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# Chapter 1

## Introduction to Russia’s Foreign Policy

*We are not surrounded by enemies and we will not end up in that position. This is absolutely out of the question. We have good, friendly relations with most countries.*

Vladimir Putin, Russian President 2016  
Direct Line with Vladimir Putin

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### Learning objectives

- Describe the importance of studying Russia as a country and Russia’s policies.
- Discuss why Russian foreign policy mattered yesterday and still matters today.
- Explain and critically examine the key methods used to study Russian foreign policy.
- Outline ways to interpret and predict Russia’s future actions.

### Russia today

#### *Introducing Russia*

Russia, officially known as the Russian Federation, is the world’s largest country. It is one of the top fifteen biggest economies in the world. It has a mixed economic system with both private and state ownership. It possesses nuclear weapons, a capable army, the air force, and the navy. It has a stable yet evolving political system. Russia has an educated population and a trained workforce. Russia’s contribution to the world’s culture is noticeable. The country plays a meaningful role in

global economic and political affairs. Overall, Russia's ability to influence international developments makes it a major player today.

However, Russia's actions during the first two decades of the twenty-first century have caused serious concerns. Difficult questions have arisen about the meaning of Russia's strategic long-term goals and specific short-term plans. What does Russia want as an international player? Is Russia a partner or a foe to the West? Do people – in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere – have to resolutely oppose Russia in international affairs, or should they remain neutral or even supportive sometimes? Is cooperation with Russia a better alternative to competition? To answer these and many other questions, one needs to better understand Russia's rich history, better know its current potentials and weaknesses, and better analyze its policies and decisions. Our understanding of Russian foreign policy should help in developing effective bilateral relations between Russia and other countries, especially the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, China, South Korea, and with the European Union. Knowing more about Russian foreign policy should also facilitate the effectiveness of many international organizations and nongovernment groups. This should help in preserving and building a more secure, stable, and prosperous world.

Before we begin the study of Russia's foreign policy, let's first review some basic facts about Russia as a country and then turn to its political and economic systems. This background will be important when we discuss particular events and specific policies (Map 1.1).



Map 1.1 Russia

## *Russia as a country*

The Russian Federation stretches over 6.5 million square miles (more than 17 million square kilometers – Russia, as do most countries in the world, uses the metric system). It is almost twice the size of the United States, Canada, or China. Russia has ten time zones extended across Eurasia. When you arrive at midday in Kaliningrad, Russia’s most western seaport in Europe, it is 1 pm in Moscow, Russia’s capital, and already 10 pm in Petropavlovsk, the city on the Kamchatka Peninsula in Russia’s far east. Russia borders the Baltic Sea in the west, the Black and the Caspian Seas in the south, the Arctic Ocean in the north, and the Pacific Ocean in the east.

Russia is among the top ten most populous countries in the world. Its 144 million citizens live on one-eighth of the planet’s inhabitable area. About 80 percent of Russia’s citizens identify as ethnic Russians. As a group, Russians share common Slavic ancestral roots (including cultural and linguistic) with many peoples of Eastern and Central Europe such as Belarusians, Ukrainians, Slovaks, Czechs, Serbs, Poles, Bulgarians, and Montenegrins. There are also about 30 million people in Russia who are not ethnic Russians and identify with about 70 different ethnic groups. They are called “nationalities” in Russia, which is a rather unusual label. Nationality – in legal terms – refers to a person’s formal identification with a group of a people who share common geographical origin, history, and language and are unified as a political entity – an independent or sovereign state recognized by other countries. In Russia, however, “nationality” refers mostly to an ethnic or cultural group. Some of these cultural groups, or nationalities, are concentrated within twenty-six separate administrative units, but there are no official restrictions on where any Russian citizen may live in Russia. Among the largest ethnic minorities are Tatars, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Chuvash, Bashkir, Armenians, Chechens, and Mordovans. Tens of thousands of Russian citizens identify with German or Jewish origins (these are also called “nationalities”), but their numbers have declined over the past twenty-five years as a result of massive emigration of people from these groups to Israel or Germany and other Western countries. The overwhelming majority of people in ethnic groups speak fluent Russian (which is the only official language in the country), and in most interethnic marriages Russian is the first language (Rosstat, 2017).

It is estimated that Russia has approximately 7 million legal migrants who have obtained short-term status as temporary workers. In addition (there are no exact numbers), there are approximately 3 to 4 million undocumented migrants. This number has been changing over the past ten to fifteen years due to several factors, including the conditions of Russia’s economy, the exchange rates of the ruble (the official Russian currency), the implementation of various residency laws, ongoing regional conflicts (such as the one in Ukraine that started in 2014), the severity of anti-immigrant sentiment within Russia, and, of course, a few other reasons.

Russia officially recognizes four major (or “traditional,” as they are referred to in official documents) religions: Russian Orthodox Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and

Buddhist. More than 70 percent of people in Russia identify in opinion polls as Orthodox Christians. Approximately 10 percent of Russians identify as Muslims (mostly Turkic groups living across the country). These estimates do not include temporary migrants, most of whom are laborers from the post-Soviet states who tend to identify as Muslims. There are between 1 and 2 million Protestants, about seven hundred thousand Buddhists, and about two hundred thousand Jews (these estimates vary). Despite considering themselves believers, most Russians do not practice religion or maintain firm religious beliefs. For example, only 30 percent of Russians stated, according to polls, that religion plays either a “very important” or an “important” role in their lives. For various personal or political reasons (Levada, 2012, 2015), many people, including Muslims and Christians, do not openly acknowledge their religious identity.

## Introducing some key definitions

What makes Russia important in today's global world? Have Russian policies made the world a more stable, safer place? How should the United States and its allies treat Russia and respond to its policies? Is Russia destined to be a constant adversary of the West, or will it find a path to cooperation? To answer these and many other questions, we need to critically assess Russia's foreign policy in the context of its domestic developments and international relations.

### *On International Relations*

As a discipline, **International Relations (IR)** studies interactions among states and the international activities of nonstate organizations (Shiraev and Zubok, 2016). These interactions take several forms. They may be negotiations about territories, borders, military threats, migration of people, economic agreements, environmental cooperation, educational exchanges, and so on. International Relations is an academic discipline in which scholars discuss their ideas, arguments, and theories. It is also an applied field because it proposes solutions to the world's many problems. Even a short list of the issues related to IR is vast. Several topics remain prominent: (1) international politics, (2) international political economy, and (3) international law. International politics is the analysis of how states interact and pursue and protect their interests. International political economy investigates how politics among states influence their economic relations and how global markets affect the international system. International law studies mutually agreed formal rules and regulations concerning interactions among states, institutions, organizations, and individuals involved in international relations.

The field of International Relations differs from **Comparative Politics**, which focuses more on comparing domestic politics, political institutions, and systems rather than on how they interact. Yet the interests of both disciplines frequently

overlap. The study of foreign policy is inseparable from International Relations and Comparative Politics and has become increasingly multidisciplinary. Professionals working in this field should know the basics of fields such as government, economics, history, sociology, cultural studies, psychology, and military studies, to name a few.

