

Putin's Reality is Russia's Geography

By David J. Keeling*

A member of the American Geographical Society's Writers Circle

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Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent announcement that the country's 89 regional governors will be proposed by the Kremlin and elected by local parliaments, rather than being elected by the local population, sent shock waves through the political establishment. Seen as a move to centralize state power even further after the devastating hostage siege in Beslan and what appears to have been the suicide bombing of two civilian airliners, Putin's restructuring strategies illustrate his fundamental political dilemma – managing a regionally fragmented country at a time when radical nationalism is on the rise.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Moscow has struggled constantly to construct a vertical power system in Russia, whereas regional authorities have attempted to pass legislation favoring local conditions, legislation that often contradicts federal laws.

Russia's geography has always presented the central government with significant administrative challenges. As the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 15 profoundly different regions or republics were governed with an iron fist from Moscow. Embedded within these regions were over 100 distinct ethno-linguistic groups practicing a variety of religions and embracing myriad nationalistic ideologies. The Stalinist ideal of a transcendent Soviet people encouraged a policy of the Russification of non-Russian regions in order to weaken any local nationalistic fervor.

By 1991, some 25 million Russians had become ethnic minorities in the 14 republics that quickly broke away from the core region of Russia to become independent states. Within the Russian Federation today live approximately 27 million non-Russians encompassing 92 different ethno-national groups. Many of the larger ethno-national groups have enjoyed considerable territorial autonomy since 1991, although irredentist and secessionist claims have grown in importance in recent years.

Part of the challenge for Russia, and for Putin, is the reality that most of the 6.6 million square miles of Russian territory are not Russian in any meaningful ethnic, linguistic, or political sense. The Slavic heartland of Russia essentially is contained within a 300-mile radius around Moscow and along the Ural Mountain chain. Over 50 percent of Russia's population and 90 percent of the country's largest urban areas are found in these two regions.

Beyond these core regions lie the North Caucasus, Tatarstan, Siberia, the southern Steppes, and the northern tundra and taiga zones, legacies of Russia's imperial expansion in the 18th and 19th centuries, where indigenous peoples with strong territorial and ethnic identities have constantly resisted Moscow's yoke. The punitive and restrictive administrative and cultural policies and practices dictated by Moscow have never won favor with non-Russian ethnic groups. Today there is a level of pent-up frustration and anger towards Moscow's heavy hand that will only be exacerbated by Putin's new policies.

The current dilemma for Putin is how to overcome the legacy of the Soviet Union's geographic construction. Today, the Russian Federation consists of two autonomous Federal cities, 21 republics, 11 autonomous regions (*okrugs*), 49 provinces (*oblasts*) and 6 territories (*krays*); it is a multicultural and multiethnic state attempting to embrace a free-market economic system while preserving aspects of a highly centralized federal political system. The current conflicts in Chechnya, North Ossetia, and Ingushetia in the northern Caucasus, along with nationalistic fervor in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and Buryatiya, among others, are just one indicator of the fragility of the Russian Federation.

Putin's attempt to consolidate power by reining in the regional governors does not augur well for democracy in Russia, as there appears to be little stomach for any political restructuring based on the country's geographic complexity. Putin, therefore, must wrestle with one of the world's most intractable geographic problems – how to exert political and economic control over an ethno-linguistically fragmented territory.

There is little doubt that failure to confront Russia's geography will lead to growing regional unrest, renewed nationalistic rhetoric, and greater efforts to assert local ethno-linguistic identities. Putin's fear is the likelihood of confronting a dozen Chechnyas and of governing a country crumbling from the outside in. To prevent such an occurrence will require Putin to rethink Russia's geographic reality, to reconsider the issue of local autonomy, and to work towards engaging rather than further isolating Russia's disparate regions.

** The author is a councilor of the American Geographical Society (www.amergeog.org) and professor of geography, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY 42101-3576, USA.*