Chapter 4  
Russia and Neighboring Countries

Chapter Overview

The Russian and Neighboring Countries region includes twelve of the fifteen former republics of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are included in the Europe region). Until Turkmenistan discontinued its membership in August, 2005, these twelve countries constituted the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a cooperative organization which primarily deals with economic policies among member states. Russia continues to be the dominant country of the region. While the other countries of the region are still dependent upon Russia, they are looking to establish greater ties with other countries, including the United States. Russian culture emerged in what is now western Russia and spread eastward across northern Eurasia with the territorial expansion of the Russian Empire.

The Russian and Neighboring Countries region is the world’s largest in terms of land area. The vast size and northerly location result in large expanses of midlatitude continental interior climates with particularly harsh winters. Plains, interrupted by the Ural Mountains and low hills, dominate the western half of the region. Low plateaus and mountains dominate in the east. There are several very long rivers in the region but many of these rivers flow northward and remain frozen during much of the year. Vegetation and soil regions follow the pattern of climates with tundra and coniferous forest (taiga) in the north and deciduous forest, steppe and desert in the south. The best agricultural conditions are the steppe grasslands, where black earth (chernozem) soils are found. Pollution is a problem in many parts of the region, particularly in areas when experienced rapid industrialization during the Soviet era. Contraction of the Aral Sea, the result of water diversion for agriculture in Central Asia, continues to be one of the world’s greatest environmental disasters.

Following World War II, the Soviet Union emerged as a global superpower. The state-run economy briefly kept pace with Western economic growth but ultimately proved inefficient. Human rights abuses were widespread, particularly those associated with the Soviet gulags. In spite of the introduction in the 1980s of economic reforms (perestroika) and informational openness (glasnost), the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991 into fifteen independent countries. Human rights abuses have decreased since the end of Communist rule, but have not ended.

The population is concentrated largely in the western one-third of the region. Outside of Russia, there are significant concentrations of ethnic Russians in areas that were of strategic or economic importance during the Soviet era. Population growth rates in the region are low, with some countries (including Russia and Ukraine) experiencing negative population growth. The region is predominantly urban with rates of urbanization currently at their highest in areas with little arable land or industrial development.

The Russia and Neighboring Countries region is divided into three subregions: the Slavic countries, the Southern Caucasus, and Central Asia. The Slavic countries are dominated by the Russian Federation. These countries share a similar history and culture and each continues to struggle economically with the transition from Communism to capitalism. The subregion’s resource base has spurred increasing foreign investment. Of note are the vast quantities of oil, gas, and timber in eastern Russia. The Southern Caucasus has a complex ethnic and cultural geography. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, conflicts over secession and borders have resulted in armed clashes in Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and several Russian republics including Chechnya and Dagestan. The countries of Central Asia are all landlocked, arid or
semi-arid, and are predominantly Muslim. An important producer of oil, natural gas, and cotton, this subregion is becoming increasingly important in global geopolitical and economic matters.

**Chapter Outline**

*Geography at Work: Russia: Still a World Power?*

*Geography at Work: Wine Industry*

*Point–Counterpoint: Russia*

I. New Relationships

II. Crossroads, Imperialism, and Cultural Diversity
   A. Rus
   B. Muscovy
   C. The Russian Empire
   D. The Soviet Union
      1. Competing for Control
      2. Five-Year Plans
      3. World War II

III. Natural Environment
   A. Plateaus, Plains, and Major River Valleys
   B. Desert, Grassland, Forest, and Tundra
   C. Environmental Problems
      1. Oil Pollution
      2. Pollution at Norilsk
      3. Nuclear Pollution
      4. Aral Sea Contraction
      5. Threatened Fisheries
   D. Global Environmental Policies

IV. Global Changes and Local Responses
   A. Communism at an Economic Standstill
   B. *Perestroika* and *Glasnost*
   C. Human Rights
   D. Population Distribution and Patterns
      1. Urbanization
      2. Urban Landscapes
      3. Secret Cities
   E. Global City–Regions

