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Spanning ten time zones and two continents, Russia and Eastern Europe stretch from the Pacific Ocean and the Bering Strait in the East to the Baltic and Adriatic Seas in the West.

The Russian and East European Institute supports study and research that addresses the following countries: Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine.

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Video Library: http://www.indiana.edu/~reeiweb/resources/collections.shtml
1. Though no longer engaged in a nuclear arms race with the United States, Russia is an economic and military power to be reckoned with. The largest oil producer in the world, Russia (or the Russian Federation) ranked 9th in terms of 2013 GDP (per capita). Russia’s nominal military budget is also the world’s 3rd largest.

2. 25 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe, many formerly communist countries have developed into mature democracies. The Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia have joined the EU. On January 1, 2015, Lithuania switched its currency to the euro, making it the fifth post-Soviet republic to enter the Eurozone.

3. Now more than a year old, the conflict in the Eastern Ukraine region of Donbas continues. This is despite two cease fires being agreed to – known as Minsk I and Minsk II – which called for a halt to the fighting between the Ukrainian government and pro-Russian rebels. Over 6,000 have been killed so far in the conflict and more than one million have been displaced.

4. Poland was the birthplace of Solidarity, the largest oppositional social movement in world history. It numbered 9.5 million members - 1/3 of the total working age population of Poland - before its September 1981 Congress. Despite government crackdown, Solidarity led Poland to democracy just eight years later.

5. Russia hosted the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi at an estimated cost of $51 billion, making it the most expensive Olympics in history. Though the Russian men’s ice hockey team failed to take the Gold Medal, the Russian Olympic team delivered an impressive performance as a whole, placing first in overall medal count and number of both gold and silver medals.

6. Every year, tens of thousands of migrants leave Russia and Eastern Europe to take up employment in Western Europe. According to 2011 census figures, the Polish minority in the Republic of Ireland numbered approximately 122,585, making it the largest minority in the country.

7. In November of 2014, Klaus Iohannis was elected the fifth president of Romania in its history. This occasion would hardly have been unique except for the fact that Iohannis, the former mayor of Sibiu, is the first non-ethnic Romanian to serve as the country’s president. Iohannis is an ethnic German (and his first language is German). Romania’s Transylvanian Saxon community, of which Iohannis is a member, dates to the 12th century in Romania, but, after years of emigration, now numbers less than 40,000 (from a high of 800,000 in 1940). Promising to “change the way we make politics,” Iohannis ran on a platform of anti-corruption and support for the rule of law and an independent judiciary in Romania.

8. Russia and Eastern Europe are home to many of the world’s newest states, while other people in the area assert their right to independence, too. Chechnya and the North Caucasus are regions on the territory of the Russian Federation whose politics have been characterized by separatist tendencies.

9. Only 26 years ago, many East European countries were subject to communist rule. Surveys suggest that the prevailing view in most of these countries is that people were better off economically under communism. Only in Poland do pluralities believe that most people are now better off. Furthermore, the consensus in many of these countries is that ordinary people have benefited far less than have business owners and politicians.

10. Men from Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia, and Kosovo continue to stand trial for war crimes at the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY), in the Netherlands. With the 2011 arrest of Goran Hadžić, the Tribunal captured its last remaining fugitive, and the Tribunal aims to conclude all ongoing cases by the end of 2014.
Chechnya and the North Caucasus

**Description:** When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Chechnya, an autonomous region within Russia, demanded independence. The Russian government sent troops into Chechnya in 1994, fearing the loss of the region’s rich oil fields and setting a precedent for other ethnic groups in the Caucasus. The war was disastrous for the Russians, and in 1996 a tentative peace accord was signed. The Russian government mounted a new offensive against Chechen separatists in September 1999. While Russia won this second war, fighting continues to flare up and there is no clear exit strategy for the large Russian military forces in the region. In September 2002, Chechen rebels laid siege to a theater in Moscow, resulting in the deaths of over 100 people, and in the fall of 2004 rebels took hundreds of children captive in an elementary school in Beslan, resulting in over 300 deaths. In May 2004, the Moscow-backed president, Akhmad Kadyrov, was assassinated by a bomb allegedly planted by a rival warlord. His son, Ramzan, took control in 2007. Ramzan Kadyrov moved quickly to consolidate power and stamp out unrest in Chechnya. Although he has brought stability to Chechnya, critics argue that Kadyrov’s reign has been unnecessarily brutal, and has merely displaced the separatist conflict to other parts of the North Caucasus.

