

# EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE **FIELD GUIDE**

Russia



U.S. AIR FORCE



# About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.

The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 “Culture General” provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on Russia.

Part 2 “Culture Specific” describes unique cultural features of Russian society. It applies culture-general concepts to help

increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training.

For further information, contact the AFCLC Region Team at

[AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil](mailto:AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil) or visit the AFCLC website at <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/>.

**Disclaimer:** All text is the property of the AFCLC and may not be modified by a change in title, content, or labeling. It may be reproduced in its current format with the express permission of the AFCLC. All photography is provided as a courtesy of the US government, Wikimedia, and other sources. [Please scroll over images to view captions.](#)



# PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

## What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

## Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the



notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in

conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to

focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

### **Cultural Domains**

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions,

help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.



We can organize behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to



better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains – which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems and others (see chart on

next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

### **Social Behaviors across Cultures**

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival,

although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more complex market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

### Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

## 12 Domains of Culture



This collective perspective forms our worldview—how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.



### **Cultural Belief System**

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns

meaning, sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true — regardless of whether there is evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, the specific components of those beliefs tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or

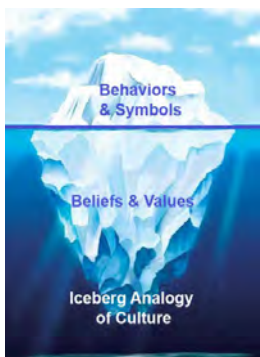


wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.



## Core Beliefs

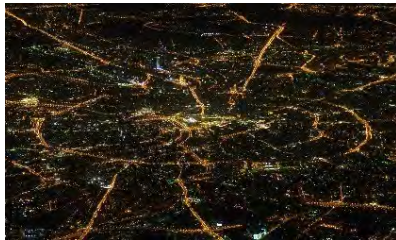
Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as



depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

In Russia as any other countries, there are cultural patterns of meaning that are common across



the country. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

# CULTURAL DOMAINS

## 1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable, or which occurred prior to written language.

As the world's largest country, Russia stretches eastward from the Baltic Sea and Eastern Europe across North and Central Asia to the Pacific Ocean. Many experts divide the country into subregions, including the West (European land from the Ural Mountains westward), Central (land in Central Asia from Kazakhstan and Mongolia north through Siberia), and East (land in East Asia from China and North Korea to the Arctic). Most residents live in the West, with much of the rest of the population concentrating along Russia's southern borders. Notably, Russia has unresolved border disputes with Estonia, Georgia, Japan, and Ukraine.



Archaeological evidence suggests early humans settled in the Caucasus Mountains between the Black and Caspian Seas and the Altai Mountains in southern Siberia some 30,000 years ago. Though sculptures, figurines, and

dwellings indicate humans lived in areas comprising present-day southern Russia for millennia, many groups were nomadic and few established large settlements.

In the 8th and 9th centuries AD, Eastern Slavs began to settle in the West. Around the same time, Viking tribes from Scandinavia moved into the region, occupying lands between the Baltic Sea and present-day Ukraine. Over subsequent centuries, the Slavs and Vikings developed Kyivan Rus, a loose confederation of city-states widely considered the precursor to the Russian state.



Meanwhile, the Finno-Ugric, Manchu, Mongol, Turkic, and other people that had settled in present-day Central and East Russia developed independently of Kyivan Rus. By the 13th century, Genghis Khan initially led Mongols in conquering much of the territory south of the Arctic, from the Pacific Ocean to Eastern Europe. For the next 2 centuries, much of the region remained under nominal Mongol rule. By 1480, the Grand Prince of Moscow, Ivan III (the Great), defeated the weakened Mongols under a policy of “gathering the Russian lands,” setting the stage for Russian **tsars** (kings) to rule the West until Mikhail Romanov established the Romanov dynasty in 1613.

In the West, Romanov emperors Peter the Great (1682-1725) and Catherine the Great (1762-96), expanded Russian territory and introduced Western European technology and ideas to the region. As Russians and allied Cossacks expanded eastward, they founded camps and trade posts across Siberia. Meanwhile, in much of Central and East Russia, various ethnic groups had largely subsisted as pastoral nomads. However, empires from Russia, China, Japan, and Korea claimed the sparsely populated territory in North Asia.

By the mid-19th century, Russia had occupied all the territory that China formerly claimed north of the Amur River. In 1860, it founded Vladivostok, first as a military outpost, and then as the primary Russian naval base on the Pacific. By 1875, Russia had acquired Sakhalin Island from Japan in exchange for the Kuril



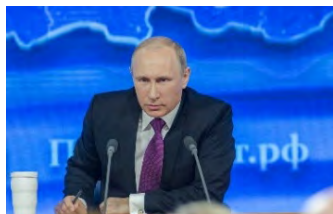
Islands. At the turn of the 20th century, the Russian Empire comprised most of the territory of present-day Russia.

Many nations sought to control Russian expansion. In the West, European powers joined the Ottomans to defeat Russia in the Crimean War, curbing Russian control near the Black Sea, while Japan defeated Russia in a brief war in the East. Beginning in 1914, Russia suffered harsh losses in World War I. Unrest caused by the monarchy's ineptitude, war losses, and food

shortages culminated in 1917, when dual revolutions ended Romanov rule and brought a communist government to power, plunging Russia into civil war in 1918.

In 1922, the victorious communists founded the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, or Soviet Union). The Soviets kept control by centralizing politics and the economy and repressing non-Russian minorities that they considered security threats. After losing millions of lives during World War II, the USSR and US emerged as superpowers in 1945. The USSR, comprising Russia and 14 other federal republics in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, and the US would compete for global influence over the next 4 decades during the Cold War.

While successive Soviet leaders led a centralized, authoritarian government that went through brief periods of social and cultural liberalization, they controlled much of Eastern Europe and lent support to socialist regimes throughout the world. However, in



the late 1980s, the Soviet economy collapsed, and by late 1991, the USSR had dissolved.

The 1990s were chaotic as Russia began to liberalize and adopt pro-market economic policies under President Boris Yeltsin. In

2000, Vladimir Putin was elected President and would come to dominate Russian politics for the next 2 decades. While many Russians' standard of living improved, the government became increasingly authoritarian, crushing political opposition and unrest at home. Abroad, Russia intervened in the affairs of former Soviet republics, and in countries further afield, particularly in Africa and the Middle East. In early 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, destabilizing Europe by bombing Ukrainian cities and threatening use of nuclear weapons.

## 2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community.

Russia's conquest of Siberia and the East, which included forced migration policies and the subjugation of indigenous groups, drastically changed society there. While Russia's ethnic and racial makeup varies by region, residents in the West, across much of southern Siberia, and in the Far East tend to be of Slavic ancestry. Some Caucasian and Turkic peoples predominate in the Caucasus and Ural Mountains. While Finno-Ugric peoples occupy areas in the northwest, many ethnic Mongols live in Arctic regions or near the border with Mongolia. Despite this variation, many residents identify as Russian nationals. Russia also has a large immigrant population from former Soviet republics, often settling in large cities or near their countries of origin.



Although Russia is a semi-presidential constitutional federation, in recent years, the government has functioned more like a dictatorship. Vladimir Putin has dominated politics since serving as President from 2000-08 and Prime Minister under political ally Dmitry Medvedev from 2008-12. Putin was elected President again in 2012 and for a fourth term in 2018. During this time, he has repressed political opposition and rigged elections in favor of the United Russia Party.

Because of its size and diversity, Russia is sub-divided into provinces, republics, territories, districts, and federal cities, together known as federal subjects. Although some federal subjects are nominally autonomous, President Putin appoints the representatives of nine federal districts that span the entire country to monitor and ensure consistencies between federal and regional institutions. Consequently, the central government effectively maintains political control throughout Russia.

Civil unrest and occasional terrorist attacks are the primary security threats inside Russia. The government closely monitors unrest, and at times, has directly intervened in nearby Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine, often under the guise of protecting ethnic Russians there. Russia provides direct

support to Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria and the opposition forces led by Khalifa Haftar in Libya. Russian mercenaries operate around the world, but particularly in Africa. While Russia has developed stable ties with China, Iran, and Turkey, relations have recently soured with the US and many European nations.

### 3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

Many of Russia's early inhabitants led rich spiritual lives. While little is known of early religions, many were likely polytheistic. Early inhabitants recognized gods and spirits that constructed the universe and influenced everyday life, believing in contact between the natural and spiritual worlds. In the West, Slavic groups tended to believe in an absent god, who left other deities and spirits to deal with earthly affairs. Many indigenous groups in the East also held beliefs about spiritual connections among



nature, animals, and the land, while others recognized the powers of local shamans, who supposedly achieved divine connections with the spirit world.

Christianity became Kyivan Rus's official religion in 988

and has remained influential in state affairs for most of history. As Russia expanded its territory eastward, it converted many local inhabitants to Russian Orthodox Christianity, though some groups retained their religions. While some indigenous groups in present-day Central and East Russia were Buddhist, many Muslims lived in the lands around the Black and Caspian Seas. For centuries, officials persecuted Jews and eventually restricted them to the far western Pale of Settlement.

The Soviet government was atheist and suppressed religious life. Today, most Russians are Orthodox Christian, though many others are atheist. Government officials maintain close relations

with the Russian Orthodox Church, which, along with Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism, are Russia's "traditional" religions. Kalmykia is notably Europe's only region where Buddhism is the dominant religion. Russia has an autonomous Jewish province on its border with China that was home to thousands of Jews in the mid-20th century, although few Jews still live there.

#### 4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called "fictive kin").

Family life and relationships are fundamental elements of Russian society. Russians tend to maintain connections with family members, supporting them emotionally and financially, while providing physical care for elderly or ailing kin if needed. While residence patterns differ somewhat by region and ethnic or religious groups, multiple generations often reside together in one household or live within close proximity.

Urbanization has changed life in many areas. As both men and women take advantage of the enhanced educational and employment opportunities available in urban areas, family structures have become more diverse. Over 80% of residents in the Northwest, Ural Mountains, and Central Russia live in cities. The Arctic region, North Caucasus, and South tend to have more rural residents.

Children generally choose their own spouses, although close family ties mean relatives have some influence over their children's choices. Although both



Russian Orthodox and Islamic teachings strongly value marriage as an institution and discourage divorce, Russia has one of the world's highest divorce rates.

#### 5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that

refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

Many cultures in Russia traditionally privilege the male's role as provider and leader. Women acquired more rights in the Soviet era, when many women worked outside the home. However, social, economic, and political inequalities between the sexes remain. While most women today participate in the workforce, they typically also assume the traditional roles of wives and mothers, often having to balance domestic duties and employment outside the home.

Russian women tend to be well-represented in lower levels of business and government. Many women own businesses and participate in local government, although fewer women are elected to national parliament today than during the Soviet era. Notably, no women have served as head-of-state or government since the Romanov dynasty.



Russia has a low fertility rate, though it varies by region. While women in the West tend to have just one child, women in the Southwest and Central Russia often have two or more. Though traditionally high by

many standards, Russia's abortion rate has fallen steadily since the 1990s.

Many Russians who identify as homosexual report discrimination and repression, particularly in Chechnya. In November 2022, the "gay propaganda" bill was signed into law which bans all forms of homosexual propaganda. Same-sex marriage is illegal in Russia.

## 6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.



Russian is the official language, widely spoken across Russia. Of Russia's over 100 indigenous languages, many are in danger of extinction, due to forced Russification and native speakers opting to learn more widely spoken languages. Of the languages with more than 1 million speakers, Tatar, Chechen, Chuvash, and Bashkort are the most common, largely spoken by ethnic minorities in ethnic republics in the West. Ukrainian is common along the Ukrainian border and in some places in Siberia. Many indigenous groups speak their own language and Russian.

## 7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.



Most Russians are highly educated. The quality and availability of education improved considerably during the Soviet era, as the government pursued more egalitarian (the principle that all people are equal) policies and a highly educated labor force. Today, most Russians receive 12 years of education or more, and Russia has one of the world's highest post-secondary attainment rates. As of 2023, over 79% of Russians ages 25 and older had acquired some form of post-secondary education. Russia also has robust and well-attended vocational programs. Nearly 34% of secondary students are enrolled in vocational training programs.

Nonetheless, educational quality and attainment vary by income level and region. For example, while almost 100% of 3-5-year-olds in Chukotka are enrolled in pre-primary programs, just 41% are in Dagestan. Likewise, the children of affluent Russians tend

to have more educational opportunities than their compatriots. In recent years, underfunded educational programs have resulted in higher student-teacher ratios, inadequate or poorly maintained school facilities, and other learning impediments.

## 8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most Western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management,



devoting less effort to relationship-building. This concept of time often remains true in business and in some regions of Russia. In others, like parts of the Southwest, and outside of business, establishing and maintaining relationships takes precedence over meeting deadlines, punctuality, or efficiently accomplishing tasks.

While concepts of personal space tend to vary by region and ethnic or religious group, Russians generally maintain less personal space than

Americans, often sitting or standing close together in public and private spaces. Family and friends also typically touch more frequently than Americans as a sign of their close personal relationship. Notably, some Russian Muslims and indigenous groups maintain more personal space and touch less frequently, especially in public spaces.

When greeting, most Russians shake hands, particularly among men. Close female friends may kiss alternating cheeks three times. Hugging and kissing cheeks are common among family and close friends. Russians tend to value eye contact as a sign of honesty and engagement, though staring may be considered rude, particularly between Russians of the opposite sex.

## 9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill, and style. Much of Russia's art, architecture, dance, music, literature, and sports reflect the country's geographic and ethnic diversity,

imperial and Soviet history, and modern global trends. Although dress varies by location and group, many Russians follow recent European or US fashion trends and don traditional attire only for holidays, special occasions, or ceremonies.



Traditional music and dance tend to vary by ethnic group, although global and Russian rock and pop are widely popular. Many Slavic dances include dancing and stomping in circles or lines to rapid melodies. Caucasian, Mongolic, Turkic, and Uralic dances are fast paced and reflect unique cultural characteristics. For example, the Turkic Bashkir people of Bashkortostan have unique songs and dances that differ from other Turkic peoples like Tatars and Chuvash.

Russia's most popular competitive sports and games are ice hockey, skating, gymnastics, soccer, and chess. For leisure, many Russians prefer swimming, fishing, badminton, or other activities like reading, socializing with friends and family, and day trips or vacations. Locations along the Black Sea are popular for beach vacations, while the Altai region is notable for fishing.

Russian architecture reflects cultural influences that have varied over time. For centuries, wooden churches with onion-shaped domes influenced by Greek Byzantine designs were common. In the 1700s, Western Baroque and Rococo styles became popular. In the mid-20th century, Stalinist architecture and its variations, from elaborate arched and columned buildings to rigid and sober structures that prioritized functionality, were dominant. Today, new buildings reflect various modern styles.

Since the 19th century, Russia's rich tradition of written literature has gained global recognition, and Russian authors have won several Nobel Prizes in Literature. Some indigenous groups, like the Evenk of northern Siberia, maintain oral literary traditions, though many are at risk of extinction due to globalization and youth leaving traditional homelands. Traditional handicrafts such as paintings, ceramics, embroidery, and figurines vary by region.

## 10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures, and economics. Theories of disease



and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

While Russian cuisine varies based on local products and tastes, residents tend to rely on many of the same staple ingredients, such as fish,

cabbage, mushrooms, and potatoes. Some Russians reserve ingredients like reindeer meat and special desserts or pastries for holiday festivities. Soups are especially common. Armenian, Georgian, Jewish, Korean, Ukrainian, and other cuisines are popular in many parts of Russia.

While overall health has improved in recent decades, significant disparities exist within Russia. As of 2024, men were expected to live 10 fewer years than women, due to both structural societal factors and behavioral differences like excessive alcohol consumption among men. Likewise, men suffer higher suicide rates than women – about 44 deaths per 100,000 men per year, one of the world’s highest rates.

Chronic and non-communicable “lifestyle” diseases are responsible for most deaths throughout Russia. Health outcomes were relatively similar across Russia until recent decades. Today, Moscow and St. Petersburg, areas in the Southwest, and a few Central oil- and gas-producing regions have the highest standards of public health, while various regions in Central and East Russia have the lowest. Healthcare access in rural areas, primarily in but not limited to Central and East Russia, is often inferior to care available in cities.

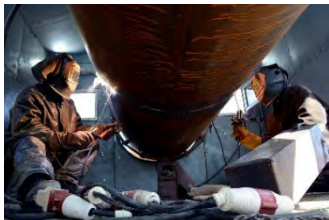
## 11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. It details how countries allocate their resources by sector, trade

with other countries, give or receive aid, and pay for goods and services within their borders.

For much of history, the people residing on the land comprising present-day Russia subsisted as farmers, primarily in the West and South, or nomadic pastoralists in Central and East Russia. The state funded its expansion eastward primarily through high taxes levied on landowners, who bound peasants to the land through serfdom, thereby keeping production costs low. By the mid-19th century, Russia's economy became increasingly industrialized, a trend that continued during much of the Soviet era. Although Russia implemented free-market policies beginning in the 1990s, the state continues to direct large swathes of the economy. In recent years, international sanctions against Russian officials and companies have negatively impacted economic growth in some of Russia's largest sectors.

While the services sector comprises the largest part of Russia's GDP, economic activity varies between 12 formal economic regions. The expansive Far Eastern region's economy, including the East and parts of Siberia, is primarily based on lumber, fishing, and manufacturing. Central Russia divides into the East and West Siberian regions. While the former's economy is based primarily on oil and mineral extraction, the latter has a large manufacturing sector, as well as sophisticated coal, oil, natural gas, and iron extraction sectors.