V. Subregions

VI. The Slavic Countries
   A. Political Divisions
   B. Heartland and Hinterland in Russia
   C. Foreign Investment
   D. Trade
   E. Science, Sports, and Society

VII. The Southern Caucasus
   A. Culture
   B. Ethnic Peace and Conflict

VIII. Central Asia
A. People: Ethnic Conflict

**Themes/Perspectives for General Discussion**

1. What is the CIS? How does it function compared to the way the Soviet Union functioned?
2. How was it that Russia was able to achieve such a great territorial extent?
3. How was central planning implemented in the Soviet Union?
4. How is Russia’s natural environment a great benefit and also a great hindrance to human activities?
5. How might growth in Caspian Sea oil and natural gas production alter the geopolitical dynamic of within and beyond the region?
6. What are the major environmental problems of the region? Why did they occur and what are their long-term impacts?
7. Is Russia still a world power? Expand on the arguments presented in the Point-Counterpoint section.
8. Examine Figure 4.21, Ethnic Russians as minorities in neighboring countries. How will the patterns you observe affect the political, economic, and cultural geography of the region?
9. What are the major demographic trends of the region? How might these trends affect the future stability of the region?
10. Why has Russia’s Caucasus region been an area of continued turmoil?
11. What do you envision regarding the future of Russia? Do you believe it will break up, like the Soviet Union, into many independent countries? What group of people seems to be pressing the Russian government for independence using very violent tactics? Why is Moscow fighting back?

**Key Terms and Concepts**

| black earth soils | heartland |
| brown earth soils | hinterland |
| central planning | northern coniferous forest (taiga) |
| command economy | perestroika |
| Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) | permafrost |
| continentality | podzol soils |
| five-year plans | Russification |
| glasnost | steppe grasslands |
| gulag | tundra |

**Check the News** – Current events that you might want to explore for your lecture, or have students explore on their own, from paper or on-line news services.

1. What is the current status of the CIS?
2. What is the current status of NATO and what is Russian opinion of this status?
3. What is the current status of the EU and what is Russian opinion of this status?
4. What have been the most recent developments regarding insurgencies in Russia’s Caucasus republics?
5. What is the condition of Russian-Chinese relations? Have the leaders of the two countries met lately? What was the reason for the meeting/what was discussed?

6. What is the position of US-Russian relations? Have the leaders of the two countries met lately? What was the reason for the meeting/what was discussed?

7. What is the current price of oil? Is Russia the leading producer in the world? How is Russia’s status as a leading oil producer affecting international relations?

8. Are there any Russian environmental issues in the news? What and where are they?

9. What is current status of Russian economy? Is it better or worse than last year?

Additional Resources

Test Item File
Test questions for this chapter are available on the Instructor’s Testing and Resource CD-ROM, available from your McGraw-Hill Sales Representative.

Transparencies
Figure 4.3 Russia etc: physical map
Figure 4.4 Russia etc: national groups
Figure 4.7 Russia etc: history of growth
Figure 4.8 Russia etc: climates
Figure 4.10b Russia etc: natural vegetation and soils (map)
Figure 4.13 Russia etc: environmental degradation
Figure 4.17 Russia etc: consumer goods, etc
Figure 4.18 Russia etc: gulag camps and secret cities
Figure 4.20 Russia etc: population map
Figure 4.23 Russia etc: age-sex pyramids
Figure 4.28 Slavic Countries
Figure 4.30 Russia: admin divisions
Figure 4.35 Southern Caucasus
Figure 4.36 Caucasus ethnic groups
Figure 4.38 Central Asia

Interactive World Issues CD
None appropriate for this unit.

The Power of Place Telecourse Series. The following segments:
Unit 3. Russian and Neighboring Countries
Program 7. Northwest Contrast
St. Petersburg: Russia's Window on the West
Vologda: Russian Farming in Flux
Program 8. Holding the Hinterlands
Dagestan: Caucuses Disconnect?
Bratsk: The Legacy of Central Planning

Digital Content Manager CD
1. All line art and photos from the textbook.
2. Nine additional photos not in the textbook.
Suggestions for Further Reading


