



# AUSA BACKGROUND BRIEF



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## RUSSIA: A PROFILE

### THE COUNTRY

The Russian Federation, covering 6.6 million square miles, is the largest country in the world. Divested of its former socialist empire, it is still almost twice the size of the United States, stretching across 11 time zones from Europe to the North Pacific. It shares borders with 14 other countries, the longest (6,846 km) with Kazakhstan on the south. The population of about 150 million is composed of some seven different ethnic groups, with the large Russian majority (81.5 percent) concentrated in the western section of the country. The administrative division of the land is a patchwork quilt, formed for political, ethnic and historical reasons into 21 autonomous republics, 49 *oblasts* (districts) and six *krais* (territories)<sup>1</sup>. Most of the autonomous republics harbor some degree of secessionist tendencies.

Analysts have pointed out that the “new” Russia of the 1990s has many of the geopolitical problems of “old” Russia. The transportation net is wholly inadequate for a modern state of its size, and the loss of its former colonies (especially the Baltic states and Ukraine) has greatly reduced its access to the open sea. Further, the disassociation of Belarus and Ukraine has tended to increase Moscow’s isolation from Europe. There is a danger that an isolated Russia, which has traditionally based its claim to “great power” status almost exclusively on its military prowess (particularly in recent memory on nuclear weapons), could come to perceive itself “forever engaged in the affairs of places like Abkhazia or Tajikistan” while being excluded from “the core questions of European or Asian security.”<sup>2</sup> Such a situation would not bode well for East-West relations in the long run.

There is also the fact that the new Russia lacks the principal control mechanisms of the ancien regime. The elaborate machinery of law and order, so prominent in the oppressive eras of czarist and communist rule, has evaporated, leaving the state with but a pale shadow of its former authoritative image. As a result, organized crime has emerged as what one observer characterizes as “the most explosive force” to spring upon the landscape. According to the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, 40 percent of all transfers of goods and services in the country in 1993 were controlled by organized crime. Further, the crime syndicates are believed to have close ties with key sections of the government bureaucracy.<sup>3</sup>

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Russian history has been heavily influenced by its geography. The vast sweep of its forests and steppes has provided little security to the heartland. In the 13th century the land was overrun and subjugated by the Mongols and Tatars from the east. Isolated from Europe and never fully exposed to the liberalizing trends of the Renaissance, life developed as an oppressive existence for the vast majority of the people, with little awareness of science, art or learning. Under the leadership of Peter the Great in the 17th and 18th centuries, the country attempted to break out of its spiritual and intellectual cave and to acquire secure, definable borders and outlets to the sea. However, most of its initiatives to the west met strong opposition and provoked waves of invasions from that quarter by Poles, Swedes, French and (twice in the 20th century) Germans.

Largely as the result of Russian defeats in World War I, the Bolsheviks were able to seize power in 1917 and to dominate the former czarist empire for the next seven decades. In the latter half of the 1980s, however, Mikhail Gorbachev came to power with a program of *perestroika*, or reorganization, under the belief that the Communist Party and the government needed renovation to rid the land of gross inefficiencies. It soon became apparent, however, that communism itself was the problem, and not simply the practices which had developed under its aegis. The rising generation of leaders well recognized the inadequacies of Marxist-Leninist dogma for meeting the needs of the people.<sup>4</sup>

In August 1991 Boris Yeltsin effectively eclipsed Gorbachev with a dramatic stand in the Russian parliament building, blocking an attempted coup by right-wing factions. Following the abolition of the Communist Party and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Yeltsin, as President of the Russian Republic, became the unquestioned leader of the Russian people.

## POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

In December 1993, in conjunction with national elections, the Russian people ratified a new constitution providing for democratically elected officials, with most national-level powers shared between a president and a bicameral Federal Assembly. However, the concept of division of powers is novel in Russia, and not yet fully developed. Some analysts characterize the present division as closer to those among contenders in the power struggles of the czarist court or the Soviet Politburo than between equal and independent branches of government in a democracy. They also point out that there is still no clear understanding of judicial power as an authority distinct from that of the executive.<sup>5</sup>

The December elections surprised most observers by propelling the extreme right-wing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to national prominence, with close to 25 percent of the vote. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the party chief, espouses many concepts reminiscent of the former Nazi Party of Germany. Zhirinovskiy's memoirs outline objectives including the reestablishment of Russia as an imperial state with all of the territories held by czarist Russia in 1900. Further, he is often quoted as calling for territorial access to the Indian Ocean, presumably at the expense of Iran. It is possible, however, that many LDP votes were cast primarily in protest against the harsh economic conditions in Russia, and that Zhirinovskiy's influence may be ephemeral.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the case, for the first time in its history Russia does possess a strong, constitutional presidency and a broadly based bicameral legislature consisting of an upper Federation Council (170 members) and a lower, but more influential, State Duma (450 members).<sup>7</sup>