### *On foreign policy*

In general terms, **foreign policy** involves sovereign states' interactions – including official decisions and communications, public and secret – with other state governments, nongovernmental organizations, corporations, international institutions, and individual decision-makers. A country's foreign policy is typically directed through embassies or other official offices overseas. Their main activities involve diplomacy.

**Diplomacy** is the practice of managing international relations by means of negotiations. The content of foreign policy ranges from peace treaties to threats of force; from trade agreements to trade sanctions; from scientific, technical, and cultural exchange programs to visa and immigration restrictions. Countries' governments usually prefer diplomatic means of interaction, but violence or a threat of it frequently backs diplomatic moves. In today's developed democratic states all three branches of government commonly participate in foreign policy, although their roles differ. Within the executive branch top government institutions dealing with international relations usually include a ministry or department of foreign affairs. The legislative branch passes laws about the direction, financing, and handling of foreign policy. In democratic countries parliaments commonly ratify (or approve) international agreements signed by state executive leaders. The judicial branch is involved in foreign policy in several ways. For example, courts can make assessments about the applicability of certain international laws or agreements about the territory of the country. The courts also decide on claims submitted by foreign countries, including businesses and private individuals.

Countries differ in terms of the involvement of the three branches in foreign policy. In some countries, such as the Netherlands or the United Kingdom, their legislative branches have more say in foreign policy than the legislature in countries such as Russia. Differences between foreign policy executed by democratic and nondemocratic governments are also important. In democratic countries political parties, nongovernmental organizations, the media, and public opinion play a more important role in foreign policy than in nondemocracies (Shiraev and Sobel, 2006, 2019).

### *The importance of specific definitions*

In the English language the word “Russian” refers to something or somebody associated with Russia. However, if you translate this word into the Russian language you have to be careful, because there are two different meanings for this term. One refers to “Russian” as an ethnic category (“Roos-ski”). The other adjective

(“Rossiy-ski”) refers to something or somebody belonging to or associated with the Russian Federation as a sovereign state. The latter is a civic, not an ethnic, category. Both these adjectives are translated in English as Russian, which sometimes creates confusion. For example, some people belonging to various ethnic groups living in Russia will likely disagree if you apply the term “Russian” to them. They might have been born and raised in Russia and hold Russian citizenship but ethnically not be Russians (Sakwa, 1993: 116). If you speak Russian, you can avoid this confusion by using the right adjective when referring to Russia or Russians. In English, you have to provide additional qualifying explanations of the word “Russian” as referring to either (a) an ethnic group or (b) statehood or citizenship.

## **Russia's past 125 years: A snapshot**

In Chapter 2, in which we outline Russia's foreign policy, we also provide a somewhat detailed review of several historical developments that affected Russia, its policies as a state, and its actions as an international power. Here we will review Russia's rich past focusing on only a few major developments of its recent history.

### *Imperial Russia*

Russia, the biggest world state and a multiethnic empire, was already a powerful international actor early in the twentieth century. Of the more than 125 million people who lived in Russia during the reign of Emperor Nicholas II (1868–1918), about 65 percent were native Russian speakers. Russia was rapidly developing its economy and infrastructure. However, the first two decades of the past century were perhaps the most turbulent in Russia's history. In a twelve-year period the country endured three revolutions. These were the historic political changes of 1905–1907 (the first revolution) and later the fundamental and violent political transformations in February and then October 1917 (the second and third revolutions). The second revolution marked the end of the monarchy. A brief transitional period followed, which ended with the creation of a communist state.

What is known as the October 1917 Revolution was an extraordinary and traumatic event for the entire country. It sparked a devastating civil war that lasted until 1922. The war had several interconnected causes. Because of the revolution and new confiscatory policies imposed by the Communist Party (known in Russia as the Bolshevik party, or the Bolsheviks), all people lost their property, possessions, and monetary savings. Peasants by law had to surrender large portions of their harvests and stock to specially appointed representatives of the government. Several millions had died on World War I and the civil war battlefields, lost their lives due to starvation and diseases, or emigrated over the five-year period after 1914. The exact estimates of the population loss vary. Production levels had plummeted by 80 percent

and agricultural output had dropped 40 percent compared with the pre–World War I period. Millions of people became unemployed. Inflation and food shortages were constant for several years (Erllichman, 2004). Nevertheless, by the early 1920s a functional centralized government had finally established control over the vast territory of the former Russian Empire.

The core ideology of the new communist government was Marxism, which was a set of theoretical principles formulated by the German philosopher and economist Karl Marx (1818–1883). Applied to politics, Marxism claimed that capitalism was a fundamentally unjust form of production reinforced by an oppressive political regime. Working people, according to Marxism, are the main producers of value (a measure of quantity and quality of products and services). Therefore, working people should become the true owners of resources; they must seize political power, abolish private property, and then establish a new political and social system of universal equality called communism (Lenin, 1917). For many decades Marxism remained a major ideological foundation for communist, socialist, and social-democratic movements around the world. It remains a formidable ideology today in Russia and elsewhere.

Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik party and head of the new government of Soviet Russia, a lawyer by education, was a Marxist. He believed in the inevitable death of capitalism in the West and globally (Lenin, 1916/1969). By liberating the oppressed, he wrote, the world's working class, called the proletariat, would abolish private property, thus simultaneously destroying the roots of injustice and war. As a result, a new international community would emerge through revolutionary violence against the oppressive social classes. Lenin justified dictatorship of one party (which would rule on behalf of the working class) as a tool to overcome domestic resistance and then build a new society.

The Bolshevik party assumed the role of the only self-proclaimed representative of the working class and peasantry. The party adopted a hammer and sickle as its motif on the red flag and coat of arms of the new state. All symbols of the old regime, including the Russian traditional tricolor flag established early in the eighteenth century, were abolished. (Russia restored the tricolor as the national flag in 1991.) In 1918 the Bolshevik government issued the first constitution of Soviet Russia, legitimizing the dictatorship of the “city and rural proletariat and poor peasantry” with the goal of eliminating capitalism in the country. Thus the ruling party established an early legal precedent for its unlimited power, which it maintained until 1991. Under these conditions, the State of the Soviet Union was officially formed on December 30, 1922. It lasted for nearly seventy years.

### ***The Soviet years***

By the 1930s the Soviet Union was an industrialized state with an increasingly educated multiethnic population. Russia, as a republic itself, dominated the union. The legal foundation of the government was a one-party political system. The new

constitution of 1924 declared the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) a federation of republics. On paper, each of the republics had the right to leave the federation and to conduct its own educational, social welfare, and labor policies. In reality, Moscow controlled practically all the republics' institutions and their policies.

The government in Moscow implemented a policy of rapid and massive industrialization. According to the communist doctrine, the strength of a state is determined by the size and quality of its heavy industries. Therefore, Soviet leaders in the 1920s and later focused on steel production and the manufacturing of machinery. The Communist Party also wanted all peasants to be organized into collective farms whose members shared property and land. As a result, individual ownership of land was abolished. The government introduced mandatory quotas for harvests and established extremely low prices for collective farms' agricultural products. The government exercised almost total political control over the peasantry. The compulsory collectivization was the foundation of Soviet agriculture for many years to come. This policy, unfortunately, among many other negative impacts, significantly reduced the peasants' incentive to produce (Conquest, 1986).

