# Chapter 7 Russia and its neighbours

## 7.1 untameable nature

Russia is the biggest country in the world with big differences in the climate, indigenous vegetation and soil.

### Climate

The climate is bitterly cold in large parts of the country in the winter. This is due to 3 factors:

1. Russia is a large land mass far away from the Atlantic ocean with lower moderating influence of the sea.
2. A large part of the country lies very far to the north and in the winter days are short and the sun is low.
3. There is a **high** **mountain** **range** in the south, which holds back warm tropical air.

### Soil

The climate has a strong influence on the **soil**. The soil in a large part of Russia is **podzol**. It occurs mainly in sandy ground in coniferous forests (**taiga**). Only some of the precipitation evaporates and the rest sinks into the soil. This process (**eluviation**) makes the soil infertile. There is also **hardpan**, a dense layer, unsuitable for agriculture because water cannot drain away.

**Chernozem** or **black earth** (including a thick layer of **humus**) is much better for agriculture. This type of soil is found in a fertile **loess** belt south of the podzol. The climate is better there, because precipitation and evaporation are balanced. There is almost no eluviation and temperatures are higher.

### Permafrost

**Permafrost** is soil that is permanently frozen. The closer to the north pole, the thicker the permafrost becomes. The upper layer melts only in the summer a bit. The surface then becomes marshy because meltwater cannot flow into the frozen subsoil. The vegetation consists of mosses, grasses and shrubs, characteristics of **tundra** landscape.

Permafrost creates problems for builders as the heat inside buildings can melt the ice in the soil and cause houses to sink. There are similar problems in the construction of roads, railways and pipelines. These problems are solved with pile foundations.

### Transportation problems across land

The bleak natural conditions make it difficult to cross long distances in Russia. Winter is not the worst season as conditions are much worse in spring: in permafrost areas were meltwater cannot flow away, a thick layer of mud forms which makes the roads almost impassable, as many roads are unasphalted.

### Transportation problems across water

Nature plays a key role in inland waterway shipping: most rivers are frozen and unnavigable during the long winters. But there are problems in summer too, as most rivers in the European part of Russia are **rain-fed** **rivers**. Though there is a lot of rainfall in summer, high temperatures cause high levels of evaporation. This results in low water levels and creates problems for shipping.

Secondly, most rivers in Siberia flow from south to north but the main goods flow goes from west to east. They also empty into seas which are frozen most of the year.

Another problem is created by the south-to-north flow of the rivers. When spring arrives, the snow melts first in the south and the meltwater arrives in the **upper** **reaches** of the rivers and is transported north. However, the **lower** **reaches** are still frozen, so drainage is poor: the water cannot sink into the subsoil because that is frozen too. This inadequate drainage also causes flooding across large stretches of land.

## 7.2 Land of many changes

Russia has a turbulent history. Two world wars, revolution in 1917, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 have made deep impressions.

### History

Until the start of the 20th century, Russia was a country of peasant farmers who had no rights and were more or less treated like slaves. In 1917, a revolution took place, which led to the establishment of the Soviet Union (USSR= Union of socialist soviet republic). The USSR was a gigantic union which became the first **communist regime** in the world.

### Planned economy

After the revolution, the state was the owner of the **means of production:** natural resources (land) and capital (money, buildings). The government set up large mechanized farms (to feed all factory workers), so that more people could work in factories -> this speed up the development of the USSR into a modern industrial economy.

The Soviet Union was governed on the basis of a **planned** **economy**. It was the state who decided what was produced and how much.

There was no competition so manufacturers were under no pressure to deliver good quality products. The only thing mattered was meeting the production target (tractors without engines). Hardly any attention was paid to the environment.

### And today?

After communism collapsed in 1991 the Soviet Union fell apart into 15 republics and switched to a **free** **market** **economy**. It was tough and businesses went bankrupt and people lost their jobs. Poverty and crime increased and wars were waged against regions that wanted independence.

