

Russia in the 21st Century



The Russian Federation since the turn of the century has reemerged as an important player in global politics. Russia largely left the economic chaos of the 1990s behind as its energy sector became increasingly profitable and the government reintroduced order. However, the period has also seen a retreat from the democratic promise of the end of the Soviet Union. As the state has grown more powerful, it has tightened control of the media and domestic political life, leading to accusations of human rights abuses. Renewed Russian confidence has also led to it asserting more influence in international political events, often at odds with the US and the EU.

QUICK FACTS

Vladimir Putin—The current president of the Russian Federation. Putin began his career as a KGB agent in East Germany. When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, Putin left the spy agency and worked as a political advisor in St. Petersburg and Moscow. He was appointed head of the FSB in 1998 and then prime minister in 1999. When Boris Yeltsin resigned on New Year's Eve 1999, Putin became acting president. He was elected in 2000.

Dmitry Medvedev—The current prime minister of Russia. Medvedev served as president from 2008–2012 while Putin served as prime minister. Medvedev's term has been described by some as a period of “tandemocracy” due to Putin's influential role. When Putin became eligible to run for a third presidential term and won in 2012, Medvedev was appointed prime minister.

Second Chechen War—Fought from 1999 until 2009 with the establishment of a pro-Russian Chechen Republic inside the Chechen federal region of Russia.

END OF THE YELTSIN ERA AND A CENTURY

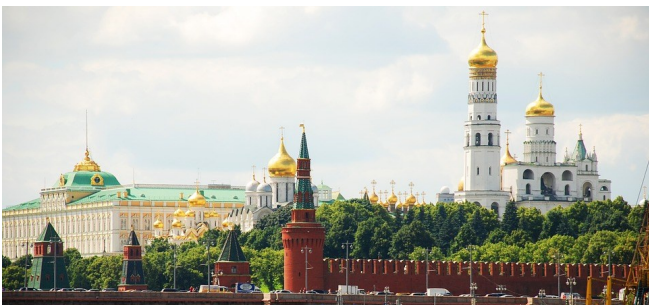
When Vladimir Putin became president in 2000, he promised to bring order to the domestic chaos and breakdown of law and order that had characterized the 1990s. He narrowed his sights on the oligarchs that had risen to power and fortune during privatization schemes under Yeltsin.

In exchange for their loyalty, Putin promised not to renationalize their industries or interfere in their business interests. Oligarchs would be free to pursue their businesses as long as they stayed clear of politics. Those who disobeyed, such as oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, were punished by arrest or exile. This allowed Putin more breathing room to focus on domestic reform and subdued some of the conflicts between warring political factions backed by oligarch clans and the mafia.

Putin also inherited a second war in Chechnya, which had been launched while he was prime minister. The First Chechen War had ended in a humiliating retreat as the demoralized Russian army failed to recapture the breakaway republic. This time, the Russian military proved more formidable and scored quick victories against Chechen separatists, raising morale among soldiers and regular Russians.

When Chechen militants held hundreds hostage at a Moscow theater in 2002, Putin refused to negotiate with the hostage-takers. Security forces pumped a powerful chemical into the theater to disable the hostages, resulting in the deaths of all of the attackers and more than 100 hostages. Despite the casualties, Putin earned a reputation as a strong leader and emerged from the crisis more popular than before.

The first decade of the 2000s saw steady economic growth as Russia's energy sector proved profitable. The currency stabilized and regular Russians enjoyed improved living standards.



THE HENRY M. JACKSON
SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON



RUSSIA'S RENEWED INFLUENCE ABROAD

When the Soviet Union collapse in 1991, Russia saw its influence in the international community diminish. The economic and political crisis preoccupied the government more than world affairs during the decade, while a demoralized and weakened armed forces meant Russia was less able to flex its military muscle.

Under Putin Russia began rebuilding and modernizing its military. Increased government spending and lucrative arms deals with emerging nations helped revive the armed forces, which had shrunk to one fifth the size of the Soviet military in 1988.

Russia looked on nervously as the former Soviet republics of Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan underwent mass protest movements in 2003-2005. Known as “color revolutions,” the movements in Ukraine and Georgia brought to power new governments that promised democratic reform and closer relations with the West. Russia, which accused the US and EU of meddling in the countries’ affairs, did not intervene militarily but attempted to influence the results of elections in those countries, which it saw as key strategic interests.

