Four Russias: rethinking the post-Soviet map


Russia has traditionally been conceptualised as a single entity, albeit divided into many regions, but is this approach appropriate given the country's stratified population? Natalia Zubarevich argues that for a better understanding of Russia and where it is going we need to think not geographically, but arithmetically.

Change and convention

Twenty years after the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russia is changing. The disciplines of political science, sociologogy and economics are animated in ferocious discussions about the speed and direction of that change. Opinions vary enormously: from a continuing belief in a potentially bright future (the number of optimists has grown since the political events of late 2011) to the view that the country is stuck in a rut and will be unable to dig itself out in the foreseeable future. Both sides’ arguments are equally convincing and there is no consensus among the experts.

One thing that has been getting in the way of expert analysis, however, is a conventional view that still sees Russia as a single entity, albeit one that is heterogenous in its nature. When such heterogeneity is taken into account, it is usually considered in terms of economic inequality, employment, salary levels, standard of living, demographic situations and so on. All this forms the basis of imaginary league tables, with huge federal cities like Moscow and St Petersburg, rich oil regions on one end; and less developed regions such as Tyva, Ingushetia and Kalmykia on the other.

Geographers, meanwhile, use the method of typology to make things clearer. Some categories are obvious enough: the huge federal cities of Moscow and St Petersburg; oil, gas and metal-rich regions that provide foreign currency reserves for the whole country; less developed regions. But where do you go from there, given that two thirds of Russia’s 83 regions show little variation in economic and social indicators? Traditionally it has been done geographically – the Volga region, the Urals, Siberia – but this actually tells us very little. The Volga region, for example, is very diverse in terms of economic development and way of life among the population. Another traditional division has been between the autonomous republics and the so-called ‘Russian regions’. The problem with this is that the less developed republics of the northern Caucasus and southern Siberia are very different from wealthy Tatarstan and the strongly russified Karelia and Khakasia republics, in both of which only about 10% of the population belong to the nominal ethnic group.

Things become much intuitive, however, if we change our scale, and instead of one Russia or 83 (the number of regions), we distinguish... four
Russia No.1: a land of post-industrial cities

‘First Russia’ incorporates the heart of Russia’s post-industrial economy, based in cities such as Moscow (pictured), St Petersburg and Yekaterinburg. Almost exclusively, First Russia has been driving the protest agenda. Photo: flickr/hydhydhyd

The ‘First Russia’ is a land of cities. There are not many of these - 73 out of more than 1000 towns, if by cities we mean towns with a population of more than 250,000. However, more than one in five Russians lives in the fourteen cities with populations of around a million or more. In fact, one in nine lives in Moscow or St Petersburg, and this has a significant effect on the political ‘weather’.

The advantages of life in these two ‘federal’ cities are obvious; they are at the heart of the post-industrial economy, with a high level of economic development: Moscow’s gross regional product translates in terms of spending power as $47,000 per head of population and St Petersburg’s as $22,000, both of which are comparable with the developed world. These cities have an educated population: 50% of Muscovites and 44% of St Petersburg’s inhabitants over the age of fifteen have higher education. Here you find the most diverse labour market and the highest paid jobs.

There are differences between the two cities, of course. Moscow’s economic indicators are all considerably higher: in terms of per capita income, for example, St Petersburg lags by 40%, which puts it on a par with the wider Moscow region. The cities’ local politics also differ – in Moscow no one would dream of attempting to revive industry, as St Petersburg is doing. But the point is that the inhabitants of both cities have a higher standard of living than those elsewhere. All of them, one might ask? It is a good question. The two cities have an older population, with about 25% of inhabitants of pensionable age, and Moscow’s pension supplements and other mechanisms are vital for a large proportion of the elderly population.

The last twenty years have also brought change to the other ‘million-cities’. Although Ufa, Perm, Omsk Chelyabinsk and Volgograd remain economically dependent on large-scale Soviet heavy industry (oil refineries and metallurgical plants), these are no longer the cities’ largest employers. Post-industrial transformation is patchy, with Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, Rostov-on-Don and Kazan making the most progress. The first three originally developed as inter-regional capitals, of the Ural,
Siberian and Southern areas respectively. After losing their Soviet role as centres of heavy engineering in the 1990s, they were the first to re-invent themselves as major service industry centres.