The nine geographically smaller economic regions in the West are extremely diverse. While the Central Black Earth, Volga, and Volga-Vyatka regions have large agricultural sectors, the Ural region is known for industrial activity. The other regions tend to have mixed economies centered on services, manufacturing, and extractive industries. Accordingly, GDP per capita varies widely. While Moscow, St. Petersburg, and some districts in northern Siberia with large extractive industries have high GDP per capita, many districts in the Southwest and southern Siberia are much poorer.

In recent years, Russia's economy has been severely impacted by international sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic. Though its economic outlook had improved by late 2021, largely due to subsiding effects of the pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 resulted in even harsher sanctions which has caused the country's economy to contract severely.

## 12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Roads form the primary infrastructure in Russia, though quality tends to deteriorate in rural areas, particularly in the East. Russia has the world's second-largest rail network,



which is largely concentrated in the West. While Russia utilizes large sea and river ports, it has plans to expand shipping routes in the Arctic Ocean, as climate change makes sea routes more navigable year-round.

Russia generates most of its electricity from fossil fuels, which are primarily extracted from Siberia and the Southwest. Hydroelectric and nuclear power account for over 50% of energy generation, and Siberia is home to several large hydroelectric

plants. Because Russia is rich in energy resources, it exports large volumes of oil and gas.

Russia is in the bottom 10 in a 2025 worldwide press freedom ranking of 171 out of 180, and the government routinely harasses journalists. Pressure on media independence has grown in recent years, and was further restricted in 2022 after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While many Russians use the Internet and social media to communicate, officials have blocked access to numerous platforms. Russia has an extensive telecommunications network, and while Internet penetration has grown in recent years, rural areas tend to be underserved.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize Russian society at large, we will focus on specific features of society in Russia.



## PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

### 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

#### Overview

Russia traces its origins to 9th-century Slavic principalities ruled by Viking invaders. After consolidating power in the 15th century, Russian imperial rulers conquered vast swathes of territory to become the world's largest country. When dual revolutions in 1917 placed communists in power, Russia became the most influential member of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, or Soviet Union) until its collapse in 1991. Since then, Russia has sought to reassert its position as a global power.

#### Early History

Late Stone Age gravesites in the country's northwestern and far eastern regions indicate human presence throughout the country some 30,000 years ago. While many groups passed through Russian territory, significant population growth did not occur until Slavic people arrived from present-day Ukraine around the 8th and 9th centuries AD.



#### Kyivan Rus

Although Eastern Slavs first settled in the region, Viking tribes known as the Varangians (or Varyagi) descended from Scandinavia and took control of the land

between the Baltic Sea and Kyiv (present-day Ukraine's capital) that would become far-western Russia. The Varangians ruled from fortified settlements and established a loose confederation of city-states called Kyivan Rus, named after the dominant Varangian tribe in the region. Some scholars believe the name Rus later evolved into **Rossiia**, which is how Russia got its name.

Kyivan Rus gained wealth through trade in furs, amber, and honey with the Vikings to the North and Byzantine merchants to the South. In subsequent centuries, it gained strength, expanding eastward and eventually reaching the Oka River near present-day Moscow.



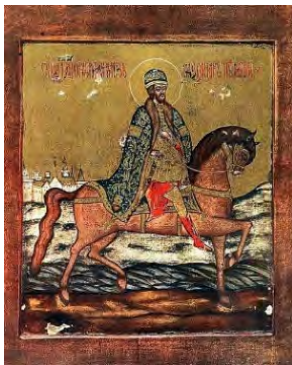
King Volodymyr I (also known as Volodymyr the Great) expanded Kyivan Rus's influence in the 10th century. An admirer of the Byzantine Empire (based in modern Turkey), he converted to Eastern Orthodox Christianity in 988 and made it the official religion of Kyivan Rus (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Volodymyr held mass baptisms in Kyiv and invited the Byzantine Church to send a Metropolitan (a high-ranking bishop, see *Religion and Spirituality*) to Kyivan Rus. Christianity and Byzantine culture influenced the confederation's development.

In the mid-11th century, the kingdom entered a long period of decline due to a reduction of revenue from its southern trade routes and infighting among the Varangian princes. During this period, centralized power in Kyiv gradually declined into fractured principalities loosely associated under the name Rus' Land. In 1147, rulers of the Rostov-Suzdal principality founded the city of Muscovy (Russia's present-day capital of Moscow).

### The Golden Horde Invasion

The Varangian Princes were weak and fractured when Genghis Khan and the Mongol Golden Horde, including armies of Turkic Tatars (see *Political and Social Relations*), reached the outskirts of Rus in 1237. In 1240, the Golden Horde sacked Kyiv, ending the Kyivan Rus era and ushering in a period of constantly shifting rulers and territories under nominal Mongol rule. Notably, the northern Novgorod and Rostov-Suzdal principalities managed to stay somewhat independent during this period by paying tribute to the Mongols.

In 1252, the Mongols promoted Alexander Nevsky, the Prince of Novgorod, to Grand Prince of Vladimir, a more powerful position



that controlled large tracts of land south of Novgorod. In this position, Nevsky became a hero for rebuffing Germanic and Swedish invasions.

After his death in 1263, Nevsky's descendants governed Muscovy (Moscow) and the adjacent territories that the Mongols had granted them control. As it grew increasingly wealthy from land taxes and trade, Moscow quickly replaced Vladimir as the region's urban center of power.

### The Rise of Moscow and Ivan the Great

In subsequent decades, the Grand Princes of Moscow grew their power. In 1325, the Metropolitan of the Orthodox Church moved to Moscow from Kyiv and established the city as the regional center of the religion (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

In 1462, Ivan III (the Great), one of Nevsky's descendants and the Grand Prince of Moscow, took control of the principality and began a policy of "gathering the Russian lands." Ivan invaded Novgorod, Moscow's main rival at the time, and imposed his rule on other weaker principalities through military conquest and land purchases. After withholding tribute from the weakened Mongols, Ivan's forces defeated them in 1480, effectively ending Mongol control of the region and gaining Russian independence. Until his death in 1505, Ivan increased Moscow's territory, which extended from present-day northern Ukraine to the Arctic.

### Ivan the Terrible and the Time of Troubles

After Ivan III and his son Vasily III expanded Moscow's borders and strengthened the power of the Grand Princes of Moscow even further, a period of infighting ensued. **Boyars** (members of the aristocratic landowning class) clamored for more power and sought to increase the control they held over the peasants working their land. Eventually, the *boyars* agreed on the need to crown a new leader, naming Vasily III's son, Ivan IV (the Terrible) the first **tsar** (king) of Russia in 1547.

Ivan IV's reign was tumultuous. His neglectful governance weakened the country and exposed it to foreign invasions. A period known as the "Time of Troubles" began soon after his death. During this period (1605-13), the *boyar* class was plagued with infighting, while several royal pretenders sought the throne. Additionally, foreign powers intervened in Russian affairs, with Poland-Lithuania briefly occupying Moscow in 1612.



### Establishment of the Romanov Dynasty

After Russian troops expelled invading Poles, Lithuanians, and Swedes from the country, the *boyars* chose Mikhail Romanov as tsar in 1613. Mikhail was the first tsar of the Romanov dynasty, which having replaced the Varangians, would rule Russia for the next 3 centuries.

Both Mikhail and his son Aleksey, who succeeded him in 1645, sought to strengthen government administration and expand their kingdom into present-day Ukraine, Siberia, and to the Pacific coast. Notably, Aleksey passed a legal reform that began to solidify the status of serfdom, whereby most peasants became enslaved laborers, who were bought and sold with the land they worked (see p. 1 of *Economics and Resources*).

### Peter the Great

Aleksey's youngest son, Peter I (the Great) became tsar in 1682. Exposed to foreign ideas at an early age, he profoundly reshaped Russian society during his reign. Peter traveled through Europe and recruited scholars to modernize Russia in accordance with Western European trends, founding institutes of higher education (see *Learning and Knowledge*) and forcing Western European customs on the Russian elite. He also introduced the Table of Ranks, a system of civil service in which the *boyar* class lost its privileges and nobility could only be obtained and kept through service to the monarch. In 1703,

Peter founded the city of St. Petersburg and moved the capital there from Moscow in 1712.

As part of his efforts to make Russia a major power, Peter joined the Kingdom of Denmark-Norway and the Commonwealth of Saxony-Poland-Lithuania to launch the Great Northern War against Sweden in 1700. When the coalition defeated Sweden in 1721, Russia gained significant territory along the Baltic Sea coast, and the Orthodox Church and Russian Senate (a body of nobles that advised the tsar) bestowed the title “Emperor of All Russia” on the tsar, though the title of tsar also continued in use.

### **Rule by Empresses and Territorial Expansion**

Elizabeth succeeded her father Peter in 1741. The popular Empress continued Peter’s reforms, promoting higher education and the arts, and oversaw the construction of the luxurious Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. Elizabeth’s armies also resisted Prussian invasion attempts and briefly occupied Berlin (present-day Germany’s capital), which cemented Russia’s position as a major player in European affairs.

After Elizabeth’s death, her nephew, Peter III, ascended the throne, but a military coup loyal to her deposed Peter. His wife ascended the throne in 1762 as Catherine II (the Great). Like Peter and Elizabeth, Catherine was also a reformist and modernizer, who sought to make Russia more like Western



Europe. She expanded the empire through diplomatic and military triumphs. Russia took land in present-day Belarus and Lithuania upon dividing Poland with Austria and Prussia. After victories against the Ottomans (based in present-day Turkey), Catherine annexed land in parts of present-day Ukraine, including the Crimean Peninsula (see *Political and Social Relations*), extending Russia’s border to the Black Sea.

### **War and Further Expansion**

Following the deaths of Catherine and her son, Paul I, her grandson Alexander I took the throne in

1801. While Alexander hoped to revitalize Russia's outdated bureaucracy, foreign entanglements prevented him from making any significant reforms. Alexander led Russia in the Napoleonic Wars, a series of conflicts between the French Empire and a coalition of British, Russian, Swedish, Prussian, and Austrian forces, that engulfed the European continent for over a decade. In the conflict, Napoleon's troops first crossed into Russia on June 24, 1812.

The Russians initially suffered losses and resorted to burning much of Moscow to prevent it from falling into French hands. However, a harsh winter decimated Napoleon's troops, and Russia eventually emerged victorious, even occupying Paris (France's capital) in 1814. During his reign, Alexander also annexed Finland and parts of present-day Moldova, Azerbaijan, Romania, and Armenia, further expanding the growing empire.

Upon Alexander's death, his brother, Nicholas I, took the throne in 1825 following a failed coup by military officers known as the Decembrists, who sought to reform the monarchy. Many Russians considered Nicholas's reign as a time of stagnation, with stalled reforms and military blunders jeopardizing Russia's reputation. Of these failures, the most notable was the Crimean War (1853-56), during which Russia was defeated by Britain, France, Sardinia (in present-day Italy), and the Ottoman Empire.

### **Reform and Repression Under Alexanders II and III**

When Alexander II ascended the throne in 1855, he implemented sweeping reforms in response to Russia's humiliating defeat in the Crimean War. Notably, Alexander II emancipated the serfs, which prompted significant migration to the cities.

Even as Alexander II modernized Russia, revolutionary groups emerged. One of these groups, People's Will, assassinated him in 1881, resulting in the ascension to the throne of his son, Alexander III, who brought the era of reforms to an end. Seeking to save Russia from





revolution, Alexander III strengthened the authority of the nobility over the peasantry, forced national minorities to adopt the Russian language, persecuted Jews, and exiled many socialists.

### Nicholas II and Imperial Decline

Alexander III's son, Nicholas II, ascended the throne in 1896. Nicholas was not adept at managing the empire and resisted pressure to make the government more representative. In 1905, Russia lost a costly war against Japan on its eastern border. Russia's humiliating military defeat was followed by a popular uprising in St. Petersburg, which prompted Nicholas to convene a **duma** (assembly, see *Political and Social Relations*) and begin a transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy.

In 1914, the Russian Empire joined World War I (WWI), in which the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire) fought the Allies (Britain, France, Russia, and the US). Poor leadership and ineffective mobilization of the home front caused Russia a series of defeats, which led to social unrest, including worker protests and military mutinies in the

capital, Petrograd (the new name for St. Petersburg).



### The Dual Revolutions

Faced with unrest and a collapse of the monarchy's authority, the leaders of the *Duma* pressured Nicholas II to abdicate in what became

known as the February Revolution of 1917. Some 300 years of Romanov rule came to an end and Russia transitioned to a liberal democracy. Meanwhile, workers and soldiers elected their own representative body, the Petrograd **Soviet** (Council), which had more support among the lower classes than did the provisional government.

As a result of a major military defeat in the summer of 1917 and a deepening economic crisis, a radical Marxist party, the **Bolsheviks** ("The Majority"), sought to overthrow the provisional government and gained a majority in the Petrograd Soviet by promising "land (for the peasants), peace (for the soldiers), and

bread (for the workers).” Under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin, the Bolsheviks seized power in the October Revolution of 1917, and Russia’s brief experiment with liberal democracy ended.

### **The Soviet Era Begins**

The Bolsheviks, who renamed themselves the Communist Party in 1918, quickly cemented their authority in Russia. They signed a peace treaty with Germany to end Russian involvement in WWI, moved the capital from Petrograd to Moscow, expropriated landowners and distributed their land to the peasantry, and executed Nicholas II and his family to prevent a restoration of the monarchy.

**Civil War:** The Bolsheviks’ seizure of power plunged the nation into a civil war. The newly founded Red Army led by Leon Trotsky, a Communist Party leader, fought largely disorganized monarchist forces. During the civil war, the Red Army was able to recapture most of the Russian Empire’s former territories. At the war’s end in 1920, the Russian, Belorussian, Ukrainian, and Transcaucasian Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) merged to form the USSR. Notably, Poland and the Baltic States would remain independent until World War II (WWII, see “The Great Patriotic War” below). Although the USSR’s 1924 Constitution granted each republic’s government extensive authority over internal affairs, the Communist Party based in Moscow exercised supreme power.



**Stalin Takes Power:** In 1924, Lenin died without appointing a successor. Joseph Stalin, a prominent Party member, had emerged victorious by 1928 in a struggle for succession. He consolidated power by sidelining and exiling rivals. In subsequent decades, Stalin staged party purges and show trials to eliminate rivals and further consolidate his dictatorship. Many of those convicted were either executed or sent to the **Gulag**, a massive system of labor camps.

Stalin, an ethnic Georgian, promoted Russian nationalism and conducted selective repression of non-Russian national groups,

particularly the Ukrainians, in a Russification campaign (see *Language and Communication* and *Political and Social Relations*). He also implemented forced industrialization and collectivization programs to modernize the economy. While industry developed rapidly in the 1930s, collectivization had devastating effects. Widespread resistance was met with fierce repression, resulting in famine. During Stalin's rule, which ended with the dictator's death in 1953, as many as 20 million Soviet citizens died from manmade famine and mass repression.

### The Great Patriotic War

Known as the Great Patriotic War in the USSR, WWII began with Nazi Germany's invasion of western Poland in 1939. Soon after, and in accordance with the terms of their secret non-aggression pact with Germany, the Soviets invaded eastern Poland, the Baltic States, and the eastern part of Romania, all of which were soon forcibly incorporated into the USSR.

Despite the non-aggression treaty, Nazi Germany invaded the USSR in June 1941. During the next 19 months, the Red Army was in retreat as German forces penetrated deep into Soviet territory. The Germans waged a war of annihilation, murdering millions of Soviet civilians, especially Jews. The turning point in the war came in January 1943, when the Red Army defeated the



Germans at Stalingrad (present-day Volgograd). By 1944, the Red Army had expelled German forces from Soviet territory. A year later, the Red Army took Berlin, ending the war in Europe. Some 27 million Soviet citizens, 70% of whom were civilians, perished in the Great Patriotic War.

### The Cold War

Hopes for postwar cooperation between the USSR and the West were dashed when Stalin imposed Soviet-style regimes in Eastern and Central European countries that the Red Army occupied. By the end of the 1940s, an "Iron Curtain" divided Europe: on one side were the generally democratic and capitalist regimes of the West, and on the other were the

authoritarian and communist regimes of the East. At this time, the US and USSR viewed themselves as engaged in a global ideological, political, economic, and military struggle. The Cold War had begun.

The USSR was an enormous geopolitical entity that consisted of present-day Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Members of the Eastern (Soviet) Bloc behind the Iron Curtain, aligned to but not formally part of the USSR, included present-day Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and East Germany. In addition, communist Yugoslavia aligned with the USSR until 1948, as did communist Albania until 1961.

The bipolar geopolitical dynamics during the Cold War forced many nations to align with either the US or USSR. Competition between the superpowers extended to the military realm as well. In 1949, the USSR became the second country to develop nuclear capabilities. An arms race ensued, as did a policy of “mutually assured destruction,” whereby the superpowers sought to assure their security by possessing sufficient nuclear weapons to destroy the other regardless of who attacked first.

In addition, the USSR sought to balance power with the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO, a political and military alliance among 30 nations that promotes its members’ security through collective defense). To do so, in 1955, the USSR and Soviet Bloc nations signed a collective defense treaty called the Warsaw Treaty Organization, also known as the Warsaw Pact.



