



The Russian Federation

The breakup of the Soviet Union was a pivotal event in modern vexillology. As each former Soviet republic asserted its own identity, old symbols were replaced and a number of new national flags were introduced. This was not the case for the Russian Federation, which reverted to traditional designs for its national symbols. The most dynamic aspect of modern Russian flags appears at the subnational level. This paper will examine the current flags of Russia's subdivisions, collectively known as "federal subjects", and will analyze design trends to draw conclusions about the new subnational flags of Russia.

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the 15 republics of the USSR each became independent states. By far the largest of those republics is the Russian Federation, the largest country in the world geographically with an area of 17 million square kilometers. It ranks ninth in the world in population, with 142 million people as of 1 January 2009. The Russian Federation is both a European and an Asian country—geographically, historically, and culturally. Its territory covers 40% of the European continent and spans all of northern Asia. The population of Russia is ethnically diverse—there are approximately 160 different ethnic groups in Russia, speaking over 100 languages. In fact, two words in the Russian language translate to "Russian" in English. The first, *russkii*, means ethnically Russian, while *rossiiskii* means someone who is a citizen of the Russian Federation. Thus, while all the citizens of Russia are *rossiiskii*, they are not all *russkii*. This diversity is reflected in the political subdivisions of Russia, as well as in their flags.¹

1. "Russia", *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_federation, accessed 21 July 2008; *Merriam-Webster's Geographical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 2001); "Geography", "Transliteration Systems" (Appendix 1), "Geographical Designations" (Appendix 2), in *The Russian Context: the Culture Behind the Language*, edited by Eloise M. Boyle and Genevra Gerhart (Bloomington, Ind.: Slavica, 2002), pp. 505-560; 633-640.

A short lesson in Russia's political geography is necessary for any study of its subnational flags. When the constitution of the Russian Federation was adopted in 1993, the country consisted of 89 subdivisions called "federal subjects". Since that time several of these geographic units have been consolidated so that, effective 1 March 2008 there are now 83 federal subjects in the Russian Federation. Each is represented by two deputies in the *Sovet Federatsii* (Federation Council), the upper house of Russia's parliament—the *Federal'noe Sobranie* (Federal Assembly), so in terms of representation at the federal level, they are equal. However, different types of federal subjects enjoy different levels of autonomy.

The federal subjects with the highest level of autonomy are the republics. According to the Russian constitution, each of the 21 republics can adopt its own constitution and establish a national language (to be used in addition to the Russian language). Each republic also has an elected president and parliament. While republics are meant to be a home to a specific ethnic group (called the titular nationality), that group does not always constitute a majority of the population in that region. During the Soviet period most of the current republics were Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs) within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (Russian SFSR). There are also several regions that were classified as autonomous oblasts in the Russian SFSR, but are now republics of the Russian Federation. While the formal names of these federal subjects include the word "republic", in everyday usage they are usually called by their common names.³

There are currently 9 *krais* (usually translated as "territories" and often spelled "kray" in English) and 46 *oblasts* (usually translated as "provinces") in the Russian Federation. These subdivisions are basically the same in terms of autonomy. Each has a federally-appointed governor and a locally-elected parliament. Most oblasts and krais are named after the largest city in the region. For this reason, it becomes important to differentiate between the federal subjects and their namesake cities by using the word "oblast" or "krai". The krais were historically considered frontier regions and have retained the designation of "territory" in recognition of this status.⁴

3. "Federal Subjects of Russia", *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_subjects_of_russia, accessed 1 May 2008; "Federativnoe ustroistvo Rossii", *Vikipediia*, no direct URL available, accessed 1 May 2008; "Republics of Russia", *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republics_of_Russia, accessed 1 May 2008.

4. "Federal Subjects of Russia", *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_subjects_of_russia, accessed 1 May 2008; "Federativnoe ustroistvo Rossii", *Vikipediia*, no direct URL available, accessed 1 May 2008.

The Russian Federation currently includes one autonomous oblast and four autonomous *okrugs* (usually translated as “districts”). The lone autonomous oblast is the Jewish Autonomous Oblast. This region was established in 1934 as a secular home for the Jews of the Soviet Union and was intended as a center of Yiddish culture. Ironically, today the Jewish residents of this region constitute only about 1.2% of the population. The autonomous okrugs are ethnic homelands which are usually encircled by an oblast or krai, although one is not within another federal subject. When the 1993 constitution was adopted, there were 10 autonomous okrugs, but six of them have since been consolidated into their oblasts/krais and only four retain their status as federal subjects.⁵

Finally, there are two metropolitan areas designated as “cities of federal importance”, or federal cities. They are the largest cities in Russia—Moscow and St. Petersburg. These cities enjoy the status of “federal subjects”, but they do not have the same level of autonomy as most of the other federal subjects. While they are surrounded by oblasts, they are not technically part of those oblasts.⁶

It is also important to note that all federal subjects, regardless of their level of autonomy, are considered an inherent part of the Russian Federation and according to the constitution their status cannot change without the consent of the Russian government. While some regions might desire more than their current level of autonomy, it is unlikely that any of the federal subjects will be allowed to seek independence in the near future.⁷

The majority of federal subjects had no historical flags when the Russian Federation became an independent country, although in many cases historical arms could be used as a basis for their new symbols. During the period of the Russian Empire and the chaos following the revolution, several of the current Russian republics briefly enjoyed status as independent countries and had their own flags, but few of those designs have gained status as federal subject flags. In fact, most of the subdivisions of the Russian Federation have long histories as territories of

5. *Ibid.*; “Autonomous Okrugs of Russia”, *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autonomous_okrugs_of_Russia, accessed 1 May 2008.

6. “Federal Subjects of Russia”, *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_subjects_of_russia, accessed 1 May 2008; “Federativnoe ustroistvo Rossii”, *Vikipediia*, no direct URL available, accessed 1 May 2008.

7. *The Territories of the Russian Federation 2007* (London: Routledge, 2007); Boyle and Gerhart, pp. 505-560; 633-640; “Federal Subjects of Russia”, *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_subjects_of_russia, accessed 1 May 2008; “Federativnoe ustroistvo Rossii”, *Vikipediia*, no direct URL available, accessed 1 May 2008.

Russia. The old imperial subdivisions, known as *guberniyas* and *oblasts*, typically had arms but not flags. In the Soviet period, while each of the 15 Soviet Republics had its own flag, the only subdivisions of the Russian SFSR with flags were the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics. Their flags consisted of the Russian SFSR flag with the initials of the autonomous republic underneath the hammer and sickle.

Only after the creation of the Russian Federation did most federal subjects have the opportunity to create and adopt their own flags. The new flag designs that have emerged are as diverse as the federal subjects themselves. Some are completely new, but the majority of the designs are drawn from the historical symbols of the regions. In fact, many of the oblast coats of arms are directly related to the historical arms of their namesake cities, and this has in turn influenced the flag designs. In summary, the modern flags of the federal subjects are for the most part completely new since 1991, while still heavily influenced by the heraldry and some flag designs of the past.