## **THE ECONOMY**

Russia is well endowed with natural resources. It has extensive oil deposits and the world's largest natural gas reserves. It also has abundant quantities of other minerals including iron, zinc, lead and gold. However, three-quarters of the deposits are located in Siberia in areas of difficult access. Russia also has extensive forests and possesses rich grain-producing land in the areas of the North Caucasus and the Volga and Amur Rivers. Ten million people are engaged in agriculture.<sup>8</sup>

Since independence, Russia has discovered that it has inherited a largely obsolete industrial plant, the best parts of which have been oriented toward the production of arms. Moreover, key components of the former Soviet industrial network are now located in other states which have their own political and economic agenda. These problems are further complicated by the poor quality of the labor force, which has been long conditioned to low productivity under socialism. As a result, the country is in a severe depression. The economy is currently contracting by nine percent per year while inflation has virtually destroyed the value of the currency. The ruble, pegged at \$1.64 in 1991, is worth less than a fortieth of a cent today.<sup>9</sup>

There has been some progress in the privatization of government enterprises. By July 1994 more than 100,000 firms had been sold to private investors, but there has been little motion toward the regulation or control of share trading. Stock purchases and sales by insiders is the norm, while private citizens have little access to corporate financial data.<sup>10</sup>

Few observers are willing to guess what lies ahead, but they recognize that political and economic stability will be essential for recovery and growth. An important determinant, some point out, will be the behavior of the military establishment, both as a potential player in the political realm and as a consumer lobby on the economic side. The military budget was subjected to reductions of about 26 percent in 1992-93, but there are strong pressures for restoration of some of the cuts. Nevertheless, some analysts appear to believe that the economy has a chance of recovering its former productivity by the end of the decade. Unfortunately, there is no great consensus of optimism.<sup>11</sup>

## **MILITARY CAPABILITIES**

Experts disagree about the size of the Russian armed forces, with estimates ranging from 1.4 million to 2 million troops.<sup>12</sup> In any event, they are expected to continue to contract to about 1.1 million or less by January 1, 1996.<sup>13</sup> Officially constituted by presidential decree on May 7, 1992, the forces have been battered by meager funding, top-heavy manning (one officer for every enlisted rank), marginal opportunities for training, redeployments to areas with few life-support facilities, and a lack of respect by the population.<sup>14</sup>

Having had to leave much of their best equipment and logistical base in the former frontier military districts (now parts of Belarus and Ukraine), Russian forces find themselves with large stocks of materiel of old design and inadequate infrastructure for maintaining the good equipment brought back from Germany. Reportedly, only 20 percent of the Russian tanks are combat ready.<sup>15</sup>

But deadlined equipment is not the only problem. According to the defense minister, Army General Pavel S. Grachev, the forces lack a capability for coherent action in combat. (He has referred to them as "an army of ruins and debris.")<sup>16</sup> The command, control and communications systems have been badly disrupted in the process of withdrawal from Central Europe. Many of the units are stationed in areas ill-suited for their capabilities. Alone among the services, the Strategic Rocket Forces enjoy virtually full staffing and operational capability, providing some credence to Russia's continued claim to superpower status.<sup>17</sup>

The Ground Forces are undergoing substantial changes as many units are being converted from the traditional motorized rifle and tank division structures to combined arms brigades. However, the end state of the reorganization is likely to continue to feature some division-size units, and perhaps armies as well.<sup>18</sup>

The Air Forces inherited about two-thirds of the aircraft of the former Soviet Air Force, but not all the best. As with the equipment of the Ground Forces, many of the newer aircraft were deployed in the western military districts which are now detached from Russia. Most of the fighters based in Russia were of older design and belonged to training regiments.<sup>19</sup>

The country now finds itself particularly short of transport aircraft, many of which went to Ukraine when the countries broke apart.<sup>20</sup> The breakup of the national airline, Aeroflot, among many smaller carriers, and a shortage of fuel and maintenance have undercut the ability of military transport aviation to fulfill its traditional missions of providing lift for airborne forces and other high-priority tasks.