### **The Khrushchev Era:**

After Stalin’s death, Nikita Khrushchev, a high-ranking member of the

**Politburo** (the Communist Party’s policy-making body), took over as the Soviet leader. Khrushchev led a more liberal period, working to “de-Stalinize” the Party to allow for a more tolerant cultural and economic environment.

Under Khrushchev, several significant international incidents unfolded. In 1956, Soviet troops violently crushed a popular uprising in Hungary, and in 1961, the East German government erected the Berlin Wall to prevent Soviet Bloc defectors from escaping to West Berlin, an enclave in East Germany controlled by American, British, and French forces. Most notable was the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, when the USSR provided nuclear-capable missiles to Cuban allies just south of the US, leading to a tense stalemate that nearly resulted in a nuclear war.



**The Brezhnev Era:** In 1964, the conservative Leonid Brezhnev and his allies ousted Khrushchev and tightened political and economic control. The **Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti** (Committee for State Security, or KGB – the secret police) constrained dissidents, sending those who refused to conform to psychiatric institutions or exile. As the economy stagnated and

the USSR fell behind the West technologically, Brezhnev increasingly relied on hydrocarbon exports to maintain living standards, while funding the country's global military footprint (see *Economics and Resources*).

In 1968, Brezhnev approved the invasion of Czechoslovakia, which had attempted to liberalize its communist political system. This reassertion of control over the Soviet Bloc formally began the Brezhnev Doctrine, which involved military intervention in countries where socialist rule was threatened. Under Brezhnev, the USSR aided friendly regimes in Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Vietnam, and others. A notable example was the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which resulted in a decade-long, failed attempt to prop up the communist government there.

### **Gorbachev and the End of the USSR**

In 1985, after the deaths of Brezhnev and two short-lived successors, Mikhail Gorbachev became the General Secretary of the Communist Party and leader of the USSR. Gorbachev enacted a series of reforms, including **glasnost** (openness) and

**perestroika** (restructuring), with the goal of creating a more liberal social and economic climate. Gorbachev introduced the so-called “Sinatra Doctrine,” which loosened Party control and allowed the Soviet Bloc nations to govern “their way”.

As the Soviet economic crisis deepened in 1990 (see *Economics and Resources*), Gorbachev ended the Communist Party’s monopoly on political power,



transferring some authority to each SSR. The following year, Russians elected Boris Yeltsin, a former Communist Party leader, who had become an outspoken critic of both the Party and the central government, as President of the Russian SSR.

### **The Russian Federation**

With Yeltsin’s support, Gorbachev drafted a new Union Treaty in 1991 that would have shifted power from the federal government to the constituent republics. Seeking to prevent the treaty from being signed, communist hardliners launched a coup in August 1991. The coup failed almost immediately and shattered the authority of the central government. Power shifted decisively into the hands of the leaders of each SSR, and Yeltsin used his newfound authority to ban the Communist Party.

The Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were the first to break away from the USSR, followed by other republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia. On December 8th, Yeltsin and the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus declared that the USSR would cease to exist as of December 25th. On that date, Gorbachev resigned as the last Soviet head of state, and Russia emerged as an independent country.

**The Yeltsin Years:** Yeltsin presided over a tumultuous first decade in post-Soviet Russia. He imposed “shock therapy” on the economy by adopting pro-market policies, cutting subsidies and spending, and privatizing state-owned industries (see *Economics and Resources*). Well-connected individuals, including former Communist Party officials, took advantage of

the economic liberalization by consolidating control of important companies, becoming oligarchs in the process. However, these

policies did not benefit ordinary Russians and increased inequality. By the late 1990s, Russia's economy was again on the brink of collapse.



Yeltsin's administration became mired in political, economic, and security crises. After a

violent conflict with Parliament in 1993, Yeltsin drafted a new Constitution that gave substantial powers to the President. Central authority was not recognized everywhere. In Chechnya, a Muslim enclave in southern Russia (see *Religion and Spirituality*), a violent movement for independence was underway (see *Political and Social Relations*). Amidst health issues and corruption scandals (see *Economics and Resources*), Yeltsin resigned as Russia's first democratically elected President on December 31, 1999.

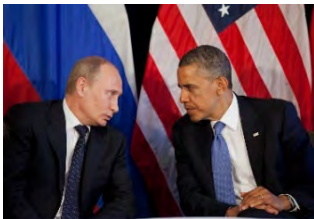
### **Putin Takes Control**

Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin, a former KGB agent, had quickly moved up the ranks of the Yeltsin administration and became Prime Minister (PM) in 1999. Putin had become increasingly popular for his organizational skills and handling of the armed uprising in Chechnya. Leveraging his popularity, Putin won Russia's 2000 presidential election with some 53% of the vote.

Putin quickly centralized power, giving the federal government more direct control over Russia's regions. His carefully crafted image as a vigorous and effective leader of a seemingly more disciplined state, combined with high oil prices that resulted in a booming economy, won him support among many Russians. Putin's government closely allied itself with the Orthodox Church and encouraged a rise in Russian nationalism, seeking to regain regional prominence. Russia's aggressive foreign policy towards former SSRs was exemplified by a brief war with Georgia in 2008 and clashes with Ukraine. Meanwhile, *siloviki* ("strongmen," mostly former KGB officers who had longstanding ties to Putin)

rose to power and limited some of the influence of the oligarchs, who had grown powerful during the Yeltsin administration.

**A Brief Interlude:** In 2008, Russia's Constitution prohibited Putin from seeking a third consecutive term. His close ally, Dmitry Medvedev, was elected President and Putin became PM. While Medvedev pursued some economic reforms and pro-Western policies during his term, many Russians believed Putin wielded political control. In 2012, Putin was reelected President after the state suppressed extensive protests against his return to power.



**Intervention in Ukraine:** In 2014, amid protests in neighboring Ukraine (see *Political and Social Relations*), Russian troops illegally annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. Putin followed the annexation by supporting violent separatist movements in Russian-majority areas of Ukraine and threatening to withhold gas supplies to Western Europe. During the conflict, Putin remained popular among many Russians, in part due to economic progress (see *Economics and Resources*) and the country's growing regional influence. However, some observers noted widespread voter fraud and electoral manipulation in the 2012 and 2018 presidential elections (see *Political and Social Relations*). Electoral inconsistencies and the political persecution of critics like Alexei Navalny led to big anti-government protests in 2017.

**Putin Meddles Abroad, Consolidates Power at Home:** During his fourth term that began in 2018, Putin sustained support to friendly regimes in Syria and Libya (see *Political and Social Relations*), often coming into conflict with forces supported by the US and European Union (EU). Putin also has pressured the EU by threatening to cut it off from Russia's natural gas supplies (see *Economics and Resources*).

In 2020, the legislature passed constitutional amendments that allow Putin to run for two more terms (see *Political and Social Relations*), likely enabling him to stay in power until 2036.



**Russia Invades Ukraine:** In February 2022, Putin launched an invasion of Ukraine, falsely claiming that Ukraine posed a threat to Russia and was mistreating its Russian-speaking minority. In response, the US, EU, Japan, and several other countries imposed wide-ranging sanctions on the Russian economy and Putin's inner circle (see *Economics and Resources*). As of February 2025, the military confrontation is ongoing, with human rights groups claiming that Russian forces have committed war crimes in Ukraine while violently suppressing dissent in Russia.

### Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. For Russians, myths played a role in maintaining pagan beliefs in the face of pressures to convert to Christianity (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

**Baba Yaga:** One of the most well-known mythical figures in Russian folklore is Baba Yaga, a forest-dwelling witch, who is known to either help or devour lost children. Baba Yaga lives



with her sisters in a hut perched on chicken legs, where they guard the waters of life and fly on a mortar and pestle creating storms in their wake.

Baba Yaga appears in many folktales, often in conflicting roles. In *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, the witch helps the young Vasilisa escape her abusive stepmother by giving her a magical skull lantern that combusts and engulfs her wicked family. In another tale, Baba Yaga is a villain, chasing her daughter and the young

Princess Katerina through the countryside, attempting to trap them in an oven. While the women flee Baba Yaga, the items they throw behind them to slow down the witch transform into the lakes, forests, and mountain ranges that are emblematic of Russia's varied terrain (see *Political and Social Relations*).

## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Official Name

Russian Federation

**Rossiyskaya**

**Federatsiya**

(Russian)

### Political Borders

North Korea: 11 mi

China: 2,597 mi

Mongolia: 2,145 mi

Kazakhstan: 4,750 mi

Azerbaijan: 210 mi

Georgia: 556 mi

Ukraine: 1,208 mi

Belarus: 815 mi

Latvia: 206 mi



Estonia: 201 mi

Finland: 813 mi

Norway: 119 mi

Poland (Kaliningrad Oblast): 162 mi

Lithuania (Kaliningrad Oblast): 130 mi

Coastline: 23,396 mi

### Capital

Moscow

### Demographics

With a population of just nearly 140.8 million, Russia is the world's ninth most populated country. Significantly, Russia's population is declining at an annual rate of -0.49%, largely due to low birth rates (see *Sex and Gender*). The population concentrates in the westernmost fifth of the country. As of 2023, some 75.3% of residents reside in urban areas.



### Flag

Adopted in 1991, Russia's flag consists of three horizontal bands of white, blue, and red. Although the flag's colors have no official meaning, there are many interpretations of their origin, such as they were first inspired by the Netherlands' flag. Notably, the Russian flag inspired other Slavic countries to adopt horizontal tricolors in

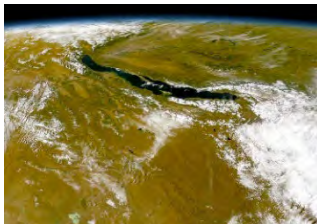
different arrangements. Consequently, white, blue, and red became the national flag colors of several Slavic countries.

## Geography

Located primarily in North Asia, Russia borders the Arctic Ocean to the north, Pacific Ocean to the east, North Korea and China to the southeast, Mongolia and Kazakhstan to the south, Azerbaijan and Georgia to the southwest, Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia, and Estonia to the west, and Finland and Norway to the northwest. Russia also has an exclave – the Kaliningrad **Oblast** (province) – which borders Poland, Lithuania, and the Baltic Sea, that it annexed from Germany following World War II (see *History and Myth*). Russia is the world's largest country, with a total land area of 6,612,077 sq mi. Spanning 11 time zones (see *Time and Space*) and 2 continents – Asia and Europe – Russia is about 1.8 times the size of the US.

Russia has diverse landscapes that vary by degree of latitude. Arctic deserts exist in the far north, followed by tundra, forests, wooded steppes, and semidesert zones along the Caspian Sea. As of 2022, about 50% of Russia is forested. The West comprises vast areas of lowland plains with low hills and plateaus, while the East is predominately mountainous with some lowlands. Permafrost covers approximately 4 million sq mi in and around the tundra.

Russia contains Lake Baikal, the world's deepest lake, which holds approximately one fifth of the world's unfrozen fresh water. Russia is also home to some 2 million other fresh and saltwater lakes and rivers, as well as Europe's largest lake (Ladoga) and longest river (Volga).



Russia has four mountain ranges: the Caucasus, Altai, Ural, and Sayan. The Caucasus lie between the Black and Caspian Seas. The Urals are a 1,300-mi belt of low mountains and plateaus, spanning from the Arctic coast in the North to the Kazakhstan border in the South, forming the traditional boundary between Europe and Asia. The Altai in southern Siberia is shared with

China, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan. The Sayan are formed by two ridges in southern Siberia and northern Mongolia. Mount Elbrus, an extinct volcano, is part of the Caucasus range. With a peak at 18,510 ft, it is the highest point in both Russia and Europe.

### Climate

Due to its vast size and varied terrain, Russia experiences a diverse climate. Much of Russia has a continental climate with long winters and brief summers. Spring and autumn also tend to be short. Winter temperatures vary from an average of 45° F along the Black Sea to -96° F in Siberia. In Moscow, the average lows and highs are 14° F in January and 75° F in July. Annual precipitation varies by region: the North tends to be the driest, with averages of about 8 in, while the South is often the wettest, receiving some 39 in. Annual snow cover ranges from 40-200 days across the western plains to 120-250 days in Siberia.

### Natural Hazards

Russia lies along the Ring of Fire, a volcanic- and earthquake-prone zone that circles the edge of the Pacific Ocean and accounts for 75% of the world's volcanoes. Many of Russia's volcanoes are still active, and several are higher than 10,000 ft.



Russia is also vulnerable to annual fires in Siberia and flooding in the South and East.

### Environmental Issues

Air pollution from Russia's industrial sector (see *Economics and Resources*), emissions

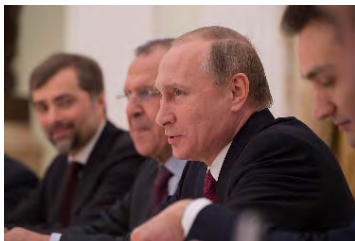
from coal-fired electric plants, and transportation in cities (see *Technology and Material*) cause significant environmental damage. Improper application of agricultural chemicals contributes to soil erosion, contamination, and deforestation, which is also a result of clearing land for agriculture and logging (see *Economics and Resources*). Radioactive contamination from nuclear waste disposal, toxic waste, and solid waste management contribute to groundwater contamination and pollution that cause lower life expectancies and standards of living. In addition, the widespread warming and thawing of

permafrost releases methane that contributes to global warming. A 2020 heatwave in Siberia led to unprecedented thawing of permafrost soils.

## Government

Russia is a semi-presidential constitutional federation that divides into 46 **oblasti** (provinces), 21 **respubliki** (republics), nine **kray** (territories), four **okrugs** (autonomous districts), one autonomous *oblast*, and two federal cities – Moscow and St. Petersburg. The US government does not recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea, including the city of Sevastopol, nor Russia's designations of these areas as the Republic of Crimea and Federal City of Sevastopol (see "Foreign Relations" below).

Adopted in 1993 and amended most recently in 2020, the Constitution outlines the fundamental rights of Russian citizens and guarantees local self-governance. However, the central government has implemented extraconstitutional measures to reduce the power of regional governments and increase its own influence. Notably, in 2000, President Vladimir Putin created federal districts covering all of Russian territory and governed by directly appointed representatives. As of 2023, Russia has eight federal districts, Crimea included.



## Executive Branch

The President is head-of-state and Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. As head-of-state, the President appoints a Prime Minister (PM), deputies, and cabinet. Presidential powers include the ability to declare martial law or a state of emergency and issue decrees that have the force of law when the legislature fails to pass the President's initiatives. The President is elected by popular vote for a 6-year term. If no candidate receives a majority in the initial round of voting, a run-off is held.

After Putin served as President from 2000-08, his PM, Dmitry Medvedev, replaced him as President to avoid breaking the constitutional prohibition of a President serving more than two

consecutive terms. In that same year, a constitutional amendment extended the President's term from 4 to 6 years, though it did not become effective until 2012. In 2020, the government approved an extensive list of amendments affecting about 60% of Russia's principal laws, which included a clause allowing Putin to run for two additional terms (see *History and Myth*).

President Putin took office again in 2012 and was reelected for a third term in 2024. In early 2020, he appointed Mikhail Mishustin as PM, also known as Premier, or the Chairman of the Government. As head-of-government and Chief Executive of the Russian Cabinet, the PM's responsibilities include the implementation of domestic and foreign policy, coordination of

economic and fiscal policy, and control of social, labor, migration, and family policies set by the President.



The Moscow Kremlin is the official residence of the President, though Putin does not reside there. "The

Kremlin" is often used interchangeably with the Russian Presidency, just as "the White House" is used to describe the US executive administration.

### Legislative Branch

The two-chamber **Federalnoye Sobraniye** (Federal Assembly) consists of a 169-seat **Soviet Federatsii** (Federation Council) and a 450-seat **Gosudarstvennaya Duma** (State Assembly). The Federation Council consists of two members from each of the 85 federal administrative units, including Crimea and Sevastopol, to serve 4-year terms. *Duma* members serve 5-year terms, with half the members elected by majority vote and the other half elected by proportional representation. The *Duma* and Federation Council both have representatives from Crimea and Sevastopol.

The *Duma* and Federation Council must pass legislation, and the legislature can override a Presidential veto by two-thirds majority vote. The *Duma* must confirm a Presidential nomination

for PM. However, the President can dissolve the *Duma* and call for a new election if it rejects the nomination. The legislature may remove the President from office with the approval of the Russian Constitutional Court for serious criminal offences.

### Judicial Branch

The judiciary includes the Supreme Court of Russia, Constitutional Court, a system of lower courts in the republics, provinces, federal cities, and autonomous *oblast*, and district courts. The Supreme Court is the highest and final court of appeal and supervises all other judicial bodies. Consisting of 170 members, the Supreme Court is organized into a Judicial Panel for Civil Affairs, Judicial Panel for Criminal Affairs, and a Military Panel. The Constitutional Court consists of 11 judges and is responsible for judicial review, particularly the constitutionality of laws. All members of Russia's highest courts are appointed for life, nominated by the President, and appointed by the Federation Council.



### Political Climate

While Russia is formally a multi-party democracy, its political landscape is characterized by an authoritarian executive. Politics today are dominated by United Russia, a political party formed in 2001 that supports President Putin. United Russia claims to be a centrist party with a platform based on free-market economics and wealth redistribution. However, Putin dominates politics and has gained power since coming to office in 2000, coopting the legislature and judiciary, forcing through approval to serve additional terms, and prohibiting international organizations from observing elections. Since the 2021 legislative election, United Russia has held a majority in the *Duma*, having won 326 seats, with the remaining 124 seats split between the opposition parties, which include the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, A Just Russia For Truth, Liberal Democratic Party, New People, and a few others.