Today, Russia Is one of the four **BRIC countries** in the world. Russia gets a large part of its income from the export of oil, natural gas and other **natural** **resources**. But there is a downside: natural resources are sensitive to price fluctuations so its better not to be too dependent on them.

### Demographic time bomb

After the collapse of communism, the Russian population shrunk. This shrinkage (no **birth** **surplus**) was partly caused by a steep decline in the **birth** **rate**. The high **mortality** **rate** also contributed to the shrinking population. Russian tend to die young as a result of poor diet, alcoholism and inadequate healthcare. The **life** **expectancy** of a Russian man is 65.

The net migration rate is rising due to growing prosperity and welcome bonuses. Most of the immigrants are Russians from neighbouring countries which became independent after 1991.

### Effects

A decline in population has negative effects:

* There are fewer people to do jobs -> this can slow down economic growth.
* Fewer workers means lower tax revenues -> government will find it difficult to finance pensions and health care.
* The effects are particularly noticeable in rural areas, which are emptying fast.

## 7.3 Ukraine: between Russia and the West

Ukraine is much more than just a neighbour of Russia. It is the buffer between Russia and the West. That’s why Russia takes such an active interest in Ukraine.

### Ukraine, a powder keg

Ukraine became independent in 1991. Russia is not happy about this independence because it is afraid that the country may develop close military ties with Western Europe. In addition in the south of Ukraine is the Crimean peninsula, which is strategically very important to Russia: the city of Sebastopol on the black sea is an important naval base.

Many Russians regard the Ukrainian capital Kiev as the mother of all Russian cities. The main language in the south and east of Kiev is Russian and there is an affinity with Russian culture. In the west of Kiev, where the main language is Ukrainian, people tend to favour Europe.

In 2013, tension mounted again between the two countries because Ukraine wanted closer contacts with the European Union, but the inhabitants of Crimea were divided. So the Russian army occupied Crimea. After the majority of the population in Crimea had voted to be part of Russia, the army remained in the region, supposedly to protect the Russians who lived there.

There was also unrest in the east of Ukraine, the location of important industrial cities such as Kharkiv, where a lot of equipment for the Russian army is built. The Russian speaking population in this part of the country wanted to become part of Russia.

**Russification:** Russian culture is superior and Russian is the main language at school. Industrialization also had a russifying effect as experts came from Russia.

### Natural gas

Russia is an important supplier of energy to Europe. Gas is transported via pipelines from sites in Russia to European countries. Half of these pipelines pass trough Ukraine.

Russia uses the gas to put pressure on Ukraine. When Ukraine and Russia are at loggerheads (onenigheid/ ruzie), the gas supply is cut off. Then large parts of Europe are also denied Russian gas. Many eastern Europe countries are entirely dependent on Russian gas.

Russia says there are economic reasons for the hostilities: Ukraine refuses to pay. Ukraine points to the political reasons, as Russia is engaging in **geo-politics** (Russia has power by exploiting its natural resources and its geographical location).

### Nord stream

Western Europeans do not want to be caught up in quarrels about gas. That is why Russia, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK have laid the expensive Nord Stream pipeline through the Baltic sea. The Russian gas travels through this pipeline to the Baltic coast in Germany and is piped to the Netherlands and other places.

The Nord Stream is important to the Netherlands as we wanted to become the gas hub of North-western Europe.

A Turkish stream (since 2020) run via the Black sea and Turkey. Gas is not passed through Ukraine anymore.

### Geo-political effects

This will generate various geo-political effects:

* The Nord stream and the expansion of gas pipelines will strengthen Russia’s position against Ukraine, which will not longer be a gas transit country.
* The Nord Stream does not pass through Poland, so Poland will not get an income from gas transit. Russia will gain more power over Poland as it can cut off the gas supply any time it wants.
* Western Europe will become more dependent on Russian gas.