Both industrialization and collectivization required massive support from the state. The government in Moscow needed to develop a coercive bureaucratic system capable of functioning in a new social and economic environment. It did so and put the Communist Party at the center of it. The party played a major role in all areas of economic and political life in the Soviet Union: factories and plants became part of a sophisticated network administered by a centralized system of planning, production, distribution, and management. From the 1920s until the late 1980s, in big cities and small towns, a centralized bureaucratic structure was in charge of every aspect of economic planning and social development (Ruble, 1990).

The Soviet Union defeated Germany in World War II (1939–1945). Yet the victory was very costly. On the one hand, the Soviet Union became a major player in international affairs; many communist, pro-Soviet states have emerged in Europe and Asia. On the other hand, the Soviet Union was substantially weakened economically: the country lost more than 26 million people dead, and its infrastructure was devastated. Despite these difficulties, the Soviet Union emerged from the war as a proud nation unified around its autocratic and charismatic ruler Joseph Stalin (1878–1953). Although the leaders in Moscow, Washington, and London had established very productive contacts during the war, after 1945 they failed to create the conditions for lasting good relations. The difficult period of international tensions from the late 1940s to the late 1980s is known as the Cold War (we will return to this topic in Chapter 2 as well as in other chapters).

Most Soviet people for many years showed support for the government and its leadership, no matter who occupied the highest offices in the Kremlin. In the 1970s, however, the prestige of the official communist ideology diminished. In most places labor ethics were in decline. Mass cynicism (a mixture of skepticism and fake enthusiasm) spread. The period from the late 1970s to the middle of the 1980s was a time of widespread political apathy in the Soviet Union. The political ascendance of the

new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev (b. 1931), who became General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1985, changed the country forever. Gorbachev introduced a series of massive reforms that shook the country and had global consequences (Glad and Shiraev, 1999).

On the plus side, in the course of these reforms the people of the Soviet Union had obtained political freedom by the late 1980s. Censorship was gradually eliminated and freedom of speech guaranteed. The one-party political system was gone. Limited private property became legal, and small private businesses grew. The Cold War was seemingly over, and the Soviet Union called for a normalization of relations with the West. Moscow and Washington agreed to destroy thousands of nuclear warheads and the means to deliver them. People could finally travel overseas with their own foreign currency and without **exit visas** (which were difficult-to-obtain government permits that for decades allowed only limited foreign travel for the vast majority of Soviet citizens). The reforms of the 1980s, however, caused a profound crisis in all spheres of life. Sharp social inequality and polarization emerged. Inflation skyrocketed. Food shortages became common by the end of the 1980s. Crime flourished. Lawlessness was rampant. In many ethnic regions violence broke out, taking thousands of lives and bringing destruction and despair to hundreds of thousands of people. In 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed. Russia and fourteen former Soviet republics became independent. Except in Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania, democracy was struggling in the former Soviet republics. Central Asian states turned to authoritarianism.

The transformation of 1985–1991 was full of contradictions, uncertainties, and disputed outcomes. Many contemporary Russian policies, as we will examine later in this book, took root in the processes that started in the 1980s and continued through the 1990s and later.

### ***Russia after 1991: Major transitions***

From a historical viewpoint, the period from the early 1990s to today was very short. Yet these years were filled with dramatic events that have few parallels in Russian or even world history. Over just two-and-a-half decades Russia had to be reassembled in every sense: it had to build a legitimate government, regain economic and military might, maintain a multiethnic state, and attempt to build democracy. The challenges were daunting. Privation and lawlessness in the 1990s, several economic crises, terrorist attacks, and scores of social problems slowed down the development of a new civil society. On paper, the political restructuring in Russia was a transition to a democracy. Yet the type of democracy existing in Russia today is unique and full of contradictions. According to the Constitution, Russia has three independent branches of government. The executive power is disproportionately strong, and it has been getting ever stronger since the early 2000s. Russia has an increasingly personal form of political rule, which is a source of uncertainty in domestic and

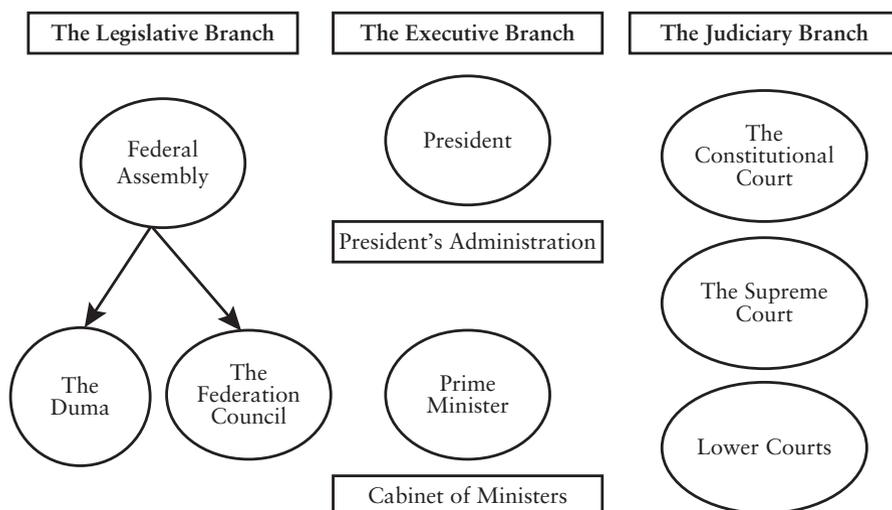
international policies. Yet Russia as an international player has become more confident and predictable even in the ways in which it was developing tensions with its close and distant neighbors.

## Russia's political and economic systems today

### *Russia's political system*

Russia is a presidential, federal republic, organized according to Russia's basic law or Constitution, which was adopted in 1993. The term republic means that supreme power in the country belongs to the people and their elected representatives. The term "federal" means that Russia, as a sovereign state, consists of several subdivisions or units that can initiate and exercise certain policies and make particular independent decisions. Article 10 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation states that the power of the state in Russia is divided among three independent branches of government: the executive, legislative, and judiciary. The article also guarantees a separation of powers (see Figure 1.1).

Based on the Constitution, the president of Russia is head of state. Presidents are elected by popular vote once every six years (they were elected to four-year terms



**Figure 1.1** Russian government's structure

before a recent amendment to the Constitution). The country's executive power is also in the hands of the prime minister who chairs the Russian Council of Ministers. The prime minister is appointed by the president and must be approved by the State Duma. After 1990, there have been three Russian presidents: Boris Yeltsin (1931–2007), who was elected in 1991 and 1996; Vladimir Putin (b. 1953), who was elected in 2000, 2004, 2012, and 2018 for his fourth term; and Dmitry Medvedev, who was elected president in 2008 for only one four-year term.

The highest legislative body of the Russian Federation, according to the Constitution, is a parliament called the Federal Assembly. It consists of two chambers, the Federation Council and the State Duma. The members of each chamber are elected by means of a complicated system, the details of which have frequently changed. However, over a period of a little more than two decades, Russia has produced a stable legislative system based on democratic principles. It is somewhat different from the legislative systems in the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and many other democracies. One substantial difference is that the Russian legislature today tends to approve most of the bills introduced by the powerful executive branch. The influence of the legislature on the executive branch is relatively minor.

