

Russia.

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Does anything work right?

Once a global superpower, Russia now faces tough times.

Yevgeny Dvoretzky insists he is not anti-American. But the 15-year-old from Moscow does think that the United States has grown way too powerful. It's time, Yevgeny (yev-GAIN-nyee) said for Russia to regain some of the global power it once had.

"There used to be two superpowers, and the world was a much better place," he told JS. "Countries could choose whether to follow America or Russia. But Russia had too many problems and lost its power. Now America tells everybody what to do. That's wrong, and that's why Russia has to build up its strength again."

Yevgeny, whose friends call him Genya (GAIN-yuh), expressed an opinion common among Russians these days. Russia, the world's largest country and home to 145 million people, has seen hard times and bitter disappointments in recent years.

"You can talk about freedom and human rights," said Genya, "but those are luxuries for rich countries. They are useless if your country is weak.

"Only a strong government can fight crime and terrorism, and make things work properly. That's what we need to have in Russia again."

Today, Russians feel that little is working properly--especially after one of their nuclear submarines sank in the Barents Sea in August. Russia's government was unable to save any of the 118-member crew.

Just 10 years ago, Moscow was the capital of the Soviet Union--a huge country with a mighty army, a large nuclear arsenal, and global influence that rivaled that of the U.S. Under the Communist system, the government owned most property and

strictly regulated the lives of every citizen.

The Soviet Union claimed its people enjoyed a superior way of life. The Soviet system, the Communists said, had eliminated the greed found in capitalism.

But in 1991, Communist rule collapsed, and the Soviet Union broke apart into 15 countries, including Russia. Political and economic crises had caused the downfall of the Soviet Union. Most of its citizens hated living under Communism. Anyone who spoke out against the government was punished.

Russia is the largest and most powerful of the 15 countries that had been part of the Soviet Union. Russian leaders promised to build democracy and create a capitalist economy--one based on private property, individual enterprise, and personal freedom--much like that of its old enemy, the U.S.

But unlike the U.S., Russia had no experience with democracy. Before 1917, it had been ruled by czars, or emperors. And from 1917 to 1991, Russia was a Communist dictatorship.

The promised change to democracy did not work out. Reforms became bogged down as criminals took over businesses. Government officials accepted bribes in exchange for favors. Struggles for political power kept Russia on a roller-coaster ride of tension and uncertainty.

Short of funds, the once-awesome Soviet army has shriveled to a shadow of its former self.

Many Russians blame former President Boris Yeltsin for their problems. Yeltsin was committed to establishing a democratic government. But he was often ill, and rumored to have a drinking problem.

Genya and his mother, Alla, cheered when Yeltsin resigned last New Year's Eve. Yeltsin was replaced by the young and energetic Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

"Most of my life I've been waiting for better times," said Alla, a teacher. "Now I hope our government is in capable hands, and there will be real changes."

Alla, a single mom, works two part-time jobs to supplement her meager teacher's salary. Nevertheless, she and Genya have trouble getting by on the equivalent of \$1,000 per month that she earns. "I know we're way better off than most Russians," Alla told JS. The average monthly income in Russia is about \$120. "Still, I had to save for months to buy Genya a new computer."

Putin was elected President last March on promises to fight crime, clean up corruption, stimulate the sputtering economy, and restore Russian prestige in the world. While most Russians seem to have welcomed his message of a stronger government and more law and order, others are dubious (doubtful).

"I'm very worried about the future," said Yelena Trofima, a magazine editor. "I'm afraid a strong government will mean going back to the past, when there was no freedom and people had to do whatever job they were assigned to."

People worry about Putin because he was a longtime secret agent for the KGB--the Soviet equivalent of the CIA and FBI put together. The KGB harshly punished Soviet citizens who dared to criticize the government.

Though the KGB has been disbanded, Russia still has a huge secret-police force. Since Putin became Russia's President, there have been disturbing signs that he intends to crack down on dissent (expressions of disagreement). Last June, the owner of Russia's leading independent TV network was arrested.

"No one wants to go back to the days when you couldn't write what you think and publish what you want," said Yelena. "We couldn't have produced our magazine in Soviet times. What if the government decides they don't like us now?"

Yelena and her husband, a journalist, have a 14-year-old son named Kostya. Unlike his parents, Kostya has no interest in politics. "If I live my life my own way," he told JS, "I don't see how they can touch me. I plan to spend my life ignoring politics."

Kostya loves to hang around with friends in downtown Moscow. They play computer games and Rollerblade in a park near the family's three-room apartment. He proudly said he never looks at a newspaper or watches TV news. "The only thing that matters is my family and my friends," he said.

Not all teenagers feel that Russia's problems can be so easily ignored.

"I see things on the TV news, particularly about the war in Chechnya, and it makes me so upset," said Masha Brovtsina, 14, an eighth-grader. "I can't understand why this is happening."

Russia has been fighting an ugly war to crush rebels in the small, mountainous republic of Chechnya (see map). The rebels want Chechnya to break away and form a new country.

Many Russians, like Genya, believe the war is necessary to prevent Russia from breaking up the way the Soviet Union did. But others are not so sure.

"I can't believe there was no alternative to killing people," said Masha, whose dad, Sergei, programs computers. "If there aren't peaceful ways to work out differences, we're all doomed."

Masha's mom, Lena, believes things will work out. "So many things have changed in Russia, particularly over the past 10 years," said Lena. "We've survived it all, just by adapting ourselves at every turn. You have to live and struggle one day at a time.

"We have very high hopes for Putin, but I personally am prepared for the worst. If things go wrong, we'll just keep on surviving."

Word Match

What has changed in the past 10 years to leave Russia in such a desperate situation?

Russia, the world's largest country, covers much of both Europe and Asia. Until 1991, Russia was part of the Soviet Union, an arch rival of the U.S. But at the end of 1991, the Soviet Union broke up into 15 different countries. Russia is shown in red on the map. The other 14 former Soviet republics are shown in orange.

AREA: 6,592,819 square miles, the world's largest country.

POPULATION: 145,200,000; the sixth-most-populous country.

GOVERNMENT: Presidential-parliamentary democracy; Vladimir Putin is President.

ECONOMY: Russia faces many problems in changing from a government-run economy to a free-enterprise system like the U.S.

Arable land: 8%. Industries: steel, machinery, chemicals, vehicles. PER CAPITA GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT (GDP): \$4,000 (U.S.: \$31,500).

CURRENCY: Ruble, worth about 3.6 U.S. cents.

LIFE EXPECTANCY: 61 years, males; 73 years, females.

Questions

Study the map and Facts to Know to answer the following questions.

MAP: RUSSIA

PHOTO (COLOR): Will President Putin preserve democracy?

PHOTO (COLOR): Women sell items on the street to survive.

PHOTO (COLOR): Some Russians favor a return to Communist rule, like these young demonstrators.

PHOTO (COLOR): Right: A Russian soldier in Chechnya. Many young Russians oppose the war there.

PHOTO (COLOR): Genya Dvoretzky and Mom

By Fred Weir, Moscow