In August 2008 Russia invaded Georgia after conflict broke out between the Georgian military and insurgents in the breakaway republic of South Ossetia. Russian tanks and soldiers routed Georgian forces, driving them out of South Ossetia and pushing to the outskirts of the capital, Tbilisi. The use of force surprised the international community and demonstrated that Russia was willing to wield its influence in former Soviet space.

In 2013 mass protests again erupted in Ukraine. Known as “Euromaidan,” the protest and its supporters demanded closer ties with the European Union and an end to the rule of Viktor Yanukovych, the country’s corrupt president who had the backing of Russia. Shortly after Yanukovych was ousted in February 2014, Russia annexed Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula, drawing condemnation from the international community. Russia then supported separatist militias in Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region, a conflict that continues today.

Russia intervened in the Syrian Civil War in 2015, supporting President Bashar al-Assad against rebels, some of whom had the backing of the United States. It was Russia’s first military engagement outside the former Soviet Union since the Afghan War of the 1980s.

The 2000s has seen Russia re-emerge as an important geopolitical actor and has seen the steady rebuilding of the country’s armed forces. It has identified the countries of the former Soviet Union as important strategic interests and has found itself often at odds with the United States and the European Union in international conflicts and policy.



QUICK FACTS

Near Abroad—The term Russia uses for the countries of the former Soviet Union. Russia considers these states its most important strategic interests.

Oligarchs—Powerful business owners who earned their fortunes in the 1990s when Russia privatized many of the state-owned industries it inherited from the Soviet Union.

Color Revolutions—A series of mass protest movements in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan in 2003-2005. The revolutions overturned the results of rigged elections and brought new leaders to power.

South Ossetia—A breakaway republic in northern Georgia on the border with Russia. In 2008 Russia intervened on behalf of South Ossetia against the Georgian military, which had tried to regain control from separatists.

2011-2012 Protests—Mass protests centered in Moscow that erupted to oppose the election of Vladimir Putin for a third term. Laws passed after Putin’s election restricted protest activity.



More resources for educators are available on the [Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies website](#).



USEFUL LINKS

[CIA World Factbook:](#)
[BBC Country Page:](#)
[National Geographic:](#)



DOMESTIC DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 2000

The 21st century has brought relative stability to Russia. The economy grew steadily in the first decade of the new millennium, and much of the worst crime and lawlessness of the 1990s was calmed.

However, observers note that political freedom has deteriorated since the first term of Vladimir Putin. The state has moved to wield control over mass media, and many prominent journalists have been harassed or killed for unflattering coverage of the government. In one infamous case, Anna Politkovskaya, a prominent journalist who was covering the Second Chechen War, was gunned in an elevator of her apartment building in 2006. It remains a mystery who ordered her killing.

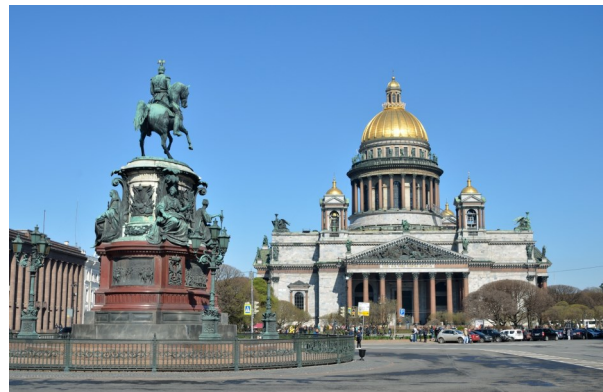
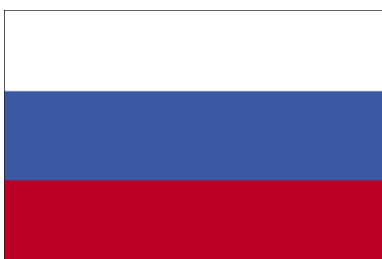
The period has also seen the persecution of opposition politicians. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, once Russia's richest man, was arrested and jailed for 10 years on fraud charges after challenging Vladimir Putin's government. Alexander Litvinenko, a former spy who fled to London in 2000 after accusing the government of ordering the assassination of another Oligarch, Boris Berezovsky, was poisoned with polonium-laced tea while living in exile. In 2015 Boris Nemtsov, a liberal opposition politician, was gunned while walking near the Kremlin in Moscow.

