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## The Russian Diaspora in the US

By Maria Belousova, Washington

### Abstract

Russian emigrants came to the United States in waves, with participants at various times representing different groups and having different reasons for coming. The most recent emigrants are much better prepared for life abroad and are able to preserve their culture and ties with their homeland to a much greater extent than their predecessors.

### Waves of Emigration

Today there are about 3.1 million Americans of Russian descent living in the United States, according to 2008 Census data.<sup>1</sup> Only a fraction of these citizens, however, were actually born in Russia. In 2008 864,000 individuals reported that they primarily spoke Russian at home. This number has been growing rapidly in recent decades and Russian is now the eighth most popular language in the US.

Russian explorers first came to America in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, setting up their first settlements in Alaska and California. The first wave of large-scale migration took place between 1880–1920. This group of emigrants was mostly made up of individuals and groups fleeing religious persecution at home. These groups included Jews and various Christian groups that broke off from the Russian Orthodox Church, including the Molokans and Old Believers.

The 1917 Russian Revolution and the subsequent civil war led to another wave of emigration, thanks to the exodus of people who feared the new Bolshevik government. Typically these “White Russians” were members of the nobility, czarist officers, and intellectuals. Many of these migrants initially hoped to return to Russia after the collapse of the Communist regime, but they eventually adapted to American life and assimilated into it.

World War II sparked another wave of emigrants from the USSR. This wave included citizens of the Baltic states who did not want to recognize the Soviet occupation, prisoners of war reluctant to return home, young people who had been brought to fascist Germany as forced labor, and those who did not want to live under the Soviet system. The number of Soviet emigrants to the US during 1941 to 1950 was as high as 550,000. These migrants had no intention of returning to their homeland and sought as quickly as possible to learn English and restart their careers in their new country.

The next wave of emigrants came in the 1960s and 1970 and consisted mostly of people leaving for political reasons. The Soviet regime let many dissidents go, figuring that it was better to be rid of these people rather than face international criticism for persecuting them.

Figures like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Joseph Brodsky were effectively forced to leave the country. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviets allowed more Jews to emigrate and they typically went to Israel or the US. However, after the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the sharp Western criticism of this move, the Soviets tightened the emigration procedures for Soviet Jews.

The largest wave took place around the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Between 1990 and 1999, more than 433,000 former Soviet citizens came to the US and became permanent residents. The largest group among this wave was people declaring that they would be persecuted if they returned to the USSR. Many were scientists and engineers who found few job prospects and low salaries at home. These immigrants made a major contribution to science in the US and helped develop many American software companies.

This group adapted well to life in the US and, in contrast to their predecessors, were able to maintain ties to Russia. They created their own Russian-American society, which brought together the values and traditions of both cultures. They established their own Russian-language media, established Russian-language day care centers, and sponsored cultural activities. By 2000, Russian households had an average annual income of \$51,000, topping the non-Hispanic White population’s average of \$46,000.

### Making a Life in America

Russian-speakers in the US hail from a variety of social and cultural backgrounds. This diversity is a result of the amount of time spent in the US, the region or country of origin, and such factors as income and level of education. Nevertheless, these Russian speakers share an attachment to Russian/Soviet culture and traditions and these customs serve to unite them into social networks in their new home.

These networks are based on various determinants. Often people who knew each other in their homeland maintain strong connections after emigrating. Jewish community centers in the US often facilitated such connections. Similarly, many Russian networks are based on people working in the same profession. For example,

1 <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2011/tables/11s0052.pdf>

those who work in information technology (IT) often share information about job vacancies, job-search strategies, and ways to obtain more training. The same is true for a wide range of scholars, many of whom maintain ties with scholars across the US, including friends they knew in the Soviet Union. Others build networks around the Russian Orthodox Church. This institution brings together members of different emigrant waves and people with different levels of adaptation to American lifestyles.