The Constitution is also the principal source of law in Russia. The Constitution states that only *law courts* administer justice in Russia. As in other countries, a court of law in Russia is supposed to establish the legality or otherwise of a certain action (which could be the behavior of an individual, a decision of an institution, or a government decree, for example) and then pass a ruling. Judiciary power is exercised in four major areas: constitutional, civil, administrative, and criminal. The law courts in Russia constitute a hierarchy, with the higher courts having the right to overrule decisions of lower courts. The Constitution identifies two federal legal bodies and outlines their basic responsibilities: the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation and the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation. Despite gradual changes that have taken place in the judiciary since the 1990s, it has not achieved full independence from the executive branch. The justice system – Russia's leaders admit this openly – suffers from inefficiency, bureaucratic delays, and corruption.

According to the Constitution (Article 65), the Russian Federation consists of republics, regions (known as *oblasts*), special regions (known as *kraj*), three cities with special federal status (Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Sevastopol after 2014), and autonomous regions. All of these are the subjects of the Russian Federation or specially recognized territorial units within the federal state. The definitions of these units are fairly complicated, and the exact number of the subjects of the Russian Federation has changed several times and may be changing in the future.

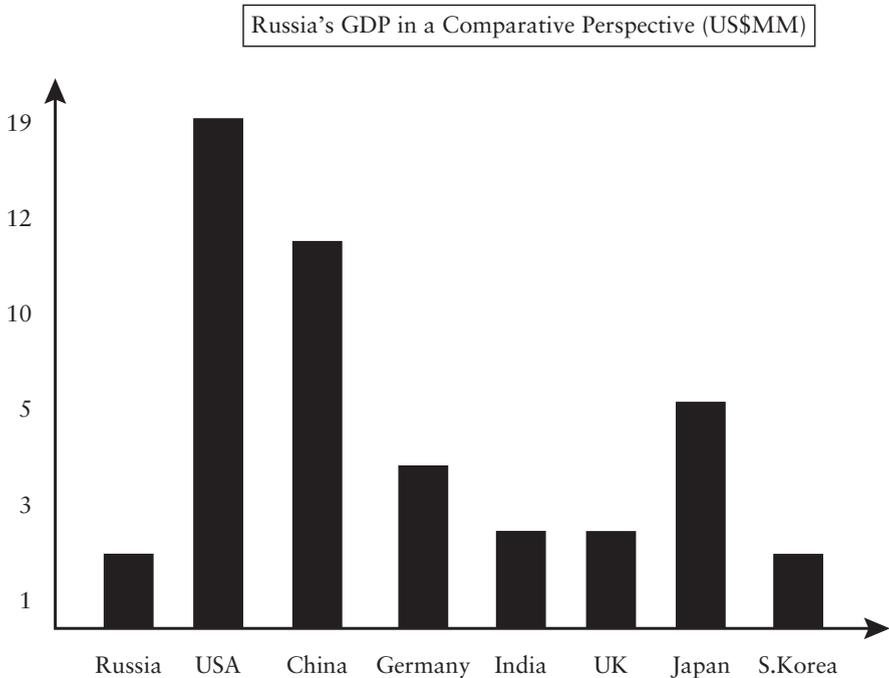
To reiterate, the executive branch of government in today's Russia is the paramount power and is in almost full control in most areas of life. In comparison, in some other countries that, like Russia, underwent democratic transition in the 1990s, more powerful parliamentary systems emerged (for example, in Slovakia, Hungary, and Estonia) with relatively weaker executive branches. Moreover, in the past fifteen years Russia has introduced specific legal reforms as constitutional amendments that have further consolidated the executive power in the president's

hands and increased the power of the federal (central) government in Russia's capital, Moscow, where the vast majority of federal institutions are located.

### *Russia's economic system*

Russia is an economically developed country. The country's **Gross Domestic Product** (GDP or the value of all goods and services produced over a specific period), is one of the world's twenty largest. Russia's economy, relative to its size, is behind those of the United States, China, the European Union, Canada, and India, among a few others. It is ahead of South Korea, Mexico, and Spain. Russia has a functional economy with both private and state control of major industries (IMF, 2016) (see Figure 1.2).

Russia entered the 1990s as a decayed, centralized yet disorganized, economy, which was transformed within ten years (Shleifer and Treisman, 2004). Russian exports (mostly oil and gas) and fiscal austerity have generated a steady economic growth in the early 2000s (McFaul and Stoner-Weiss, 2008). Russia's economic policy-making, based on free-market principles coupled with significant government



**Figure 1.2** Russia's GDP in comparative perspective

Source: Created using IMF (2018)

regulation of key industries, has worked well during the period of high prices for energy resources, as the Russian leaders acknowledged themselves (Putin, 2012c). In addition, capital gains and personal income taxes remained low in order to attract new foreign investments and stimulate foreign business. By the early 2010s Russia had achieved financial stability and a budget surplus. Inflation remained modest, and the Russian economy grew at a steady pace of around 6–7 percent annually. Wages on average went up 350 percent, compared to the late 1990s (Strategy, 2012). These were major characteristics indicative of Russia's economic success early in the 2000s.

Yet several global and local developments have negatively affected Russia's economy. The global financial crisis that began in 2008, plummeting global oil prices, and the serious structural problems of Russia's economy have contributed to Russia's slower economic growth and the economic stagnation that began in 2014. In the area of international relations, Russia's actions in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014 and after (we will return to the latter case several times in the following chapters) prompted a very negative reaction in the European Union, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and many other countries. Russia had to deal with economic and political sanctions, to which it has responded with its own counter-sanctions. In part as a result of these developments, scores of foreign investors pulled out of the country's markets.

Overall, Russia is highly dependent on its oil and gas revenues. This reliance on its natural resources affects Russia's policy choices. The leadership was long aware that Russia needed to modernize its economy, develop manufacturing, and make itself less dependent on exports of its natural resources (Strategy, 2012). Yet in simple terms, Russia so far has been interested in prolonging the world's dependency on imported fossil fuels, thus keeping the global oil and gas prices high.

## **Assessing Russia's political and economic system**

Traditionally, the assessments of the Russian political and economic system have differed: most homegrown experts in Russia have tended to see it in a positive, mostly uncritical light, while most Western experts have taken a critical view (Isaev and Baranov, 2009; Shleifer and Treisman, 2004; Shlapentokh, Shiraev, and Carroll, 2008). According to a popular view from Russia, the country's political system is rooted in Russia's unique historic and cultural experiences. Russia is a sovereign country pursuing its own national interests and conducting policies that are no different from those of most other countries, including the United States. From a regime of the early 1980s, allowing one party and no private property, the country turned to a multiparty democracy. What used to be a planned economy has been reshaped into a market one. Supporters of this view also maintain that political censorship has gone for good. Russia's economic and political systems are far from perfect, yet they are the best option in the current economic and political conditions. The view that Russia's political system is unique and different from Western models finds support among many Russian experts (Dubin, 2012).

