



BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Russia is the largest country in the world. At 6,601,668 square miles (17,098,242 square kilometers), it is nearly twice the size of the United States. Four of the world's largest rivers (Lena, Ob, Volga, and Yenisey) and the deepest freshwater lake (Baikal) are in Russia. Plains cover much of Russia, but a large frozen tundra dominates the extreme north. Forests blanket western Russia. The low Ural Mountains divide Russia's European side from its Asian regions. Siberia is mostly taiga (conifer forests), with tundra (treeless plains characteristic of arctic or subarctic regions) to the north, and steppe (dry, treeless grasslands) to the south. Russia's climate varies considerably by region. Winters last from November to March except in Siberia, where winter can last nine months.

History

Slavic peoples settled in eastern Europe during the early Christian era. Many converted to Christianity in the ninth and tenth centuries. In 988, Prince Vladimir declared Christianity the state's official religion. Early in the 13th century, Mongols conquered the Slavs and ruled for 240 years. The Slavs finally defeated the Mongols in 1480 to regain their sovereignty. In 1547, Ivan the Terrible (who ruled from 1533 to 1584) was the first Russian ruler crowned czar of Russia. He expanded Russia's territory, as did Peter the Great (1682–1724) and Catherine the Great (1762–96). During their reigns, the empire stretched from Warsaw in the west to Vladivostok in the east. In 1814, Russian troops that had defeated France's

Napoleon marched on Paris, and Russia took its place as one of the most powerful states on earth.

When Czar Nicholas II gave up the throne because of popular unrest during World War I, Vladimir Lenin, head of the Bolshevik Party, led the 1917 revolt that brought down the provisional government and put the Communists in power. Lenin disbanded the legislature and banned all other political parties. A civil war between Lenin's Red Army and the White Army lasted until 1922, with Lenin emerging victorious.

In 1922, the Bolsheviks formed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and forcibly incorporated Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, and Belarus into the union. By the time Lenin died in 1924, many people had perished as a result of his radical social restructuring. Lenin was followed by Joseph Stalin, a dictator who forced industrialization and collective agriculture on the public. Millions died in labor camps and from starvation. Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, and World War II (the Great Patriotic War) eventually took more than 25 million Soviet lives.

After Stalin died in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev declared he would build real communism within 20 years. Hard-liners opposed to his reforms and policy of relaxing strained relations with the West replaced Khrushchev in 1964 with Leonid Brezhnev. Before his death in 1982, Brezhnev orchestrated the expansion of Soviet influence in the developing world, ordered the invasion of Afghanistan, and built up the Soviet nuclear arsenal. When the next two leaders died in quick succession, young Mikhail Gorbachev rose to power in 1986. Gorbachev soon introduced reforms like

perestroika (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness). The failure of many reforms exposed inherent weaknesses in the Soviet system. The union quickly unraveled in 1991 after several republics declared independence. Russia's leader at the time was Boris Yeltsin.

In 1993, after Yeltsin dissolved a combative parliament, his opponents voted to impeach him and seized the parliament building in an attempted coup. Street riots followed, and the militants were forced to leave the building. That victory and the approval of Yeltsin's new constitution were two highlights of an otherwise difficult term in office. Despite many challenges, Yeltsin became Russia's first freely elected president.

A violent war in Chechnya tarnished Yeltsin's image in 1994. Tens of thousands died before a 1996 treaty granted Chechnya independence in all but name, while deferring a decision on its official status. After the Russian withdrawal, crime and Islamic extremism rose within and spread outside the border of Chechnya. Russia had sent troops back in 1991 to take on a Chechen nationalist movement that had been infiltrated by Muslims intent on waging a global *jihad* (holy war). The troops devastated much of Chechnya and killed all the famous Chechen rebel leaders, including the notorious warlord Shamil Basayev. Russian troops remain in Chechnya, which is ruled by Ramzan Kadyrov, a former rebel who has used brutal means to restore some security.