The Navy has been plagued with deterioration of its ships and base structure, forced dislocations from its former bases in the Baltic states, and a running dispute with Ukraine over the ownership of the Black Sea Fleet. Reports from the Far East indicate that many of the ships of the Pacific Fleet, including an aircraft carrier, are unfit to go to sea. In 1993 a number of naval cadets in that region fell ill or died from malnutrition, resulting in the dismissal of the commander in chief of the Navy and other senior officers.<sup>21</sup>

In spite of these hurdles, and the decommissioning and scrapping of many vessels, the Navy has managed to bring into service a few new submarines and surface vessels in the last year. The current rate of retirements, however, while running at about 15 times the rate of new commissionings, is not progressing fast enough to rid the fleets of unseaworthy craft.<sup>22</sup>

The most important organizational change in the forces is the creation of a Mobile Forces Command. The influence of both General Grachev (a former airborne commander) and his deputy, Colonel General Boris Gromov (the last commander in the war in Afghanistan), is clearly visible here. They tend to focus upon light infantry, airborne and airmobile troop formations. The Mobile

Forces Command, with an unusually light structure (for Russia), is envisioned as a joint command for rapid reaction to security problems arising anywhere within the country or for meeting peace-keeping requirements in neighboring states of the former Soviet Union — the “near abroad.”<sup>23</sup> Moscow defines its interest in the other former Soviet republics primarily in terms of the welfare of the 25 million Russians living there.<sup>24</sup>

Another major issue for the military leadership is the distribution of units recently withdrawn from Central Europe. The movement of the great bulk of troops has created many imbalances which will need to be corrected soon. Largely for lack of suitable garrison areas elsewhere, significant numbers of troops have been assigned to the Kola Peninsula in the north, in the old Leningrad Military District, and to the North Caucasus Military District in southern Russia, on the isthmus between the Black and Caspian Seas. Unfortunately, these new deployments exceed the provisions of the 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty with NATO.<sup>25</sup>

Russia has repeatedly asked NATO to excuse these excesses on the basis that the treaty was drawn up when there was a Warsaw Pact and that the circumstances have changed drastically. NATO, however — particularly Norway and Turkey, which are most intimately concerned — has thus far held firm. Western analysts are uneasy with the whole matter. There is concern that Russia has become too involved with security matters in its “near abroad” and may harbor imperialist ambitions, perhaps to include a resurrection of the old empire.<sup>26</sup>

In Russian eyes, the Caucasus region (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) and the Central Asian region (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) represent areas of substantial potential wealth but are vulnerable to exploitation by other powers, particularly Turkey and Iran. Russia maintains about 40,000 “peacekeeping” troops in Central Asia, including the 201st Motorized Rifle Division in Tajikistan supporting the pro-Moscow regime. Most of the troops are welcome as border guards by the host governments since the countries have few coherent forces of their own. While Moscow has no forces deployed south of its Caucasus Military District, tensions are high because of the reemergence of anti-Russian sentiment on both sides of the border and the outbreak of hostilities in Chechnya. The concern was of sufficient proportions to prompt the chief of the General Staff, Colonel General Mikhail Kolesnikov, to remark that if the CFE force limits could not be adjusted, Russia would be forced to exceed the limits “temporarily” in that region.<sup>27</sup>

The Chechen insurrection has involved only Russian citizens, albeit a distinct ethnic minority group. The fiercely independent mountain people have long been a thorn in Moscow’s side. In Russian eyes, the autonomous republic has a well-earned reputation for harboring brigands and mobsters. In one notorious case in 1992, Chechens were caught in an attempt to swindle some \$350 million from private Russian banks using interbank transfer notes.<sup>28</sup>

The poor performance of Russian military forces in the battle for Grozny, the Chechen capital, should not have come as a great surprise. General Grachev repeatedly warned of inadequate funding for defense, and in November 1994 President Yeltsin criticized his commanders for lax discipline among the troops and low levels of combat readiness.<sup>29</sup> Practically the entire Russian high command expressed grave reservations about the Chechen operation from the beginning.<sup>30</sup> The troops evidenced little spirit or motivation for the Chechen campaign and suffered inordinate casualties and

materiel losses. One observer reported that the most common sight in the battle area was a Russian soldier bent low over a broken engine. Tanks, he said, traveled in pairs — one towing the other.<sup>31</sup> As many as six general officers may have been relieved of their positions in the process, including Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Georgy Kondratyev.<sup>32</sup>

There is some indication that President Yeltsin plans to take direct control of the General Staff in any future domestic military crisis. Colonel General Vladimir Semenov, commander in chief of Ground Forces, has argued strongly for such an arrangement, with the General Staff playing a principal role in the coordination of the “power ministries” — Defense, Internal Affairs (MVD), and the Federal Counter-Intelligence Service (FSK).<sup>33</sup> The 100,000-man Frontier Troops and another organization, laboring under the Stalinesque title of “Ministry for Civilian Defense, Extraordinary Situations and Natural Disasters,” might also be included. Reportedly, this latter, a seeming dinosaur from the era of the Cold War, may employ as many as 300,000 people.<sup>34</sup> General Semenov argues that the defense minister should be a civilian, overseeing arms purchases, budgets and policy matters.<sup>35</sup>