Experts in the West tend to disagree with these generalizations. Every country's political system, not only Russia's, has unique elements; yet every country can be evaluated according to some common criteria. For example, Russia resembles a "hybrid" state combining or mixing both democratic and authoritarian features (Hale, 2011). **Authoritarianism** refers to a political system in which individual freedom is subordinate to the power or authority of the state – meaning an individual or a small group such as a political party. Authoritarian leaders rely on a small inner circle and impose their decisions on their country's population. The country thus lacks at least three main institutions of accountability: viable opposition parties, independent media, and an independent court system (McFaul and Stoner-Weiss, 2008: 83). Elections are held, but they are not necessarily democratic because of the government's control of the media and interference in the electoral process. In Russia important political decisions belong to one person (the president) or very few individuals; their actions can be criticized but are not commonly scrutinized or rejected by opposing political forces, who remain, in most cases, either quiet or powerless. Russia has established a free market but did not develop the political freedoms common in the West. The legal protection of private property is rather weak. Although the people have more individual liberties than in Soviet times, such guarantees have not been fully implemented yet. The government limits people's major civil rights in exchange for providing them with social stability and economic security (or at least promises of stability and security). The leader's individual characteristics play a more significant role in decision-making than in democratic (nonauthoritarian) political countries. In the context of international relations and foreign policy, governments of democratic countries often see authoritarian leaders as less cooperative than they were expected to be (King, 2008). Indeed, Russia in the 2000s has been on an increasingly confrontational course with the United States and most European countries (Sestanovich, 2008: 28; Shlapentokh, 2015). In sum, as most critics maintain, Russia during the past fifteen years or so has developed a highly centralized and powerful government within a weak civil society lacking democratic traditions.

In this book we shall be introducing these and other points of view and assessments of Russia's foreign policy. It will be up to you to decide which of these views better reflect historical realities as well as unfolding events.

After we have examined several major definitions and reviewed several key points in Russia's history, let's discuss why we should spend more time studying Russia. What is Russia's role today in global affairs?

## **Five reasons why Russian foreign policy matters**

### ***Geopolitics***

In the context of foreign policy, **geopolitics** refers to countries' power in relation to geographic space. The space that Russia occupies affects its foreign policy. Russia shares land borders with five NATO countries (Norway, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania,

and Poland), faces others (Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria) across the Black Sea, and is separated only by the fifty-three-mile-wide Bering Strait from the United States, which is another NATO member. Overall, Russia borders sixteen internationally recognized sovereign states. The facts of Russia's location are an important geopolitical factor affecting policy: anything that happens on Eurasian territories stretching from Central Europe to the Sea of Japan can appear critical to Russia and cause it to react. All these and other factors point to Russia's important role as a regional power. In addition, Russian leaders increasingly often emphasize Russia's significant role in global affairs. As an example, Russia participates in several UN peacekeeping operations in various parts of the world. Russia remains active in the Middle East. Russia is reaching out to several Latin American countries. Therefore, it is important to understand and anticipate Russia's reactions in many regions that are close to Russia's borders.

### *Differences in policies*

From Russia's perspective, its strategic interests do not generally correspond with the strategic interests of the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, and their allies. As a result, Russia tends to conduct policies that challenge the foreign policies of most Western countries. For example, despite Russia's unenthusiastic view of North Korea's military posturing, especially in recent years, Moscow has for decades maintained its economic and political ties with the government of that country. By contrast, the West has mostly cut its relations with the government in North Korea. Russia has also maintained friendly relations with the government of Iran despite this country's nuclear ambitions and support of international terrorism (based on Washington's point of view). Russia has been building multistate economic and political coalitions with nearby countries, including major international players such as China, India, and Iran. Russia also claims its own "privileged interests" in the so-called post-Soviet territories (Putin, 2012a).

Russia's relations with most Western powers during the past fifteen years have been, at best, lukewarm and, sometimes, unfriendly. Relations between the United States and the United Kingdom and Russia have rapidly deteriorated since 2008. Although the White House attempted to "reset" United States–Russia relations after 2009, this effort has failed (see Chapter 7 on US–Russian relations). In light of these and many other problems that have surfaced in the past twenty years in the relations between Russia and the West, several important tasks for foreign policy, defense, and security decision-makers in the West will likely remain as follows:

- monitoring Russia's international actions;
- assessing Russia's economic capabilities and its global energy policies;
- assessing Russia's military capabilities;
- checking Russia's ambitions and actions in various regions; and
- finding ways for productive cooperation in several key areas, including conflict resolution, nuclear security, and counterterrorism.

## *Energy politics*

In the twenty-first century Russia has become one of the biggest world energy suppliers and competitors in the global market. Further, it has confirmed vast reserves of natural gas and oil on its territory, which should be available for exploration and extraction in ten or fifteen years (if this proves to be necessary). These assets include Arctic gas and oil reserves, a large, unexplored source of hydrocarbons. Moscow claims that they must belong to Russia; other countries disagree. Such international disagreements may cause significant tensions in the future. Because of its size and economic infrastructure, Russia remains one of the biggest contributors to greenhouse gases: it is just behind the United States, China, and the European Union as a global polluter. Russia is aware of these facts as well as its role as an important decision-maker in global energy environmental policies. The drop in oil and gas prices after 2013 has brought new, long-term, and difficult challenges to Russia. Therefore, its actions in the area of energy policies should be monitored and properly addressed.

## *Nuclear power*

Russia remains a very strong military state with immense nuclear capabilities. Having strong military capacities has always been the highest priority of Russian and Soviet leaders in the past (Pipes, 1984). Russia successfully tested nuclear weapons in 1949 and reached nuclear parity with the United States by the 1970s. In the twenty-first century Russia maintains a nuclear arsenal and delivery systems (such as missiles and bombers) generally comparable with the arsenal of the United States (Legvold, 2009). It is important to make sure that Russia continues its policies of nuclear nonproliferation, which mean that no other country or political force should gain access to nuclear weapons as well as to nuclear materials. It is important that Russia, together with the United States and other nuclear powers, continues policies aimed at reducing the risk of nuclear war. These policies, however, receive different assessments and interpretations. We will return to these discussions in later chapters such as Chapter 7 on US-Russian relations.

## *Soft power*

Natural resources, technologies, and deadly weapons are not the only sources of power in international relations. Countries can influence other countries as well as international politics by means of example, persuasion, and reputation. This is called **soft power**. The liberal tradition of international relations emphasizes the importance of economic and cultural factors (such as economic aid, fashion, sports, music, role models) in making a country's foreign policy effective. Russia's soft power – to some degree – is rooted in its rich culture. Russians tend to consider

their culture as part of Western civilization. In the field of art, Russia has given the world many celebrated musical composers, such as Tchaikovsky, Glinka, and Rachmaninoff. Russian writers including Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Nabokov, and Chekhov (to name a few) are known worldwide. Russian ballet, with its unique choreography and performance, remains among the best in the world. Several Russian cities, St. Petersburg in particular (designed by top European architects), are among the world's most desirable tourist attractions. The art collections in Russian museums, such as the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, are priceless. Cultural and educational programs between Russia and other countries, including student exchanges, have continued for years.

Today, Russian youth listen to Western rock and hip-hop, follow British and American singers on Twitter, dress very much like their peers in London or Boston, and watch European soccer tournaments and NBA games on television. Yet, as we will see later, despite Russia's pro-Western cultural orientation, the country overall maintains a very ambiguous love-hate relationship with the West. Nationalism has been on the rise for years. Understanding Russian cultural values, identities, and their inconsistencies as well as their impact on Russian domestic policies and foreign policy is a very important yet challenging task.

