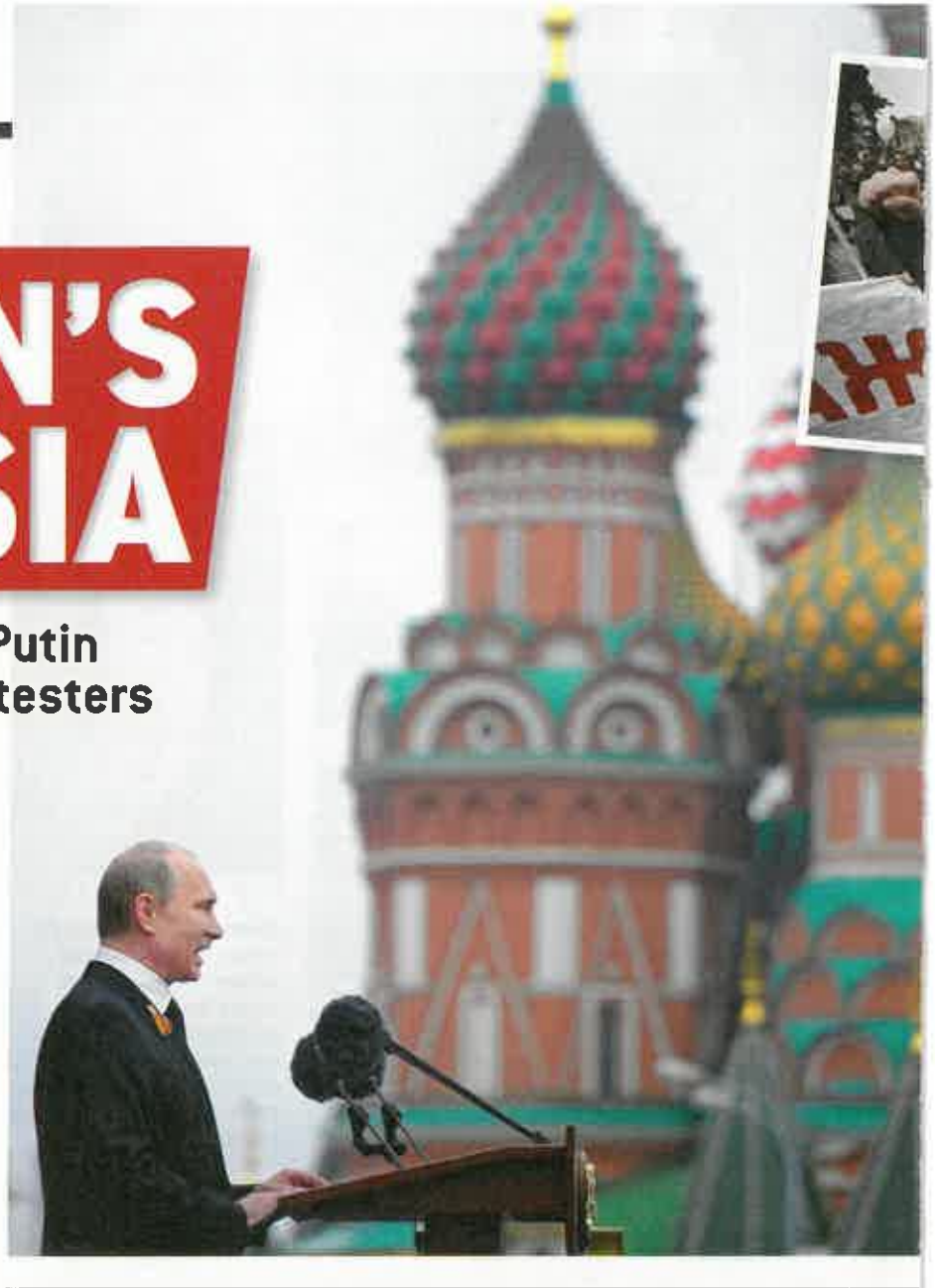
PUTIN'S RUSSIA

President Vladimir Putin cracks down on protesters



If it had happened in the U.S., the stunt would have made headlines, but nothing more. In February 2012, a Russian punk band made up of three young women entered Moscow's main church and sang a satirical song about President Vladimir Putin.