## **RUSSIA AND NATO**

Russia recognizes that it is unlikely that it could ever become a full member of the NATO alliance. It is wary of initiatives by other former Soviet republics and Warsaw Pact states to join, fearing that an expansion and revitalization of the alliance could revive its former anti-Russian stance. On June 22, 1994 Moscow moved to join the NATO “Partnership for Peace” (PFP) program, but made it clear that Russia’s expectations were quite different from NATO’s intent. The Russian foreign minister, Andrei V. Kozyrev, argued for a loosening of ties between NATO and its subordinate North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), to which many eastern states have rallied, and for the development of closer association between NACC and the 52-member Conference on Security and Coordination in Europe (CSCE). Russia enjoys full membership in CSCE, only NACC and PFP membership in NATO. Kozyrev went on to say that he hoped that such a shift would reduce pressures for extending NATO membership to former members of the Warsaw Pact.<sup>36</sup>

The Russian argument cannot be well-received in Warsaw, Prague, Budapest or other capitals where most leaders are looking to the PFP and the NACC as stepping stones to the security of eventual full NATO membership. Nor could it have been well-received by NATO. Senior NATO officials have spoken of the PFP as an important step in the preparation of eastern countries for NATO membership. The issue is likely to gain in prominence as the divergent interests press their points.<sup>37</sup>

## **WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION**

The Russian Ground Forces, like our own, are essentially free of nuclear weapons, but the Strategic Rocket Forces (SRF) remain well equipped, and their future seems assured. Perhaps typical of Russian continued preoccupation with preparation for a military apocalypse is the continuing work on construction of a vast subterranean command and control complex in the Ural

Mountains, near Ufa, for use in case of nuclear war. Development is also proceeding with three new types of intercontinental missiles: one to be imbedded in a silo, as most of Russia's weapons have traditionally been; one to replace the single-warhead mobile SS-25; and one to go to sea aboard submarines. There are still about 7,000 strategic warheads in Russia. Another 3,000 are retained by Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan.<sup>38</sup>

Most analysts believe that Moscow now has control over all of the weapons in the SRF — with “black boxes” for control in the hands of the president (Yeltsin), the minister of defense, and the chief of the General Staff — but others are not so sure. The chiefs of government in the other former Soviet states where missiles are deployed may retain at least some form of veto power over the weapons still on their soil. A positive development has been the 1994 agreement between the United States and Russia to cease targeting each other's vital areas. If both sides live up to the agreement, at least the chances of accidental nuclear war will have been significantly reduced.<sup>39</sup>

Russia has agreed to destroy all but 5,000 tons of its reported 40,000+ metric ton chemical weapons stockpile, and to eliminate the remainder by 2005. The United States has financed much of the project, but the undertaking has not advanced smoothly. Differences exist about the actual tonnage of toxic material in Russian hands, and a whistle-blowing Russian scientist, Vil Mirzayanov, has claimed that a binary weapons program is still underway. Former CIA director James Woolsey testified to Congress on June 23, 1994 that “contradictions” exist, but the next day Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin assured U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher that there was “no chemical weapons development going on in Russia.”<sup>40</sup> It may be some time before the full story emerges of what is actually happening in this field.

In 1993 President Yeltsin signed a decree banning the development and production of biological weapons, but suspicions persist that, as with chemical weapons, some biological laboratories are still in business. Thus far Western inspections of Russian laboratories have not been very systematic or complete.<sup>41</sup> In January 1995 the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Lieutenant General James Clapper, expressed concern to Congress over Russian maintenance of both chemical and biological warfare research and development programs.<sup>42</sup>

Since 1992 the United States Congress has approved \$1.2 billion in aid to Russia (also known as Nunn-Lugar funding) under the Cooperative Threat Reduction program for the elimination of mass destruction weapons. In January 1995 Defense Secretary William Perry announced that Russia had removed nearly 2,600 nuclear warheads from missile and bomber bases and eliminated about 575 bombers and launchers, with help from U.S. funding. Notably, Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Jesse Helms (R-NC), who is not known as a great enthusiast for foreign aid, has expressed support for the program.<sup>43</sup>

The next few years are likely to prove crucial for Russia's long-term political development. While events of historical importance may occur all around the world, it is doubtful that many will match those affecting the course of the largest country in the world in the new century. Russia could easily revert to its traditional path of despotic, xenophobic rule, coupled with an aggressive foreign policy. On the other hand, it has now had a number of years of at least quasi-democracy and virtually unrestricted individual freedom of thought and expression. At the same time, Russia has suffered its



worst economic and social catastrophe since the German invasion of 1941, and it is not surprising that a large segment of the population associate their whiff of liberalism with raw destitution. Russia will regain its major — perhaps even “super” — power status at some time in the future. Whether it will again become a direct threat to the United States in our time will depend to a great extent upon the course of events before the end of the decade.

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