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Review: *Faces of Contemporary Russia: Advanced Russian Language and Culture*

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Mesropova, Olga M. *Faces of Contemporary Russia: Advanced Russian Language and Culture*. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press. 2019. 256 pages.

Cultural literacy is of the utmost importance for advanced language students. Olga M. Mesropova's *Faces of Contemporary Russia* is thus a welcome addition to the selection of upper-level textbooks for Russian learners. Unlike existing advanced materials, it offers an interdisciplinary approach to contemporary Russian culture, media studies, history, politics, anthropology, and sociology, making it well-suited for a content-based language course with discussions and independent research as its primary focus. The book successfully presents input at the academic essay level with intricate syntax and target output of paragraph-length oral and written discourse on abstract general topics relevant to both Russia and the learners' own culture.

The book consists of 14 units, 12 of which feature various facets of Russian cultural life with their prominent representatives (e.g., Russian ballet and Diana Vishneva, or Russian television and Vladimir Posner). The modular structure allows instructors to cover materials in any order. The Introduction and Conclusion are intended to open and close the course, as they are interrelated and offer a useful overview of 21st-century Russia and a comprehensive test of cultural knowledge at the end. Each chapter prominently features one or more of the following subsections: «Глазами культуролога», «Сквозь призму социологии», and «В контексте истории». Each of these has an authentic text, followed by assignments aimed at practicing language skills while also engaging in scholarly inquiry and "broader humanistic debates" (ix). Another unique feature of this textbook is the excellent compilation of authentic and engaging infographics produced by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center. The color photographs and images serve as lively biographical illustrations and often as discussion catalysts (e.g., pictures of the two ballets (59), Worker and Kolkhoz Woman statue (23), fashion-related photographs (99), and others).

Typically, upper-level textbooks with a thematic approach tend to use topics similar to those used in beginning and intermediate textbooks. The focus on the biographies of selected cultural figures makes *Contemporary Faces of Russia* stand out. To my knowledge, this is the only such textbook among published pedagogical materials in the US. The texts present a wide

variety of topics and vocabulary while remaining similar in their genre and structure, which facilitates comprehension and thus progress in reading, speaking, and writing skills. The author describes it as one semester of readings, although there is enough material for a full academic year in an advanced Russian class that meets for two to three hours weekly.

Other features also distinguish Mesropova's work from the other advanced Russian textbooks. First, the volume intentionally avoids grammar charts and explanations. Instead, the textbook features grammar-targeting review exercises on issues Advanced-level learners often still find challenging, such as verbs of motion, declension of large numbers, participles, and others. For instructor and student reference, the grammar topics are listed in the table of contents for each chapter. Second, the topics are notable for their fresh approach to the traditional topics of education, sport, appearance, crime, and health. Students discuss flash-animation, ironic detective fiction, Russian glamour, talk shows on Russian television, women in Russian politics, and Russian vloggers, to name a few. The book does not simply present a glossy picture of contemporary Russian phenomena and achievements, but invites discussion of controversial topics such as doping in sports and political protests.

Despite the textbook's undisputed strengths, several significant elements are missing. The book lacks its own listening comprehension exercises or an accompanying website, although it provides links to various open online sources for further inquiry. Instructors who adopt this textbook will likely need to supplement their courses with a listening component. The absence of a student workbook or instructor's manual with assessment tasks, such as grammar/vocabulary tests and sample syllabi, might be a significant obstacle for beginning instructors. Finally, writing assignments are scarce and lack sub-tasks for preliminary work to facilitate successful output.

In conclusion, *Faces of Contemporary Russia* provides an excellent compilation of engaging texts and practical exercises for the further development of advanced learners' reading and speaking proficiency, albeit less so writing and listening. The flexible modular structure of the textbook allows for creative implementation of the material in a wide range of language courses, including intensive, content-based, and more traditional classroom-oriented.

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