



Country Profile: Russia

Russia: The Basics

Size (square miles)	6,592,772- Roughly 1.8 times the size of the U.S.
Population	140,702,094- Roughly half the population of the U.S.
Major Ethnic Groups	Russian 79.8%, Tatar 3.8%, Ukrainian 2%
Major Religious Groups	Russian Orthodox 15-20%, Muslim 10-15%, other Christian 2%
GDP Growth Rate 2007	8.10%

Government Overview

Russia is a federal and presidential republic governed under a constitution that took effect in 1993. The central government is composed of three independent branches: the executive (the president and prime minister), legislative (the Federal Assembly), and judicial. The government is responsible to the president. The executive branch is considerably more powerful than the other two branches, and has been consolidating its control over the judiciary and legislature (Duma). Increasing authoritarianism, such as control of the press and intimidation and violence against opposition candidates, have rendered recent elections less than democratic. However, the growing strength of the government after the contraction under President Yeltsin in the 1990s is popular with many, perhaps most, Russians.

Freedom House Political Rights Score: Not Free

Key Players

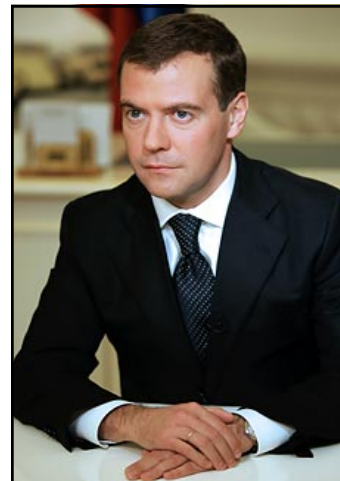


Vladimir Putin: is the current Prime Minister of Russia, Chairman of United Russia (Russia's most powerful political party), and Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Union of Russia and Belarus. He became acting President on December 31, 1999, succeeding Boris Yeltsin, and then won the 2000 presidential election. In 2004, he was re-elected for a second term lasting until May 7, 2008. In international affairs, Putin has been publicly critical of the foreign policies of the U.S. and other Western countries. In February 2007, at the annual Munich Conference on Security Policy, he criticized what he calls the United States' monopolistic dominance in global relations, and pointed out that the United States displayed an "almost uncontained hyper use of force in international relations."

Numerous journalists and historians believe Putin is reconstituting a strong state, rolling back democracy, and working to reassert Russian influence in the former communist states of Europe; whether those states want Russian influence or not. At the same time, he has made it clear that Russia no longer sees Western nations as benign trading partners. He has, however, been cooperative with the U.S. in terms of counterterrorism and non-proliferation.

The precise power relationship between Medvedev and Putin remains unclear; however, Medvedev is now the public face of Russia in foreign affairs.

Dmitry Medvedev: Medvedev was elected President of Russia on March 2, 2008. According to the final election results, he won 70.28% of votes with a turnout of over 69.78% of registered voters. The fairness of the election was disputed, with official monitoring groups giving conflicting reports. Some reported that the election was free and fair, while others reported that not all candidates had equal media coverage and that opposition parties were treated unfairly. Medvedev was Vladimir Putin's chosen successor.



Russia: Historical Background

In 1991, the Soviet Union splintered into Russia and fourteen other independent republics. Since then, Russia has struggled in its efforts to build a democratic political system and market economy to replace the social, political, and economic controls of the Communist period. In tandem with its prudent management of Russia's windfall energy wealth, which has helped the country rebound from the economic collapse of the 1990s, the Kremlin in recent years has overseen a recentralization of power that has undermined democratic institutions. Many Russians believe U.S. policy in the 1990s – which included NATO expansion into former Soviet bloc countries and forcing Russia to adopt “shock therapy” economic reforms – was pursued with the express purpose of weakening Russia.

Sources of Potential Conflict in U.S.-Russia Relations

While there are potentially limitless ways in which Russia can interfere with U.S. foreign policy goals – e.g., the recent veto by Russia of an American led UN Security council resolution targeted at Zimbabwe – there are three areas in particular where the U.S. and Russia are likely to have strong disagreements.

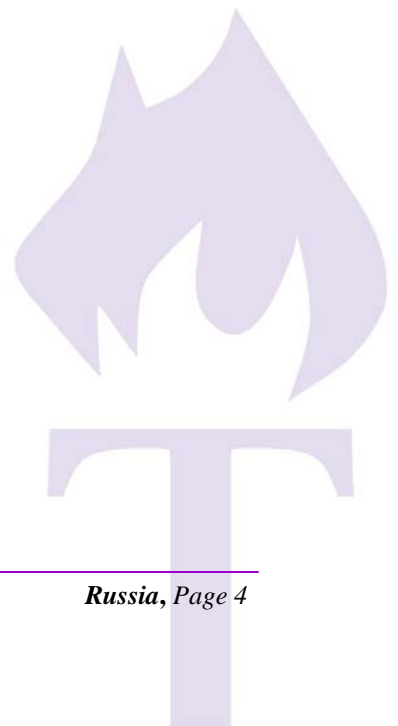
- **Missile Defense in Europe.** The Bush administration has been determined to place a missile defense system in the Czech Republic and Poland. While the U.S. insists the missile shield is a hedge against “rogue regimes,” such as Iran, Russia sees it as another projection of American force closer to Russian borders. Hopes that Medvedev would take a softer line on the issue than Putin have so far proved unjustified.
- **Kosovo.** The United States has recognized Kosovo as an independent state while Russia has backed Serbia's position of not recognizing Kosovo's independence.
- **Georgia and NATO Expansion.** The United States has supported Georgia as a potential NATO member, while Russia stands opposed to any further NATO expansion. The Russian-Georgian conflict, however, goes far beyond NATO membership. Russia currently supports breakaway Georgian republics (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and Georgia plays a large part in holding up Russia's membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO). War between Russia and Georgia erupted on August 8, 2008, after Georgia launched a lightning attack to retake South Ossetia, a separatist province, and Russia responded with disproportionate force.

