA COMPOSITION BY PARTY | 2021



Source: Russian Federation Federal State Statistics Service

© 2022 Geopolitical Futures

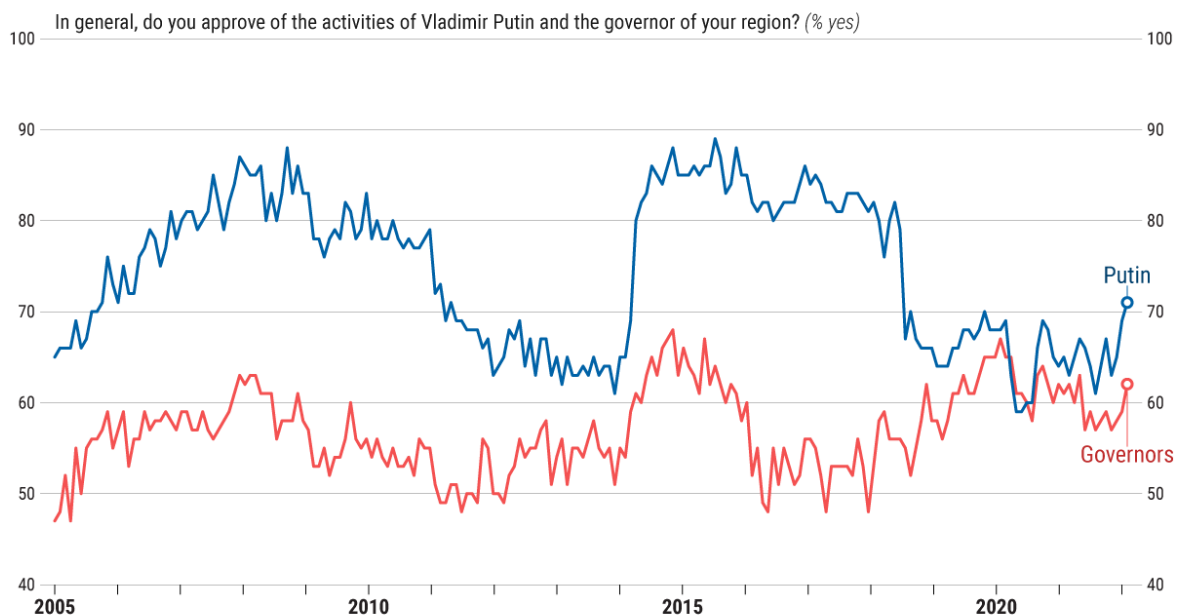
used loosely; the representatives rarely defy Putin-led initiatives. Votes cast by officials of these parties reflect a disagreement with United Russia and bureaucracy while simultaneously staying loyal to the president and system. They have some mild distance from the regime but do not outright oppose it.

Putin also consolidated political power by purging Russian governors – an important move, considering the relationship between governors and members of the national government. They often work together, depend on each other and look out for one another’s interests. Gubernatorial elections were reintroduced in 2012, but while the law to reintroduce them was making its way through the system, more than 20 governors were reappointed by the Kremlin, delaying elec-

tions in these locations until 2017. Then, in 2013, Putin signed a law that permitted regional legislatures to decide between directly electing governors or having the regional legislature select and appoint a governor from a short list drawn up by Putin.

Regional governors, in turn, play a role in appointing members to Russia’s Federation Council, the upper chamber of parliament. The council consists of two representatives from each of Russia’s 83 federal entities. One representative is chosen by the regional legislature and one is selected by the region’s governor. The length of the representative’s term varies with the federal entity. Built into this system is a level of reciprocity between governor and president, further enabling Putin to wield influence. He is able to ensure

Approval Ratings of Putin and Governors



Source: Levada Center

© 2022 Geopolitical Futures

that a candidate gains a gubernatorial office, and in return, the governor can appoint a pro-Kremlin member to the council. This relationship becomes even more important considering that the council approves presidential decrees for martial law, declares a state of emergency, deploys troops abroad, oversees the presidential appointment for attorney general and decides impeachment verdicts.

Putin has dedicated much of his political capital and resources to consolidating his power through reforms in various government security bodies. By rebuilding his inner circle and revamping the power structure, Putin has demonstrated that he needs to extend his power network to ensure that his decrees and policies are implemented properly and that dissenters remain silenced.

