EXPLORE GLOBAL ISSUES IN A REGIONAL CONTEXT: Russia and Eastern Europe

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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.
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 just below Germany in terms of 2012 GDP. 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, 2014, Latvia switched its currency to the euro, making it the fourth post-Soviet republic to enter the Eurozone.

3. 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.

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. Croatia is one of the world’s most popular tourist destinations. Tourism accounts for 20% of the country’s GDP, and the industry is growing, with a record numbers of visitors in 2013. Unfortunately, other economic indicators are not as favorable. In 2013, Croatia posted an 18% unemployment rate, the third highest in Europe. A low economic growth rate (1.4%) has been forecast for 2014.

7. Dramatic events have gripped Ukraine in the last few months (as of March, 2014). Disgusted by corruption and angry over the country’s political direction, tens of thousands took to the streets in opposition to President Yanukovych. The Ukrainian parliament voted to impeach Yanukovych, and on February 22 2014 he left office and fled to Moscow. In response, the Russian-majority Crimean region has threatened to secede from Ukraine, and thousands of Russian soldiers have been deployed in there despite vehement protests from Western European and American leaders.

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 Nevski 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/
CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION

Russia-Georgia Conflict

Description: Independent since 1991, Georgia, a small nation-state in the Caucasus mountains, set a precedent during the instability of the 1990s by asking for Russian military assistance to quell unrest in the neighboring autonomous regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Georgia sustained heavy damages as open warfare broke out between it and Russia at the beginning of August, 2008. In August 2008, fighting broke out between Ossetian and Georgian forces. With the help of EU president Nicolas Sarkozy, Georgia and Russia soon reached a cease-fire agreement with stipulations for Russian troop withdrawals. Military action has abated, but the political situation remains tense, as Russia openly supports the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, who heads a coalition that came to power in the parliamentary elections of October, 2012, pledged himself to repairing Georgia’s relations with Russia while maintaining the country’s pro-Western foreign policy. Georgia is ranked 9th in the world by ease of doing business and its economy has grown quickly over the past decade. These factors, along with Russian aggression in the post-Soviet sphere, have strengthened Georgia’s case for further economic and political integration with the west.

Related Resources:
• Podcast: “Russia-Georgia Conflict: Legal Implications and American Foreign Policy” http://podcast.iu.edu/portal/PodcastPage.aspx?podid=24a33d3b-5974-42e5-bbf8-5d7bc5b413cd
The Balkan Conflicts

Description: Post-Soviet political turmoil was particularly acute in the Balkans. The break-up of Yugoslavia resulted in a 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)
- NY Times World News Kosovo:
ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

The Arctic Ocean 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:
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](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.iub.edu/~reeiweb/av_library/index.shtml

Online Resources

• CIA World Factbook: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/

• Slavic Collection Office: http://www.libraries.iub.edu/index.php?pageId=334


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