Regional Profile of Northern Asia

by Desiree Nixon

As an American citizen looking at regions of the world besides North America, one of particular interest to American life is Northern Asia. Based upon the maps defined in this class, Northern Asia is entirely Russia, formerly the Soviet Union. Students who have taken any history class know that the long-standing rivalry between the former Soviet Union and the United States which sparked a 44-year cold war. Both countries histories changed. Nevertheless, Russia has an interesting history that took place before its interactions with the United States. The governmental system has changed yet has not over the course of the last hundred plus years. Some of these changes are tied to the economic system. When it was communist everything was produced in certain fashion from a certain group, in its pseudo-democracy there is completion between companies. In summary, the economic system is tied with the government system. Speaking of ties, because Russia is on its own in its region there are no international relationships present, instead there are relationships with Russia’s neighbors worth noting. The relationships as well as governmental system and economic system have led to a major issue of trust in the government within the region. Different actors have chosen different ways to deal with these with different policy solutions. The regional profile of the area will analyze all of these issues more in depth including: government type, economics, relationships with neighbors, issues facing the region, actors influencing these issues, and policy solutions. These issues must be comparatively analyzed to provide a better understanding of our relationship with the country.

If the average American citizen were asked, “what government type does the Russian Federation have?” It is safe to assume that most people would say communist. However, a 1998 description by the Congressional Digest says that this is not the case, “The structure of the Russian government has been radically transformed four times since 1990. The constitution, designed by and for President Boris Yeltsin, combines elements of the US, French, and German systems with an even stronger presidency” (Congressional Digest, 1998). In the years following this Congressional Digest article, Vladimir Putin took office in 2000 and 2014 and has begun to reshape the semi-democracy that is in place. As we discussed in class, there is mass amounts of voter fraud and quasi elections to keep the people in power that Putin agrees with, which by definition does not fall under a democracy. When Putin sought reelection, and won the 2011 parliamentary elections before he ran for president the second-time, protests broke out. “Elections were widely criticized as fraudulent by opposition parties and media, a charge partially supported by an OSCE report that stated that “there was no real competition” in the election. Protests in Moscow on December 5, 2011, grew by December 10 into the largest protests since the 1990s… Protesters demanded an annulment of the elections, official investigations into voting fraud, greater liberty to register parties, and new elections,” (Lansford, 2014). Besides the executive branch in Russia, there is a legislature and court to an extent. The legislature consists of two bodies: the Federation Council and the State Duma, according to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. “The Federation Council consists of two representatives from each region of the Russian Federation: from the executive and legislative bodies of the region. Since the composition of the Russian Federation changed due to the merge of the regions, at different times the number of members of the Federation Council changed accordingly,” (Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 2018) In contrast the State Duma is much like the United States House of Representatives. It has 450 members and Russians are able to join at age 21. There has been controversy as of late, Putin has changed the number of parties being allowed to run in the Federation Council. This has led to a higher concentration of KGB sympathizers (Lansford, 2014). Another similarity between the US and Russia is the court system. It is called the Supreme Court of Russia, in contrast, like the legislature there is high levels of manipulation from the executive branch. This manipulation is enforced by the military.

Putin reaffirms the militaries importance to try and recreate the international fear of Russian military. In *the Role of the Military in Russian Politics and Foreign Policy Over the Past 20 Years* written by Anna Borshchevskaya she said, “One scholar argued in early 2007 that Putin grew to be more in charge of the military than any post-Stalin Soviet leader. A crucial tactic Putin used to achieve this control was the provision of important government posts to retired officers and generals,” (Borshchevskaya, 2020). The governmental system of northern Asia, in this case, Russia, resembles that of America. However, unlike America there is high levels of manipulation generated from the top.

Aside from the governmental system, an important aspect of a region is its economic policies. Russia used to be a communist nation. Our book Introducing Comparative Politics defines communism as a mode of political and economic means for ruling a country theorized by Karl Marx. In this model, he believed communism was the final step in human development. This is when there is common ownership among people and redistributed wealth (Orvis and Drogus, 2019). In Russia, this was used under Joseph Stalin through totalitarianism. After the USSR fell in the 1990’s the Russian Federation was formed changing the economic policy of the country. In an article written by Sergey Bodrunov, *Modernizing Russia’s National Economic System,* the issues associated with going from communism to a sort of free trade were discussed in depth. Shifting from one system to another has created great problems in the area. The article continues with, “The economy reacted to the uncertainty—or rather, to the distortion—of the economic signals by reducing demand and accordingly, production; by shortening the horizon of economic decision- making; and by rejecting long-term investments and high-risk projects” (Bodrunov, 2017). In summary, Russians are not investing of furthering economic involvement in Russia because there is too high of a risk attached.