Energy as a Weapon

Russia has used its vast natural resources to gain power in these three disputes, as well as in other areas where Russian policy conflicts with the U.S. and/or the West. Oil and gas resources are empowering Russia in two ways:

Economic Wealth. The high price of oil provides Russia with ample resources to pursue whatever policies it desires. A strong economy has emboldened Russia to take a hard line in opposing U.S. foreign policy, even in regions of little interest to Russia, such as in Zimbabwe.

Using Energy as a Weapon Against Europe. The more scarce energy resources become, the more potential power Russia will have – especially over European countries – by threatening to withhold energy, in particular natural gas (Russia provides a quarter of all European natural gas needs). Russia has cut off oil and gas in recent years during disputes with Ukraine and the Czech Republic, and recently stopped the flow of gas to Georgia in the middle of winter. The ability of Russia to threaten Europe may have ripple effects in terms of coordinating joint U.S.-EU responses to Russian actions.



Sources of Potential Cooperation in US-Russia Relations

Despite the potential for conflict between the United States and Russia, it is important to remember that there remain areas where cooperation between the United States and Russia have been fruitful and could continue to be so in the future, especially if newly inaugurated President Dmitry Medvedev takes a more conciliatory approach towards the West. There are two critical areas in which cooperation is likely to be strongest. Working together on these issues may allow the U.S. and Russia to broaden cooperation to other issues.

- **Counter-terrorism.** As early as 1999, Russia suggested the United States and Russia work together against al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. The threat of Islamist radicalism is of great concern to Russian authorities, who have faced a number of terrorist incidents, which makes counter-terrorism a natural springboard for U.S.-Russia cooperation.
- **Non-proliferation.** Russia's nuclear arsenal is a source of national pride, so Russia has no desire to see other countries acquire similar capabilities. This applies to Iran and North Korea, although Russia does not believe these regimes pose as great a threat to international peace as the U.S. does. While Russia has diplomatic muscle to flex in terms of slowing or halting nuclear programs in these countries, they will not treat the issue with the same urgency as the U.S. Nor do the Russians wish to see nuclear material fall into the hands of terrorist organizations. Russia is therefore an excellent partner for non-proliferation whose tactics regarding "rogue regimes" are bound to differ from ours.

If Medvedev does end up pursuing a more pro-Western foreign policy, he will likely face opposition at home. Therefore, a more pro-Western orientation will develop slowly, if at all. If Medvedev is interested in moving towards the West, he will need to demonstrate that the West is not solely interested in weakening Russia. Thus the West should put serious thought into how it will respond to overtures from Medvedev.



Democratic Backsliding

Russia is not a democracy and should not be considered in the same category as other “post-communist democracies,” such as Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, or even Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia. Despite potential hiccups in East-Central European countries, democratic backsliding has gone much further in Russia. Recent elections have not met acceptable “free and fair” standards, with the most obvious manifestation of this being that President Vladimir Putin essentially picked his successor, Dmitry Medvedev.

Other signs of democratic backsliding include:

- **Growing state control of the media.** This is true particularly for televised media, although there are still independent print media outlets.
- **State coercion of Elites.** Under Putin, Russia has shown a willingness to use the state to “punish” uncooperative business-leaders and business entities, such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky of Yukos Oil. Convicted of fraud and tax evasion, many suspect he was arrested and brought to trial primarily for his support of independent political organizations.
- **Harassment of civil society organizations.** Growing harassment of both domestic and foreign NGOs has increased in recent years
- **Concentration of Power.** Thanks to Vladimir Putin, provincial governors are now appointed, not elected.

Nevertheless, Russia in 2008 is a far cry from the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union. Elections and political parties are firmly ensconced in the political scene, most firms are able to go about their business with little state interference other than petty corruption, and there is a vibrant internet-media culture that is gaining increasing popularity. Furthermore, President Medvedev has placed great rhetorical emphasis on increasing the independence of the judiciary, reigning in corruption, and strengthening the rule of law. His background as a lawyer – as opposed to Putin’s background as a KGB agent – has given some hope that he may follow through on these promises.

Executive Power: Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev

In May of 2008, Dmitry Medvedev became the third president of Russia in the post-Soviet era. The Russian president possesses immense political power. This prevents the development of checks and balances, which allowed former President Putin to impose his will on the parliament, political parties, and the judiciary. However, with the election of Medvedev, it is uncertain whether the source of Putin's power lay in the office of the presidency or in his person.

There are three theories explaining where power is likely to be located in Russia in the near future:

- **Medvedev is serving as Putin's puppet.** Popular with the media, this theory holds that real power will stay in Putin's hands, despite the fact that Medvedev is legally the president.
- **Putin will gradually turn over power.** Yet he will remain in the position of Prime Minister long enough to "protect" Medvedev from potential enemies among the Russian elite (in particular, those whose backgrounds were in the security services – known in Russia as the "siloviki" – who were not happy that Putin did not choose one of their own as his successor). Putin also has an incentive to remain in office for the diplomatic immunity this grants him, regardless of whether he chooses to turn actual power over to Medvedev.
- **The nature of the presidency will channel power to Medvedev.** This theory holds that while Putin will try to hold on to power as Prime Minister, he will find that power will gradually flow to Medvedev because of the strength of the institution of the Russian presidency.

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