Vladimir Putin's third term, beginning in 2012, has emphasized social conservatism more than his first two terms. Putin gave more support to the Russian Orthodox Church, while the government passed legislation targeted LGBT rights activists. Putin has sought to define Russia as a unique society that holds different values than the European Union or the United States.

Over the past two decades, Russia has become a center of business, banking, and a leading producer of oil and natural gas. While the economy of Russia has grown for much of the 2000s, falling oil prices and Western sanctions sent the currency tumbling in 2014 and 2015. Following a brief recession, the economy stabilized.



More resources for educators are available on the [Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies website](#).



QUICK FACTS

Alexey Navalny—A popular opposition blogger. Navalny has spent much of the past 10 years in and out of jail and has faced government censorship.

Gazprom—Russia's state gas company. Gazprom sells natural gas throughout Europe and is an important source of income for the state.

Commonwealth of Independent States—A loose confederation of 9 former Soviet republics that formed following the dissolution of the USSR. Two other states, Ukraine and Turkmenistan, are associate members. The three Baltic states do not participate. Georgia withdrew in 2009.

Ethnic Groups in Russia—Russian (77.7 percent), Tatar (3.8 percent), Ukrainian (1.7 percent), Bashkir (1.1 percent), Chuvash (1 percent), other (14 percent).

Russian Federation—Modern Russia is divided into 85 federal subjects, including republics, krais, oblasts, cities of federal importance, autonomous oblasts, and okrugs. Two of those subjects, Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, are not recognized by the international community as parts of Russia.

USEFUL LINKS

[CIA World Factbook:](#)

[BBC Country Page:](#)

[National Geographic:](#)



RUSSIA AND THE UNITED STATES

Relation between the United States and Russia have been complicated since the beginning of the 21st century. The new millennium began with tension as the US criticized Russia's conduct in the Second Chechen War while Russia criticized the US and NATO for intervening in the Kosovo conflict.

Despite these events, the US-Russia partnership endured. Vladimir Putin leant support to the United States following the September 11, 2001 attacks and endorsed the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. He and US President George W. Bush developed a rapport early in the decade. However, Russia was sharply critical of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and relations soured over US support for the color revolutions and Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008.

When Barack Obama became president in 2009, he and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton attempted to repair relations with Moscow in what was called a "Russian Reset." The two countries cooperated on a number of issues, such as troop deployments in Afghanistan and negotiations to stall Iran's suspected nuclear weapons program.

However, the 2013-2014 revolution in Ukraine, which the US endorsed, and Russia's annexation of Crimea severely strained relations between Moscow and Washington. In 2014 the US and the EU implemented sanctions against Russian banks and government officials in response to the Crimea annexation and the country's support for militias in Ukraine's east. The crisis plunged relations between the two countries to their lowest point since the Cold War. Russia's suspected interference in the 2016 US Presidential election further eroded trust between the two governments.

US President Donald Trump has promised to improve cooperation with Russia. His term as president presents new opportunities and challenges for US-Russia relations in the 21st century.



More resources for educators are available on the [Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies website](#).



Vladimir Putin meets Barack Obama.

DISCUSSION IDEAS

How has Russian society changed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991?

What is Russia's current role in global affairs? What are Russia's main interests and how does it pursue them?

Ask students to discuss the main interests of the US and Russia in the world. Where do the two countries' interests conflict? How can they improve cooperation?

What are some of the main challenges facing Russian society and politics today? How is the country confronting them?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Myers, Steven Lee. *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin*. Vintage, 2016.

Galeotti, Mark. *The Modern Russian Army 1992-2016*. Osprey Publishing, 2017.

Gorbachev, Mikhail S. and Tishkov, Valery. *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society*. University of California Press, 2004.

Politkovskaya, Anna. *Putin's Russia: Life in a Failing Democracy*. Holt Paperbacks, 2007.

USEFUL LINKS

[CIA World Factbook:](#)
[BBC Country Page:](#)
[National Geographic:](#)