Yekaterinburg, for example, is now known for its high quality higher education, luxury goods and contemporary culture. Kazan has capitalised on significant dates – both invented (its millennium) and real (it will host the 2014 ‘Universia’ International Student Games). The ability of the Tatarstan government to attract federal investment, along with its own considerable oil revenues, has created an ever-changing cityscape, new employment opportunities and a steady stream of migrants from the hinterland. Migrants, of course, can also create problems, by bringing their rural conservatism to a city that suffers enough from this already.

Volgograd is finding modernisation a bigger problem, again because of its historic industrial legacy. This city, industrialised in the Soviet period, looks like one enormous industrial zone stretching for 70 kilometres along the Volga. Most of its massive plants are no longer profitable, but they have not been closed. Also, Volgograd was never a centre of regional government, and its cultural heritage is veneer-thin. The city’s poor urban environment and the industrial mindset of its population have slowed its development, but it is now belatedly gathering speed.

‘The increasing concentration of active and well educated citizens in the big cities tolls the death knell of the ‘power vertical’.

Patterns of employment have changed in all the million-cities: the proportion of white collar workers has risen, there are more medium size businesses, and even in the public sector there is more demand for staff with high qualifications. These cities are the first to adopt the capitals’ consumer lifestyle, although salaries are substantially lower that those in Moscow. It is here that you find the middle class, the ‘angry urbanites’ who came out on the streets in December 2011 – although it must be said that the majority of these live in Moscow. The smaller cities are much less active – their middle classes are not large enough to make a difference.

But this is just a question of time; objectively speaking, the ‘grapes of wrath’ are ripening: migration in Russia is directed towards the largest cities, the only difference being that greater Moscow and St Petersburg and its contiguous Leningrad region attract migrants from all over the country (60% and 20% respectively of all net migration in Russia, while regional cities rely for their growth on an influx from their own regions, mostly young people going into higher education. The increasing concentration of active and well educated citizens in the big cities tolls the death knell of the ‘power vertical’.

One could also include in this ‘First Russia’ cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants, which raises its share of the total population to 30%. ‘Half-million’ cities differ widely from one another, but they are increasingly on the ball. If big money turns up, as in Tyumen and Krasnodar, they can transform themselves very quickly. Krasnodar, a city of 750,000 people, languished for decades in the shadow of Rostov-on-Don, but since 2000 it has been rapidly developing not only its leisure facilities, with chains of restaurants and bars, but also its business services and higher education sector. At the end of the 2000s Krasnodar led the country for per capita investment and residential development. An obvious factor here is the seepage into the regional capital of some of the funds allocated for the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, but there is another, more long term reason: life in the South is cheaper and more comfortable, making it attractive to investors.

Tyumen, with a population of around 600,000, is another example of a successful ‘tax harvest’, in this case from the two main oil and gas producing areas (the Yamalo-Nenets and Khanty- Mansi autonomous districts). The results are similar, from the rapid development of higher education to a mushrooming of leisure and shopping centres. Both cities have rural hinterlands to swell their populations, they are politically very passive, and local government is much more authoritarian than in other regions. The old description of Tyumen as ‘the capital of villages’ is still heard, but its university is expanding and forging new urban dwellers who will soon be demanding both good jobs and freedom of choice.
If we were also to include in this ‘First Russia’ towns with more than 250,000 inhabitants, this category would account for nearly 40% of Russia’s population, or 53-55 million people. Of course these vary enormously, from the academic hothouse that is Tomsk (one person in five is a student) with its own independent TV channels and a flourishing cultural life, to Saransk, whose entire three hundred thousand strong population, as generally in Mordovia, votes for United Russia.

The crises of the last twenty years have shown that towns with a population of over 250,000 tend to be more stable, which makes size a significant factor when predicting the impact of a further period of crisis. So the boundaries of this ‘First Russia’ will vary according to the criteria used: if one is talking about the dynamic of change, then it stops at the ‘half-million’ cities; if the criterion is stability then it is towns with a population of over 250,000. The choice is the reader’s.