Facing rising crime, poverty, corruption, and inflation in the late 1990s, Yeltsin announced his resignation in 1999. Former prime minister Vladimir Putin was appointed acting president until elections, which he later won decisively. Putin was reelected in 2004 and was popular throughout his time in office, largely because Russia's economy grew. However, he was criticized for his authoritarian style. In 2008, Putin's handpicked successor, Dmitry Medvedev, won what some claimed was a flawed presidential election and appointed Putin as prime minister. Later that year, Russia and Georgia clashed militarily over the independence-seeking Georgian region of South Ossetia. Recently, Russia agreed to cut back its nuclear weapons stockpile by 30 percent in an agreement with the United States.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Russia's population of roughly 140 million is shrinking annually by 0.47 percent. Most of the country's 120 ethnic groups are small. Ethnic Russians form 80 percent of the population. Other groups include Tartars (3.8 percent), Ukrainians (2 percent), Bashkirs (1.2 percent), Chuvashes (1.1 percent), Belarusians (almost 1 percent), Udmurts, Kazakhs, Buryats, Tuvinians, and Yakutians. The capital and largest city is Moscow, with a population of more than 13 million. Other large cities include Saint Petersburg, Novosibirsk, Nizhny Novgorod, Yekaterinburg, Saratov, and Samara. Nearly three-fourths of Russians live in urban areas. Serious gaps between the educated rich and the unskilled poor are widening and threatening Russia's development.

Language

Russian is the official language. Its Cyrillic alphabet includes 33 letters, many of which look similar to but are pronounced differently than letters in the Roman (Latin) alphabet. Non-Russians also usually speak Russian, especially in urban areas. Rural minorities more often speak their own languages at home or within their ethnic groups. For example, Tartars speak Tartar, Chuvashes speak Chuvash, and Udmurts speak Udmurt. After Communist rule, these individual languages began to be taught at schools where the ethnic group was prominent. Ethnic Russians are not required to learn other local languages, but students are increasingly studying foreign languages (English, French, German, and Spanish).

Religion

Christianity is the main religion in Russia, with the Russian Orthodox Church claiming 15 to 20 percent of Russia's population. More than 10 percent of Russians are Muslim. After the October Revolution (1917), the Communists discouraged all religious worship. Mikhail Gorbachev was the first Soviet leader to officially tolerate—even support—religion. Though many Russians still claim no religion, the Russian Orthodox Church has rapidly regained influence, at times even forming a *de facto* alliance with the state. Churches other than the Russian Orthodox are allowed to operate if they register with authorities and prove they have a long-standing presence in Russia. Islamic and Jewish groups do not face these restrictions. Small groups of Buddhists also practice in the country.

General Attitudes

In Russia's long history of totalitarianism, its inhabitants had few opportunities to make their own decisions, whether ruled by a czar or the Communist Party. Initiative, personal responsibility, and the desire to work independently were suppressed by the state, and one was expected to conform to official opinion and behavior. While many people simply endured or ignored major problems, others coped by participating in the well-developed underground counterculture or by concentrating on spiritual aspects of life rather than the lack of material wealth.

After 1991, many Russians were searching for new social values and were optimistic about a future of freedom and opportunity. In reality, Russia's social fabric and economic stability have so deteriorated that Communists and nationalists have regained popularity with people who are tired of Russia's chaos, declining living standards, rampant crime, and unemployment. Those who are taking advantage of economic opportunities are far fewer than those who wonder each month whether they will be paid. Prosperity promised within a few years now seems a generation or more away. Still, social status is often measured by the acquisition of power and wealth. Respect for authority continues. Though frustrated, many Russians seem resigned to their situation and are willing to endure it the best they can. For example, they continue to work when not paid. And, to compensate for the lack of wages, many families feed themselves by gardening. Friendship is extremely important to Russians, who are warm and open with trusted friends. They rely on their network of

friends in hard times and will go to great lengths to help friends whenever possible.

Although intensely proud of their country and its achievements, Russians are basically pessimistic and usually do not express much hope for a better life in the future. Even generally optimistic Russians might not show their true feelings in public but rather express frustration with everyday life. Still, Russians see their heritage and social structure as unique. They desire to be known not for the negative aspects of the Soviet period and its aftermath but for Russian contributions to world literature, art, science, technology, and medicine.

