

# Russia - people, culture, language

## A guide for businesses



### The country



Red Square, Moscow

■ **Russia today:** Is the successor to the USSR which dominated Eastern Europe from 1917-1991. Russia's leading cities are now modern consumer metropolises but there are massive differences in wealth between the cities and the more traditional countryside.

Russia is the largest country in the world with a population of 147 million and a land mass of 17,075 square kilometers (6,592,800 square miles).

- **Growth sectors:** The mainstay of Russia's economy is its huge oil and gas reserves.
- **Environment:** 75% of Russia's population live in cities - 10.5 million in Moscow (the capital) and 5 million in St Petersburg. 112 million live in European Russia (The Western borders to the Urals) and 35 million live in Siberia and the Russian Far East. Russia covers eleven time zones, Moscow and St Petersburg are three hours ahead of GMT. Russia's climate varies considerably between the northern tundra and the southern black sea coast. It has a long cold winter from November to April, a brief thaw in April and May and a hot summer from June till September.

To enter Russia you need a visa and an invitation. This can be obtained through your travel agent or on the internet. When you arrive you will be expected to fill in and sign a declaration of valuables you are bringing into the country, even personal things such as wedding rings. They may check, when you leave.

### Did you know..?

- Winston Churchill described Russia as 'a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, surrounded by an enigma.'
- The official currency in Russia is a 'ruble', however, it is very common for businesses to make their calculations in US\$. This does not mean that you have to pay in \$ as most of the stores, restaurants, and hotels will only accept rubles.
- Blat is the Russian word to describe favours and contacts, a very important part of Russian business.

### Business culture & etiquette

- **Formality:** Russians may begin formally but they like to do business with friends and a warm relaxed tone is very important in building good relations. People greet each other by shaking hands on arrival and departure. The famous Russian 'bear hug' is rare but Russians are more comfortable standing much closer to each other compared with the British. Unusually for a relationship dominated society they can be very direct. Dress tends to be formal.
- **Presentations:** Russians enjoy an authoritative but friendly approach. They need to establish the credibility of the speaker in terms of experience, qualifications, and knowledge. They enjoy new ideas and appreciate a moderate 'sell' but like presentations to be serious and to include facts and technical details. Avoid words like 'aggressive' and 'compromise'. Use words like 'meeting halfway'.
- **Hierarchy:** Russians are hierarchical and the most senior person makes all decisions, so ensure you are negotiating with the decision maker. Make sure the working process is highly organised and that everyone knows who is responsible for what.
- **Negotiating:** Good personal relationships are important if you want to succeed, so frequent personal contact is important. The Russian negotiation style varies from strong confrontation to extreme patience. Your key strength is NEVER to get upset and exercise patience. Have a number of throwaway concessions to use in negotiation. Show you understand their position and make recommendations rather than direct orders or regulations. Build up trust through clarity of action.



Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow

- **Hospitality:** Much hospitality still takes place over vodka and zakusky (snacks) but the aggressive drinking contests are less in evidence. Gifts may be exchanged at the end of a meeting if the meeting has gone well.



## Language

- **Official language:** Russian is a Slavic language and uses the Cyrillic alphabet. It is worth learning Cyrillic for regular signs, such as restaurant or pharmacy.
- **Other languages:** Although English is becoming the second language of Russia, many, especially the older generation, speak German or French. People address each other by their name and patronymic (father's name), for example, Ivan Ivanovitch to a man or Ivana Ivanova, to a woman.
- **Finding translators/interpreters:** in the UK, you can search for local, quality-assured providers by contacting the Regional Language Network. In Russia, translators and interpreters are readily available - the best place to enquire is at the British Embassy.

## Basic Russian phrases

The positive impression you will make by learning to speak a few basic Russian phrases cannot be overestimated. Below are some commonly-used phrases - if you are interested in learning the Russian language, you can search for quality-assured trainers and courses at [www.blis.org.uk](http://www.blis.org.uk).

	<i>Russian (phonetic)</i>
Hello	Privyet
Goodbye	Dos vidanya
Yes /no	Da /Nvét
Please	Pazhálusta
Thank you	Spasiba
Excuse me	Izveníte menyá
What's your name?	Kak vashe imya?
My name is ...	Moye imya.....
Good	Horoshó
Cheers	Na váshe zdróviye



## People, culture & heritage

- **Federalism:** Russia is a federation with 89 provincial authorities including a number of semi-autonomous republics. 81% of the population are Russian Slavs but there are also Tatar, Ukrainian, Chuvash, Belorussian, Baskir, Tuvan and Chechen minorities.
- **Religion:** There is no state religion but traditional Russian Orthodox Christianity is regaining popularity. The southern provinces of Chechnya, Ossetia and Dagestan are Muslim and the Far East region bordering on Mongolia has a predominantly Buddhist population.
- **Rules and regulations:** The younger generation, under 40, are relatively untouched by the old Communist system but over 40s may still exhibit some characteristics, such as unwillingness to take responsibility, sticking to rules and needing authorisation. Many older Russians are nostalgic for Communism, not for the political system but for the job and social security. Although Russia is beset by regulations, Russians quite happily ignore them much of the time.
- **Communal responsibility:** Based on the old village communal system, Russians have a strong communal spirit. They often intervene and comment on behaviour and give unsolicited advice and are very patriotic (never complain to a Russian about Russia, even if they do!)

## Signposting and resources

- **Resources** and organisations for more information:

Foreign & Commonwealth Office [www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk)

UK Trade & Investment [www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk](http://www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk)

International House is one of the largest language and cultural training organisations in the world. They train UK business in modern languages and international briefings. Contact them at [www.ihlondon.com/culture](http://www.ihlondon.com/culture).

## Sources

Research and text: International House [www.ihworld.com](http://www.ihworld.com)  
Mary Habibis (2003) CultureSmart Russia London Kuperard Publishing

Photographs: [www.moscow-landmarks.com](http://www.moscow-landmarks.com)

RLN East Midlands: promoting a greater capability in language and cultural skills for business and employment.  
Tel: 01332 826432  
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