Due to the uncertainty and economic chaos The Moscow Times reports that only 14% of Russians are classified as the middle class (2019). However, the World Bank does not report that Russia receives foreign aid. Instead they have donated aid to many other organizations. The number one donation was three-million US dollars to the Ebola Recovery and Reconstruction Trust Fund (World Bank, 2020). Although there are donation’s that are being made, the sources of these donations are not noted in the article. However, The Moscow Times also reported in an article that, “The wealthiest 3 percent of Russians owned 89 percent of all financial assets in 2018, according to joint research by the Higher School of Economics and the state-run VEB Bank” (2019). With all of this information, it is rather safe to assume that Russia is in debt. It has a trade deficit 461 billion USD, according to trading economics.com which reports world trade deficits. This deficit is on the decrease from the last quarter whenever it was 477 billion. The website continues in explaining that its main deficit is from capital flows. Some of its trade deficit is to its neighbors.

As Russia is the only country included in this analysis of Northern Asia, there is no relationships to talk about between the region. Instead, the relations with its neighbors is going to be discussed. Some of these neighbors include: China, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Belarus and Finland. It is important to note that most of these countries excluding China and Mongolia were part of the former USSR. Therefore, its ties are more direct than that the US for instance with Mexico. At one point in time, these were all part of one country. This has created unique problems among the nations. As described in Russia and Its Neighbors, an article written by Paul Goble after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1993, “The diversity of cultures has been accentuated by the Soviet collapse. So too has the desire of all non-Russian groups to integrate directly into world culture: They do not want their participation to be mediated by the Russians, as was the case in the past,” (Goble, 1993). In a more recent article, it explains that Russia has tried to elevate these differences between its neighbors by trying to create another USSR type superpower. Zvi Magen wrote in Russia and the Middle East: Policy Challenges, “The working plans published by the Russia media spoke of an essentially economic regional unity, similar to the EU, intended to include most of the states of the former USSR and any other nations in Asia or Europe that want to join,” (Magen, 2013). The article continued explaining that many of the nations including China did not approve of this idea. However, there were some former Soviet nations which did not mind the idea. Russia would like there to be a reunification because after the fall of the USSR, the European Alliance and NATO have had a great influence on the western region of neighbors, former USSR (Magen, 2013).

In particular Russia is having issues with Ukraine. Magen wrote that Russia is putting pressure on Ukraine by limiting the supply of energy resources to try and influence a unification. On Russia’s southern border there are former USSR countries now Muslim nations, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Magen, 2013). Russia has tried to influence these countries to try and curb radical Islam and prevent China from expanding its reach. However, it has not been very successful as Western nations have directly tried to curb this. Magen said, “they are doing so by halting the spread of Russian’s influence via political and economic tools, and by offering many types of assistance, including military,” (Magen, 2013). In a final discussion of one of the neighbors, China must be mentioned. It is the far east neighbor of Russia. Many believe this to be Russia biggest competition. They are in constant worry that China will try to expand its culture and policies to Russia. “For Russia, then, China is the major enemy of the future,” (Magen, 2013). Although it may be a major enemy of the future, Russia has major problems within its region, now.

As mentioned above, the current President of Russia, Vladimir Putin has manipulated branches of the government throughout Russia. This has caused the major issue of the region, trust in the system. In summary of all the research this issue stems from the fact that the nation and government still holds on to most of their Soviet ideas. This can be witnessed with the police force for instance. Many Russian’s believe that the police pose a threat to the economy and government. In *Corruption in Russia,* by Dmitry Gorenburg it said, “The main causes of extensive corruption among the police stem from their de facto privatization and use by governing elites in the division of assets left over from the Soviet system,” (Gorenburg, 2013). People may ask, why are the police corrupt to begin with. The Gorenburg article explains that when the USSR was broken up the pay for police was cut substantially making them have to take bribes to get enough money to live. This issue with trusting the system does not only stick to the police, however. Russian’s do not have faith in their border either physical borers or conceptual borders. The article explains that one of the most significant border corruptions is, “lobbying government officials in support of legal standards that are conducive to border zone corruption,” (Gorenburg, 2013). In addition, drugs and money are smuggled in even – people are snuck into Russia illegally. Businesses are allowed to operate that normally would not be able to if they have connections with the Russian government. Finally, an aspect that leads to the lack of trust in the system is, “corruption in Russia as a social institution that is based on a principal–agent relationship that allows for frequent violation of formal or informal rules,” (Gorenburg, 2013). As we defined in class, this means that a representative may act on behalf of themselves instead of those who they represent. These complex issues are further exacerbated by those who try to solve them.