Many emigrants are interested in passing on the Russian language to their children. Therefore they send them to Russian language nursery schools and other schools and camps that provide a variety of educational services. Similarly the Russian Orthodox Church provides organizations for young people to ensure that they maintain their religious ties. All of these activities naturally build informal social networks. Day Care for Adults, which provides services for senior citizens, plays a special role in these networks and helps bring together older emigrants as well as their younger descendants.

Many emigrants go to Russian stores, where they can buy the products familiar to them from their youth including goods which are usually not available in American stores. Many of these stores sell and rent Russian books, videos, and music. Russian-language bookstores are often informal cultural centers, which organize concerts, dances, and cooking classes that give people a chance to get together.

Russian-speakers often meet at concerts of itinerant Russian musicians and singers or to watch traveling theater productions. Festivals for rock music and bard bal-

ladeers are particularly popular. Across the US, Russian emigrants often organize such festivals at American camp grounds for two to three days, bringing together anywhere from a dozen to 2,000–3,000 performers and fans. Every minute of these gatherings is filled with performances and non-stop networking among the campers, who include residents of the US and guests from Russia, Canada, Israel and other countries. Participants in these festivals are representatives of a distinct subculture, for whom high levels of communication and efforts to preserve and expand their social networks is typical.

Today's emigrants maintain numerous channels of communication, including print and electronic journals and newspapers, and e-mail distribution lists. Usually an informal group leader will set up the electronic distribution networks and ensure that they continue to function. These communication channels provide information about cultural events as well as advertisements for Russian-speaking lawyers, doctors, real estate agents, and tax specialists, and a variety of other service providers.

The opening of the iron curtain removed the former limits on traveling between countries. Now the relatively comfortable incomes of the emigrants make it possible for them and their family members to regularly visit Russia. The Internet facilitates daily contact with friends and relatives there, watching Russian television, and receiving all kinds of information. The new emigrants do not leave behind an isolated country; rather, thanks to globalization, they are now much better prepared for living conditions abroad.

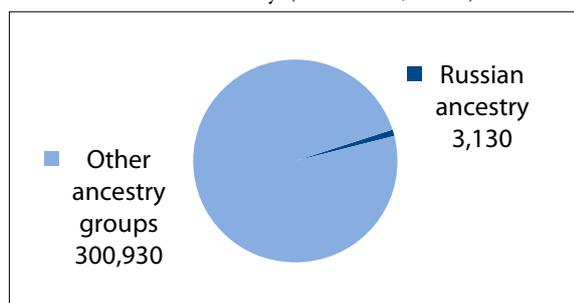
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Maria Belousova is a Russian emigrant living in Washington.

## STATISTICS

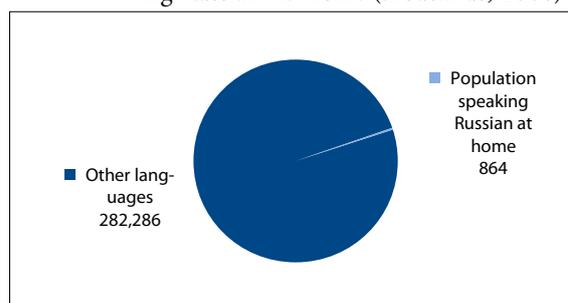
### Russian Immigrants in the USA

Figure 1: Total Fraction of US Population of Russian Ancestry (thousands, 2008)



Source: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/11statab/pop.pdf>

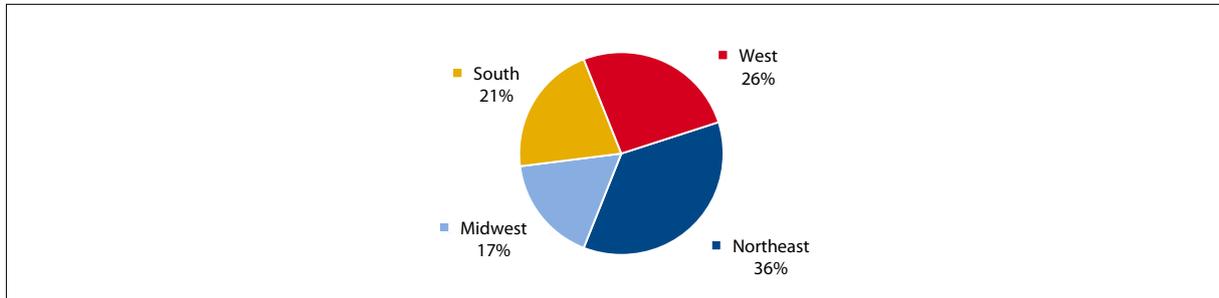
Figure 2: Total Fraction of US Population\* Speaking Russian At Home (thousands, 2008)