## **How we study foreign policy**

The study of foreign policy includes three basic kinds of interconnected activities. The first is informational: you have to search for and gather facts. You describe events, decisions of political leaders, the media's commentaries, and other developments. The second is interpretive: you have to analyze and explain the facts that you have gathered. The third activity is critical thinking: you look critically at the facts, the ways they were gathered, compare the different views, and the ways in which others have interpreted them.

### ***Official reports***

All government organizations in Russia issue official reports and publications related, directly or not, to foreign policy. Political parties regularly upload official statements and publish their leaders' interviews and press conferences. Every government office at the federal and regional level has its own website containing updates, policy statements, and statistical information. Big agencies often make these reports available in English. How reliable are such documents? When working with Russian as well as other foreign sources, always keep in mind that their accuracy and objectivity are related to the professional prestige of the sources, political ties with the government, the quality of previous reports, or competition from other sources of information. Government institutions (and this of course refers not only

to the Russian government) can deliberately distort facts in official reports. History provides examples. In the Soviet Union before the 1980s, for example, many government organizations knowingly falsified their official printed statements to cover up existing problems or generate a false impression of success. Most of the published official statistics about crime in the former Soviet Union, for example, provided deliberately lowered numbers. Thus, it was next to impossible for a scholar or reporter to know the frequency of violent crimes or the number of prison inmates in the Soviet Union. Today the vast majority of published official reports in Russia are reliable. In many cases there are no deliberate government interventions to distort statistical information or other facts. However, some facts can be easily overlooked, while others are purposely exaggerated for political or other reasons. In the book, we will learn about many cases in which the Russian government's version of certain international events differs substantially from the views of the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the United States and many other countries.

### *Statements, letters, and communiqués*

Official statements provide evidence on how the government communicates with other states and international institutions. A communiqué, which is an official report, provides information about the intentions, expectations, or actions of political leaders or government agencies. Historians and political scientists view correspondence between state leaders as an important source of information. For example, official letters exchanged between US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin during World War II show detailed evidence of the difficult bargaining process in strategic decisions affecting millions of lives. However, most government documents including letters remain classified for years: Russian officials are no different from public officials in other countries who are interested in keeping communications away from the public for as long as possible. Today Russian public officials, including the president and prime minister, frequently use televised interviews, press conferences, and live Internet chats to convey the government's vision of policies and events. Of course, official lines of communication can be used to distort the facts or mislead the public, as has happened in the past (Pearson, 1987). However, with the spread of social networks, the number of independent reporters representing various views has also grown dramatically. Keep in mind though that not all web-based sources are reliable. You have to check and verify their reports using multiple sources including eyewitness accounts.

### *Eyewitness sources*

An eyewitness account is a description of an event or a chain of events provided by an individual who observed them directly. In some cases eyewitness accounts are the only available source of knowledge. Personal testimonies tend to provide

valuable facts and important details that are not always necessarily supplied by the official institutions or independent media. Former ambassadors often publish their own accounts of important events they witnessed, such as private negotiations with top state officials, as the former US ambassador to Russia Jack Matlock did in his influential book on US-Russian relations (Matlock, 2005). Personal translators to political leaders such as Pavel Palazhchenko (1997) and family members of top diplomats such as Naomi Collins (2007), bring valuable observations and add important details to official publications related to diplomacy.

Biographical studies of Russian leaders can be helpful too. Biographical research often provides a comprehensive picture of how a leader's policies were initiated and executed. For instance, books such as *The Man without a Face* (Gessen, 2012), *The Strongman* (Roxburgh, 2012), or *Wladimir Putin: Der "Deutsche" im Kremlin* (Rahr, 2000) provide factual information about the Russian president's ascendance to power and discuss the individual motivation behind his policies. Still, we need to understand that biographers' personal views may affect their discussion of facts, especially in relation to politics.

Political memoirs often include details previously unavailable even to experts. Some Russian officials, like most other countries' politicians, usually after retiring from active politics, choose to write memoirs and provide valuable information about their past policies and decisions (Gorbachev, 2006; Yeltsin, 1994, 2000; Yakunin, 2018). Beware, though: most leaders do not necessarily write memoirs in order to describe their foreign policy mistakes. In most cases they want to show off their achievements. Even when witnesses try to describe facts candidly, they almost inevitably put their spin on them. *Investigative journalism* has brought a new dimension to eyewitness accounts: a reporter specifically pursues cover-ups or looks for facts unavailable to most people. In many countries, including Russia, this type of journalism is especially effective in dealing with government schemes, corruption, or political censorship. Unfortunately, investigative journalism frequently meets with resistance from Russian authorities (though they routinely deny this), and many reporters face mistreatment from the government simply because they try to provide truthful information about serious problems.

One useful research technique, used for the quantitative examination of reports, is content analysis. This systematically organizes and summarizes both the manifest (what was actually said or written) and latent (the meaning of what was said and written) content of information. A researcher, for example, can analyze official documents, including transcripts of speeches. As an illustration, Former President Medvedev in his first annual address to the Federal Assembly (parliament) in 2008 mentioned the United States ten times but only two times in the three subsequent years of his presidency. President Putin after 2012 began to mention America in his speeches significantly more often (Green, 2015). Does this suggest anything important about Russia's priorities in foreign policy? Perhaps yes. Most official statements of Russian leaders as well as government documents published between 2006 and 2019 suggested Russia's reorientation in its foreign policy, which was becoming more confrontational toward the West. Researchers do not limit their focus to official speeches and statements; they also examine the content of television or radio

programs, posted comments, and printed articles. As an example, Shlapentokh, Woods, and Shiraev (2005) examined how Russian newspapers reacted to the events of September 11, 2001, in the United States, describing the common tendencies and the overall tone of the reports: although papers expressed their concerns about the tragedy, most reports in Russia indicated that America itself and its policies were partially to blame for the attack.

### *Intelligence reports*

In a general sense, **intelligence** is information about the interests, intentions, capabilities, and actions of foreign countries, including government officials, political parties, the functioning of their economies, activities of nongovernmental organizations, and the behavior of private individuals. Intelligence can be electronic or human. The term is often used to refer specifically to the output of state intelligence agencies. Today most intelligence information about foreign countries comes from open sources such as official reports, press releases, opinion polls, and interviews with government officials. Specially trained intelligence professionals gather and interpret “open source” information. State leaders can use intelligence information effectively, but they also can manipulate and misuse it. It is customary for many political leaders to “push” their intelligence agencies to produce information (or “leak”) that corroborates their own views of foreign policy. In 1982 the head of the Soviet security forces (the KGB) and soon-to-be top Soviet leader Yuri Andropov pushed intelligence professionals to generate evidence of US preparations to launch a surprise attack against Russia (Zubok, 2007). In the United States there were periodic scares produced by the military and intelligence establishment that the Soviet Union was getting ahead in the nuclear arms race. Although the Soviets were not necessarily getting ahead, the US Congress sometimes voted for huge military appropriations to retain American strategic superiority.