The Focus of Its Foreign Policy

Much of Putin’s political machinations, though, are meant to perpetuate a myth abroad. The myth: that Russia is as strong as it appears. Without the ability to act as decisively as it could during the Cold War, Russia is relegated to focusing on its own backyard. The vulnerabilities along its western border compel Russia to maintain a strong foothold in Ukraine and Belarus. Russia needs these two countries to insulate it from outside threats. Though Belarus has remained firmly within Russia’s sphere of influence in

the post-Soviet era, Ukraine has not. After pro-Western supporters overthrew the Russia-friendly government in Kiev, Moscow had no choice but to respond with force. In early 2014 it seized the Crimean Peninsula and sent troops and supplies to pro-Russia rebels fighting in eastern Ukraine.

Crimea was annexed partly to ensure a foothold in Ukraine and partly to secure the port of Sevastopol, home to the Black Sea Fleet. Russia’s navy consists primarily of four main



fleets – the Northern, Baltic, Black Sea and Pacific. The first three are all based on the European side of Russia and are constrained by major chokepoints that limit their access to global waters. Since much of Russia is landlocked, the loss or compromising of the headquarter ports for any one of these fleets would severely reduce Russia’s naval power and negatively affect maritime trade. From the Black Sea, through the Bosphorus, Russia gains access to the Mediterranean

and from there the Atlantic.

Through it all, though, Ukraine has remained Russia’s top priority and the focus of its foreign policy. Post-Soviet Russia had neither the resources nor the wherewithal to retake Ukraine. Russia’s diminished power forced Moscow to adopt a strategy of global disruption that targeted primarily at the United States. (Their rivalry is one element of the Cold War era that remains intact.) Moscow

Russia’s Maritime Chokepoints



© 2020 Geopolitical Futures

did so most visibly in Syria – where it worked to parlay its influence in the conflict’s resolution to a more beneficial outcome with the United States over Ukraine – though it has also been active in Venezuela and North Korea.

For example, in mid-2013, Russia inserted itself into the international crisis by negotiating a deal to destroy Syria’s chemical weapons program. Later that year, the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine ousted the Russia-friendly government in Kiev and replaced it with one that favored the West. In a much weaker position than it was just a few months earlier, Russia once more turned to the conflict in Syria. After reshaping perceptions of Russian power, strengthening the position of Assad’s forces and prompting negotiations with the U.S., the limited Syrian intervention largely fulfilled its strategic purpose for Russia.

Recently Russia deviated from the global disruption strategy and invaded Ukraine. The move revitalized NATO and the broader US-European relationship. While the West has not directly engaged in military action with Russia in Ukraine, it provided significant logistical and military support to Ukraine.

Additionally, the West applied severe sanctions against Russia, isolating the country from much of the global economy. NATO has also increased its troop rotations, boost defense and deploy weapons systems along NATO’s eastern flank. For Russia, increased NATO presence – and in particular U.S. presence – in its backyard constitutes a major threat.

It is a threat it cannot fully manage. More than 30 years after the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia is still trying to find its way. In the lives of nations, 30 years is not so long a time, and the fall of empires tends to reverberate for years thereafter. Moreover, Russia pandemic economic recovery now faces the added constraints of far-reaching sanctions. This is particularly problematic in a region as complex and dangerous as Russia’s, a region where appearing weak can be as big a threat as being weak. Russia must simultaneously try to appear more powerful than it is and meticulously manage what power it has. But real power is durable. Illusions are ephemeral. Actions taken by weak nations designed to make them appear stronger nearly always fail in the long run.

Mission Statement of GPF

The mission of Geopolitical Futures is contained in its name. Geopolitical Futures understands the world through the rigorous application of geopolitics: the political, economic, military and geographic dimensions that are the foundation of a nation. The imperatives and constraints contained in these define the nation. We study first the past and thereby understand the future. At its core geopolitics assumes, as does economics, that events are governed by these impersonal forces and not by individual whim or ideology. Geopolitical Futures is rigorously non-ideological. Our staff may have their personal beliefs, but they must check them at the door.

We therefore strive to be objective, not merely neutral, but indifferent to the opinions swirling around the world. We have one underlying belief, which is that liberal democracy can survive only if there is a segment of society, which we call the learned public, who is not caught up in the passions of the moment, but is eager to look at the world as it is, and influence the polity toward the prudence that flows from understanding. It is this learned public we serve with the methods we have developed. Above all, Geopolitical Futures is an intellectual undertaking, an ongoing experiment in finding order in the apparent chaos of the world. We are a business that lives the life of the mind.

Subscribe Today

GPF | GEOPOLITICAL FUTURES



facebook.com/geopoliticalfutures



twitter.com/GPFutures



linkedin.com/company/geopolitical-futures

www.geopoliticalfutures.com