\* Five years old and older

Source: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/11statab/pop.pdf>

Figure 3: Percent Distribution of US Population of Russian Ancestry By Region



*Northeast: Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania;*  
*West: Alaska, Washington, Oregon, California, Idaho, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico;*  
*Midwest: North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan;*  
*South: Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Kentucky, West Virginia, Virginia, Delaware, Maryland, District of Columbia.*

Source: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/11statab/pop.pdf>

Figure 4: Persons Obtaining Legal Permanent Resident Status By Region and Country of Birth: Fiscal Years 2001 To 2010



Source: <http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/LPR10.shtm>

## Russian Emigrants in the Corporate Culture of American High-Tech Firms

By Janna Ataiaants and Irina Olimpiewa, Pennington, NJ, and Washington

### Abstract

The Russian Federation's scientific community has suffered a new wave of brain drain in recent years, which is distinguished from the exodus at the beginning of the 1990s by the relative youth of the migrants, the spread of new forms of brain drain, and a change in the main reasons for the migrants to leave. Russian citizens generally are successful in adapting to American universities and high-tech companies, though there are differences in professional strategies across generations. Russians praise the corporate and managerial culture and the organization of work in American high-tech firms, particularly in contrast with Russian scientific organizations. At the same time, Russians bring to American culture not only professional expertise, but also the specific features of their "national character," which is largely the product of their socialization in the Soviet and post-Soviet environment. Most of the migrants are not interested in returning to Russia, which holds relatively little attraction for them.

### Waves of Migration and the Brain Drain Problem

The US was, and remains, one of the main recipient countries for Russian immigrant scientists. Other popular destinations include Canada, Germany, and Japan. In recent years, Asian countries are also starting to become key destinations as well. American high-tech firms have traditionally welcomed Russian IT specialists, biologists, chemists, physicists, and mathematicians. According to Scopus, more than 50 percent of the publications of the Russian scientific diaspora come from the US; the US-based scholars account for 44 percent of the citations of Russians' work, while Russians working in the Russian Federation account for only 10 percent of the citations.

The first wave of brain drain began immediately after the opening of the Iron Curtain. Although it is clear that the scale of the migration was great, precisely determining the number of scholars who left Russia is practically impossible since they used all possible channels to leave. Even defining who is a "scientist" is open to considerable debate. As a result, estimates vary widely and the very problem has become an object of considerable contention. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, from 1992 to 2001, 43,000 Russian citizens working in the sphere of science and education received permission to leave for permanent residence abroad. But these figures are not universally accepted. According to the Russian State Statistics Agency, the number of scientists leaving for the West was 100,000 individuals; while the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace cites the figure of 300,000. At the high end of the scale, the Union of Scientific Workers of Russia claims one million. The experts agree that the exodus mostly affected representatives of the natural sciences, which in the 1990s included the departure of entire laboratories, and affected humanities specialists much less.

In recent years there has been a new brain drain which differs from the flight of the 1990s with respect to the following characteristics:

- The younger age of the scientists leaving, including college and graduate students studying in various programs abroad, and young scholars seeking a more challenging environment for their education and professional experience;
- Wider use of new forms of brain drain supplementing the traditional emigration, such as through "contract migration," when scholars go abroad for 1–3 years of contract work with a high probability of staying for a permanent position and "pendulum migration"—work on temporary contracts leading to scientists continually going abroad and returning; "outsourcing", when specialists work for foreign companies and organizations without actually leaving Russian territory (we do not discuss outsourcing here);
- A change in the motivation for emigrating. There is a consensus among experts that the main reason for the migration of scientists and scholars in the 1990s was economic, particularly the desire for a more comfortable life and greater material well-being. Today the most common reason for migration is a desire to fulfill one's professional goals and a sense that Russia does not offer the conditions necessary to achieve professional satisfaction. These reasons encourage young people to migrate.