Personal Appearance

Clothes are considered important as a sign of status and culture. European fashions are popular in urban areas. Knock-off articles of clothing that offer “brand-name” labels for a cheaper price are common. Young women often wear short skirts, high heels, and a fair amount of makeup. More young people are also wearing shorts in warm weather. Jeans are popular among most age groups, except older women. During winter months, many Russians (especially older men) wear a fur hat called a *shapka* or *ushanka*.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

When meeting, Russians shake hands firmly and say *Zdravstvuyte* (Hello), *Dobry dien* (Good day), *Dobroye utro* (Good morning), *Dobry vecher* (Good evening), or *Privet* (a casual “Hello”). Good friends say “Hello” with the more informal *Zdravstvuy* or *Zdorovo*. Friends, but not strangers, might also ask *Kak dela?* (How are you?) and expect a detailed response. Surnames are not used without titles, such as *Gospodin* (Mr.) and *Gospozha* (Mrs.). The military, police, and some citizens continue to use the Soviet-era title *tovarishch* (“friend” or “comrade”). At work, in polite company, or when addressing an elder, Russians use the given name and patronymic (the father's name and a gender-specific suffix). Strangers are introduced using given name, patronymic, and surname. Close friends use given names alone.

Gestures

Pointing with the index finger is improper but common. It is impolite to talk (especially to an older person) with one's hands in the pockets or arms folded across the chest. To count, Russians close their fingers rather than open them. Many gestures are considered bad luck and should be avoided. For example, Russians do not like to shake hands through a doorway, give birthday presents before the actual birthday, or leave keys or an empty bottle of alcohol on the table.

Visiting

Russians like to visit and have guests. Sitting and talking for hours is a favorite pastime. One usually removes shoes when entering a home. Hosts generally offer refreshments, but

guests may decline them. Friends and family may visit anytime without notice but they usually arrange visits in advance if they have telephones. They make themselves at home and generally can expect to be welcome for any length of time. Visits with new acquaintances are more formal.

Giving gifts is a strong tradition, and almost every event (birthdays, weddings, holidays, etc.) is accompanied by presents. For casual visits, it is common (but not required) for guests to bring a simple gift (flowers, food, or alcohol) to their hosts. The object given is less important than the friendship expressed by the act. Flowers are given in odd numbers; even numbers are for funerals. If friends open a bottle of *vodka* (literally, “little water”), they customarily drink until it is empty.

Eating

Russians eat with the fork in the left hand and the knife in the right, although many use only a fork. People keep their hands above the table, not in their laps. Soup is common for lunch or dinner. At lunch or the main meal, diners often eat *zakuski* (appetizers). When entertaining, Russians put more food than they can eat on the table and may leave some on the plate to indicate there is abundance in the house (whether this is true or not). Guests can indicate they have eaten well by leaving a very small amount of food on the plate. Russians generally do not go out to eat in cafés or restaurants because the few that exist are fairly expensive.

LIFESTYLE

Family

The family is the basic social unit in Russia; most people expect to marry and have children. Urban couples usually have one child, but rural families are larger. Parents support their children financially until they reach adulthood. Grown children are often expected to help their parents financially because pensions are frequently inadequate. The father is considered the head of the family, though single mothers lead many households. Both husband and wife usually work, but men rarely share in household duties. Women face many challenges, rarely receiving equal pay, promotions, or leisure time. Child care is available but is too costly for some families. Grandparents often provide child care and do the shopping.

Housing

Urban housing mainly consists of apartment buildings, most of which were constructed during the Soviet era from concrete panels. However, the communal apartments common during this era, in which several families shared a kitchen and bathroom, are now rare. Because housing is difficult to obtain, two or three generations often live together. Considered the most intimate room in the house, the kitchen is the place where people receive close friends. More formal meals and visits take place in the living room, which is often decorated on one wall with a large rug that doubles as insulation against the cold of the concrete during winter months. Russians combat drafts by sealing their windows

with foam, newspaper, or tape from mid-October to April. In addition to a television set and a china display, the living rooms of more educated families are filled with books, in which the owners take pride. Many urban families own small homes (*dacha*) a few miles outside of the city, where they go on the weekends during spring, summer, and fall months to relax and grow most of the produce they eat. Rural families usually own their own homes (made of wood, brick, or stone), which have electricity but often lack running water and central heat. Rural houses have a wooden *banya*, or Russian steam bathhouse.