Following a 2021 parliamentary election, a protest occurred in Moscow in response to what observers believe was a rigged

vote in favor of United Russia. Although many at the rally supported the Communist Party, members of other parties also joined to condemn electoral fraud. In addition, many Russians had expressed support for Alexei Navalny, a now-deceased

Kremlin critic, whose poisoning by Russian operatives in 2020 sparked widespread protests and international investigation.



## Defense

The Armed Forces of Russia is a unified military force which

consists of ground troops, a Navy, aerospace forces, airborne troops, and strategic missile troops. It has a joint strength of 1,134,000 active-duty troops, 1,500,000 reserve personnel, and 559,000 paramilitary troops. Military operations focus on maintaining domestic stability and territorial integrity, while both preserving and increasing Russia's influence abroad. All Russian males aged 17 must register for the draft and serve a compulsory 1-year period. Conscripts may opt for 24-month contract service.

**Army:** As the largest branch of the Russian military, the Army consists of some 550,000 active-duty troops organized into 7 divisions that consist of 14 headquarters and 5 corps, 9 special forces brigades and regiments, 61 maneuver brigades and divisions (including reconnaissance, armored, and mechanized), 37 combat support brigades and regiments, and 11 logistics brigades. The Army also includes 15 Air Defense and 13 Surface-to-Surface Missile brigades.

**Navy:** Comprising some 119,000 active-duty troops, Russia's Navy includes four major fleet organizations (Northern, Pacific, Baltic, and Black Sea) and the Caspian Sea Flotilla. Branches include the Naval Infantry (Marines), consisting of 12,000 active-duty troops, Naval Aviation (25,000), and the Coastal Missile and Artillery Forces (2,000).

**Aerospace Forces:** In 2015, Russia merged its Air and Space Forces, establishing the Aerospace Force that consists of some



170,000 active-duty troops, organized into 7 bomber regiments and squadrons, 7 fighter regiments, 6 fighter/ground attack regiments, 8 ground attack regiments, 8 intelligence, surveillance, and 4 reconnaissance (ISR) regiments and squadrons, an airborne early warning and control squadron, a tanker regiment, 14 transport regiments and squadrons, 19 attack/transport helicopter squadrons, 9 air defense division headquarters, and 30 air defense regiments.

**Airborne Forces:** Comprising some 35,000 active-duty personnel, the Russian Airborne Forces includes special and air maneuver forces.

**Strategic Rocket Forces:** Numbering about 50,000 active-duty troops, the Russian Strategic Rocket Forces includes three Rocket Armies: Aerospace Defense, Space, and Long-Range Aviation Commands, operating silo and mobile launchers with a total of 324 nuclear surface-to-surface missile launchers. Organized into 12 divisions, each regiment is typically equipped with 10 silos or 9 mobile launchers and one control center.



### **Special Operations Forces:**

Consisting of some 1,000 active-duty personnel, the Special Operations Forces consist of two special forces units.

**Railway Forces:** Comprising 29,000 active-duty personnel, Russia's Railway Forces include four regional commands with 10 combat service support brigades.

**Command and Support:** The Russian Command and Support Forces consist of 180,000 active-duty troops.

**Paramilitary:** Numbering about 559,000 active-duty troops, the Paramilitary includes the Border and Federal Guard Services, Federal Security Service Special Purpose Center, and National Guard.

# Russian Air Force Rank Insignia



Army  
General



Colonel  
General



Lieutenant  
General



Major  
General



Colonel



Lieutenant  
Colonel



Major



Captain



Senior  
Lieutenant



Lieutenant



Junior  
Lieutenant



Cadet



Chief  
Warrant  
Officer



Warrant  
Officer



Sergeant  
First  
Class



Senior  
Staff  
Sergeant



Sergeant



Junior  
Sergeant



Private  
First  
Class



Private

## Foreign Relations

Russia is one of five permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council and a member of the Council of Europe. Its participation in the G8 (now G7), a group of the world's richest liberal democracies, was suspended in March 2014 in response to its annexation of Crimea. It is also a member of other international organizations, notably the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and Shanghai Cooperation Organization.



In the Cold War, Soviet Bloc nations aligned with the central government in Moscow to form the Warsaw Pact (see of *History and Myth*) and counterbalance the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO, a

political and military alliance among 32 nations that promotes its members' security through collective defense). Today, Russia still competes with NATO, which suspended cooperation with Russia following its military intervention in Ukraine. According to NATO members, any future cooperation is contingent on whether Russia complies with international law.

**Regional Relations:** Since the former Soviet republics declared independence in the early 1990s (see *History and Myth*), Russia has sought to sway the outcomes of regional events to retain influence by military, political, and economic intervention.

Some countries are particularly exposed to Russian influence due to their close proximity and reliance on Russia's energy and large market (see *Economics and Resources*). Russia actively engages with ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in many countries in the region, often through media (see *Technology and Material*). It asserts influence in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus through political intervention, investment, and propaganda, notably supporting separatists in Moldova and Georgia's territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as backing Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko.

In Central Asia, Russia maintains close ties with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. It also has military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. After Russia mediated a ceasefire to end the First Nagorno-Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1994, it remained involved in the ongoing conflict. In late 2020, following 6 weeks of fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh (a region claimed by Azerbaijan but administered by ethnic Armenians), Russia brokered a peace deal, while keeping working relations with both nations.



In other countries, Russia uses a shared Orthodox Christian religious identity (see *Religion and Spirituality*) to influence public opinion, notably in EU and NATO members Greece and Romania. The neighboring former Soviet countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have distanced themselves from Russian influence by aligning with the West, joining both NATO and the EU.

**Relations with Ukraine:** Ukraine and Russia share historically tense relations that progressively deteriorated as Ukraine cultivated ties with the West over the last several decades. The annexation of Crimea violated international agreements such as the UN Charter and 1975 Helsinki Final Act. Russia's support of pro-Russian separatists in the eastern provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk (or the Donbas, short for Donetsk Basin) resulted in a conflict that has been ongoing since 2014. Armed rebels seized government buildings with military support from Russia, which granted citizenship to some 600,000 people in the Donbas.

In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine (see *History and Myth*), claiming the country posed a threat to Russia and mistreated Russian-speakers in the Donbas. During its invasion, Russia committed war crimes and crushed entire communities, sparking a migration crisis as some 6.8 million Ukrainians had fled and 3.7 million were displaced as of December 2024. Nearly three years post-invasion, over 12,500 Ukrainian civilians have been killed.

**Relations with the US:** The US and Russia established diplomatic relations on December 31, 1991. Despite years of conflict during the Cold War, the US and Russia historically have shared common interests like space exploration, preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, and diminishing the threat of Islamist extremist militant groups such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In 2021, Russia and the US extended the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), an agreement to reduce

nuclear arms. However, Russia has since claimed suspension of the treaty.



Still, tensions have grown in recent years. The US imposed severe sanctions on Russia after its 2014 annexation of Crimea and 2022

invasion of Ukraine. The US also condemns Russia's support of the Bashar al-Assad regime in the Syrian Civil War (2011-ongoing). Other contentious issues include Russian interference in recent US elections, malicious cyber activities, and its use of banned weapons-grade chemical substances against Russian nationals opposed to President Putin, like Alexei Navalny (see *History and Myth*). Some Russians claim the deterioration of US-Russian relations is due to US and European support for Ukraine.

**Relations with China:** China and Russia ended a long-running border dispute in 2004. In mid-2021, the countries renewed their Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation. A few months later, Russian and Chinese warships held their first joint naval exercise, when 10 of their warships encircled Japan, which still has land disputes with Russia. At the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, China and Russia reaffirmed their close relations, and China has not condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

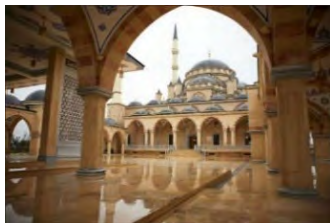
**Relations with the EU:** Tensions between the EU and Russia have risen due to Russia's military interventions in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Despite significant economic cooperation and EU reliance on Russian energy, the EU imposed severe sanctions on the Russian economy and government (see

*Economic and Resources*), including businesspeople, officials, and their families in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Likewise, six EU members increased their defense budgets in March 2022 in response to the invasion.

**Relations with Turkey:** Despite being on opposing sides of wars in Syria and Libya and the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia and Turkey cooperate in many areas. Russia is building Turkey's first nuclear power station and opened the Turkstream gas pipeline in 2020, which transports natural gas to Turkey and southeastern Europe via the Black Sea. Recently weakened US-Turkish relations resulted in improved Russian-Turkish trade and military ties. The US imposed sanctions on Turkey following its purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense system, though Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan stated he intends to buy more defense equipment from Russia, regardless of the threat of future US sanctions.

### **Security Issues**

Civil unrest and terrorist attacks have occurred periodically in the North Caucasus region



consisting of Chechnya, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Stavropol, Karachayevo-Cherkessiya, and Kabardino-Balkariya. Since the early 1990s, conflicts have emerged as separatist groups have demanded more autonomy or independence from Russia, predominately in Chechnya, and to a lesser extent, Dagestan (see *History and Myth*).

After Chechnya declared its independence from Russia in 1991, Chechen separatists fought the Russian military during the First Chechen War (1994-96). In 1999, groups based in Chechnya invaded neighboring Dagestan, effectively leading to the Second Chechen War that lasted until 2000. A low-level insurgency and terrorist attacks recurred, including two female suicide bombers from Dagestan attacking the Moscow metro in 2012, killing some 40 people. More recently, Chechen gangs in Chechnya have kidnapped foreign nationals for ransom, in addition to reports of arrest, torture, and the extrajudicial killing of homosexuals (see

*Sex and Gender*). Risk of civil unrest and terrorist attacks persist in other North Caucasus regions, notably North Ossetia, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria.

## Ethnic Groups

While Russia is home to a diverse society with over 120 ethnic groups, ethnic Russians comprise nearly 78% of the population. In 2021, non-Russian residents identified as Tatar (3.2%), Chechen (1.14%), Bashkir (1.07%), Chuvash (0.73%), Avar (0.69%), Armenian (0.64%), and Ukrainian (0.6%).

As the largest minority in Russia, Tatars primarily concentrate in the Republic of Tatarstan located some 550 mi east of Moscow. Ukrainians are Russia's second-largest minority, who live across the country but concentrate in Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as in the regions of Kuban in the South, Zhotly Klyn in the West, and Zeleny Klyn and Siry Klyn in Siberia. Bashkirs, the third-largest minority group, mostly live in Bashkortostan, as well as the Chelyabinsk and Orenburg *oblasti*. Other minorities include Jews, Roma, Russian or Volga Germans, Meskhetians, Cossacks, and various indigenous communities.



**Migrants:** In 2013, more migrants moved to Russia than any other country except the US. From 2003-10, Russia naturalized some 600,000 stateless people. Today, 60,185 stateless Roma,

Meskhetian Turks, and citizens from former Soviet republics live in Russia. As of June 2023, Russia is home to about 1.2 million Ukrainian refugees.

## Social Relations

Russians divide into many socioeconomic classes. The rise of the oligarchs, who acquired control of many Russian industries after the USSR's collapse (see *History and Myth*), led to the development of a new ultra-rich elite class in the 1990s. Meanwhile, a new wealthy class that supported the oligarchs in exchange for protection of property and status also began to develop, mostly in major cities.

Many middle-class small business owners have lost their financial security due to corruption, successive financial crises, and Russia's recent economic woes (see *Economics and Resources*). Most Russian people are intellectuals, technicians, or agricultural and blue-collar workers, who concentrate in both regional cities and rural areas. Marked social divisions also separate the generations. Russians raised since the collapse of the USSR grew up without Soviet ideology and experience a sense of freedom that did not exist for much of the Soviet era.

Of its 83 federal administrative units, Russia has 21 republics originally established to represent non-ethnic Russians. The ethnic minorities who live in these republics may pass laws to protect their language and culture, which they may teach in local schools (see *Learning and Knowledge*). Nevertheless, the recent growth of Russian nationalism and ethnic Russian migration to the republics have led to some restrictions of minorities' freedoms of language, land, security, and expression.

Following 2008 legislation requiring high school exams be conducted in Russian (see *Learning and Knowledge*), many schools in Tatarstan changed instruction from Tatar to Russian. Protests and demonstrations have occurred since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, when Russian officials imposed repressive policies on Crimean Tatars. Demonstrators frequently demand sovereignty in Tatarstan and Crimea, improved human rights, and increased educational and language freedoms.

Indigenous communities, such as Altai and Yakut, mainly live in Siberia and the North. Many indigenous residents suffer from poverty and societal exclusion. Although Russian law grants indigenous communities special land and preservation rights, companies seeking to drill oil in indigenous territories frequently violate these rights. In 2013, the government abolished the legal requirement for oil and gas companies to perform official consultations with indigenous populations prior to beginning drilling projects on their land.





### 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

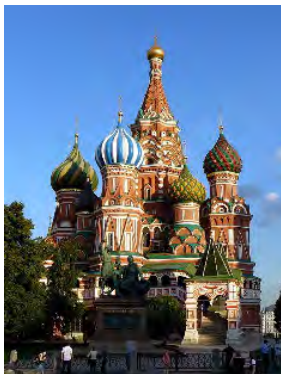
#### Overview

In 2023, an independent Russian research organization's survey found that 72% of Russians identify as Orthodox Christian, 18% atheist, and 7% Muslim. Less than 1% of residents identify as Buddhists, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Baha'is, and several other religious groups.

Russian law recognizes the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism as the four "traditional" Russian religions and the ROC as holding a special place in Russian history and culture. Other religious organizations face legal restrictions and governmental persecution.

While the Russian Constitution provides for religious freedoms, the government has used laws aimed at "preventing extremism" to persecute religious minorities by labelling them "extremist groups." These laws typically target Muslim groups, especially in predominantly Muslim areas in the North Caucasus region (see *Political and Social Relations*). However, in recent years, the government has applied the laws to other groups, notably Christian organizations such as Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Russian government tightly controls religious organizations, requiring groups to register with the government, which grants operating permission. Religious activities cannot be conducted outside of government-approved religious spaces without prior authorization. The government bans missionaries from proselytization and frequently fines some Protestant organizations for these activities. It also restricts foreign religious organizations from operating in Russia.



## Early Spiritual Landscape

Eastern Slavic tribes and clans, who shared many similar spiritual beliefs, first settled the territory comprising present-day Russia (see *History and Myth*). Although not much is known about their beliefs prior to the 6th century due to a lack of written records, external sources and later accounts describe a rich mythology of spirits and deities, who governed the natural world and various aspects of life.

While most Slavic groups believed in a supreme creator deity, they believed this creator was an absent god, who left earthly affairs in the control of numerous lesser deities and spirits. Such spirits include **Leshy** (a forest spirit), who governed the hunt and guarded flocks, **Vodyanoy** (a malevolent water spirit), and **Polevoy** (a field spirit), who governed agriculture. Early Slavs also believed in spirits that manifested in dwellings and other buildings, such as the **domovoy** (house spirit), who guarded the home. Many of these beliefs persisted well past the arrival of Christianity and into the modern era, particularly in rural areas.

A 12th-century chronical written about life in the confederation of city-states known as Kyivan Rus (see *History and Myth*) named seven major deities worshipped by the region's inhabitants: **Perun** (god of thunder and order), **Veles** (god of the underworld), **Khors** and **Dazhbog** (sun gods), **Stribog** (god of



wind and wealth), **Mokosh** (goddess of fertility), and **Simargl** (a winged lion or dog).

Early Slavic worship, while varied by region, had several common tenets.

Slavs built and

decorated temples with idols representing gods and spirits. The temples were the site of pagan festivals celebrating the gods and spirits, as well as animal and human sacrifices aimed at securing good fortune. Banquets celebrating religious occasions were also a major part of early Slavic life, and this tradition carries on in modern Russian culture (see *Sustenance and Health*).

## The Arrival and Spread of Christianity

Despite the work of Byzantine missionaries in the 9th century, Christianity was initially slow to take hold among the Kyivan Rus people (see *History and Myth*). While the missionaries succeeded in establishing some small Christian communities, traditional Slavic pagan beliefs remained firmly entrenched.

In 988, Kyivan Rus leader Volodymyr the Great converted to Orthodox Christianity (see *History and Myth*). Although sources provide differing accounts of his conversion, it was likely political, aimed at uniting the Kyivan Rus people under a single faith. As a result, he led the spread of Christianity throughout Kyivan Rus territory, ordering idols to be publicly smashed and announcing that all citizens must be baptized or face his wrath. Although Byzantine clergy from Constantinople (present-day Istanbul, Turkey) initially spread the new religion in Kyivan Rus, native clergy, who originated the early development of the ROC, eventually replaced them.

## Medieval Russian Religion

While the 13th-century arrival of Mongol invaders spelled the end of Kyivan Rus (see *History and Myth*), the event positively affected the ROC. The Mongol rulers were largely tolerant of religious practices and granted the ROC special privileges, such as exempting it from paying tribute. As a result, the ROC gained significant land, wealth, and its influence grew because it was the only Rus institution that retained significant prominence under Mongol rule. Thus, the ROC became an important aspect of the fledgling national identity that was forming in much of the territory that would eventually become Russia.