The new wave of brain drain worsens the already poor situation in Russian science, leads to a rift between older and younger generations of scientists, a destruction of scientific schools and the stripping of priority fields. The share of scientists in Russia today between the ages of 50 and 70 is more than 50 percent (Fokichev 2009). Additionally, brain drain is causing significant economic losses for the country, which includes the preparation of specialists who leave after graduation, the unrealized

contribution to the country's economy, and the losses of outsourcing and the outflow of know-how (according to some estimates, from \$600–\$700 million to \$3–4 billion) (Faranosov 2008).

### How Do Russians End Up in American High-Tech Firms?<sup>1</sup>

Today it is possible to find Russian scientists and specialists in state and private companies, big companies and small, in all links of the “innovation chain” from universities and research organizations to R&D and the industrial production of high tech products. However, not all emigrants who had science-based jobs in Russia find work appropriate for their experience and knowledge in America, and those who do generally go through a long and difficult period of adaptation. The professional trajectories of the Russians vary. The “classical” route is when a scientist comes to work on a contract basis and ends up staying permanently. This path is the least painful and is characteristic for famous scholars who have publications in international journals, extensive international contacts, and fluent command of foreign languages. However, in the general flow of migrants, there are relatively few of these high level figures in comparison with those who left through other channels and do not have a similarly strong reputation. These problems particularly affected emigrants of the first wave, who often had to start their working career in the West performing jobs far from the scientific sphere (working as gardeners, custodians, or night watchmen). If they nevertheless were able to join a science-focused company, it was typically in a low-level, poorly-paid position with a narrow range of relatively simple functions (programmers, production line workers, etc.) Often in looking for a job, they had to hide the real level of their education and experience so that they would not be rejected as “overqualified.” The very process of looking for a job for older generation Russians, who grew up in conditions of full employment during the Soviet era and are not used to selling themselves on the labor market, from the beginning was a stressful exercise, which was exacerbated by the need to shine in an interview conducted in English, a language that they usually had not mastered.

The younger emigrants of the new wave move in different circles since many of them received degrees or stipends from American universities (a typical strategy is to earn a PhD in Russia, where the procedure is simpler and quicker, and then go to the US for a post doc) or come to work in the US by invitation, often orga-

nized by another Russian who has already established himself in the US. In either case, the young scientists quickly end up in professional positions without having to travel through the “rings of hell,” which awaited emigrants of the first wave. The new generation is distinguished from the old by its better knowledge of English, extensive international experience, and different reasons for leaving. In contrast to emigrants from the first wave, who left because of their poverty, the newer generations are focused on professional self-realization which is not possible in the current conditions of Russian science. Such emigrants typically say that “Earning money is not a problem, it is just that the work is not interesting.” In other words, for this generation, working in one's field and professional growth are the main reasons for emigrating. Despite their differences, representatives of the first and the second waves in general are similar in their evaluation of the specific corporate culture and organization of work in American companies.

### American Companies through the Eyes of Russians

The corporate culture and organization of work in American companies is superior to that of Russian scientific organizations in the eyes of Russian emigrants. Above all the Russians are surprised by the atmosphere of respect and trust in the scientist, which is unusual for Russian organizations. Russians often have trouble understanding this at first (“In Russia, we assume that they are deceiving you and they do not trust you,” one respondent told us.) This respect and trust stimulates creative initiative and the desire to work. The opportunities for self-realization to a significant degree are provided by the beneficial conditions for working, the effectiveness of the organization, and the provision of resources necessary for conducting experiments and research. These conditions make it possible for the scientist to focus on scientific work and not on solving some organizational problems, a situation that is particularly welcomed by Russian scientists.