Dating and Marriage

When young people date, they usually go to a movie or for a walk in a city park. Sometimes they go to bars or cafés, but this is too expensive for many. Instead, they like to have parties in their apartments when their parents are not home. Before 1991, couples could marry only in a “wedding palace.” Many couples are now also having a traditional church wedding before or after the civil ceremony. The elaborate traditional ceremony is called *venchaniye* (literally, “coronation”). The divorce rate is high since many people do not view marriage as a lasting commitment.

Life Cycle

In order to avoid the “evil eye,” a curse believed to be caused by envy or praise, Russian women delay announcing their pregnancies, people refrain from buying things for unborn babies, and parents keep infants away from visitors during the first month after their births. After 30 to 40 days have passed, family and friends may be invited to a party (*smotriiny*) to see the baby; they bring flowers, gifts for the baby, and money, which is placed under the baby's pillow with the words *na zubok* (for the tooth). Upon the death of a family member, all mirrors and reflective surfaces (such as a television screen) are covered with white bed sheets. Soon after the body is moved from the house, the floors are washed in the direction of the threshold. Family and friends gather after the burial for pancakes (*bliny*) and boiled rice with raisins (*kutiya*). White handkerchiefs are given to relatives of the deceased. The group drinks vodka to the deceased's peaceful transition to heaven but do not clink their glasses.

Diet

Though food is plentiful, it is often expensive. Most people eat more homegrown produce than imported fruits and vegetables. Those on fixed and limited incomes (mainly the elderly) eat more bread and potatoes than anything else. Urban residents have meat and dairy products more often. Traditional Russian foods include *borsch* (vegetable soup), *pirozhenki* (a stuffed roll, eaten as “fast food”), *golubtsy* (stuffed cabbage leaves baked with tomato sauce and eaten with sour cream), *pelmeni* (a pasta dish), and *shi* (soup with sour cabbage). *Borsch* is one of the most popular foods in the country. Its ingredients (beets, potatoes, cabbage, carrots, and onions) almost complete the list of vegetables used in everyday life. Pork, sausage, chicken, and cheeses are popular but can be expensive. Russians drink coffee, tea, and mineral water; juice and soda are available. Alcoholic drinks such as

vodka are also popular.

Recreation

Most Russians have little leisure time because of the hours they must devote to getting food, working extra jobs, or taking care of their households. Urban Russians like to spend their spare time at their *dachas* (country cottages), if they have them, relaxing and growing fruits and vegetables. During the fall, people like to gather mushrooms. Cities have relatively few nightclubs, but that is changing gradually. The country's favorite sport is soccer. Winter sports such as ice-skating, hockey, and cross-country skiing are also popular. Most families like to watch television in the evening. Russians highly appreciate theaters and movies, but these are available only in big cities. Rural people can watch movies at community recreation centers called *dvorets kulturey* (palace of culture) or the smaller *dom kulturey* (house of culture).

The Arts

Russia has a grand and abiding heritage in the cultural arts. Realistic, romantic, political, and psychological themes are common in Russia's world-famous poetry, short stories, novels, and plays. Russian composers wrote some of the world's most beloved symphonies, ballets, operas, and other musical works. Ballet is an important art form; *Swan Lake* and *Don Quixote* were first performed in Russia. The Bolshoi Ballet, a renowned company, started in 1776. Traditional music and dance are also important to the people. Theater, ballet, symphonic, and folk productions are well attended. Russian folk crafts include nested dolls (*matryoshka*), wood carving, lacquer painting, and lace making.