The ROC's cultural importance persisted after the end of Mongol rule and during the rise of Moscow (see *History and Myth*). When Byzantium fell to the Muslim Ottoman Empire in 1453, reducing the authority of the Patriarch of Constantinople, Moscow became the center of the Orthodox world. Successive

Muscovite princes used this new influence to gain legitimacy, declaring Moscow the “Third Rome” and eventually proclaiming themselves **tsar** (king). The Patriarch of Constantinople formally recognized the tsar as the chief monarch of the Orthodox faith. He also elevated Moscow’s Metropolitan, or senior Orthodox leader, to the rank of Patriarch in 1589, giving him greater autonomy and authority over all Russian religious matters.

However, the rising power of the tsar quickly began to supplant the ROC’s influence. Secular leaders sought to acquire its vast lands and wealth and bring the ROC under the firm control of the state. While Moscow acquired land and eventually became the Russian Empire (see *History and Myth*), the tsars wanted to limit the ROC’s authority and consolidate their power. As the expansion of Russian territory introduced more Muslims to the growing empire, Russian rulers treated them harshly through widespread discrimination and the destruction of mosques.

### Religion in Imperial Russia

The ROC changed considerably under the Russian Empire. In 1665, the Patriarch of Moscow initiated substantial reforms to the ROC, causing a schism between the Church and adherents known as “Old Believers,” who preferred traditional Orthodox

practices. These reforms included revising texts and doctrine, as well as changing some rituals. Conflict soon broke out and many Old Believers were driven towards the edges of the empire.



Reforms continued under Peter the Great (see *History and Myth*), who demoted the Patriarch of Moscow to a Metropolitan and replaced him with the Holy Governing Synod, a council of religious leaders.

Notably, the position of Patriarch was not restored until the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 (see *History and Myth*). As a result, the Church took on a far less independent role in Russian society during the 18th and 19th centuries, as the tsar

took direct control of the Church. During this time, the clergy developed into a closed caste with a significantly reduced status.

Jews also faced tremendous hardship in the Russia Empire, as the government only permitted Jews to live in certain territories. In addition, in many regions, Jews were the victims of numerous pogroms – riots that targeted and often killed Jews, destroyed their property, and drove them from their communities.

### Religion during the Soviet Era

When the Bolsheviks overthrew the Russian Empire in 1917 and established the USSR (see *History and Myth*), it had an immense impact on religion in Russia. By the early 1920s, the Soviets had imposed their communist worldview, which included atheism – the disbelief in deities and rejection of religion. As a result, the government discouraged churchgoing and religious worship. It persecuted or outlawed religious organizations and destroyed or converted many places of worship for other uses.

Religious repression was particularly brutal in the 1930s, when the Soviets silenced, deported, and executed many Orthodox clergy as part of an effort to rid Russia of



dissidents. Jews faced substantial persecution during the early Soviet era, and Nazi Germany's invasion of the USSR in 1941 caused the deaths of over 2 million Jews living in Soviet territory (see *History and Myth*). Despite both religious persecution and genocide, religious practices persisted. Although Soviet officials repressed religion, they eventually recognized that demolishing it was futile and, in some ways, harmful to the cohesion of the state. In 1943, Stalin allowed many churches to reopen to secure peasant support for the war effort and permitted the election of a Patriarch. Under Gorbachev, the ROC gained new prominence as belief in communist ideology waned.

### Religion Today

After the collapse of the USSR and establishment of the Russian Federation (see *History and Myth*), public affiliation with religion

experienced a resurgence. One survey showed that the number of Russians identifying as Orthodox Christians doubled between 1991-2008, while the number of Russians who did not identify with any religion dropped from 61% to 18% in the same period. Other religions also experienced growth, but not at the same rate as Orthodox Christianity. Jews and Muslims still face prejudice but tend to experience greater acceptance today than under imperial Russian or Soviet rule.



Nevertheless, the government restricts many religious freedoms and has strict and frequently enforced blasphemy laws. Anyone charged with “offending the feelings of religious believers” or public actions “demonstrating clear disrespect for society and committed with the intent insult to the feelings of religious

believers” can face substantial fines or jail time.

**Orthodox Christianity:** Nearly 40% of all Orthodox Christians live in Russia and reside throughout the country, although only about 12% of Russians attend church regularly and 17% pray daily. This data, along with high rates of divorce and abortion (practices opposed by the ROC – see *Family and Kinship* and *Sex and Gender*), suggest that, while many Russians identify as Orthodox Christian, they do not practice ROC tenets and teachings as widely as the recent rise in affiliation might otherwise indicate.

Assuming office in 2009, Patriarch Kirill is the current Patriarch of Moscow and head of the ROC. Under his leadership, the ROC has reassumed a prominent role in society, due in large part to Russia’s political climate. President Vladimir Putin has promoted a platform of Russian nationalism (see *History and Myth*) and embraced the ROC as a symbol of Russian identity. ROC leaders often make appearances with Putin, who has recently embraced Orthodox values through policy directives, such as tightening blasphemy laws and limiting access to legal abortions.

The ROC has been drawn into controversy because of its recent political role. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 (see *History and Myth*), the Patriarch of Constantinople gave the Ukrainian Orthodox Church permission to formally separate from the Patriarch of Moscow's authority in 2019. As a result, the ROC severed ties with the Patriarch of



Constantinople, ending a relationship that began during the 10th-century establishment of Christianity in Russia.

**Islam:** It is the second most common religion in Russia, though estimates of the number of adherents vary greatly. While

Russia's highest-ranking Islamic jurist stated Russia was home to 25 million Muslims in 2018, or some 18% of the population, a poll found that just 7% of residents identified as Muslim in 2023.

Most Russian Muslims adhere to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, a generally tolerant school of thought that emphasizes community consensus and the primacy of the Qur'an over later Islamic teachings. Muslim communities tend to concentrate in areas where Islamic states existed prior to their absorption into Russia. These include Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and the republics of the North Caucasus. Many major cities also have large Muslim communities. High birthrates among Muslims and migration from Central Asian nations means that the number of Muslims in Russia will likely continue to grow in future decades.

**Other Religions:** Many other religious minorities also live in Russia. Estimates of the Jewish population range from 127,900 to 172,500. Despite Buddhism's status as a traditional Russian religion, fewer than 200 Buddhist organizations are registered with the government. Atheism decreased considerably after the collapse of the USSR, where it was the official policy of the state. However, in recent years it has experienced a resurgence, particularly among younger Russians. Most Russian atheists do not belong to a formal organization, though Russia has a state-registered atheist society.

## 4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

### Overview

The family is the foundation of Russian society, with members relying on each other for emotional, economic, and social support. Parents typically maintain close relationships with their children into adulthood. Marrying and starting a family remain priorities for most young adults.

### Residence

Around 80% of residents lived in rural areas until rapid industrialization in the 1930s accelerated the process of migration to cities. As of 2023, some 75% of residents live in urban areas. The government owned most housing during the Soviet era (see *History and Myth*), prohibiting most private property in urban areas and strictly limiting the size of rural homes. When the housing sector was privatized in the 1990s, the government offered renters free ownership of their units. As of 2023, about 92% of families own their home.

**Urban:** Most urban residents live in small residential apartment blocks typically having 5-10 floors, many modern apartments are in high-rise buildings. Although some newer buildings have gyms, private security, and covered garages, most Russians cannot afford these amenities. Most apartments have two-four rooms with centralized heating. Notably, some 64% of Russian families live in apartments 650 sq ft or smaller. Many urban Russians also own **dachas** (country houses).

**Rural:** Most rural Russians live in self-built homes made of wood or brick. Although electricity, running water, and indoor plumbing are available in most places, some rural homes lack these utilities. During the 17th-century rule of Peter the Great (see *History and Myth*), the





government gave some Russians land for farming that included a small wooden *dacha* for summer use. Although property ownership was prohibited in the former USSR, *dachas* remained an important part of Russian life, regardless of social class. While most *dachas* were simple structures without electricity or

running water, today, many include modern amenities.



### Family Structure

During the Soviet era, both men and women worked to provide for their

families. Today, many Russians view nonworking wives as status symbols, or a demonstration that the husband's income is sufficient to care for his family. Most Russians live as nuclear families (two parents and their children), in which the father is traditionally the primary breadwinner and head-of-household, while the mother is responsible for domestic tasks and childcare. Many women still work outside the home (see *Sex and Gender*). As of 2021, single mothers manage about one-third of all Russian families.

### Children

Most Russian families have only one or two children (see *Sex and Gender*). While parents typically exercise of control over their children, they tend to maintain deep and enduring affection for each other. Children usually continue to live at home after graduating from university, and some parents support their children well into adulthood. **Babushkas** (grandmothers) often play a large role in raising children and sometimes live with the nuclear family.

Domestic violence is common and disproportionately affects children and women (see *Sex and Gender*). As of 2024, some 58,000 children live in orphanages. Reports show that one in three youth who leave residential institutions becomes homeless, one in five ends up with a criminal record, and one in ten commits suicide. Orphans are more inclined to experience mental illness and physical and intellectual underdevelopment, and are more vulnerable to being trafficked. Notably, nearly 30%

of Russian children with disabilities live away from their families in closed institutions, often experiencing extreme neglect and abuse.

**Birth:** Following a birth, many Russian parents baptize their babies. Some 86% of Russian Orthodox Christians (see *Religion and Spirituality*) are baptized, typically at the request of parents or relatives. The ritual includes a priest performing a blessing, anointing the child with oil, and ceremonially dunking the baby into a baptismal basin. Godparents usually feature prominently in both the ceremony and the celebratory meal, consumed with relatives and friends.



Some Russian women follow superstitions, such as keeping the delivery date a secret, to ward off evil spirits. Because some Russian mothers believe compliments bring bad luck, they reject praises for their babies.

**Circumcision:** Although most Russian boys do not traditionally undergo circumcision, as it is not a custom within the Orthodox Christian majority, some 12% of males are circumcised.

### **Dating and Courtship**

Most Russians marry in their early 20s due to family pressure and social stigma around marrying later in life. Consequently, dating is not typically casual. Couples generally meet through social circles or in public places like bars and clubs, though in recent years dating websites have become increasingly popular. First dates usually consist of a meal or drinks at a bar before venturing into activities such as walking through parks or going to the movies, nightclubs, or other leisure activities (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

**Weddings:** Marriages are legally recognized only once a couple registers with the government. Most Russian weddings begin with an Orthodox Christian ceremony, during which a priest gives lit candles to the couple to hold during prayers and scripture readings. Some rituals include acts like holding gold

crowns over the couple's heads, drinking wine, and following the priest around the lectern three times. In a recent revival of an old tradition, friends and relatives in some weddings hold a mock kidnapping of the bride, in which the groom pays a ransom – typically alcohol, chocolates, or money – to the supposed kidnappers. In other traditions, the bride cleans the reception hall



as guests leave money on the floor, guests make toasts with the word **gorko** (bitter) while the couple kisses, and the couple ends the wedding with a local road trip.

### Divorce

Russia has one of the world's highest divorce rates at 4.7 per 1,000 people, compared to about 2.5 in the

US. The divorce rate also has risen in Muslim communities (see *Religion and Spirituality*), which traditionally have comparatively low divorce rates. To divorce, a couple must prove the marriage is broken, and they can no longer live together. Notably, a Russian man cannot apply for divorce if his wife is pregnant.

### Death

Following a death, Russian Orthodox Christians typically hold a reception at the family home for a **pominki** (memorial meal) that often features a **kolyva** (wheat pie) and **blinis** (small, crepe-like pancakes). They then usually hold a church funeral service, after which guests follow the coffin to a cemetery, where a priest performs another short service at the gravesite. The third, ninth, and 40th days after death, and half and full anniversaries, are significant commemorative days. During these times, mourners often pray, give alms to the poor, and sometimes eat **kolyva**.

Some Russians hold death-related superstitions, traditions, and spiritual beliefs (see *Religion and Spirituality*). For example, relatives fastened a belt around the dead as a symbol of order and protection in both traditional and Orthodox culture, a custom sometimes still practiced today. Some Russians cover their mirrors and stop the clocks at home after a death in the family.

## 5. SEX AND GENDER

### Overview

Russian society is traditionally patriarchal, meaning men hold most power and authority. Domestic abuse and sexual violence affect many families, and in particular, women and children.

### Gender Roles and Work

**Domestic Work:** Russian women traditionally hold responsibility for childcare and domestic chores. During the Soviet era (see *History and Myth*), social policies like extensive paid maternity leave and childcare supported working mothers. Since the USSR's collapse in 1991 (see *History and Myth*), these programs have become less extensive. However, the expectation that women balance domestic and professional responsibilities remains. As a result, women today conduct household chores and work outside the home. Because some rural areas lack utilities such as running water and electricity (see *Family and Kinship*), domestic chores can be particularly burdensome.



**Labor Force:** In 2024, some 55% of Russian women worked outside the home, higher than in neighboring Ukraine (48%) and Poland (52%) but slightly lower to the US (57%). Women typically work in healthcare, education, and business. Notably, women hold some 42% of senior positions, though many companies reserve their most senior positions and higher pay for men. As a result, many women start their own businesses, owning about 40% of businesses registered in Russia.

### Gender and the Law

In the Soviet era, women and men held equal rights in work, salary, marriage, divorce, and education. Today, despite similar legal stipulations for equal treatment, social and financial inequality between the sexes is more common. Although the Constitution protects the right to equal pay, many women make less than men for similar work. Nevertheless, women receive

140 days of maternity leave worth 100% of their wages. Though rarely enforced, Russian law forbids sexual harassment.

Laws prohibit women from participating in certain jobs, such as boat captains or truck drivers, as these tasks are considered “too risky.” In 2021, the government lifted restrictions on about 350 jobs that it previously forbade women from holding.



### Gender and Politics

Russia has a long history of powerful women leaders. In the 18th century, Empresses Elizabeth and Catherine the Great governed Russia and significantly expanded its territory (see *History and Myth*). Women received the right to vote in 1917. At this time, the government created **zhenotdely** (government departments for women's affairs), which defended women's rights and had a lasting effect on some legislation, notably the implementation of maternity leave.

In the Soviet era, women comprised around 50% of State Assembly members (see *Political and Social Relations*). Today, women play a less prominent role in politics. As of April 2025, women accounted for just 17% of the federal legislature, lower than neighboring Ukraine (21%) and the US (28%). While many civil servants are women, they become significantly less represented at higher levels of government.

### Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

In 2017, Russia decriminalized domestic violence, and in a 2021 survey, approximately 70% of women who experienced domestic violence did not report it. Of those who did, only 3% of cases reached the courts. Many GBV cases go unreported, likely due to the lack of legal protection and the authorities' failure to respond to domestic violence complaints. Shelter and counseling services tend to be inadequate, and even when survivors report crimes, many perpetrators are only fined. While new legislation was proposed to combat GBV in 2019, a lack of support, particularly from the Russian Orthodox Church (see *Religion and Spirituality*), blocked its passage. Critics claimed the proposed legislation would infringe on families' rights and

that private and governmental issues should remain separate. In 2022-23, 93% of women who were killed died as a result of domestic violence.

**Female Genital Mutilation (FGM):** Also known as female genital cutting or female circumcision, FGM is any procedure whereby a woman's external genitalia or genital organs are cut or removed for non-medical reasons. Although FGM is not widely practiced in Russia, it remains legal. Girls are most at risk of FGM in Dagestan, in the North Caucasus region.

### **Sex and Procreation**

Between 1960-2024, Russia's birthrate declined from 2.5 births per woman to 1.5, which is below that required to maintain the population but higher than neighboring Ukraine (1.2) and Poland (1.3). While most urban Russian families have only one or two children, some rural families have more.

Russia became the world's first country to legalize abortion in 1920. Although Russia's abortion rate is more than three times the US rate, it has declined in recent years due to improved sexual education and availability of contraception. However, President Vladimir Putin has urged abortion prevention strategies to offset Russia's population decline (see *Political and Social Relations*), and some women were denied access to free abortions during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown (see *Sustenance and Health*).



### **Homosexuality in Russia**

Although homosexual relations were decriminalized in 1993, discrimination based on sexual orientation is common. Russian authorities intimidate and arrest homosexual activists. In 2013, the legislature passed what became known as the "gay propaganda law" that prohibits exposing minors to the "homosexual lifestyle." The law criminalizes public displays of affection among homosexuals partners and positive media portrayals of same-sex relationships. At this time, the US State Department does not have a Status of Forces Agreement in place for Russia. Service members will be subject to local laws with regards to this topic.

## 6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

### Overview

Russian is the official language and the primary language of business, education, and media. Some provinces have other official languages in addition to Russian.

Modern Russian first began to diverge from related Eastern Slavic languages like Belarussian and Ukrainian during the 13-16th centuries. Old Church Slavonic, a South Slavic language



used by missionaries in the first Slavic Bibles, heavily influenced the language. Peter the Great's 17th-century Westernizing reforms (see *History and Myth*) also influenced Russian through the addition of words from several European languages to the Russian vocabulary.

In the late 19th century, Tsar Alexander II sought to create a singular Russian identity to promote unity within his empire (see *History and Myth*). He began

a process of Russification, which included promoting the use of Russian as the only language in the Russian Empire, a tactic that Soviet leader Joseph Stalin also used to repress some ethnic minorities in the 1930s and 40s (see *History and Myth*). Russian-language education became compulsory in Soviet schools (see *Learning and Knowledge*). Almost all non-Russian languages had to adopt the Cyrillic alphabet, and Russian became the sole language of command in the Soviet military. While some non-Russian speakers voluntarily learned Russian as a means of advancing their social standing in the USSR, many people continued to use their native languages in private.