They also praise the managerial culture, which Russians consider one of the key conditions for the effectiveness of high-tech companies. They especially emphasize the division of scientific work (the scientific leadership) and the technical management. In American companies, the task of the manager is not to generate ideas, but to organize the process, resources and people for implementing the given tasks. By contrast, the scientific leader in a Russian scientific institute must himself organize both the material and financial side of his project, resolve all the logistics and other problems which inevitably arise, and prepare all reports. In contrast to Russia, where servility and subordination are characteristic,

<sup>1</sup> This section is based on data gathered in interviews with Russian emigrants in American high-tech companies conducted by the authors between January and May 2011.

American corporations cultivate democracy. American managers, as a rule, are open to discussion and accessible to their subordinates, and not only in small companies (of course, there are always exceptions in both Russian and American companies). This situation generates feelings of surprise and approval among Russians.

Another quality that American companies have that is significant for effective work, in Russians' view, is the ability for long-term planning, which provides for greater stability. In the conditions of the unstable Russian economy, a scientific manager must develop "multiple financial schemes" in order to assure project funding. It is noteworthy that the possibility of long-term planning has an impact on the motivation of employees. The Americans are "more honest," they care about their professional reputation because they have a sense of their professional future, which they need to protect and invest in today.

Although the contrasts between American and Russian companies dominate, there are also similarities. As in Russia, academic organizations in the US are more informal than industrial concerns, where technical discipline is crucial. The demands for labor discipline also are significantly softer in academic scientific organizations, which make them closer to their Russian counterparts. There are also analogous differences in the organizational culture between big and small businesses, above all, in the relationship between formal and informal rules. The bigger companies that work on government contracts remind our informants of large Soviet scientific organizations in terms of their bulkiness and bureaucratization.

### **"Russian National Character" in the Context of American High Tech**

Russians "export" to American high-tech companies not only professional expertise, but also specific types of corporate behavior, which is largely a result of their socialization in the Soviet and post-Soviet environment. The specifics of the "Russian national character" are both an advantage and insufficiency from the point of view of American companies.

On one hand, Russian workers are characterized by their creativity, desire for perfection, and ability to innovate. The source of this creativity is above all the fundamental general scientific preparation of Russian specialists (particularly the older generation) that is characteristic of Russian education. The Soviet Union's universal shortages also facilitated the development of this creativity by forcing scientists to turn their ideas into actual products through the drive of their own ingenuity. Accordingly, they had to develop a variety of skills in a wide range of practical fields. Additionally, with the

Russians, the American companies often get a person who not only thinks in non-standard ways, but is totally immersed in his or her work, which the Russians think distinguishes them from their American colleagues. A characteristic example is that Russians are shocked when their American colleagues in private conversations say that for the money the high-tech firms pay them, they would "sweep the streets." For a former Soviet citizen, the opportunity to work in one's profession is a fundamental life goal.

However, on the other hand, the Soviet-Russian reality formed characteristics which poorly fit into American corporate culture and prevent Russian employees from "playing by the general rules." One such characteristic is the traditional Soviet and Russian distrust in the official authorities. This personality feature manifests itself in that Russian employees, as a rule, rarely or never "rat out" their colleagues, a practice that is widely practiced in American corporations. The basis of this behavior began in childhood: Soviet schools and subsequent socialization taught Russians to independently solve their own conflicts and problems within groups. At the same time, the American educational system from the early ages teaches students to tell the teacher about the dishonest or problematic behavior of the other children. As a result, in case of conflict with their colleagues, the Russian does not provide enough information to his or her manager and often ends up in a losing situation since the manager receives information from the other side of the conflict. Thus, there is a cultural paradox: what Russian employees value (not snitching on their colleagues) is interpreted as incomprehensible, and therefore disrespectful, behavior by American managers.