Recent years have seen continued violence coming from the North Caucasus, with the bombing of a luxury train (the *Nevskiy Express*) on November 27, 2009, and the March 29, 2010 suicide bombings in two major stops of the Moscow metro during morning rush hour. Two women, one from Dagestan and the other from Chechnya, were identified as the metro bombers. On April 15th, 2013, the Boston Marathon was targeted by two Chechen brothers in a terrorist attack that killed 3 and wounded 264. Most recently, two suicide bomb attacks in the southern city of Volgograd killed a total of 34 people. Separatists from the North Caucasus are widely believed to have been behind these latest tragedies.

**Related Resources:**
- BBC “The Kremlin’s Post-Chechnya Challenge”: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8598476.stm
- "Prague Watchdog,” a group devoted to observing the conflict in Chechnya: http://www.watchdog.cz/

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Russia - Ukraine Conflict

**Description:** Ukraine, one of the largest countries in Europe, has existed for much of its independence, which it regained in 1991, in a state of suspension between East (Russia) and West (the EU) unable or unwilling to choose either side. However dramatic events on the Maidan Square in the nation’s capital of
Kyiv sought to change this. The protests started when Ukraine’s President Viktor Yanukovych rejected, after pressure from Russia, an association agreement with the European Union. Unhappy with Yanukovych’s decision and disgusted by his regime’s corruption, tens of thousands of Ukrainians took to the streets in protest. Months of protest followed. After scores of protestors were killed, the Ukrainian parliament voted to impeach Yanukovych, and on February 22, 2014 he left office and fled to Russia. Many in Ukraine’s south and east, where Yanukovych won a majority of the votes in the 2011 presidential election and Russian speakers are the majority, were turned off by the pro-Europe, anti-Yanukovych protests in Kyiv. Russia supported Yanukovych and opposed the Maidan demonstrations, seeing such protests as an attempt to lessen Russia’s historical influence on Ukraine. Later Russia took advantage of the political instability when, in March 2014, it invaded, occupied and annexed the Ukrainian region of Crimea, where ethnic Russians constitute a majority of the population.

Following the annexation of Crimea, which most other countries condemned and refused to recognize, pro-Russian forces sought to repeat such a situation all throughout Eastern Ukraine. Mysterious pro-Russian forces took over government buildings across Ukraine’s East, proclaiming independence from Kyiv and calling for Russian aid. While the Ukrainian government was able to retake many of these areas, they were unable to secure the region of Donetsk, the home base of Yanukovych, which borders Russia and is home to mostly ethnic Russians. War then broke out between the Ukrainian government and the pro-Russian separatists, who were supported by Russia not only with weaponry but also with Russian troops. Since the conflict began, more than 6,000 people have lost their lives, including the passengers of Malaysia Airlines flight 17, which was shot down – most believe by the separatists – in a separatist-held portion of Eastern Ukraine. Russia so far has refused to acknowledge its role in aiding the separatists in Eastern Ukraine. A propaganda war also broke out, with Russian media referring to the new pro-Western Ukrainian government as a military junta. Other Russian media outlets claimed pro-Ukrainian forces crucified a toddler in the nation’s East and that Western Ukraine, where antipathy towards Russia is strong, is a hotbed of Nazis. Two ceasefires have been signed, but the war grinds on.

Related Resources:

The Balkan Conflicts

Description: Post-Soviet political turmoil was particularly acute in the Balkans. The break-up of Yugoslavia resulted in series of complex and vicious ethnic conflicts that roiled the region throughout the 1990s. In 1991, Slovenia and Croatia declared independence from socialist Yugoslavia. Fighting erupted between federal Yugoslav forces and the Slovenian and (then) Croatian National Guard. This left Bosnia and Herzegovina, the most ethnically diverse republic, stuck in the middle. By 1992 it too declared independence. Serbs fought against Croats and Muslims in Bosnia, hoping to keep Yugoslavia united. War in the region ended with the signing of the Dayton peace accords in December 1995 and the entrance of United Nations (UN) troops to Bosnia. Marked by atrocities and war crimes, the conflict was the bloodiest seen in Europe since WWII. It left over 140,000 dead.

In the late 1990s, violence flared up once more as ethnic Albanians in Kosovo pushed for independence from Serbia. Serbian forces responded with brutal violence. Fearing a revival of the ethnic cleansing campaigns that marked the Bosnian war, NATO began a bombing campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999 without securing UN approval. NATO brought an end to the violence, but Kosovo remains in a precarious position. On February 17, 2008, Kosovo declared independence from Serbia, but Russia, an important Serbian ally, has not recognized Kosovo’s sovereignty.