After the USSR's collapse in 1991 (see *History and Myth*), Russia's linguistic diversity slowly returned to public spaces. Formerly restricted minority languages are once again taught in some schools (see *Learning and Knowledge*), and many

provinces and republics promote the use of minority languages (see *Political and Social Relations*). However, in recent years, President Vladimir Putin has been critical of teaching minority languages in schools, and other Russian leaders have advocated promoting Russian over them.

## Russian

Russian is a member of the East Slavic branch of the Slavic language family, spoken nationwide by around 92% of the population. It is closely related to Belarusian and Ukrainian, sharing about 60% of its vocabulary with the latter. Russian has three primary mutually intelligible dialects that originally developed in Western Russia: Northern (spoken by residents in the region stretching eastward from St. Petersburg), Southern (in much of central and southern Russia), and Central (in between and heavily influenced by the Northern and Southern dialects, and notably spoken in Moscow). Many residents in the East speak the dialect based on the origin of the people who settled nearby. Modern literary Russian (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*) is based on the Central dialect.

Russian uses a Cyrillic alphabet comprising 33 letters, some of which resemble English letters, though sometimes pronounced differently. Because of this different alphabet, Russian words are transliterated when written in English, a process of spelling Russian words using the Roman (Latin) alphabet that can result in different spellings for the same word.

## Other languages

Nearly 130 languages are spoken in Russia, and ethnic minorities often speak their native languages at home. Many residents of Central Russia speak Turkic languages, such as Tatar, which is the country's second most spoken language, with 4.07 million native speakers. Other Turkic languages are spoken across southern Siberia, near the vicinity of Lake Baikal, and in the Arctic.





Some residents speak Finnic languages, typically in the Ural Mountains, upper Volga, and northwestern regions. Residents



living in the stretch of tundra from around the Kola Peninsula to the Ob River speak Samoyedic languages. Some residents of the North Caucasus region speak Caucasian languages, divided into the Nakh and Dagestanian groups.

Other common languages, most of which are spoken in ethnic republics (see *Political and Social Relations*), include Chechen (1.49 million speakers), Bashkort (1.09 million), Chuvash (700,000), Ukrainian (627,000), Avar

(654,000), Armenian (508,000), Kabardian (450,000), and Azerbaijani (291,000).

**English:** According to the 2020 census, 5.07 million English Russians speak some level of English. While English is the most popular foreign language taught in schools (see *Learning and Knowledge*), some students take French, German, Spanish, Chinese, or other languages.

### Communication Overview

Communicating competently in Russia requires not only knowledge of Russian, but also the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

### Communication Style

Communication patterns reflect the value Russians place on conciseness and respect. Russians usually communicate in a direct and realistic manner. Compared to Americans, they may appear guarded or overly formal among new acquaintances and business contacts. Russians do not hesitate to correct people

and tend to be concise and candid, which can seem blunt to an American. Smiling at strangers on the street is uncommon due to the historical belief that people who smile without reason are simpletons. Nevertheless, Russians tend to be gregarious and lively with friends, family, and during celebrations.

## Greetings

Greetings vary by age, gender, and social situation. When greeting strangers, Russians typically shake hands firmly, while maintaining eye contact. When greeting an elder or someone of higher social status, Russians tend to use the first name and patronymic – use of the father's first name to form the root of the child's – middle name. Typical formal greetings are **Zdrastvuyte** (hello), **Dobroe utro** (good morning), **Dobriy den** (good afternoon) or **Dobriy vyecher** (good evening). **Privyet** (hi) is more informal. Although close friends often greet each other with a hug, pat on the back, or by kissing alternating cheeks three times, Russians generally limit physical contact (see p. 3 of *Time and Space*). Many Russians consider it bad luck to greet someone across a threshold or doorway.



## Names

Russian names comprise a first (given), middle, and last (family) name. The middle patronymic name is formed by taking the person's father's name and adding the suffix **vich** or **ovich** for men and **avna** or **ovna** for women. Women often, but not always, take their husband's last name after marriage. Russians typically add an "a" to a woman's last name. For example, President Putin's parents are Vladimir Putin and Maria Putina. Many Russians use diminutives or nicknames to address one another informally. For example, Ekaterina may become Katia and Mikhail becomes Misha.

## Forms of Address

Russians modify names to convey formality or respect. For example, Russians address President Vladimir Putin as Vladimir

Vladimirovich. To address foreign nationals, some Russians use titles such as **Gospodin** (Mr.) and **Gospozha** (Mrs.) with last name to convey respect. In casual conversation with peers, many Russians use first names, diminutives, or nicknames. Children and youth may use **Dyadya** (uncle) or **Tyotyia** (aunt), followed by the first name to address older family members or close family friends.

### Conversational Topics

Polite conversation among acquaintances and in business settings tends to be formal, centering on basic information like family, occupation, interests, and hobbies. Often direct, such inquiries are meant to establish open and honest dialogue.



Informal conversation flows more freely and covers a range of topics such as sports, cultural subjects like books and movies, and humorous anecdotes. While some Russians discuss sensitive topics, foreign nationals should avoid

any potentially controversial topics such as Russia's experience during World War II, criticism of the USSR, or current politics. Because Russians may have differing perspectives on historical events, foreign nationals should remain neutral to avoid offense. Russian humor tends to be dry, sarcastic, and direct.

### Gestures

Foreign nationals should avoid pointing with the index finger, which is considered uncultured. Making a fist with the thumb between the middle and index fingers is considered an obscenity. Some Russians count by closing their fingers rather than opening them. They typically avoid speaking with hands in their pockets, a stance that older Russians in particular, consider rude.

### Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) and click on "Resources" for access to language training and other resources.

## Useful Words and Phrases

English	Russian
Hello	Zdrastvuyte
Hi	Privyet
Good morning	Dobroe utro
Good afternoon / evening	Dobriy den / vyecher
Good night	Spokoino nochi
What's your name?	Kak vas zovut?
My name is...	Menya zovut...
Yes	Da
No	Net
Please / You're Welcome	Pozhaluysta
Thank you	Spasibo
Cheers!	Na zdarovie
Where are you from?	Oktuda vy?
I am from...	Ya iz...
Where do you live?	Gde vy zhivete?
I am American	Ya amerikanets / amerikanka (m/f)
Do you speak (English / Russian)?	Vy govorite po-angliiski / russki?
Today	Segodnya
Tomorrow	Zavtra
Yesterday	Vchera
Have a nice meal	Priatno appetita
Good luck!	Udachii!
Excuse me	Izvinite
I don't understand	Ja ne ponimaiu
What?	Shto?
Me	Menya
What time is it?	Kotoryy chas?
Where is...?	Gdye...?
What is the address?	Kakoy adres?
Left	Nalyeva
Right	Naprava
Train	Poyezd

## 7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

### Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 99.7%
- Male: 99.7%
- Female: 99.7%

### Early Education

Before the arrival of formal education that accompanied the introduction and spread of Christianity in Kyivan Rus (see *History and Myth*), regional inhabitants informally transmitted values, skills, beliefs, and historical knowledge to younger generations. In the 10th-11th centuries, Kyivan Rus experienced a blossoming of culture, arts, and education. During this time, Russian Orthodox priests (see *Religion and Spirituality*) taught some students to read and write. The 13th-century decline of Kyivan Rus halted regional educational development, which only recovered with the rise of Moscow and the rule of the first **tsars** (kings) (see *History and Myth*). Nevertheless, most education in the region remained under the supervision of the Orthodox Church.



In the 17th century, Peter the Great (see *History and Myth*) reformed the Russian Empire's educational system, using Western Europe as a model and reducing the Church's influence. He introduced the first investments in secular education and made schooling a requirement for civil and military service and the newly established aristocratic class. Peter also founded notable post-secondary institutions, such as the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Empresses Elizabeth and Catherine the Great (see *History and Myth*) also encouraged secular education, founding Russia's first universities. However, the main beneficiaries were the aristocratic and merchant classes that could afford the private tutors, boarding schools, and books necessary to prepare for

entrance into St. Petersburg's elite institutions. For the serfs (see *History and Myth*), who comprised most of Russia's population, education was either too expensive or actively discouraged by the elite.

In the 19th century, the tsars standardized curricula across the Empire and offered education to more people. In 1804, Tsar Alexander I instituted a standardized national schooling system. However, fearing that foreign ideas would threaten the monarchy, the tsars expelled many foreign educators and increased censorship in the Empire. This trend continued into the 20th century, with restricted access to higher education and prohibitions on working-class Russians and non-Orthodox subjects from finishing secondary schooling.

### Soviet Education

After the 1917 dual revolutions (see *History and Myth*), communist rule drastically changed Russia's educational traditions. Soviet officials made schooling free and compulsory, with curricula tailored to raise literacy rates, discourage counter-revolutionary ideals, and meet the needs of the increasingly industrialized economy (see *Economics and Resources*). Officials also created technical institutes and **rabfaki** (schools



for workers), which prepared workers to pursue post-secondary education.

Under Joseph Stalin (see *History and Myth*) the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, or Soviet Union) halted

many educational experiments and imposed a more standardized curriculum throughout the country. Stalin's purges of the educated elite, along with the devastation of World War II (WWII – see *History and Myth*), negatively impacted Soviet education.

After WWII, Soviet education recovered from the repression of the Stalin era and destruction of the war. Under the Khrushchev and Brezhnev administrations (see *History and Myth*), the USSR

increased access to secondary education and expanded literacy programs. Their governments established schools that introduced electives at earlier ages and opened programs that specialized in foreign languages and research in science and technology.



In the 1980s, the stagnant economy (see *Economics and Resources*) was detrimental to Soviet education. Schools in rural areas suffered from chronic underfunding, which led to unequal educational outcomes, with urban children having greater access to universities and jobs than rural residents.

### Modern Educational System

Education is free and compulsory for all citizens, with a mandated minimum of 11 years of schooling starting at age 7. Generally, state-run public schools dominate the educational system, with some 99% of primary school students attending them in 2023. A 2018 assessment of student performance in reading, math, and science determined that Russia had similar scores as Hungary, Italy, and Lithuania, but ranked below the US. The government mandates that schools are secular. However, a 2010 educational reform allows for religious and ethics instruction in grade 4.

The Ministry of Education oversees all pre-primary, primary, and secondary education, while the Ministry of Science and Higher Education supervises post-secondary studies. A 1996 law on education gives the central government the authority to manage institutional accreditation and regulate national curricula, such as making Russian a mandatory subject in all schools. However, autonomous and ethnic republics (see *Political and Social Relations*) have the right to offer education in native languages and add culturally specific subjects to the national learning plan. Nevertheless, autonomous republics tend to have fewer specialized educational programs and gymnasiums or lyceums (see “Secondary Education” below) than areas that are predominately ethnically Russian.

As of 2022, Russia spends some 4.1% of GDP on public education, slightly than the global average (3.8%) and much lower than the US (5.4%). Nevertheless, many Russian schools have historically struggled with financing. While less common in recent years, failure to pay teachers and a lack of building maintenance are serious concerns in some institutions. Likewise, a shortage of school buildings has caused some



schools to operate multiple shifts to meet student demand.

**Pre-Primary:** Children aged 3 weeks to 3 years may attend free public or fee-based private *yasli* (nursery schools), followed by

*detsady* (kindergartens) for children aged 3-6. Although the government finances most pre-primary schools, demand for spots at these institutions exceeds supply. Nevertheless, in 2022, some 74% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in pre-primary school.

**Basic Education:** It consists of grades 1-4 and begins at age 7. Instruction focuses on Russian, mathematics, natural sciences, social studies, music, and a second language in autonomous and ethnic republics. To continue to the next grade, students must pass a year-end exam. In 2023, some 95% of students of the appropriate age were enrolled in primary school.

**Secondary Education:** This second level divides into basic secondary (grades 5-9) and upper secondary (grades 10-11). While often colocated with primary schools, specialized instructors teach secondary school classes, which feature a wider array of electives and technical training programs. Some secondary schools are classified as lyceums or gymnasiums, meaning the school has a certified specialization in a particular area (such as mathematics, law, or foreign languages). Notably, English is the most popular foreign language among students.

To advance to the next grade, most students must pass a series of exams in Russian, math, and one or two subjects of their choice. After grade 9, all students must take exams to determine



if they proceed to upper secondary school or technical training. Students whose scores qualify them to finish the final 2 years of upper secondary school take college preparatory courses before taking a series of national exams. Passing exam scores result in receipt of a “certificate of maturity” that validates completion of upper secondary education. As of 2023, about 55% of students of the appropriate age were enrolled in secondary education.

### Post-Secondary Education

Russia has a variety of post-secondary institutions, commonly referred to as *vysshaye uchebnoye zavedeniye* (institutions of higher education, or VUZs). Since 2003, Russia has aligned its post-secondary educational system more closely to those of many other European countries, offering the equivalent of a 4-year bachelor's degree or 5- or 6-year specialized degrees equivalent to a master's. If Russians choose to continue their education, VUZs offer *doktor nauk* (Doctor of Sciences) programs, the equivalent of a US PhD.

Gaining entrance to post-secondary programs is contingent on secondary school grades and university entrance



exams, which causes intense competition among students for spots in the top VUZs. The number of private VUZs has grown since the collapse of the USSR, and some require less demanding scores for admission than public VUZs. However, the associated costs make these institutions too expensive for many Russians. Consequently, the government heavily subsidizes tuition at public universities.

Among the most prestigious and internationally recognized VUZs are the oldest universities in Russia, including Moscow State University, St. Petersburg State University, and Tomsk State University, founded in the 18th and 19th centuries. Many VUZs founded during the Soviet era, notably the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, also have become prestigious centers of learning. As of 2023, 30% of adults had completed at least short-cycle tertiary education.

## 8. TIME AND SPACE

### Overview

Russians consider a reliable work ethic and punctuality as key to conducting business. While public displays of affection tend to be inappropriate, social touching among friends and family is common.

### Time and Work

Russia's workweek runs Monday-Friday. While normal business hours are 9am-6pm, some shops and businesses follow a 10am-8pm schedule. Banks and government offices open from 9am-6pm during the week and often close by 5pm if open on Saturdays. Post offices typically open from 8am-8pm. While hours vary, some supermarkets and other food stores remain open 24 hours, though they often close at 11pm in rural areas.



**Working Conditions:** Russian labor laws establish an 8-hour workday and 5-day workweek and also guarantee a national minimum wage, overtime pay, 28 days of paid vacation, and paid maternity leave (see *Sex and Gender*). According to Russian labor codes, employers must obtain written consent from workers before assigning overtime tasks, which cannot exceed 120 hours per year. Despite these and other benefits and protections, lax enforcement often results in unsafe working conditions. Notably, about 19% of Russians labor as informal workers, for whom labor codes and workplace standards are often unenforced.

**Time Zone:** Russia has 11 time zones. Most Russians live in the Moscow time (MSK) zone, which is 3 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 8 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). The Kaliningrad **Oblast** (province) is in the westernmost time zone, 2 hours ahead of GMT, and the Kamchatka **Kray** (territory) is in Russia's easternmost time zone, 12 hours ahead of GMT. Russia does not observe daylight savings time.

**Calendars:** Dating to ancient Roman times, the Julian calendar is 13 days ahead of the modern Western (Gregorian) calendar. For example, Christmas on the Julian calendar generally falls on January 7th instead of December 25th. Orthodox Christians (see *Religion and Spirituality*) used the Julian calendar widely through the 19th-20th centuries. The Soviets (see *History and Myth*) adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1918, in part to weaken cultural traditions associated with the Orthodox Church. Today, Orthodox Russians use the Julian calendar to track religious holidays (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

### National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- January 7: Orthodox Christmas
- February 23: Defender's Day
- March 8: Women's Day
- May 1: Labor Day / Workers' Day
- May 9: Victory Day (marks the end of World War II, see *History and Myth*)
- June 12: Russia Day (celebrates Russia's formal declaration of independence from the USSR, see *History and Myth*)
- November 4: Unity Day (marks the expulsion of Polish troops from Russia and end of the Time of Troubles, see *History and Myth*)
- December 31: New Year's Eve

Any holiday that falls on a weekend is observed on the following Monday. If a holiday falls in the middle of the week, employers often give "bridge holidays" to the nearest weekend.

**Time and Business:** While Russians tend to have a relaxed approach to time, they value punctuality in most workplaces, and business meetings typically begin and end on time. Workplaces are often hierarchical, and subordinate staff's inability to act without management's approval may prolong negotiations and decision-making.

## Public and Personal Space

As in most societies, personal space in Russia depends on the nature of the relationship. Russians typically maintain close personal space with friends and family yet preserve a greater distance among acquaintances. When waiting in line or riding public transportation, Russians tend to stand or sit closer to each other than Americans.

**Touch:** Conversational touching depends largely on the level of familiarity. Formal situations rarely involve touching beyond a handshake (see *Language and Communication*). Some Russians engage in same-sex touching in casual situations. For example, while some male friends greet with a pat on the back, some women link arms while walking to convey affection.

**Eye Contact:** Russians typically engage in direct eye contact during greetings (see *Language and Communication*) to convey interest and respect. During conversation, moderate eye contact signals attentive engagement, although staring typically is considered rude.

## Photographs

Foreign nationals should acquire a Russian's permission before taking his photo. Government and military installations and some churches and national monuments discourage or prohibit photography.