It is in the large cities that Russia’s 35-50 million internet users are concentrated, as well as the Russian middle class that is demanding change. This group’s activism is founded not on a fear of imminent crisis, but the scary prospect of a long Putinist stagnation which will put the brakes on social mobility. The stimulus for protest in this ‘First Russia’ was not an economic crisis or a collapse in the price of oil, but rather a moral repugnance. A new crisis would have a substantial impact on the educated urban population, but their greater mobility and competitive advantage would enable them to adapt more quickly to changing circumstances.

Russia No.2: blue-collar workers

The Second Russia is the usually the first to feel any economic downturn and is therefore particularly vulnerable in times of instability.

Photo: Flickr / zooropatriot

This ‘Second Russia’ is a country of industrial towns with between 25,000 and 250,000 inhabitants, although a few larger cities also fall into this category: Cherepovets, Nizhny Tagil, Magnitogorsk, Naberezhnye Chelny and Surgut have populations of 300,000 to 600,000, and Togliatti has 700,000. Not all these towns have preserved their industrial profile from Soviet times, but they have retained a strong Soviet ethos and way of life. They have large numbers of blue-collar workers and public sector employees, most in lower grades. There is usually little in the way of small business, because of either low consumer spending power or a high level of cronyism. There are of course exceptions; in Magnitogorsk, for example, there is a wide variety of small businesses, but they are critically dependent on its famous iron and steel works: if the steel workers’ wages fall, demand for services drops.

‘The 2009 economic crisis hit metallurgic and heavy engineering company towns particularly hard. The government’s main response was to protect jobs at any price, regardless of companies’ viability.’
More than 25% of Russia’s population lives in this ‘Second Russia’, with 10% in its least stable category – company towns. Official figures put the number of these towns at 334, but this includes a good many settlements that would be more accurately described as semi-urban villages. Viable company towns, offering more or less stable employment, number around 150, but in the rest the local firms shed so many workers in the 1990s that they can no longer really be considered company towns.

The 2009 economic crisis hit metallurgic and heavy engineering company towns particularly hard. The government’s main response was to protect jobs at any price, regardless of companies’ viability. There was widespread recourse to reduced working hours and work creation programmes, and despite a huge fall in production, employment levels were maintained thanks to large injections of government finance. A longer term support strategy, based on economic diversification, was not a success. The mains result of all this was a proliferation of putative ‘complex investment plans’ in which municipal councils listed economic and production sectors that were ripe for development, but did not specify who they expected to invest in them. Most of the federal money allocated to company towns went to Togliatti, where the government not only extended enormous credit to Lada car manufacturer AvtoVaz, but took on the town’s entire social infrastructure and unemployment benefit bill. Major industrial centre Nizhny Tagil was helped in other ways: the government effectively gifted 20 billion roubles to the Uralvagonzavod industrial complex, a subsidiary of the state owned Rostechnotlogia Corporation, and forced another state owned company, RZhD, to provide it with orders for railway carriages. In Pikalevo, scene of the largest public protests, central government had an even simpler solution: it forced Fosagro, a private company supplying raw materials to industry, to sell them at a loss to a factory owned by oligarch Oleg Deripaska. Another 30 company towns received small amounts, and then the crisis began to pass. The complex investment plans mostly remained on paper: who was going to invest money in failing towns with massive social problems, if there was so little investment going into more trouble free places?

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Should a new crisis arise, it is this ‘Second Russia’ that will be hardest hit; the old problems haven’t gone away, and the last crisis confirmed that industry is declining faster than other economic sectors. Apart from Togliatti and the northern oil and gas towns, there are few alternative sources of work in these towns, and the local populace suffers from lack of mobility and low qualifications. Will there be enough money in the treasury to increase regional subsidies by a third and employment support by several times, as happened in 2009? If not, it will be the inhabitants of industrial towns who will be spearhead protest with demands for work and wages, increasing the pressure on the federal and regional authorities to make concessions. The Russian government recognises the danger of social protest in ‘Second Russia’ and will probably be able to calm the situation through economic and administrative measures for as long as the federal budget can afford it.

Even if a new economic crisis does spark mass protest, ‘Second Russia’ will be fighting for work and wages, but will remain indifferent to the issues that rally the middle class. The government realises this and is already trying to rouse blue collar anger against ‘First Russia’. We may well see miners and metal workers banging their helmets on the pavement again, not outside the White House, as in the 90s, but at Moscow business centres or its ‘Strelka’ Media and Design Institute.

