

## Reflections on World Politics: Russia - #20

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July 9, 2022

### **Do Russian People Support the War with Ukraine?**

Russia is a huge country – 1.8 times the size of the United States – with 11 time zones from central Europe to the Pacific Ocean. Economically it is very heterogeneous, with wealthy cities in the West, relatively developed cities spread across the center of the country, and many economically backward regions. It is a country very different from ours, and for us to understand the significant differences, we need to look to Russian scholars.

**The Four Russias:** Professor Natalia Zubarevich teaches at Moscow State University and is widely recognized as a leading economist-geographer who is involved in many international projects with the World Bank and the United Nations. In 2014, she published a landmark study entitled “The Four Russias,” which explained the different dimensions of Russian society to help make its people and their context more understandable.

Russia-1 includes the major cities such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other cities with more than a million residents. 21% of the Russian population lives in these 12 cities, where the middle class is concentrated. If you add cities with more than 500,000 residents, and include other cities with more than 250,000 residents, the total percentage is roughly 30%. These cities are where most of the internet users live, and where the urban professionals who have access to the West are located. These populations are the source of most of the opposition to Putin, but they only constitute one-fifth of the overall population of these large cities.

Russia-2 is made up of the poorer industrial cities, where the people have attachments to their Soviet past. This population is employed mostly in industrial plants, is poorly educated, and lives a “Soviet lifestyle” – this 25% of the Russian population is barely making it financially.

Russia-3 includes the people who live in small towns and villages and represent 38% of the total population. These localities are shrinking and aging and have little contact with the major centers of power.

The final category is Russia-4, which is made up of the republics of the North Caucasus and southern Siberia, where non-Russian ethnic groups are located, accounting for 6% of the country’s population. The economy of these regions is largely dependent on federal support from Moscow.

**Support for Putin:** For those of us who have become friends with Russians either here in the States or in the major Western cities of the Russian Republic, the people we know have mostly come from locations in Russia-1. They are largely urbanites and often have multiple connections with the West. They fit into our American urban centers very easily, for the most part, and it is natural for us to assume there are many other Russians like them. But this is not true.

According to Professor Vladislav Zubok from the London School of Economics, the people who live in Russia-2, Russia-3, and Russia-4 “overwhelmingly support Putin because they depend on subsidies from the state and because they adhere to traditional values when it comes to hierarchy, religion, and worldview.” Putin’s imperialist and nationalist propaganda appeals to them. Most of them do not feel connected to the global economy, and they think they will be unaffected by the sanctions from the West. Their turbulent history makes them willing to follow a strong leader, and they strongly oppose unfamiliar Western values related to democracy and human rights. They would also like to see Russia become a strong empire once again, so they believe the false propaganda statements of Putin and his national security cronies.

The repression of independent media and dissident journalists makes it hard for most Russians in non-Russia-1 locations to get the truth about what is happening in Ukraine. The brutality of the Russian army and the loss of young Russian lives is being hidden from large segments of society, especially those outside the major urban centers. Putin is afraid of Western attempts to overthrow him and fears any sign of protests both in Russia and in neighboring countries. The soft authoritarianism of the early Putin years has disappeared, and Russia is now a repressive police state. In this context, war in Ukraine justifies domestic repression and fear of Western influences at home justifies the war.

**Putin’s Future:** In a low-trust society like Russia, where foreigners are warned that “nothing is as it seems” when they come to work in this country, it is very hard to predict what will happen. It does not seem likely that a coup will topple Putin and his cronies or result from a massive public protest – that is probably not what will happen to end the war in Ukraine, but notice I used the word “probably.” During the 25 years I worked in Russia, I made several predictions about developments in the country as I became more familiar with its governing authorities, and I was wrong every time! I have given up this prophetic role.

Recently, scholars have described Putin as a “spin doctor,” one of many autocrats who enjoy high approval ratings from state-controlled media or news sources owned by their supporters, and who carefully manipulate elections that they always win. These autocrats have the option of putting opponents in prison, but often harass them with defamation suits and substantial fines. They also discredit their rivals, so there are few potential alternative leaders.

The primary strategy needed to end this war is to defeat the Russians on the battlefield, because we know Ukraine is just the beginning of Putin’s “forever wars,” which will eventually spread to include other neighboring states and possibly even some small NATO countries.

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