By Peter Zeihan

This coming weekend marks the 10th anniversary of Vladimir Putin's assumption of a leadership position at the Kremlin. Much has happened since Putin's appointment as first vice prime minister in August 1999, but Russia's most definitive evolution was from the unstable but semidemocratic days of the 1990s to the statist, authoritarian structure of today.

While it has hardly been clear to STRATFOR that Putin would survive Russia's transition from tentative democracy to near-police state, the transformation of Russia itself has always fit with our predictions. Authoritarian government is a geographically hardwired feature of Russia.

Russia's authoritarian structure has its roots in two interlinking features: its size and its lack of geographically defined borders.

The Matter of Size

Russia is huge. Mind-numbingly huge. Even Americans, whose country is large in its own right, have difficulty absorbing just how large Russia is. Russia spans 11 time zones. Traveling from one end to the other via rail is a seven-day, seven-night journey. Commercial jets needed to refuel when flying the country's length until relatively recently. The country's first transcontinental road became operational only a few years ago. In sum, Russia — to say nothing of the substantially larger Soviet Union — is roughly double the size of all 50 U.S. states combined.

In being so huge, Russia is condemned to being hugely poor. With the notable exception of the Volga, Russia has no useful rivers that can be used to transport goods — and the Volga, which is frozen most of the year, empties into the commercial dead end of the Caspian Sea. Whereas the Americans and Europeans always could shuttle goods and people cheaply up and down their rivers and use the money this allowed them to save to build armies, purchase goods and/or train workers — and thus become richer still — the Russians had to apply their scarce capital to build the transportation systems necessary to feed their population.

Most Western cities grew on natural transportation nodes, but many Russian cities are purely the result of state planning. St. Petersburg, for example, was built exclusively to serve as a forward position from which to battle Sweden and control the Baltic Sea. Basic industrialization, which swept across Europe and the United States in the 19th century, required rapid, inexpensive transit to make the process economical and dense population centers to serve as cheap pools of labor and concentrated markets.

Russia had neither transit nor population going for it. Large cities require abundant, cheap food. Without efficient transport options, farmers' output will rot before reaching market, preventing

them from earning much. State efforts to confiscate farmers' production led to rebellions. Early Russian governments consistently found themselves stuck having to choose between drawing upon already-meager finances to purchase food and subsidize city growth, or spending that money on a security force to terrorize farmers so the food could be confiscated outright. It wasn't until the development of railroads — and the rise of the Soviet Union's iron grip — that the countryside could be both harnessed economically and crushed spiritually with enough regularity to grow and industrialize Russia's cities. But even then, cities were built based on a strategic — not economic — rationale. Magnitogorsk, one of Russia's vast industrial centers, was built east of the Ural Mountains to shield it from German attack.

Russia's obstacles to economic development could be overcome only through state planning and institutional terror. Unsurprisingly, Russia's first real wave of development and industrialization did not occur until Stalin rose to power. The discovery of ample energy reserves in the years since has helped somewhat. But since most of them are literally thousands of miles from any market, the need to construct mammoth infrastructure simply to reach the deposits puts pressure on the country's bottom line.

The Best Defense

Russia's size lends itself to an authoritarian system, but the deeper cause for this system is rooted in Russia's lack of geographically defined borders. The best illustration of this requires a brief review of the lessons of the Mongol occupation.

The strength of the Mongols — who once ruled the steppes of Asia, and in time most of what is now Russia (among other vast territories) — lay in their military acumen on horseback. Where the land was open and flat, the Mongol horsemen knew no peer. Russia's populated chunks are as flat as they are large. It possesses no physical barriers that could stop, or even particularly slow, the Mongol's approach and inevitable victory. The forests north of Moscow served as Russia's best defense.

When the Mongol horde arrived at the forests' edge, the cavalrymen were forced to dismount if they were to offer combat. Once deprived of their mounts, the Mongol warrior's advantage over the Russian peasant soldier shrank precipitously. And so it was only in Russia's northern forests where some semblance of Russian independence managed to survive during the three centuries of Mongol rule.