‘A study by the Independent Institute for Social Research shows that industrial towns, even the more successful ones, are losing their attraction for residents.’

This kind of stunt is however likely to prove unhelpful in the long term – a study by the Independent Institute for Social Research shows that industrial towns, even the more successful ones, are losing their attraction for residents. At times of economic growth wages have risen more slowly than in regional centres; the government has been quick to raise public sector and managerial salaries on the back of enormous oil revenues, but the industrial sector has been unable to increase its wage bill
to the same extent. And in 2009 wages also went down faster because of the slump in industry. As a result, population numbers in the vast majority of industrial towns are falling rapidly, as young people move to the larger cities and the capital.

The location of medium sized towns, both industrial and post industrial, is crucial here. If they are close to large population centres then their future is assured: they will gradually be absorbed into the conurbation, and sustainable enterprises will emerge to service the metropolitan market. An example of this is the town of Kopeysk, which from a moribund mining community has turned into a rapidly growing suburb of Chelyabinsk. Towns situated on main arterial roads also have more of a future; all the towns on the Moscow-Minsk motorway, the road to Europe, are gradually being transformed into logistics and handling centres for the Moscow agglomeration. But even if a town is less fortunately located, it won’t disappear; it will shrink and become a local centre servicing its surrounding area. The only places that might disappear are small resource-extraction towns and settlements in the far North, but that is another story.

Russia No.3: rural and semi-urban populations

Rural and semiurban Russia — home to a third of the Russian population and largely indifferent to politics.

The ‘Third Russia’ is the vast peripheral territory of villages, semi-urban villages and small towns that are home to a third of Russia’s population. The third Russia lives off the land and is indifferent to politics; the agricultural calendar isn’t affected by changes at the top. Depopulated small towns and semi-urban villages with an elderly population are scattered across the country, but there is a higher concentration in Central Russia, the north-west, industrial areas ion the Urals and Siberia.

Villages are most common in the south of Russia and the north Caucasus, where 27% of the country’s rural population is concentrated. The southern ‘Russian’ village is still a viable demographic unit that survives thanks to the intensive exploitation of the region’s fertile black earth on its residents’ individual smallholdings. Large scale agribusiness is expanding in the most
profitable and non labour intensive areas of production (grain, sunflower oil), depriving many locals of work, and young people are flooding out of the villages and into the towns.

‘In the Pskov region, 40% of the female population are pensioners. Those among this rural population who are still active earn a living by gathering mushrooms, berries and pine cones for their nuts, and by fishing.’

In other regions the only villages that survive are those on the outskirts of cities; their population is younger, more mobile and better off, since many of them commute to the city to work. The fastest transformation of rural areas is happening within the boundaries of the Moscow agglomeration, where a lot of new jobs are unconnected with agriculture. And even in the villages around Moscow many people have come from other regions, and migrants are always more energetic and adaptable. In the depopulated peripheral areas the situation is more depressing. In the Pskov region, for example, 40% of the female population are pensioners.

The percentage distribution of Russia’s population among cities and towns of differing size and rural settlements (2010)

Those among this rural population who are still active earn a living by gathering mushrooms, berries and pine cones for their nuts, and by fishing. On Sakhalin there are villages where are no jobs apart from those in the public sector, but people don’t move away – the fishing season, when the salmon come up the river to spawn, feeds them for the whole year. Involvement in the shadow economy teaches people independence from the state, and those who are dependent – pensioners, public sector workers – have no energy or resources to either leave or protest. The potential protest power of the ‘Third Russia’ is minimal, even if a crisis brought delays in the payment of pensions and wages.

Russia No.4: under-developed Russia

The three previous Russias have been defined using the centre-periphery model, which explains social variations by geographic factors, that is to say their position in a hierarchy of settlement from the most modernised large cities to the patriarchal rural periphery. This model is perfectly valid for most of the country, but we need to abandon it to define the ‘Fourth Russia’. This name can be given to the less developed republics of the northern Caucasus and, to a lesser extent, southern Siberia.
(the Tyva and Altai areas) which are home to less than 6% of the population. These republics have cities and towns, but none of them have any industry. There is also one developing agglomeration – Mahkachala has a population of 580,000, or almost a million if one counts its built up suburbs, and it continues to expand at a rapid pace. But this agglomeration has very few educated middle class residents, and those there are, are leaving it for other regions where they feel more at home.