Holidays

New Year's Day is the most popular holiday in Russia. Almost everyone decorates fir trees and has parties to celebrate the New Year. Grandfather Frost leaves presents for children to find on New Year's Day. Easter and Christmas observances, long interrupted by communism, regained some prominence in 1990. Christmas is on 7 January, according to the Julian calendar used by the Russian Orthodox Church. Women's Day is on 8 March. Solidarity Day (1 May, also known as May Day) is a day for parades. Victory Day (9 May) commemorates the end of World War II and is deeply important to most Russians. New holidays since 1991 include Russian Independence Day (12 June) and Constitution Day (12 Dec.). Every profession (teachers, miners, police, etc.) has its own special day each year to celebrate.

SOCIETY

Government

Russia is a federation of 21 autonomous republics and 46 *oblasts*, or regions. The president (currently Dmitri Medvedev) is head of state and the prime minister (Vladimir Putin) is head of government. The president has power to dissolve parliament, set foreign policy, and appoint the prime minister. The Federal Assembly has two houses, a 168-seat Federation Council and the 450-seat State *Duma*. An array of

political parties is represented in the *Duma*. The actual party names are less important than their alliances. Communists form the largest block, but nationalists and liberals form other substantial voting blocks. The voting age is 18.

Economy

Russia's natural resources give it great potential for economic growth and development. Oil, natural gas, coal, diamonds, and precious metals are abundant. The agricultural sector is potentially strong. Heavy industry and oil have spurred economic growth in recent years, but they are also vulnerable to downturns in global prices. In 2008, falling oil prices and the global financial crisis hit the Russian economy hard. The government responded with a US\$68 billion bank rescue package, among other measures. Russia's economy remains unstable for many additional reasons, including an inefficient distribution system, political uncertainties, poor infrastructure, high inflation, low tax-collection rates, low-quality production, organized crime, and corruption. Perhaps 40 percent of Russians live in poverty; exact numbers are difficult to determine because so much of the economy is underground. The currency is the *ruble* (RUR).

Transportation and Communications

Although the number of privately owned cars has grown since the 1980s, most people use public transportation. Major cities have subways, trolleys, trains, and buses. Taxis are expensive and hard to find, but unofficial taxis are increasingly common. Domestic air travel is not always reliable. Railroads are extensive, but service is poor. The telephone system is outdated but has undergone significant changes in recent years. Cellular phones are ubiquitous, especially in major cities, and internet access is common. The press faces challenges to its independence.

Education

Education is free and compulsory for students between ages 6 and 17. Guidelines were introduced in 1994 to encourage innovation in teaching, but many public schools have not implemented the reforms because they lack money, supplies, and clear local leadership. However, a few are embracing new ideas and even teaching basic market economics. Students attend primary, middle, and high school. They can specialize in a subject during their last two years. Private schools offer a high-quality education but are costly. Education is highly valued; however, economic hardship has led to some school closures and teacher strikes. More than five hundred universities, medical schools, and technical academies are found throughout the country. Higher education may be public or private; it takes five years to earn a degree.

Health

Medical care is free but of poor quality. Some doctors are well trained, but they lack modern equipment and medicine to adequately treat their patients. Private clinics provide better (but expensive) care. Common major diseases are cancer (especially lung cancer, reflecting a high percentage of smokers), diabetes, and heart ailments. Alcoholism and drug abuse may affect a large portion of the population, including

teenagers. This abuse is a contributing factor in many crimes, accidents, and suicides. Diphtheria, dysentery, tuberculosis, polio, AIDS, and other serious maladies are spreading. The decline in health is reaching crisis proportions. Life expectancy for men is far lower than it is in most other Western countries.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of the Russian Federation, 2650 Wisconsin Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20007; phone (202) 298-5700; web site www.russianembassy.org. National Tourist Office, 224 West 30th Street, Suite 701, New York, NY 10001; phone (877) 221-7120; web site www.russia-travel.com.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	139,390,205 (rank=9)
Area, sq. mi.	6,601,668 (rank=1)
Area, sq. km.	17,098,242

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	65 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	41 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$15,100
Adult literacy rate	100% (male); 99% (female)
Infant mortality rate	10 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	60 (male); 73 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).