The three women were arrested, and a judge later sentenced them to two years in prison. (One of them was later released.)

The case has become an international symbol of Russia's increasingly repressive government. The U.S. and other Western nations fear that Putin is trying to restrict all forms of public protest and other democratic rights.

When Putin was inaugurated for his third term last May, tens of thousands of Russians took to the streets of Moscow to demonstrate against what they claimed were rigged elections. Since then, the government has targeted protesters. For example, one new law says that protesters can be imprisoned if they are "foreign agents"—a charge that authorities can easily "prove."

The world is taking notice. In January, Human Rights Watch accused Putin of unleashing "the worst political crackdown in Russia's [recent] history." But such experts as journalist Steve LeVine say that this is all "bigger than Putin." It's the way the Russian system works, he says—and it's not going to change.

WORDS TO KNOW

- **market economy** *(n)*: a system in which business—not government—determines the price of goods
- **nationalism** *(n)*: an extreme form of patriotism, with feelings of superiority over other countries

"Russia Has Returned"

Russia has a long history of autocratic rulers *(see sidebar)*. For most of the 20th century, Russia was part of the Soviet Union, the massive Communist country that was America's adversary during the Cold War. The Soviet Union dominated the countries of Eastern Europe, holding them as well as its

NATALIA KOLESNIKOVA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Left: **President Putin speaks in Moscow's Red Square shortly after his inauguration last May.** ***Top:*** **Russians in St. Petersburg protest Putin's third term.** ***Above:*** **Members of the punk band that criticized Putin are kept in a glass cage as they appeal their two-year sentence in court. The appeal was denied.**

own people in an iron grip of fear.

By the 1980s, that grip began to weaken. In the end, the Soviet Union was undone by its own policies. Its economy stagnated under decades of corrupt government control. People had to wait years to buy a car or get a phone. Store shelves were often empty.

When the Soviet Union broke apart in 1991, Russia seemed to be headed toward democracy. It adopted a new constitution and changed to a **market economy**. But in the following decade, as Communist controls collapsed, the country was plagued by chaos.

Much of the country's wealth was seized by a group of wheeler-dealers and con men known as oligarchs. Government corruption and crime ran unchecked. Prices and unemployment skyrocketed. Rebels from the province of Chechnya carried out terrorist bombings in Moscow.

"People seemed to yearn for a symbol of a strong state to face down terrorism and uncertainty," journalist David E. Hoffman wrote. Putin, a former spy for the feared Soviet spy agency the KGB, fit the bill. He cracked down on oligarchs and gangsters. As money from Russia's vast oil reserves began to flow, the economy grew. So did a sense of stability.

In time, Putin could say that Russia was once again a world power. As a Russian official put it to a group of European diplomats: "Gentlemen, Russia has returned. It should be reckoned with."

At the same time, Putin moved to increase his powers. By 2008, he had served two elected terms as president. When the constitution prevented him from running for a third consecutive term, he simply named Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev to run as his successor. In effect, critics say, Putin "loaned" him the presidency for four years.

Last year, Putin ran for his third term as president. The protests aside, millions of Russians voted for him. Many didn't seem to notice—or care—that elements of Soviet-style control had returned.

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The Great, the Terrible, and the Tragic

For centuries, Russia was the center of an empire ruled by all-powerful czars (emperors). The reign of czars started in 1547 with Ivan the Terrible, named for his great cruelty. A century later, Peter the Great (ruled 1682-1725) helped transform Russia from an isolated country into a world power with great influence in the West.

Ivan the Terrible

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, the czars were succeeded by the Communist rulers of the Soviet Union, beginning with Vladimir Lenin. His successor, Joseph Stalin, ruled from 1929 until 1953. Stalin imprisoned and murdered millions of Russians for opposing his policies.

Joseph Stalin

When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, the absolute control of the Communist Party was gone. For a time, disorder reigned in Russia. That inspired many Russians, including Vladimir Putin, to long for the good old days. Putin called the Soviet collapse the biggest "catastrophe" of the 20th century. "For the Russian people," he said, "it became a genuine tragedy."