The Mongols taught Russians just how horrible invasions — especially successful invasions persisting for generations — could be. The Mongol occupation became indelibly seared into the Russian collective memory, leaving Russians obsessed with national security. Echoes of that terrible memory have surfaced again and again in Russian history, with Napoleon's and Hitler's invasions only serving as two of the most recent. Many Russians view today's steady NATO and EU expansions into the former Soviet territories through this prism, as simply the most recent incarnation of the Mongol terror.

After the Mongol period ended, Russian strategy could be summed up in a single word: expansion. The only recourse to the challenge of size and the lack of internal transportation

options — and the lack whatsoever of any meaningful barriers to invasion — was establishing as large a buffer as possible. To this end, massive and poor Russia dedicated its scarce resources to building an army that could push its borders out from its core territory in the search for security.

The complications flowing from such an expansion — like the one achieved during Soviet times — are threefold:

First, the security is incomplete. While many countries have some sort of geographic barrier that grants a degree of safety — Chile has the Andes and the Atacama Desert, the United Kingdom has the English Channel, Italy has the Alps — potential barriers to invasion for Russia are far-flung and incomplete. Russia can advance westward to the Carpathian Mountains, but it remains exposed on the North European Plain and the Bessarabian gap. It can reach the Tien Shan Mountains of Central Asia and the marshes of Siberia, but between mountain and marsh lies an extension of the steppe into China and Mongolia. Short of conquering nearly all Eurasia, there is no way to secure Russia's borders.

Second, the cost of trying to secure its borders is enormously expensive — more massive than any state can sustain in perpetuity. Trying to do so means Russia's already-stressed economic system must support an even longer border, which requires an even larger military. The bigger Russia gets, the poorer it gets, and the more critical it becomes for its scarce resources to be funneled toward state needs — meaning central control becomes more essential.

Third, any buffers Russia conquers are not empty, they are home to non-Russians. And these non-Russians rarely take a shine to the idea of serving as Russia's buffer regions. Keeping these conquered populations quiescent is not a task for the faint of heart. It requires a security force that isn't just large but also able to excel at penetrating resistance groups, gathering information and policing. It thus requires an internal intelligence service with the primary purpose of keeping multiple conquered peoples in line — whether those people are Latvian or Ukrainian or Chechen or Uzbek — and this intelligence service's size and omnipresence tends to be matched only by its brutality.

The Kremlin Crucible

Russia is a tough place to rule, and as we've implied, STRATFOR is mildly surprised Putin has lasted. We don't think him incompetent, it's just that life in Russia is dreadfully hard and the Kremlin is a crucible, and leaders often are crushed swiftly. Before Putin took Russia's No. 2 job, former President Boris Yeltsin had gone through no fewer than 10 men — one of them twice — in the position.

But Putin boasted one characteristic that STRATFOR identified 10 long years ago that set him apart. Putin was no bureaucrat or technocrat or politico; he was a KGB agent. And as Putin himself has famously proclaimed, there is no such thing as a former intelligence officer. This allowed him to harness the modern incarnation of the institutions that made Russia not just possible but also stable — the intelligence divisions — and to fuse them into the core of the new regime. Most of the Kremlin's current senior staff, and nearly all Putin's inner circle, were deeply

enmeshed in the Soviet security apparatus.

This is hardly a unique coalition of forces in Russian history. Andropov ran the KGB before taking the reins of the Soviet empire. Stalin was (in)famous for his use of the intelligence apparatus. Lenin almost ran Russia into the ground before his deployment of the Cheka in force arrested the free fall. And the tsars before the Soviet leaders were hardly strangers to the role such services played.

Between economic inefficiency — which has only gotten worse since Soviet times — and wretched demographics, Russia faces a future that if anything is bleaker than its past. It sees itself as a country besieged by enemies without: the West, the Muslim world and China. It also sees itself as a country besieged by enemies within: only about three in four citizens are ethnic Russians, who are much older than the average citizen — and non-Russian birthrates are approximately double that of Russians. Only one institution in Russian history ever has proved capable of resisting such forces, and it is the institution that once again rules the country.

Russia may well stand on the brink of its twilight years. If there is a force that can preserve some version of Russia, it might not be identical to Putin, but it will need to look a great deal like what Putin represents.