## Driving

Some Russians drive aggressively, ignoring traffic laws and pedestrians' right-of-way. While road conditions in many urban areas are decent, heavy traffic, potholes, cobblestones, and streetcar lines can make driving unsafe. Conditions are typically poor in rural areas, where the combination of badly maintained roads and lack of lighting makes driving after dark dangerous. In 2021, Russia recorded 11 traffic fatalities per 100,000 people, lower than the US rate (14) but higher than neighboring Ukraine (11). Like Americans, Russians drive on the right side of the road.



## 9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

### Overview

Russian traditional dress, recreation, sports, dance, music, and arts reflect the nation's rural peasant history, foreign influences, independence movements, and modern global trends.

### Dress and Appearance

**Traditional:** Russians tend to wear traditional clothing only for folk-dance performances, festivals, and other special events, and garments vary by region. For example, women's clothing is typically brightly decorated in the North and Central regions,



while black embroidery is common in areas around Voronezh in southwestern Russia.

Women's wear typically consists

of a **sarafan** (jumper dress) in the North and **poneva** (traditional skirt) south of Moscow, though dress patterns also vary by marital status and age. Married women traditionally wear one braid and unmarried women two. Only married women wear the **kokoshnik** (an elaborate headdress).

Men's wear typically consists of a **rubakha** (loose linen shirt sometimes also worn by women), canvas trousers, and belt. Various amulets and embroidery, typically on the collar and belt, were believed to protect a man from evil spirits. In the Muslim-majority Caucasus regions, men and women typically both wear a **cherkeska** or **chokha** (a Circassian robe-style coat tightly fastened with a belt).

**Modern:** While clothes were designed to be functional and comfortable during the Soviet era (see *History and Myth*), today, street fashion consists of mostly European and Western styles, such as jeans and dresses. Many women in the West and urban areas wear heels and designer dresses. Suits are typical in business settings. Leather and fur jackets are popular in winter.

In Chechnya, women tend to dress modestly in accordance with Islamic law. Many women there wear a **hijab** (headscarf).

### Recreation and Leisure

Russians typically spend leisure time with family and friends, gathering to socialize or share a meal. Some Russians spend time outdoors playing chess, musical instruments, or singing, even in winter. Other common activities are playing billiards or cards and going to the **banya** (sauna).

During the summer, many families spend time in the countryside, where they hike, fish, relax, or garden at their **dachas** (country houses, see *Family and Kinship*). In winter, skating, skiing, and walking through outdoor holiday markets are popular pastimes.

**Holidays and Festivals:** Following the USSR's collapse in 1991 (see *History and Myth*), Russia experienced a revival of interest in religious celebrations and holidays (see *Time and Space*). Previously repressed traditions and rituals, such as Russian Orthodox Christmas midnight service and elaborate Easter celebrations, were restored. New Year's Day is one of the most important holidays in Russia, featuring a New Year tree, similar to a Christmas tree in the US, and presents brought by **Dyed Moroz** and **Snyegurochka** (Father Frost and his Snow Maiden granddaughter).

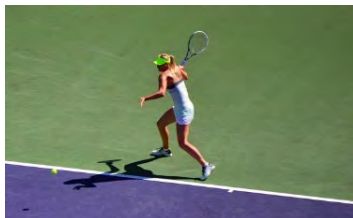


Traditional folk holidays have also gained popularity in recent years. Festivities often include street carnivals, with entertainers and children dressed in traditional Russian attire. **Maslenitsa** is the oldest Russian folk holiday that marks the end of winter, celebrated with week-long festivities and a meal served with tea, often followed by vodka. Russians also observe numerous secular holidays and events, including Women's Day, Russia Day, and Victory Day, which commemorates the 1945 end of World War II (see *History and Myth* and *Time and Space*).

## Sports and Games

Russians play a variety of sports and games. Skiing, ice skating, gymnastics, acrobatics, soccer, basketball, tennis, and martial arts are particularly popular. Sambo, an acronym for the Romanized Russian phrase “self-defense without a weapon,” is a popular martial art, which Soviet military and police forces developed in the 1930s. Russian athletes consistently excel in international competitions in volleyball, basketball, gymnastics, track-and-field, wrestling, boxing, and weightlifting.

Maria Sharapova is a renowned tennis player, who briefly became the world's best in 2005 at age 18. Though she has lived in the US since 1994, Sharapova played for Russia, winning five grand slam titles during her career. Other notable Russian athletes are wrestler Khabib Nurmagomedov and hockey player Alexander Ovechkin, who led the Washington Capitals to their first Stanley Cup Championship in 2018. Russia holds various annual international sporting events, such as the Grand Prix of



Moscow, Kremlin Cup tennis tournament, and Moscow Marathon.

Having competed over the years as part of the Russian Empire, USSR, and Unified Team, Russia historically had some of the most

successful athletes competing in the Olympic Games. Russia and the US are historical rivals, and each has won more Olympic medals than any other country. In recent years, Russia has been accused of state-sponsored doping and manipulating athletes' drug tests, resulting in a ban of over 100 Russian athletes from the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics. In 2019, the world's top anti-doping authority banned Russia from competing in international competitions until 2022 for not complying with doping regulations. Russian athletes have since competed in Olympic events, without formal association to Russia, as the Russian Olympic Committee.

**Hockey:** In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Russians played bandy, a precursor to ice hockey using a ball rather than a puck.

Ice hockey gained popularity in the 1940s, and today is Russia's national sport. In the Soviet era, the national team won every tournament in which it competed from 1963-71. Although the success of Russian hockey waned after the USSR's collapse, Russia has won four Ice Hockey World Championships since 2008. Russia is home to 20 of the 23 teams that comprise the Kontinental Hockey League (KHL), Europe and Asia's premier professional hockey league, considered the world's second-best league after North America's National Hockey League (NHL). Notably, KHL players are sometimes drafted to play for NHL teams.



**Soccer:** Along with hockey, soccer is one of Russia's most popular team sports. The legendary goalkeeper, Lev Yashin, played in the 1956 Olympics, in which the USSR won gold. Although the USSR was competitive in Europe's soccer championships, Russia has been less successful. Today, the Russian Premier League is the country's top national division league. Russia's national teams have never won a World Cup or European Championship.

**Games:** *Shakhmaty* (chess) is a competitive pastime in Russia. Since the Soviet era, Russian chess masters – players awarded a master title by national or world chess organizations – have been highly respected and successful, and thousands of Russian children have achieved this rank. Russian Pyramid, or Russian billiards, a modified version of pool, is popular in Russia and many neighboring countries of the former USSR.

### Dance

Russian folk dances vary by region, and many ethnic groups (see *Political and Social Relations*) preserve cultural expression in traditional dances. In Ingushetia, the Ingush dance features a man and woman dressed in traditional sparkling attire, dancing to fast-paced music, same as in neighboring Chechnya. The man typically performs rapid, energetic steps in contrast to the woman's slower, fluid movements. *Khorovod*, a traditional



spiritual art form, combines dancing in a circle with chorus singing. **Barynya**, a traditional western Russian folk dance, consists of elaborate stomping and squatting choreography accompanied by folk poetry.

Russian ballet originated when clowns and jesters performed theatrics in public squares during festivals and events. A strong ballet tradition became popular in the late 1700s, when Peter the Great (see *History and Myth*) sought to replace traditional folk dances with Western-style performances. Russian composer Pyotr Tchaikovsky composed “The Nutcracker” and “Swan Lake” ballets, gaining global recognition. Many new ballets are



choreographed using traditional Russian themes and compositions. Today, elaborate choreography and stages are unique features of Russian ballets.

### Music

Traditional folk music includes a variety of instruments, such as the **balalaika** (triangular guitar with three strings), **garmon** (button accordion), **gudok** (three-string violin), and **rog** (horn). Russian peasants traditionally sang **byliny** (epic songs), which are tied to historical events from as early as the 16th century. During the Christmas season, many Russians sing **kolyadi**, carols rooted in traditional spiritual beliefs (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Russian classical music evolved from folk songs. The works by Russian composers Glinka, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky, and Stravinsky are performed in major concert halls worldwide. Two other popular Soviet composers are Dmitri Shostakovich and Sergei Prokofiev. Today, Russians listen to a wide range of international pop, rock, hip-hop, and other genres. Founded in 1980 and named after insecticide, DDT is a popular rock band and has released over 20 albums.

### Cinema and Theater

Examples of Russian theatrical performances are opera, puppet theater, and the circus. Despite frequent limitations on artistic

expression during the Soviet era, the Moscow State Circus performance was widely popular.

During the Soviet era, theater and film were mostly limited to state-supported “Socialist Realism,” an artistic tradition intended to glorify the industrial worker and farmer. Since the USSR’s collapse, theater has shifted from political topics to classical and psychological themes. In 1994, Nikita Mikhalkov’s *Burnt by the Sun* received the Academy Award for best foreign-language film. *Loveless*, a 2017 film directed by Andrei Zvyagintsev, portrays a child, who is psychologically abandoned by his parents. It won the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival, among other awards.

One of the most famous Russian playwrights is Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), whose acclaimed works include *Three Sisters*, *The Seagull*, and *The Cherry Orchard*, each addressing the longing for change and the crisis of the nobility.

## Literature

For centuries, Russians have revered native poets, playwrights, and authors. Russians of all social classes (see *Political and Social Relations*) read Russian literature, particularly poetry and novels. Today, some Russians attend poetry recitals and discuss novels with friends and family.

The 19th-century “Golden Age” of Russian literature produced masterpieces in all genres, often combining politics and philosophy. As the first notable author to use everyday Russian language in literature, Alexander Pushkin is widely known as the founder of modern Russian literature and Russia’s national poet. Notable novelists of the period include Fyodor Dostoyevsky, author of *Crime and Punishment*, and Leo Tolstoy, author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*.



Russian poetry also flourished during the “Silver Age,” a time of political turmoil from 1890-1921 (see *History and Myth*), when

authors combined literary styles like mysticism, eroticism, and symbolism. Censorship was present in both the imperial and Soviet eras, which prompted many authors to address political or social issues indirectly in their writings.

Literary freedom returned in post-Soviet works, inspiring poets, essayists, and novelists to explore an array of topics. Victor Pelevin, whose works typically critique the Russian state, was a Russian Booker Prize nominee for both poetry and his novel *Omon Ra*. Novelist Lyudmila Ulitskaya, influenced by her Jewish heritage, has gained international acclaim, winning the French Medici Prize for her novella *Sonechka* and Russian Booker Prize for *The Kukotsy Enigma*. In 2014, Ulitskaya was awarded the Austrian State Prize for European Literature.

### Folk Art and Handicrafts

Russia has a rich tradition of decorative arts and crafts, such as paintings, ceramics, and embroidery. Traditional handicrafts use elaborate designs, patterns, and even scenes from fairytales, to decorate everyday objects like small boxes and pitchers. Each region is known for different types of folk art. The **gzhel** ceramics style, originating southeast of Moscow, features distinctive blue and white colors. Vologda lace, often made into tablecloths, wedding items, napkins, and festive shawls, is a specialty in northwestern Russia.



Dating to the 17th century, the lace was originally woven from gold and silver.

St. Petersburg's House of Fabergé famously made elaborate jeweled Fabergé eggs with gold, diamonds, and semi-precious stones.

Fabergé notably made the imperial Romanov family Easter eggs, which went missing after the 1917 revolutions (see *History and Myth*). Today, many of the 50 eggs are still missing. **Matryoshki**, wooden dolls that nest inside one another, typically show a peasant woman in traditional dress. They symbolize a mother carrying her child, as well as the family legacy. In recent years, political figures and celebrities have sometimes replaced the traditional peasant woman design.

## 10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

### Sustenance Overview

Meals are often special social events, with family and friends lingering for conversation and companionship. Russian cuisine reflects the country's vast territory and long history of contact with European, Central Asian, and Caucasian cultures.

### Dining Customs

Most Russians eat three daily meals and snack throughout the day. Breakfast is usually hearty. While **obed** (the mid-day meal) was traditionally the largest, this custom has changed to align with modern business hours (see *Time and Space*). Meals are often served in **service à la russe**, meaning multiple courses are brought to the table singularly. Diners typically begin their meals with **zakuski** (small appetizers) and a variety of breads, which are served with salt as a sign of hospitality. Next, they consume a soup course, followed by a large main course and dessert. When invited to a Russian home, guests typically bring chocolates, wine, or liquor to thank the host for his hospitality.

### Diet

While varying by region, Russian cuisine tends to reflect an adaptation to the country's short growing season (see



*Political and Social Relations*). Many Russian dishes rely heavily on grains and root vegetables like potatoes, preserved fruits and vegetables in the form of pickles and jams, as well as meat and dairy products. Because the Russian Orthodox Church (see *Religion and Spirituality*) encouraged adherents not to consume meat during certain occasions, many dishes feature fish (which was considered meatless) and vegetables.

Many other Russian dishes feature beef, pork, or chicken. In northern Russia, some meals include reindeer or elk. Near coastal areas and rivers, fish are prevalent, with **osyetrina**

(sturgeon), **shchuka** (pike), **oblyoma** (dried, salted fish from the Volga River), and **omul** (like trout, found in Lake Baikal) featuring prominently. Many Russian dishes consist of local herbs, spices, and other ingredients for their distinctive taste.



Common flavorings include dill, cilantro, tarragon, parsley, garlic, honey, and **smetana** (Russian mayonnaise, somewhat similar to sour cream in the US).

### Meals and Popular Dishes

For breakfast, Russians eat a variety of sweet and savory foods like **blini** (small, crepe-like pancakes) with smetana, jams, or other fillings, **kasha** (a thick porridge made with wheat, rice, or millet), or **syrniki** (cottage cheese fritters). Strong black tea sweetened with sugar is also

common at breakfast or in the afternoon and was traditionally served from a **samovar** (large metal urn that stores hot water).

Popular lunch entrees include **zakuski** with **selyodka pod shuboi** (herring with beets, pickles, and cream sauce), **salat olivye** (cold salad featuring eggs, chopped meats, peas, and mayonnaise), and **blini** with meat, jams, or caviar. Popular soups are **borscht** (beet and cabbage soup) and **ukha** (a clear fish broth). Examples of hearty main dishes are **bef stroganov** (a dish with beef, mushrooms, and smetana) and **kotlety po kievsky** (breaded chicken breasts or breaded ground chicken, stuffed with butter).

**Uzhin** (dinner) usually features dishes similar to lunch and is traditionally lighter and less elaborate. Other popular dishes are **solyanka** (a stew of pickled vegetables, meat, and potatoes), **pyelmeny** (dumplings served in stock with vinegar or butter), and **golubtsy** (meat and rice rolled in cabbage leaves). Common desserts include **morozhenoye** (ice cream) with jam or **pecheniye** (small pastries) served with tea after dinner or as a snack.

In the East, local dishes reflect the availability of seafood and influence of East Asian cuisines. Some popular dishes are **sugudai** (a salad of raw fish seasoned with onions, lemon juice, vinegar, and butter), **pigodi** (or **pysanse**, a Russo-Korean steamed bun filled with meat and cabbage), and **kyorchekh** (a dessert of milk, *smetana*, and fresh berries).

## Beverages

Black tea is the most common beverage served in many Russian households. Russians sometimes drink **kvass** (a slightly fermented beverage made from rye bread and honey that is particularly popular in the summer) and **kefir** (a sour dairy drink that resembles yogurt). Vodka is perhaps Russia's most celebrated alcoholic beverage spirits available unflavored or infused with cranberry, lemon, pepper, or **skarka** (apple and pear leaves), among other flavors. Popular Russian vodka brands are Moskovskaya, Zyelonaya Marka, and Putinka, as well as the more internationally recognized Smirnoff and Stolichnaya (originally from Russia but now produced elsewhere). Russia also has large beer and wine industries. Dark lagers from the Baltika brewery and **shampanskoye** (sparkling wine, pictured) are particularly popular options.



## Eating Out

Restaurants in urban centers such as Moscow or St. Petersburg range from upscale establishments specializing in high-end Russian or international cuisine to inexpensive food stalls and **stolovye** (cafeterias). **Kafe** (cafes) are also popular and usually serve hot foods, pastries, and coffee drinks. Traditional **restoran** (restaurants) sometimes specialize in hosting large parties or banquets for special events, such as weddings or other celebrations, though most also serve individuals or small groups. Many Russians stop to eat at more casual **stolovaya** (canteens) or street stalls that often feature Russian dishes like *pelmeni*, **shashlik** (meat skewers), or **buuzy** (meaty soup dumplings). Some Russians also go to the countryside for picnics. While some eateries add a service charge to checks, an additional 10-15% tip for good service is expected in many establishments.

## Health Overview

While the overall health of Russians has improved in recent decades, they continue to face high rates of non-communicable “lifestyle” diseases and other serious health challenges. Since 1994, life expectancy at birth has increased from about 65 to 72, though this figure is lower than the Central European and Baltic nations’ average (76) and US figure (81). Between 1990-2024, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) decreased from about 18 deaths per 1,000 live births to 6.5, higher than the Baltic average (3.9) and US rate (5.1).

## Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills that are derived from a native population’s beliefs, experiences, and theories. Today, traditional medicine in Russia focuses primarily on herbal remedies and other non-surgical procedures to treat both physical and mental illness. The use of herbal medicines is common, particularly where access to government-run medical facilities is limited. Besides herbal remedies, some Russians treat colds and flus with wet cupping,

the process of applying heated cups to the skin to extract toxins from the body.