A Matter of Pride

Since the protests over his inauguration last year, Putin has worked to encourage a renewed spirit of **nationalism** in Russia. He wants Russians to attend "patriotic education" programs and draw "inner strength" from their 1,000-year history.

Many Russians are embracing this emphasis on patriotism—in part as a rebuff to Western countries that "lecture" Russia about its human-rights record. No country is more guilty of this, they believe, than Russia's old Cold War foe, the United States.

Sometimes this battle of attitude has serious consequences. Last December, the U.S. Congress passed the Magnitsky Act. The bill freezes the bank accounts of Russians accused of human-rights violations. It's named for Sergei Magnitsky, a Russian lawyer who tried to expose government corruption. Instead, his supporters say, he died in prison after being arrested and tortured by police.

"People seemed to yearn for a symbol of a strong state to face down terrorism and uncertainty."

The Kremlin, Russia's seat of power, was insulted by Congress's action and struck back. It banned the adoption of Russian orphans by Americans—throwing families in both the U.S. and Russia into turmoil.

Howls of protest around the world condemned the ban as cruel. Russia has about 120,000 orphans, and Americans adopt more of them than any other country.

Yet polls in Russia showed that a majority support the ban as a matter of national pride. Putin agrees. "If we are slapped, we need to respond," he said. "Otherwise we will be slapped all the time."

No-Participation Pact

Despite all the crackdowns, Russians today have the freedom to travel, work, save, and express themselves, which they didn't have under Communism. The press is mostly free to say what it wants, even to criticize the Kremlin.

What Russians can't do, according to Russian journalist Masha Lipman, is try to change the system. Most Russians understand this, she says, and have reached an unspoken agreement with their leaders: "The Kremlin may have monopolized decision-making," but people are largely free to do what they want as long as they don't interfere with that arrangement. Lipman calls this a "no-participation pact."

It's all part of a "very complex, multilayered Russian system of business and power," LeVine says. Sure, there will still be protests in the streets. But what's the chance that they will lead to a Western-style democracy? "None," he says.

LeVine also says that no matter what the U.S. thinks, "Putin is a patriot." He is a loyal Russian and really believes he's "doing the best thing for Russia." Whoever replaces Putin—in time—will keep the system going as Putin has. Until then, LeVine says, "he will decide when it's time to leave."

—Bryan Brown

MAPSEARCH

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SOURCES: The World Factbook (CIA) and 2011 World Population Data Sheet (Population Reference Bureau)

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

St. Petersburg, Russia's second-largest city, is Vladimir Putin's hometown. Founded by Peter the Great in 1703, it was the capital of the czars for two centuries. In 1924, the city was renamed Leningrad. After the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the city became St. Petersburg again.

SIBERIA

This vast region of more than 5 million square miles stretches from the Urals to the Pacific. During its long winters, temperatures have reached -90°F. "Siberia" is also used as an idiom *(see pp. 12-13)* for a faraway place. If you're "sitting in Siberia" at a concert, you're very far from the stage.

FAST FACTS

- Area: At 6.6 million sq mi, Russia is the world's largest country (U.S.: 3.7 million sq mi)
- Per capita GDP*: $17,700 (U.S.: $49,800)
- Russia lies on two continents, Europe and Asia. Geographers divide the continents roughly by the Ural Mountains, the Ural River, and the Caucasus Mountains.
- When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, after nearly 70 years, it broke up into 15 countries.
- With the independence of former Soviet republics, Kaliningrad, which Russia still controls, was separated from the mainland.

*GDP stands for gross domestic product; per capita means "per person." The amount is the value of all goods and services produced in a country in a year, divided by the population. It often is used as a measure of a nation's wealth.

QUESTIONS

1. Moscow is on which continent?
2. What divides Europe from Asia?
3. What is Siberia's western border?
4. Which city is at about 60°N, 151°E?
5. Which river, Russia's longest, empties into the Caspian Sea?
6. What mountain ranges are along the Russia–Mongolia border?
7. Which city was founded by Peter the Great?
8. About how far is that city from Murmansk?
9. Chechnya borders which country?
10. What 15 countries made up the former Soviet Union?