RUSSIAN CULTURE AND HISTORY: Political and Geographical Structure

Russia is the largest country in the world with an area of 17,075,400 square kilometers. It extends across 40% of Europe and all of the northern Asia. It spans 9 time zones. Russia is the ninth most populous nation with a current population of roughly 143 million people.

Political Structure
Russia (officially The Russian Federation) is defined as a Federation and a Semi Presidential Republic. **Federation** means that it is a union of partially self governing states or regions. **Semi Presidential** refers to a form of government in which a President and a Prime Minister both play an active role in the day to day functioning of the state. Finally, **Republic** is a form of government in which the people or a portion of the people has supreme control over the state. The positions are elected and not granted through inheritance.

Like the US, Russia has three branches of government.  
**Legislative** – In Russia this is called The Federal Assembly of Russia (or the Parliament). This branch adopts federal law, declares war, has power of the purse and power of impeachment. It is made up of two “houses.” The State Duma is the “lower house” of the Federal Assembly. It is formed by 450 members who are elected for 5 year terms. The Federation Council of Russia is the “upper house” of the Federal Assembly. It is formed by 166 members – two from each of the 83 federal subjects (regions) of Russia.

**Executive** – This branch enforces and administers federal laws and policies. It is made up of the President and the Cabinet of Ministers headed by the Prime Minister. The President is Commander in Chief of the military. He can veto legislative bills and appoints the Cabinet and other officials. The current President is Dmitri Medvedev and the Prime Minister is Vladimir Putin.

Some other important Executive branch officials are Foreign Minister – Sergei Lavrov; Minister of Education and Science – Andrei Fursenko; Children’s Rights Commissioner for the President – Pavel Astakhov

**Judiciary** – This branch interprets the laws and can overturn laws they deem unconstitutional. It is made up of the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, and the Supreme Court of Arbitration.

Geographical Structure
Russia is divided into 83 Federal Subjects or Regions. There are 46 oblasts (provinces) which have a federally appointed Governor and a locally elected legislative. 21 Republics are nominally autonomous with their own constitution and president. 9 Krais (Territories) are essentially the same as the oblasts but have a historical significance of being a frontier region. 4 Autonomous Okrugs (Districts) were created mainly for ethnic minorities. There is 1 Autonomous Oblast (Province) which is the Jewish Autonomous Oblast. And finally 2 Federal cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

The regions that Wide Horizons works in are:
Moscow – Federal City and Oblast
Leningrad - Oblast
Rostov-on-Don - Oblast
Voronezh - Oblast
Bryansk - Oblast
Tyumen - Oblast
Yekaterinburg (Sverdlosk) – Oblast
Vladivostok (Primorsky) - Krai
Famous Sites

The Kremlin – The meaning of Kremlin is “fortress” and many cities in Russia have Kremlins. The Moscow Kremlin is a fortified central complex in the center of Moscow. It is adjacent to but does not include St. Basil’s Cathedral and Red Square. It includes four palaces, four cathedrals, the Kremlin Museums, and the official residence of the President of the Russian Federation. The Kremlin is both a historical site and a current site of Russian politics. Some of the first buildings in the Kremlin were built in the 1320s and 1330s. It was home to Tsars and Lenin alike.

Red Square – Red Square is named neither because of the color of the buildings nor because of the link between the color red and communism. The Russian for Red Square is Krasnaya Ploschad. Ploschad means Square. The word Krasnaya is translated as either Beautiful or Red. The name was original given to the square in honor of the beauty of St. Basil’s Cathedral which forms one side of the square. Over time, Red Square has served as a trade center, a center for religious festivities, a cultural center, and a site to showcase both the government and the military. In more recent times Red Square has hosted some high profile concerts such as Paul McCartney, Shakira, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers.
St Basil’s Cathedral – Officially called The Cathedral of the Protection of Most Holy Theotokos on the Moat, it was built in 1555-1561 on the orders of Ivan the Terrible to mark the capture of Kazan and Astrakhan. It is at the geographical center of Moscow and was Moscow’s tallest building until the construction of the Ivan the Great Bell Tower in 1600. Although originally a Church of the Russian Orthodox community, it became a state historical museum and was secularized in 1929. It has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1990. St. Basil’s is often mislabeled as “The Kremlin” but it is not a part of this separate site.

Learn to Speak Russian:

Red Square – Красная Площадь – [Krasnaya Ploschad’]
Kremlin – Кремль – [Kreml’]
Duma – Дума – [Dooma]
President – Президент – [President]
Prime Minister – Премьер Министр – [Premier Ministr]
Elections – Выборы – [Vybory]
Cathedral – Собор – [Sobor]
Tsar – Царь – [Tsar’]
Soviet Union – Советский Союз - [Sovetskiy Soyouz]