Bosnia’s future is also uncertain. The complex power-sharing arrangement laid out by the Dayton peace accords has resulted in economic stagnation and paralyzing political infighting. Unhappy with their politicians and suffering from high unemployment (estimates range as high as 40%, with perhaps 70% unemployment among the youth) Bosniaks have taken to the streets. Protests began at a factory in Tuzla in February, 2014 and have spread across the nation.

Related Resources:

- Video: **Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation** (5 part series, 60 minutes each, 1995)
The Arctic and Nuclear Security

Description: The Russian coastline with the Arctic Ocean is one of the most severely polluted areas in the world. Decades of careless and inept management of nuclear material due to economic hardship and corrupt military leadership under the Soviet and Russian governments have left dozens, if not hundreds, of abandoned nuclear reactors and other radioactive materials littering the ocean floor. While Russia is cooperating with other countries that border the Arctic to clean up this potential ecological disaster, military distrust and security concerns are hindering the efforts. Over the past few years, the United States has worked closely with the Russia government to contain other nuclear materials that have been kept secure since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Global warming and the melting of the Arctic ice sheet means that vast oil deposits near the pole will be accessible for the first time. According to the United States Geological Survey, perhaps 22% of the world’s oil and natural gas reserves are located in the Arctic Ocean. This has led to territorial disputes between the five Arctic nations (Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the United States) as each tries to stake a claim.

Related Resources:

- U.S. Embassy in Moscow statement on energy interests in Russia: http://www.state.gov/p/eur/ci/rs/usrussiabilat/c37334.htm

Chernobyl

Description: At a cost of nearly 2 billion dollars, the international project to cover the Chernobyl nuclear reactor with a permanent “sarcophagus” is one of the most difficult and expensive engineering projects in history. Engineers from 24 countries are working to remove must large sections of the reactor complex and replace the ailing sarcophagus built immediately after the accident in 1986. The complexity of working in a radioactive environment means the work is slow going, although site managers hope to finish by 2015.

It is essential that the sarcophagus is completed quickly, because the aging reactor is beginning to fall apart. A major collapse could send clouds of radioactive dust into the atmosphere in a repetition of the
1986 nuclear reactor disaster. The Chernobyl disaster, which the United Nations proclaimed the worst environmental catastrophe in the history of humanity, released two hundred times the amount of radiation of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and sickened millions in the surrounding area.

Related Resources:


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**Human Trafficking**

**Description**: Each year human traffickers force thousands of women and children from Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia into prostitution. Lured by the promise of well-paying jobs in Western Europe and North America through fake advertisements and mail-order bride catalogues, the victims are often poor, uneducated, and desperate to improve their lives and the well-being of their families. Once abroad, they are dependent upon their captors and have little chance for escape. Without food, money, passport or identification papers, the victims find themselves in an unfamiliar country, often too fearful of their captors to flee. One reason behind human trafficking is poverty and high unemployment rates in the home countries of the victims. Also, many would-be victims are simply unaware of the perils of the false lure to better jobs abroad. Thus, the UN has been supporting information campaigns about human trafficking in many countries. Still, the questions remain: Are information campaigns enough? What responsibility do the destination countries, most often the wealthier countries of North America and Western Europe, bear?

**Related Resources**:

- Video: *For Sale: The Trafficking of Albania’s Children* (25 minutes, 2002, in English)
- Report on South Eastern Europe: http://www.unicef.org/media/media_25814.html
Demographic Fluctuations

Description: After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia’s population teetered on the edge of catastrophic decline. Economic hardship and high abortion rates meant Russians were having fewer children, while mortality rates soared. The safety net of Soviet social services disintegrated, unleashing a tide of new problems: homelessness, drug use, HIV/AIDS, and poor access to medical service. Alcoholism hit record highs and became a leading cause of premature death in men. Life expectancy hit record lows in about 1994, at around 71 years for women and 58 years for men. The UN warned in 2005 that Russia’s then population of about 143 million could fall by a third by 2050, if trends did not improve.

This decline has been arrested over the last decade. Putin’s government, which has presided over economic growth and social stability, has taken active measures to increase birthrates. In 2009, Russia reported its first population growth in fifteen years. While this growth was mainly attributed to an influx of immigrants from Central Asia, in 2013 Russia experienced its first natural (native born) population increase. Additionally, mortality rates have declined, especially among men. Male life expectancy has increased by four years since 2006, raising the overall life expectancy for both men and women in Russia to its current figure of approximately 70 years—ten years less than their western counterparts, but a significant improvement nonetheless.

Related Resources:

Other Useful Resources

Books


Films

- Russian and East European Audio-Visual Library: http://www.indiana.edu/~reeiweb/resources/collections.shtml

Online Resources

- Soviet Union Exhibit at the Global Museum on Communism: http://soviet.globalmuseumoncommunism.org/