Another typical Russian characteristic that does not fit into the work style of American corporations is Russian-style individualism, which appears as excessive self-confidence and a lack of desire to share resources. What American managers call the "independent thinking" of Russian specialists often causes them problems. It manifests itself as a fixation that their opinion is correct to the point of open confrontation with the leadership, and a lack of desire and inability to work as part of a group. The explanation is again found in the previous socialization experiences of Russian specialists, who since their childhoods were taught to fight for individual success in conditions of harsh, at times, even aggressive competition despite the declared Soviet value of collectivism. Russians have difficulty understanding the value of group work because Russian science traditionally is not focused on producing commercial products. A Russian specialist is able to make individual innovative products with his own hands, but he is not able to carry his work to the point of creating a product for serial pro-

duction. The linear innovation model, typical for the organization of science during Soviet times, allowed scientific organizations not to worry much about the practical outcome of their research. American corporate culture, by contrast, has been oriented toward producing a final product from the beginning of the previous century, and then developed under the influence of Henry Ford's principles of the division of labor and cooperation. Contemporary high tech companies value the methods of group projects and open communications with cult-like intensity. It is interesting to note that while the individualism of Russian specialists grates in the culture of high-tech production companies, it is welcomed in academic circles. Possibly that is why Russian specialists feel comfortable in American universities; while in big companies that cover the full innovation cycle—from product development to industrial production—Russians are much more likely to work in R&D than in production divisions.

### Do Russians Want to Return?

Emigration was, and remains, a traumatic experience for Russian specialists, especially for those who leave for the US in the latter years of their life or held a high position in their homeland. Nevertheless, Russian specialists remain in demand by American high-tech firms. They are attractive not only because for the employer the high professionalism of the Russians is more important than cultural differences. The Russian specialists themselves are changing as they adapt to a new corporate culture and become used to the formal and informal demands which American corporations strictly require.

Recently Russia has been trying to stop the “brain drain,” or at least transform it into a global “brain circulation.” The authorities are developing programs that

envision various incentives for bringing talented citizens currently working abroad back to their homeland. These include market-level salaries, cost-free housing, and the most recent technology in the office. But do the Russian specialists who are successful in the US and left Russia even though they had plenty of opportunities to make money there want to return?

To answer this question, one must understand that during their time abroad Russian specialists became accustomed not only to higher salaries, but different organizational cultures. They are not prepared to return to organizations with incompetent managers, an atmosphere of mistrust at work, bureaucratism, and the need to invest working time in emotional relations with the bosses or “semi-scientific activity.” As one Russian scientist who worked in an American biotech company pointed out “If you just pay me, I will not return to Russia. Because it is not just about salary, it is impossible to work there.” But even if in a particular Russian company it were possible to create a Western-style work environment, it would be more difficult to give Russian repatriates a sense of political and economic stability, especially if they became used to long-term planning of their career and life while abroad. According to a Russian physicist who has set up a small American high-tech firm, “A person should believe in his future, but in Russia, it is only the ‘here and now.’”

It is possible that material concerns may play a bigger role in deciding about whether to return if the economic crisis deepens and Russian scientists in the West face the threat of unemployment. However, currently, the majority of successful Russian specialists think that working in the West represents for them the best and most predictable prospect for their professional and lifetime development.

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#### *Recommended Reading*

- Faranosov A. Problema utechki mozgov iz Rossii. *International Journal of Russian Studies*. No. 1. 2008.
- Fokichev Yu. N. Dinamika chislennosti kadrov nauchno-issledovatel'skikh uchrezhdenii Sankt-Peterburgskogo nauchnogo tsentra RAN. In Kugel' S.A., ed., *Problemy deyatel'nosti uchenogo i nauchnykh kollektivov*. St. Petersburg: Nauka 2009, pp. 197–204.

**ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST**

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Ortung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

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The CSS runs the International Relations and Security Network (ISN), and in cooperation with partner institutes manages the Crisis and Risk Network (CRN), the Parallel History Project on Cooperative Security (PHP), the Swiss Foreign and Security Policy Network (SSN), and the Russian and Eurasian Security (RES) Network.

**The Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, The Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University**

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**Resource Security Institute**

The Resource Security Institute (RSI) is a non-profit organization devoted to improving understanding about global energy security, particularly as it relates to Eurasia. We do this through collaborating on the publication of electronic newsletters, articles, books and public presentations.

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