## Healthcare System

While Russia’s Constitution (see *Political and Social Relations*) grants every citizen and resident the right to

comprehensive medical care, many Russians lack access to quality treatment. The government offers healthcare through a network of public hospitals and ***polykliniki*** (health centers) through the national Obligatory Medical Insurance (OMI) system. The government budget, employer contributions, and payroll deductions fund the OMI. The Ministry of Health supervises the public hospitals and ***polykliniki*** and provides basic preventative and curative services, as well as long-term care associated with serious illnesses like cancer and respiratory and cardiovascular diseases.

Historically, Russia's spending on healthcare as a proportion of GDP has been low, with spending in 2022 reaching some 7.4%, slightly lower than the Central European and Baltic average (7.8%) and much lower than the US rate (16.6%). Large cuts in government funding, particularly since the 2014 economic crisis (see *Economics and Resources*), have worsened conditions in public healthcare centers. International sanctions (see *History and Myth*) have also hindered the acquisition of medicines and medical equipment. Researchers have identified the OMI as a nearly inefficient healthcare system in a study of 55 developed countries. The government healthcare system suffers from corruption, as does the entire public sector. Informal payments, or bribes, are sometimes required to receive quality medical care.

By contrast, Russia's private healthcare facilities are typically well-equipped, with modern capabilities and qualified medical personnel. However, high costs prevent most Russians from



accessing private medical care. The gap in quality between the public and private systems has resulted in notable disparities in health outcomes across socio-economic groups (see *Political and Social Relations*). Russia's rural-urban divide exacerbates this inequality (see *Family and Kinship*). Most private hospitals and health centers are in cities, meaning many rural Russians only have access to the public healthcare system.

## Health Challenges

As in most developed countries, the leading causes of death are chronic and non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases, which accounted for some 62% of deaths in 2021. Of these, diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular/respiratory diseases are the most common. Preventable "external causes," such as suicides, car accidents, and other injuries resulted in about 4% of deaths, equivalent to the US rate. Meanwhile, communicable diseases accounted for some 33% of deaths in 2021, 7% of which were due to COVID-19 pandemic related outcomes.



Many Russians, especially men, suffer from an elevated risk of diseases and injuries caused by excessive alcohol consumption. In 2021, cirrhosis (liver scarring that can lead to organ failure) was the seventh leading cause of death. Despite government efforts to reduce alcohol dependency, alcohol abuse remains prevalent, and addiction treatment centers are limited in funding and accessibility.

According to the World Health Organization, Russia had the world's third-highest suicide rate in 2019, when suicide was the eighth leading cause of death. Russia's suicide mortality rate of about 25 deaths per 100,000 people is higher than the Central European and Baltic average (12.5) and US (16) rate. Mental health advocates attribute the high suicide rate, especially among men, to the economic and political instability the country has faced since the end of the Soviet era (see *History and Myth*).

Russia also struggles to contain certain infectious diseases, particularly tuberculosis (TB), which public health experts consider widespread in the country. While the TB incidence rate has dropped steadily since 2008, the 2023 rate of 38 cases per 100,000 people is much higher than the US rate (3). Likewise, unlike most other European countries, Russia has an increasing annual rate of HIV/AIDS infection, estimated at about 10-15%. In 2022, HIV/AIDS affected some 1.1 million Russians.

As of February 2025, the Russian government reported over 24.87 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, the illness caused



by the novel coronavirus, which has resulted in over 404,000 deaths. The pandemic has been most prevalent in Urban areas with high population density, particularly Moscow and St. Petersburg. In December 2023,

only 55% of the Russian population had received a full series of the COVID-19 vaccine.

## 11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

### Overview

Before the 8th century, residents subsisted by growing hearty grains like rye that could survive the harsh climate (see *Political and Social Relations*). For centuries, wealthy nobles protected poor peasant communities in exchange for tribute. By the 17th century, tensions between peasants and landowners led to the establishment of serfdom, a system whereby millions of peasants were enslaved on the land they worked (see *History and Myth*). The serfs could be sold to other owners and faced criminal prosecution for attempting to escape. During this time, high land taxes used primarily to fund military campaigns further incentivized serfdom, as it guaranteed landowners a relatively cheap, stable workforce.



By the mid-19th century, Russia began to industrialize. Among other reforms, such as the establishment of a central bank in 1860, Tsar Alexander II emancipated the serfs in 1861 (see *History and Myth*). While peasants

received land as a result of this reform, the government-imposed debts on them that had to be repaid over a 50-year period. Meanwhile, rural overpopulation and the emergence of factories prompted some peasants to migrate to cities in search of employment.

From 1883-1913, Russian industrial output grew by nearly 5% per year. Railroad networks expanded, enabling goods and people to move more easily. However, industrial development was concentrated in urban areas and did not improve workers' living standards. Workers periodically went on strike for higher wages.

Soviet rule transformed the economy. During the civil war (1918-20, see *History and Myth*), the communist government

implemented a policy of “war communism.” Soviet officials abolished markets, trade, and private property, nationalized industry, and seized grain from the peasantry. The result was economic collapse. In 1921, officials implemented the New Economic Policy, which restored markets, trade, and private property, permitted peasants to sell their grain at market price, and denationalized all but the largest or most strategically important factories. As a result, the economy rapidly recovered.

In 1928, under Joseph Stalin (see *History and Myth*), the government reversed course again and implemented policies identical to those of “war communism.” In addition, Stalin oversaw a policy of rapid, state-sponsored industrialization and collectivization of agriculture by means of 5-year plans. While industrial output climbed rapidly, living standards fell because of low wages, shortages of consumer goods, and terrible housing conditions.



Meanwhile, peasants fiercely resisted the destruction of their traditional way of life. Such resistance, combined with the inefficiencies of the new collective farms and the repression of several million **kulaks** (wealthy peasants), resulted in a famine that killed 5-6 million peasants, mostly in Kazakhstan and Ukraine. Also in the 1930s, several million Soviet citizens were arrested and sent to the **Gulag** (labor camp system, see *History and Myth*), which would soon play an important role in the economy, especially for natural resource extraction.

Despite the heavy costs of Stalin's policies, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, or Soviet Union) had industrialized by the end of the 1930s, which played a role in the Soviet defeat of Germany in World War II (see *History and Myth*). Nevertheless, the war was disastrous for the USSR, which suffered economic destruction and 27 million deaths. As a result of these losses, postwar 5-year plans focused on recovery and reconstruction.

Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev (see *History and Myth*), promised to improve Soviets' living standards. Although many of his reforms failed, massive construction of apartment buildings in city suburbs gave many Soviet families their own home for the first time. Khrushchev's successor, Leonid Brezhnev (see *History and Myth*), reversed many of the reforms, and the Soviet economy continued to fall behind the West. Labor discipline was poor, technological innovation lacking, and consumer goods in short supply. The black market thrived, and corruption was widespread. Only by exporting large amounts of hydrocarbons did the Soviet leadership maintain living standards and fund its massive military-industrial complex.

The next serious attempt at reform occurred in the mid-late 1980s. Under Mikhail Gorbachev, the USSR implemented policies of **perestroika** (restructuring), which granted private enterprise a limited role in the economy, and **glasnost** (openness), which made it possible to publicly discuss the shortcomings of the state-run economy (see *History and Myth*). However, Gorbachev's reforms backfired, and the economic situation deteriorated, as some of the non-Russian republics began to demand independence. After communist hardliners' failed coup attempt in August 1991, the USSR dissolved, and



Russia had to rapidly transition from a state-run to a market economy.

Starting in 1992, the post-Soviet Russian leadership under President Boris Yeltsin implemented free-market reforms (see

*History and Myth*). Poverty skyrocketed as price controls were lifted and inefficient factories went bankrupt or stopped paying wages. Meanwhile, large portions of the economy were privatized in corrupt deals that favored politically connected oligarchs (see *History and Myth*). After several years of a large deficit, the Russian government defaulted in 1998, resulting in further hardship for the population. Only with the rise of oil prices in the next decade did the Russian economy begin to grow. The

return to economic growth resulted in rising living standards and the emergence of a middle class for the first time in Russia.

Economic growth was briefly interrupted by the 2008-09 global financial crisis but resumed in 2010. GDP reached \$2.3 trillion in 2013 before declining sharply because of low oil prices and sanctions imposed on Russia after it annexed Crimea in 2014 (see *History and Myth*). After the economy stabilized, GDP grew from 2017-19, before falling in 2020, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic (see *Sustenance and Health*).

Today, the economy faces many challenges. Russia's annexation of Crimea and meddling in the Syrian Civil War and the 2016 US presidential election caused the US and European nations to tighten sanctions (see *Political and Social Relations*). These restrictions on individuals and businesses in strategic industries like oil, natural gas, and defense have hindered the economy. Widespread corruption also continues to have a negative effect on growth and economic development.

Despite these and other issues, in 2021, many economists were optimistic about prospects for improvement. These forecasts for growth changed when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 (see *History and Myth*). Despite Western sanctions, the Russian economy held up much better than expected in 2022: real GDP contracted by just -2.1%. In 2023, the GDP increased by 3.6%, though Russia's economic outlook is challenging.

### Services

As the largest sector of the economy, services accounted for about 57% of GDP and 68% of the labor force in 2023. Major subsectors include financial services, communications, and tourism.

**Tourism:** In 2023, over 8.2 million tourists visited Russia. Tourism accounts for 4.1% of GDP. Many tourists visit Moscow, St. Petersburg, or Russia's historical sites and landscapes.



## Industry

As the second-largest sector of the economy, industry comprises some 31% of GDP and 26% of the labor force. Significant subsectors include energy production and export, mining, manufacturing, and construction.

**Natural Gas and Oil:** These subsectors accounted for around 17% of Russia's GDP in 2023 and are largely state-controlled and dominated by a handful of corporations. With some 47.8 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, Russia has the world's largest proven reserves. As a result, it is the world's second-largest exporter and producer, behind only the US. Russia exports most of its natural gas to Europe and Central Asia, though exports to China have risen considerably in recent years. With the world's eighth-largest proven crude oil reserves, Russia is the world's

second-largest oil producer and exporter. It also produces and exports large quantities of refined petroleum products.



**Mining:** Employing over a million residents in 2023, Russia is one of the

world's largest producers of coal (sixth), iron ore (fifth), and gold (third), and accounts for about 31% of the world's diamond production. Russia also mines large quantities of nickel, lead, copper, zinc, vanadium, platinum, and palladium.

## Agriculture

As of 2023, agriculture accounts for about 3% of GDP and 6% of the labor force.

**Farming:** Just over 7% of Russia's land area is arable, and most farms are in the West and South. Russia produced some 10-13% of the world's total grain exports and 16% of wheat exports in 2023. Most Russian farms produce wheat, oats, barley, and rye. Fodder crops like grasses, clover, corn, and root crops comprise one-third of farm area. Other crops include sugar

beets, soybeans, potatoes, and sunflowers. Cows, pigs, and poultry comprise most of Russia's large livestock sector.

**Forestry:** With the world's largest forest reserves, Russia has a robust lumber industry and is a world leader in the production of softwoods, industrial round woods, sawn wood, plywood, pulp, and paper. While local industries use most cut trees, about half of refined wood products are exported. Russia's lumber industry struggles with illegal logging, which is poorly regulated in many sparsely populated areas.

**Fishing:** Russia's total catch reached over 5 million tons in 2023, an increase over the 4.7 million ton catch in 2022. Russia's aquaculture accounts for 8-9% of the total fish production. Pollock, herring, and Atlantic cod dominate Russia's fishing sector.

### Currency

The Russian ruble (₽) is issued in seven banknote values (5, 10, 50, 100, 500, 1,000, and 5,000, pictured) and four coin values (1, 2, 5, and 10). The Russian ruble divides into 100 kopeks issued in four coin values (1, 5, 10, and 50). Between 2019-23, US\$1 fluctuated between ₽65-₽81.



### Foreign Trade

Russia's exports, totaling \$465.7 billion in 2023, primarily consist of crude petroleum, natural gas, refined petroleum, coal, and fertilizers sold to China (33%), India (17%), Turkey (8%), and Kazakhstan (4%). In the same year, imports totaled \$379.3 billion and included cars, packaged medicine, broadcasting equipment, garments, and plastic products from China (53%), Turkey (5%), Germany (5%), and Kazakhstan (5%).

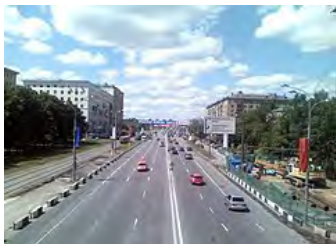
### Foreign Aid

The USSR was a major contributor of foreign aid, which reached \$1 billion in 1960. After the USSR's collapse, Russia relied on international aid to combat economic hardships. Today, Russia has resumed its role as an aid donor, giving more than \$1 billion in official development assistance in 2017, making it one of the largest foreign aid donors in the world.

## 12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### Overview

Russia has some of the world's most expansive infrastructure and telecommunications networks, which are modern and well-developed in large cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg but not in many rural areas. While freedoms of speech and press are constitutionally protected, the government routinely restricts those freedoms.



### Transportation

Russian car ownership has grown from 180 cars per 1,000 people in 2005 to 322 today, and most rural Russians travel by car. Major Russian cities have robust subway, train, bus, and tram networks. Moscow and St. Petersburg have well-established subway systems that serve millions of commuters every day. Taxis, which are usually ordered via phone or mobile application, are also widely available in cities.

**Roadways:** Of Russia's more than 750,000 mi of roads, some 560,000 mi are paved. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union (see *History and Myth*), Russia has significantly expanded its roads network, completing major projects such as the Trans-Siberian highway and an expressway between Moscow and St. Petersburg.

**Railways:** Russia has about 53,156 mi of railways and is expanding its rail infrastructure, particularly high-speed networks connecting major Russian cities. The first high-speed trains began operating between Moscow and St. Petersburg in 2009. The famed Trans-Siberian Railway connects Russia's West with Siberia and the Far East. Other rail expansion focuses on supporting agriculture and industries such as manufacturing, oil, and natural gas (see *Economics and Resources*).

**Ports and Waterways:** Russia has 63,400 mi of waterways, 44,700 of which are in the West and link the Black Sea, Caspian



Sea, and Sea of Azov, as well as the Baltic to the White Sea. Major ports in Russia include St. Petersburg and Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea, Murmansk on the Arctic Ocean, and Vladivostok on the Pacific Ocean. Russia also has several major river ports, including Astrakhan and Kazan on the Volga, Rostov-on-Don on the Don, and Saint Petersburg on the Neva. As the Arctic becomes more navigable, the Northern Sea Route connecting the Atlantic and Pacific has become strategically important, as Russia has plans to make it a prominent cargo shipping route.

**Airways:** Of Russia's 1,218 airports, about half have paved runways. The busiest international airport hubs are Moscow's Sheremetyevo, which served 43.7 million passengers in 2024, and Domodedovo (15.6 million), as well as St. Petersburg's Pulkovo (20.9 million). Russia has 32 airlines that operate over 990 aircraft, the largest of which is flag carrier *Aeroflot*. Russian airlines carried nearly 105 million passengers in 2023. Many international carriers stopped flying over Russian airspace after



its 2022 invasion of Ukraine (see *History and Myth*).

### Energy

In 2023, Russia generated about 32% of its electricity from fossil fuels, hydroelectric (33%), nuclear (18%), and

other renewable sources (17%). In 2023, Russia was the world's third largest energy producer and third largest consumer. As one of the world's largest producers of natural gas and oil, Russia has some 110,400 mi of pipelines to transport natural gas, oil (34,000 mi), and refined petroleum products (12,000 mi).

### Media

The Russian government tightly controls the media and owns or influences many media outlets. While some independent media operate in Russia, most are based online or abroad. Journalists are frequently harassed, threatened, arrested, or attacked in Russia and abroad, usually due to coverage of sensitive social issues or criticism of the government. A 2017 law labels some

journalists and media outlets as “foreign agents,” severely restricting their activities. Since 2022, officials have restricted the Internet and social media, banning many websites, messaging services, and blocking social media platforms.

**Print Media:** While the importance of print media has declined, it still plays a notable role in society. Russian print media includes widely circulated national newspapers published in Moscow or St. Petersburg, regional papers in other large cities, and local papers. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, *Izvestia*, and *Kommersant* are three widely circulated dailies. The *Moscow Times* is an English-language newspaper, published exclusively online since 2017.



**Radio and TV:** The federal and local governments and state-aligned institutions such as the Russian Orthodox Church (see *Religion and Spirituality*), military, and private companies entirely or partially own most TV stations and channels. TV and radio stations provide news, music, and religious, entertainment, sports, and educational programming. Some 2,300 radio stations broadcast in Russia, mostly in Russian (see *Language and Communication*). Foreign-language stations, like the English-language station *Moscow FM*, are also available.

### Telecommunications

Russia has Europe's largest telecommunications market, centered in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In 2022, Russia had some 15 landlines and 169 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people, well above the global averages.

**Internet:** Most Russians access the Internet and communicate via their mobile devices, though the government has expanded fiber broadband networks in recent years. In 2023, nearly 92% of Russians used the Internet. As its Internet censorship has increased in recent years, the government has used tactics such as blocking access to websites, shutting down regional access during protests, and throttling access to social media.



For more information on  
the Air Force Culture and Language Center visit:  
[airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC](http://airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC)

For more information on  
United States Air Forces Europe & Africa visit:  
<http://www.usafe.af.mil>



## CULTURE GUIDE

Access all of the AFCLC's expeditionary culture field  
guides in our mobile app!



GET IT ON  
**Google Play**



Available on the iPhone  
**App Store**



DoD Enterprise Mobility  
**Personal Use  
Mobile Apps**