Many of the issues discussed in the previous paragraph have been going on since the fall of the Soviet Union. In that time, there have been four main presidents of Russia. Each of these presidents have reacted to the situation differently which has prompted outrage or more trust from the Russian people. The current president, Putin, has brought stress to the people. In an article title, *Addressing the Challenges of Russia’s “Failing State”: The Legacy of Gorbachev and the Promise of Putin*, the difference in dealing with policy issues between Mikhail Gorbachev, final soviet leader of the USSR in 1991 and Vladimir Putin, current president of Russia, are discussed. During the Gorbachev administration, he used openness and decentralization of politics as a power to gain the public and suggest to the west that change was near and there could be a good soviet leader. However, in contrast, Putin has not done the same thing when faced with similar problems. Instead, he has used the argument that strengthening the power of the executive will solve the problems (Willerton, Beznosov, and Carrier, 2005). This suggests that he would like to go back to Soviet rule. The Russians and western nations have noticed this and are skeptical. In the 2005 article is says, “the agenda and reforms put forward by Vladimir Putin have been received with almost universal skepticism in the West, being widely perceived as measures against democratic consolidation,” (Willerton, Beznosov, and Carrier, 2005). The continued lack of trust and failure from President Putin to address these issues has led to a breeding ground of terror in Russia. Far-right terrorist groups have led bombings and other acts of terror killing hundreds of innocent Russians. This has led to frustration with the executive. *Russia’s Far-Right Violence Wave: Tracing the Development of Terror in a National-Socialist Organization* written by Mihai Varga explained, “during those years (2004-2005), far-right perpetrator groups undertook a campaign that targeted not only migrants and left-wing activists but also state authorities, including some of those involved in prosecuting perpetrator group” (Varga, 2019). These groups have continued through the years influencing politics and bringing fear to the public. Finally, since Russia is the only country in this regional profile, they are the ones leading the fight to stop this policy issue.

In my opinion, they are not doing the right things with any of the methods they have proposed to stop the lack of trust in the government. Putin’s way of gathering trust is simply by imposing more rules and regulations. These are not going to work in fixing the problem, as that is the problem. Additionally, one way that Putin could help to fix these problems is by fixing the principal-agent problem. However, that does not appear to be happening. As a result, the issues are simply becoming more exaggerated. In contrast to the stricter government approach, Gorbachev tried to lead a more open USSR. This could work under the current pseudo-democratic regime in place. However, during its time it was just a false positive. Now, however, a more open democratic regime could make a true democracy in the former Soviet land. Due to the fact that neither of these policies work to me, my suggestion would be to allow more openness. In addition to this, there needs to be a Bill of Rights protecting Russian citizens. The media needs to be free – holding the agents of their country accountable for the measures they take.

Many American’s believe they know all the information they could know about Northern Asia – Russia. However, this essay outlined the many facets of Russian history and government. The essay took us on a journey examining: government type, economics, relationships with neighbors, issues facing the region, actors influencing these issues, and policy solutions. Although the Cold War is not biting at our toes, the issues in this region must be illustrated to comparatively analyze the country.

References

Bodrunov, S. (2017). Modernising Russia’s National Economic System: The

Potential for Reindustrialization. World Review of Political Economy, 8(2), 221–234. https://doi.org/10.13169/worlrevipoliecon.8.2.0221

Borshchevskaya, A. (2020). The Role of the Military in Russian Politics and Foreign Policy

Over the Past 20 Years. Orbis, vol. 64, no. 3, 2020, pp. 434–446. DOI.org (Crossref),

doi:10.1016/j.orbis.2020.05.006.

Goble, P. (1993). Russia and Its Neighbors. *Foreign Policy,* (90), 79-88. doi:10.2307/114894

Gorenburg, D. (2013). Corruption in Russia. Russian Politics & Law, 51(4), 3–7.

https://doi.org/10.2753/RUP1061-1940510400

Lansford, T. (2014). Russia. In *Political handbook of the world 2014* (Vol. 0, pp. 1185-1198).

Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press

Magen, Z. (2013). Russia and the Middle East: Policy Challenges (pp. 13-30, Rep.). Institute for

National Security Studies. Retrieved November 19, 2020, from

http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep08971.5

Overview of the Russian parliamentary system. (2018, November 16). Retrieved November 22,

2020, from http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/28785/

Russia and the World Bank: International Development Assistance. (2020). Retrieved November

22, 2020, from https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/russia/brief/international-

development

Russia overview. (1998). *Congressional Digest*, *77*(8/9), 194.

Russia Total External Debt2002-2020 Data: 2021-2022 Forecast: Historical: Chart. (n.d.).

Retrieved November 22, 2020, from https://tradingeconomics.com/russia/external-debt

The Moscow Times. (2020, November 22). 14% of Russians Are Considered Middle Class –

Official Data. Retrieved November 22, 2020, from https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/08/12/14-of-russians-are-considered-middle-class-official-data-a66823

The Moscow Times. (2020, November 22). Richest 3% Russians Hold 90% of Country's

Financial Assets – Study. Retrieved November 22, 2020, from https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/04/12/richest-3-russians-hold-90-of-countrys-financial-assets-study-a65213

Varga, M. (2019). Russia’s Far-Right Violence Wave: Tracing the Development of Terror in a

National-Socialist Organization. Problems of Post-Communism, 66(3), 200–210. https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2017.1389613

Willerton, J. P., Beznosov, M., & Carrier, M. (2005). Addressing the Challenges of Russia’s

“Failing State”: The Legacy of Gorbachev and the Promise of Putin. Demokratizatsiya,

13(2), 219–239. https://doi.org/10.3200/DEMO.13.2.219-240