‘The Fourth Russia is the most corrupt, with fierce fighting between clans for power and resources and numerous ethnic and religious conflicts.’

In this ‘Fourth Russia’ the rural population is rising in number, and by contrast with other regions it is still young. Young people actively migrate from the villages to regional population centres, but few of them find work there. To get a job you need help from your clan, who will either buy you a legal public sector job, or find you one in the shadow economy. The Fourth Russia is also the most corrupt, with fierce fighting between clans for power and resources and numerous ethnic and religious conflicts. These obscure to some extent the normal centre-periphery issues. It must be said that the populace of the cities of the north Caucasus is undoubtedly less traditional in its thinking, but not to the extent of creating a trend towards modernisation in the region.

The Fourth Russia will not break away, no matter how much that is presented as a threat, or a promise. The overwhelming majority of people in the north Caucasian republics consider themselves Russians. But the region has many problems, and federal politics have an enormous role to play in their solution. At first glance, the policy seems to consist of flinging more money at places where there is unrest. The cries of ‘Stop Feeding the Caucasus’ will not cease until the government reveals whom it is ‘feeding’ and how. It is true that in 2009-10 subsidies to the less developed republics and the incomes of their inhabitants outpaced those of other regions. In 2010 the northern Caucasus, home to 5% of Russia’s population, received 161 billion roubles of government funding, or 10.6% of all regional subsidies; more than a third of this (56 million roubles), moreover, went to Chechnya. For comparison, in the same year Russia’s far Eastern regions, also home to 5% of the population, received a higher sum (187 billion roubles), of which prosperous Yakutia got 48 billion roubles. And another comparison: in 2012 Moscow plans to spend twice the sum paid out of federal funds to the northern Caucasus on solving its public transport problems.

The federal government’s priorities are made even more clear by another comparison: in 2011, 25% of all government investment went to the Krasnodar and Primorsky regions (for which read the International Games in Sochi and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum in Vladivostok); 10.7% to the entire northern Caucasus, and almost as much (10.1%) to super-rich Moscow. So who is the Kremlin feeding? Of course it is important that federal aid to less developed areas is spent rationally and transparently, and not in breeding more corruption. This is a huge problem in the Caucasus, but the situation isn’t much better in other regions. The problems of the Caucasus can only be solved by governmental reform in Russia as a whole.

**Towards a new, more realistic map of Russia**

If one were to draw such a map, it would show not the territory of Russia, half empty and badly developed, but its population, which is much more concentrated in specific areas. So, every fifth Russian lives in a city of over a million inhabitants. If one adds to these the cities that are home to more than half a million people, then almost a third of the populace lives in a large city. This is a distinct population – more educated, young and mobile, with a concentration of the middle class. And it is also a distinct quality of life, with a more developed infrastructure and internet access, and where old feudal ties to a single place of employment are disappearing. The size of this modernised population group is growing through migration to the big cities, and this is good news.
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Perhaps the traditional geographic map with its little circles for towns confuses us all. It is time to hang in the Kremlin, and in school classrooms for that matter, a different map, with the enormous Moscow agglomeration (13% of the population, or one Russian in every eight) and a dozen other large agglomerations. A map organised by population rather than territory (called an anamorphosis) would show our government (and all of us) that our country has a pretty large proportion of educated, mobile and well-paid city dwellers. This is an electorate that won’t stay zombies for long, as the Moscow protests on Bolotnaya Ploshchad and Sakharov Prospect showed.

It is nevertheless a minority. Until recently it seemed that the geographical proportion was stably skewed towards a patriarchal behaviour model, where the 30% of educated and modernised Russians in the big cities demanding a change in the rules of the game was more than balanced out by the 34% of Russians living in rural areas and small towns. Between them were the smaller cities and medium sized industrial towns of the ‘Second Russia’, whose populace was sometimes capable of protest if incited by losing their jobs and wages at times of crisis, but the Kremlin knew how to deal with them. This is, if you like, the stability so beloved of the present regime. But neither the government nor my reader should forget the laws of physics: brains have a higher specific gravity. Sooner or later ‘first Russia’ will shift the balance.

**Country or region:** Russia  
**Topics:** Economics

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Subjects

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