



Voting in a New Nation-State

Every year an organization called Freedom House rates countries on how free they are. Freedom House looks at how well a country protects two kinds of rights. The first is political rights, such as the right to vote or run for office. The second is civil rights, including the right to speak and worship freely. Freedom House rates a country as free, partly free, or not free.

18.2 The Geographic Setting

The Soviet Union was a vast country, covering more than half of Europe and nearly two fifths of Asia. In area it was almost two and a half times the size of the United States. It had the third largest population in the world, behind China and India.

From Superpower to Failed State From 1945 to 1990, the Soviet Union was one of the world's two great **superpowers**. (The United States was the other.) Its armed forces were the largest in the world, and it possessed a fearsome nuclear arsenal. The Soviet Union also took the lead in space exploration for much of this period in history.

In 1991, however, this superpower collapsed. That year, the Soviet Union became the world's largest **failed state**. The question is why. One way to answer this question is to compare the Soviet Union with a successful nation-state.

Features of Successful Nation-States Many factors affect the success of a nation-state, but five are critical. Those factors are security, political freedom, economic growth, quality of life, and national unity.

The most important job of a nation-state is to keep its people safe. A successful state is strong enough to protect its people from foreign enemies, and its police work to keep people safe from crime. While the Soviet Union had a powerful army for defense, its secret police made people feel less, not more, secure.

A successful nation-state also protects the rights and freedoms of its citizens. In a free country, people choose their leaders by honest and fair elections, voting freely without fear of arrest. Elected leaders usually have the authority that comes from strong public support. By contrast, the Soviet Union was ruled by **dictators**—leaders who governed by force without the people's consent.

A successful nation-state uses its resources and relative location to promote economic growth. Its **gross domestic product** (GDP)—the total value of goods and services produced in the country—rises over time. As GDP rises, incomes rise, and as incomes rise, poverty declines. In the Soviet Union, GDP rose slowly or not at all.

A successful nation-state also tries to improve its people's quality of life. The government works to ensure that its citizens have adequate and safe food, clean water, and good medical care. As people live healthier lives, **life expectancy** increases and **infant mortality rates** decrease. In the Soviet Union, however, quality of life was not improving for many people.

Successful nation-states inspire patriotism, or love of country, in their people, encouraging citizens to work to make the country succeed. Successful nation-states also inspire **nationalism**—feelings of pride and loyalty toward one's nation. In countries like the Soviet Union that have many ethnic groups, nationalism can create a sense of unity.

However, ethnic group nationalism can sometimes work against national unity. By 1991, ethnic loyalty in the Soviet Union had more support than loyalty to country. At that point, many ethnic groups decided that they would be better off as independent nation-states than as part of a failing Soviet Union.