On the other hand, political leaders often believe that they are better judges of international relations and foreign policy than intelligence and national security professionals. Thus, they often ignore the intelligence gathered – and may even suspect that it is misinformation “planted” by the other side. Infamously, Joseph Stalin ignored a number of signals from Soviet intelligence before Nazi Germany's surprise attack on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. In retrospect, some intelligence failures are in reality the personal failure of the leadership to recognize foreign threats.

### *Media reports*

In the days of the Soviet Union the government controlled the press, and any truthful information coming from the media about the real state of affairs in the country was extremely difficult to gather for both inside and outside observers. Experts

studying the Soviet Union often exchanged anecdotes about the “tricks” they used to unravel facts from the media accounts and published collective photographs of Soviet leaders, such as figuring out the actual status of top party officials by the order of their appearance onstage for an official ceremony. Today researchers on Russia use open media sources – most of them on the web – to find valuable information about a wide range of events in the country and about its foreign policy. There are hundreds of professionals working for their governments and nongovernmental organizations in countries such as the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom who translate and analyze websites, blogs, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook accounts, newspaper articles, individual statements, informal interviews, and other reports related to Russia. Government agencies, research institutions, and marketing firms hire seasoned professionals as well as college graduates for this job. It is important to know that as the diversity of media sources increases, so do the chances that the information will become biased, inaccurate, or both. It is worth repeating that you must learn more about the media sources you are using, as well as about their owners, political affiliations, and sources of their facts. This book’s website provides a sample of relatively reliable sites that deal with Russia, its policies, and its people (in English or Russian).

### *Polls and surveys*

Polls or surveys are investigative methods in which large groups of people answer questions on a certain topic. Two types of survey are most valuable: opinion polls and expert surveys. In the following chapters, you will see the results of many surveys. They will illustrate certain tendencies in Russia’s politics or provide additional illustrative examples. Today’s Russian polling companies are highly reputable professional organizations. Many Russian researchers studied polling at schools in Western Europe or North America. They use advanced techniques of information gathering and publish their results immediately after taking a poll. In general, national surveys are difficult to design and expensive to administer. Therefore, most organizations that conduct surveys these days are relatively big commercial enterprises.

If legitimate professional groups conduct them, opinion polls can give an instant assessment of people’s perception of specific events or government policies. For example, more than 70 percent of Russians viewed the role of the United States in global affairs negatively. More than 60 percent had negative feelings toward Europe after 2014 (Levada, 2015, 2016). Where do people get most of their information about foreign countries? Russians, compared to Americans, use the Internet significantly less and watch the television significantly more (Levada, 2016a). Other survey-type assessment methods are less expensive than full national surveys. Many researchers use small-scale, personalized surveys to study tendencies in people’s opinions on a variety of topics related to their daily lives (Carnaghan, 2008). Focus group methodology is used, for example, in foreign policy planning, conflict

resolution analysis, and commercial or academic research. The typical focus group contains between seven and ten participants who discuss a particular situation or problem and express their opinions to the focus group moderator. Leading research centers use the focus group method (CSR, 2012). One of the principal advantages of this method is the opportunity to analyze specific foreign policy issues in an informal atmosphere where people can speak freely and are not necessarily constrained by the presence of authorities.

An expert survey is another popular method of research, where the respondents are experts in the subject rather than a cross-section of the wider population. Such surveys can reflect reliable professional opinions about Russia's domestic and international actions. For example, Freedom House in Washington DC, an internationally recognized non-government organization, publishes annual reports on the degree of democratic freedoms in most countries. Based on experts' evaluations, The Freedom in the World survey provides an annual rating of a country's treatment of its citizens' most basic liberties. These ratings determine whether a country is labeled free, partly free, or not free. Russia is consistently rated as "not free" (Freedom House, 2018). The validity and reliability of scientific survey methods used by Freedom House can be debated. However and undoubtedly, such critical evaluations from a leading NGO can affect Russia in a negative way: tourism, international business, educational exchanges, and trade may suffer as a result. That is why Russian officials are openly displeased with such assessments and call them either wrong or irrelevant.

Transparency International (TI) is another well-known nongovernmental organization (NGO) that uses survey methods to create the internationally recognized Corruption Perception Index. It asks international entrepreneurs and business analysts how corrupt they perceive various countries to be and then ranks the countries accordingly. Russia has consistently ranked very low on this list (meaning that corruption is perceived as a major problem): in 2017 it was in 131st place out of 175 countries examined (the United Kingdom was 10th and the United States was 17th). You can easily check the latest TI numbers online. Senior Russian government officials openly agreed with these and other critical assessments and considered corruption as one of the most serious domestic problems (Bastrykin, 2008; Medvedev, 2009; Putin, 2012c). However, we will also discuss the fact that many experts in Russia criticize Freedom House and Transparency International for being, they believe, biased *toward* Russia.

### ***On the importance of theory***

Knowledge of a country's foreign policy takes more than observation and measurement. *Analysis* is the breaking of something complex into smaller parts to understand their essential features and relations. This is difficult enough, but even more is needed. What makes a country change its foreign policy course? Which policies are more efficient than others? How would these policies evolve tomorrow? These and

scores of other questions cannot be answered without looking into broader ideas about how foreign policy works in many contexts. The ancient Greeks called this knowledge “from above” theory (θεωρία). Theorizing about foreign policy requires strong empirical knowledge and a measure of imagination.

Many foreign policy debates ultimately rest on competing theoretical visions. Two approaches that have dominated the study of international relations at many universities in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom during the past half century are realism and liberalism (sometimes the latter is called international liberalism). Realism focuses on the power of states (sovereign countries), their interests, and their search for security. States can reasonably act on the world stage as they wish, without any authority above them. They defend their core interests, protect their resources, create alliances with other states, respond to outside threats, and, if necessary, impose their will on others. States, according to realism’s followers, are constantly preoccupied with the *balance of power* and look for the best position within the international order. They also balance one another by trying to prevent any state from gaining a rapid and significant advantage over others. Among common instruments of this balancing are strategic alliances, armament increases, threats of using military force, and, ultimately, war (Shirayev and Zubok, 2016). One of the most important factors that affects a country’s foreign policy is the distribution of power in regions as well as globally, which results in a certain *structure* of international relations. States conduct their policies according to an existing structure for an international system. Such structures can be unipolar (when only one country dominates globally), bipolar (when two countries dominate, as during the Cold War), or multipolar.

**Liberalism** is a different approach. It claims that international anarchy does not necessarily lead to conflicts and wars. It may result in cooperation among states. Liberalism emphasizes international collaboration, economic ties, international law, and shared values. It also sees international organizations and nonstate actors as influencing state choices and policies. Supporters of liberalism focus on states’ cooperation. Some scholars show that the growth of economic dependence among sovereign countries has become increasingly complex and multilayered. This interdependence should hinder war. Others focus on the increasing influence of intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations, as well as the emergence of a so-called international society where sovereign states voluntarily follow common norms of behavior to enhance their security and prosperity.

