

RUSSIA PROFILE

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate.

Russia is the largest country in the world. At 6,592,734 square miles (17,075,200 square kilometers), it is nearly twice the size of the United States. Four of the world's largest rivers and the deepest freshwater lake are in Russia. Forests blanket western Russia. The low Ural Mountains divide Russia's European side from its Asian regions. Russia's climate varies considerably by region. Russian 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 was the first Russian ruler crowned czar of Russia. He expanded Russia's territory, as did Peter the Great and Catherine the Great. 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 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 or "restructuring" and glasnost or "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 and unpopular war in Chechnya tarnished Yeltsin's image in 1994. Tens of thousands died before a 1996 cease-fire allowed Chechens who were seeking independence to at least elect local leaders. Although Russian troops withdrew and Chechnya's bid for independence was scheduled for negotiation, troops returned in 1999 after Chechen terrorists allegedly struck Moscow. With public support, military leaders vowed to take control of the republic. While Russian troops captured the Chechen capital of Grozny in early 2000, they have been unable to subdue the rebel resistance. Fighting continues and is a drain on Russia's budget and resources. 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 remains popular, largely because Russia's economy has grown. He has continued the war in Chechnya and promises to further economic reform, decrease corruption, and increase security. However, he has been criticized for his authoritarian style.

Population.

Russia's population of 143.4 million is shrinking annually by 0.37 percent. Most of the country's 120

ethnic groups are small. 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. More than 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. 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, and German are among the most widely taught.

Religion.

Russian Orthodox Church claims half of Russia's population. More than 10 percent of Russians are Muslim. After the October Revolution, 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 an 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.

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. Young women often wear short skirts, high heels, and a fair amount of makeup. More young people are also wearing shorts in warm weather. Young men wear jogging suits in mild weather. Jeans are popular among teenagers and young adults. The jeans often will have an embroidery design and be worn much tighter than in the US. During the winter, many older men wear a fur hat called a shapka. Fur coats are popular among women in colder weather.

THE PEOPLE, 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"). Friends, but not strangers, might also ask Kak dela? (How are you?). 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 their 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 an empty bottle on the table. When visiting an Orthodox church it is impolite to have one's hands in their pockets, for men to wear hats, and women are expected to cover their head.

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 is accompanied by presents. For casual visits, it is common though not required for guests to bring a simple gift of flowers, food, or a small trinket for 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.

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 or "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 true or not. Guests can indicate they have eaten well by leaving a very small amount of food on the plate.

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 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. Childcare is available, but it may be too costly for some families. Grandparents often provide childcare and do the shopping. Because housing is difficult to obtain due to inflated pricing, young couples often live with their parents for some time. Urban apartments are small and it is common for a family of three or more to live in a one or two bedroom apartment with a kitchen and a bathroom. Rural homes are slightly larger than apartments but often lack running water and central heat.

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 clubs 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 divorce rate

is high since many people do not view marriage as a lasting commitment. **Diet.** Although food is plentiful, it is often expensive. The average person eats more homegrown produce than imported fruits and vegetables. People on fixed and limited incomes eat more bread and potatoes than anything else. Urban residents have meat and dairy products more often. Traditional Russian foods include borsch (vegetable soup), pirozhki (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 still 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 they can be expensive. Russians drink coffee, tea, and mineral water; juice and soda are available.

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 often spend their spare time at their dachas or “country cottages”, if they have them, relaxing and growing fruits and vegetables. In the summer, 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 or the smaller houses 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, on 1 May is also known as May Day and is a day for parades. Victory Day, on 9 May commemorates the end of World War II and is deeply important to most Russians. New holidays since 1991 include Russian Independence Day on 12 June and Constitution Day on 12 December. Every profession has its own special day each year to celebrate.

SOCIETY

Economy.

Russia’s natural resources give it great potential for economic growth and development. Oil, natural gas, coal, diamonds, and precious metals are abundant. Heavy industry and oil have contributed to economic growth in recent years, but they are also vulnerable to downturns in global prices. The agricultural sector is also potentially strong. Strict government measures helped reverse a downward economic trend. However, Russia’s economy remains unstable for many 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, although exact numbers are difficult to determine because so much of the economy is underground, and most transactions are made in cash. 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 increasingly popular, especially in major cities. The press faces challenges to its independence.

Education.

Education is free and compulsory for students between ages six and seventeen. Guidelines introduced in 1994 were meant 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, 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.