The dominant theories in the last sixty years were realism and liberalism. In the past several decades a theory of **constructivism** has gained attention. According to this view, states’ actions and policies are based on how leaders, bureaucracies, and societies interpret or construct the information available to them. This does not mean that politicians manipulate realities and images of realities at will. Constructivism posits that power and security are socially created, within a cultural process where people’s interests and identities are formed. For that reason specific foreign policies should have different meanings for different states. One state’s (country’s) action may be seen as a serious threat by some states but not others. Like individuals, states can exaggerate external threats, undervalue them, or completely overlook

them. During the past twenty years constructivism became a third major theoretical approach to international relations.

There are other alternative theoretical approaches, including Marxism, feminism, world systems theory, and others (Walt, 2005). Political psychologists, for example, when studying foreign policy, focus on individual factors affecting leaders' decisions such as their ability to analyze information, emotional stability, past experiences, and so on. Different theories and approaches suggest different principles for the analysis of international relations. It is becoming increasingly common these days, when one analyzes a country's foreign policy, to take into consideration not one but several theoretical perspectives. We shall be doing this in our analysis of Russia's foreign policy.

## Conclusion

The Russian Federation is a major global power with vast natural resources, a large nuclear arsenal, an educated population, and substantial economic capacities. A country with a rich history and traditions, Russia is now defining its new role in the twenty-first century. Its journey to potential prosperity and international stability has been difficult and contradictory. Russian people relish political freedom, but – in reality – this freedom is still limited. Russia embraces democracy in some areas of life yet turns to authoritarianism in others. Although Russia's relations with some countries remain effective, with many others its relations have significantly worsened. Russian leaders declare that they seek international peace and global stability, yet their actions often suggest otherwise in the eyes of Russia's critics. Russia today is a constant newsmaker. Some strategic decisions taken by its leaders domestically and internationally appear perplexing to an average Western observer. Other decisions appear clearly wrong. Yet other decisions are interpreted in the Western media in simplistic terms. Whose judgments are more accurate? In this book we shall maintain that behind Russia's foreign policy there is a complex strategy based on a comprehensive vision of today's world and Russia's role in it. Some elements of this strategy keep on changing, but the most essential ones are likely to remain the same for some time. For a future diplomat, journalist, entrepreneur, educator, officer, analyst, or policy-maker, it is essential to learn about, understand, and correctly interpret this "Russian strategy" and the resulting foreign policy.

After the Soviet Union as a sovereign country disappeared from the map in 1991, Russia, both weakened and isolated, became a less popular area of study than it had been before the 1990s. Many experts also believed that Russia was "done" as a leading world power. At least two scenarios were expected. First, and this was the *rosy* scenario, Russia would become an automatic and willing ally of the free world. In the *gloomy* scenario Russia would remain adversarial yet largely irrelevant as an economic and political power. Both of these scenarios were wrong. Today, Russia is "back" as a major power, an important player in international politics, a subject

of study, and a source of new debates. Those who saw Russia as a sure ally have already reconsidered their view. Those who argued that Russia was “irrelevant” now realize their error, too. Russia is a formidable military, economic and political player. It has vast energy resources. It has a charismatic and powerful leader (for how long?). Its people are educated. Russia actively pursues its interests near its borders and around the world. It supports some but frequently challenges most other Western countries’ policies.

However, it is wrong to believe that Russia is destined to be a constant adversary to the Western democratic world. Russia considers itself closer to the West (not to the East), culturally and historically. Yet it also remains a Eurasian power with interests and aspirations in both Europe and Asia that have to be recognized and acknowledged.

Russia’s national symbol is a double-headed eagle looking both east and west. It will be a challenge to engage Russia in a mutually productive and reliable cooperation. But this challenge is worth pursuing.

## Summary

- Russia is the world’s biggest country; it is one of the top fifteen largest economies in the world. It has a mixed economy with both private and state ownership in important areas. It possesses nuclear weapons, a capable army, an air force, and a navy. About 80 percent of Russia’s citizens identify as ethnic Russians.
- The transformation of 1985–1991 was full of contradictions, uncertainties, and disputed outcomes. Many contemporary Russian policies took root in the processes started in the 1980s and continued through the 1990s and later.
- Russia today is a presidential, federal republic, organized according to Russia’s basic law or Constitution, which was adopted in 1993. The executive branch of government over today’s Russia is the paramount power and has almost full control over most areas of life.
- Russia’s economy is based on the free market; the state controls many industries. The country is heavily dependent on its oil and gas revenues, which affects Russia’s policy choices.
- Russia’s foreign policy should be understood in the context of International Relations theory.
- At least five reasons exist to justify why we are studying Russian foreign policy matters: geopolitics, differences in policies between Russia and many other countries, energy politics, nuclear nonproliferation, and Russia’s soft power.
- Many foreign policy debates ultimately rest on competing theoretical visions. The two approaches that dominated the study of international relations at the universities of the United States and Great Britain during the past sixty years are realism and liberalism (sometimes called international liberalism). Most recently, a theory of constructivism has begun to gain attention.

## Glossary

**Authoritarianism** refers to a political system in which individual freedom is subordinate to the power or authority of the state.

**Comparative Politics** as a discipline focuses on comparing domestic politics, political institutions, and systems rather than on how they interact.

**Constructivism** assumes that states' actions and policies are based on how leaders, bureaucracies, and societies interpret or construct the information available to them. Constructivism posits that power and security are socially created, within a cultural process where people's interests and identities are formed.

**Diplomacy** is the practice of managing international relations by means of negotiations.

**Exit visas** In the Soviet Union, these were government permits that for decades allowed only limited foreign travel for the vast majority of Soviet citizens.

**Foreign policy** involves sovereign states' actions including official decisions and communications, public and secret, with other state governments, nongovernmental organizations, corporations, international institutions, and individual decision-makers.

**Geopolitics** refers to countries' power in relation to geographic space.

**Gross Domestic Product (GDP)** is the value of all goods and services produced over a specific period.

**Intelligence** is information about the interests, intentions, capabilities, and actions of foreign countries, including government officials, political parties, the functioning of their economies, activities of nongovernmental organizations, and the behavior of private individuals.

**International Relations (IR)** studies interactions among states and the international activities of nonstate organizations.

**Liberalism** claims that international anarchy does not necessarily lead to conflicts and wars. It may result in cooperation among states. Liberalism emphasizes international collaboration, economic ties, international law, and shared values. It also sees international organizations and nonstate actors as influencing state choices and policies.

**Realism** focuses on the power of states (sovereign countries), their interests, and their search for security. The states (sovereign countries) can act on the world stage as they want, without any authority above them. They defend their core interests, protect their resources, create alliances with other states, respond to outside threats, and, if necessary, impose their will on others. States are constantly preoccupied with *balance of power* and look for the best position within the international order.

**Republic** The term means that supreme power in a country belongs to the people of this country and their elected representatives.

**Soft power** The term means that countries can influence other countries as well as international relations by means of example, persuasion, and reputation.

## Review questions

1. Summarize why Russia as a country matters in today's world.
2. There are two different meanings of the term "Russian" in the Russian language. Could you explain them? Why is it important to distinguish between these two meanings?
3. Why was the 1917 Revolution a significant and traumatic event for Russia?
4. What is soft power? How would you describe Russia's soft power these days, from your point of view?
5. Do you personally see Russia mainly as the West's foe or the West's partner? Maybe neither? Explain. Which areas of cooperation with Russia do you see as most important today in your country?

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