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Review: *Panorama: Intermediate Russian Language and Culture*

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appreciate the fact that the workbook exercises reach a wide variety of learning styles and needs.

Both the “Classroom Activities” and the “Homework Assignments” books have plenty of very practical activities. Additionally, the “Homework Assignments” book offers helpful “Strategy Tips”—principally at the beginning of larger essay assignments—which feature ideas on how to use the language, why one should not rely on Internet translations, and so forth. This is really useful and is something not always found in other textbooks.

Writing a textbook, it seems, is sort of like running for political office: you have to believe in yourself, offer others something they need, put yourself “out there,” and be fully committed to the chosen task. One can sense the dedication of the authors to this project; there is so much they have thought of and very little of which they did not. They are to be commended for offering the foreign language profession an excellent new option for learning Russian.

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Every time a new Russian textbook is released, it raises similar expectations among both experienced and new teachers: Would this textbook make my teaching life easier? The hope is even more anxious when the textbook is designed to help students move from intermediate to advanced proficiency, a challenging task that needs more published teaching materials. Panorama is a textbook meant to respond to this market need.

Panorama is organized on thematic principle. Its 16 chapters are various and can be taught in any sequence: образование, социальные сети, преступление и наказание, здравоохранение, религия, внешность, город, семья, диалог культур, гендерные отношения, богатые и бедные, творчество, окружающая среда, герои современности, работа, путешествие и туризм. The choice of topics is
diverse and innovative with the themes of social media, societal aspects of crime and punishment, religious denominations, images of heroes and role models, many of which are new to Russian language textbooks and will be extremely helpful for instructors longing to stay current in class content. The common and traditional topics (like, образование, семья) are also covered in innovative formats (Facebook posts) or presented in an original way (for example, through a discussion on effective ways of child upbringing in a single-parent family). Each topic is supplied with a basic thematic vocabulary and, in some cases, with new colloquial neologisms (like твитнуть, пиарить, лайкнуть, widely accepted by young Russian social media users), and in this way Panorama is truly relevant and innovative. The authors give instructors a lot of freedom with selection of chapters, texts and also with the choice of fundamental concepts of Russian grammar meant for reviewing and supply only two recommendations: start with chapter 1 (focused on reviewing the basics of Russian grammar)-and teach unprefixed verbs of motion (chapter 15) before prefixed ones (chapter 16). The modular approach to the textbook’s design will allow instructors to skip back and forth and cover the materials in any order. From this perspective, Panorama will prove highly beneficial for courses that focus primarily on expanding students’ cultural literacy. The flexibility of topics adoptions, grammar presentation and texts selections allow for implementing the book content in focused and intensive courses. Panorama will be helpful in courses aimed at improving language production skills in deliberation on current affairs or up-to-date topics, a highly desirable ability at the advanced level.

Panorama is full of ideas for student activities in the classroom, including more traditional oral and written exercises, discussion topics, and texts for reading, and also pioneering tasks. Among the latter are interview activities designed to engage students in communication with members of a Russian-speaking community (both in the US and possibly in Russia via Skype or similar technologies), while also offering the opportunity for in-class presentations based on interview findings. Each chapter contains authentic photojournalism images meant to foster discussion. The textbook also offers summative exercises in different formats: grammar tests, vocabulary tests, and written essays. Many of these suggestions and ideas can be obtained through a free Instructor’s Manual available for download at press.georgetown.edu. Moreover, a
companion website, the Electronic Workbook for Panorama (sold separately on books.quia.com), provides online homework exercises on vocabulary, grammar, listening, and speaking, some of which are automatically graded in order “to free the instructor from the burdensome correction of mechanical exercises, thus giving instructors more time to develop and implement more meaningful and creative classroom activities” (Preface, p. XX).

Panorama also stands out for including substantial study materials from different registers and a variety of genres, which should prove beneficial for advanced learners. The diverse readings embrace blogs, blog comments, public opinion polls surveys, newspaper articles, interviews, Russian literary classics, and contemporary nonfiction texts. Grammar points are explained through examples or exercises drawn from the Russian National Corpus, as well as through more traditional proverbs and sayings. Virtually every lesson also contains a poem.

Although a time-saver in many ways, Panorama also presents some challenges that, in a way, are an extension of its benefits. For one, an instructor might easily get lost in Panorama’s abundant content and flexible structure. While this kind of freedom can be liberating for instructors with adequate experience or interests to warrant it, the lack of structure also means that Panorama does not provide a planned, lesson-by-lesson sequence intended for reaching the next level of proficiency. It leaves instructors with the task of developing their own course vision, selecting the lessons, choosing the texts, and minimizing the textbook’s broad content to fit within limited classroom hours. One might argue that in departments where graduate students do a significant amount of teaching and lesson planning, this kind of structure will prove overwhelming for beginning, inexperienced instructors.

The second challenge is a disparity between the grammar foundation and the level of skills that needs to be gained. The grammar covered in Panorama is a review of fundamental concepts typical for the intermediate level (cases, verbal aspect, verb conjugation, imperatives, short form adjectives, verbal adverbs, verbs of motion, participles, etc.), and it essentially replicates the grammar layout of V Puti: Russian Grammar in Context by Olga Kagan, Frank Miller and Ganna Kudyma (1996, 2006) or Grammatika v Kontekste: Russian Grammar in Literary Context by Benjamin Rifkin (1995). Yet the goal of Panorama is to provide students
with advanced-level proficiency, which presumably requires work on more complex Russian morphology and syntactic structures (the syntax of complex sentences and of particular simple sentences, research style constructions, word formation specifics, lexicological nuances, etc.). Unfortunately, these portions of the grammar are not the point of the textbook; and even though some useful hints are scattered throughout Panorama, digging them out of comprehensive grammar explanations (like the 11-page explanation of verb conjugation or the 9-page explanation of nominative case usage) will take additional time on part of the instructors.

In some parts of the textbook, exercises that require searching for explanations of culturally-specific details or that rely on innovative online resources may take up too much valuable in-class or homework time. Specifically, the practice of searching the Russian Corpus for examples of multiple uncommon words and collocations (like, подошва Воробьёвых гор, новомученики и исповедники) might distract students’ attention, rather than focus them on the task. Moreover, in some cases the exercises from the Corpus seem to mask relatively simple grammatical exercises, like selecting between the prepositions в or на (ex. 16, p 158). Furthermore, some tasks are assigned with little or no preliminary work to facilitate completion: every lesson usually ends with the assignment of writing a 500-600-word paper in a specific genre (отзыв – письмо – статья в газету – доклад), with no explanation of Russian composition genre clichés.

Ultimately, an instructor seeking to adopt Panorama will find plenty of deeply contextualized study materials but should not expect his/her teaching life to be made instantly easier. Extra time and effort are needed to adapt its plentiful content to the realities of actual class contact hours, particularly at advanced levels, and in developing a vision of how this content could bring students to a higher proficiency level. That being said, if the content of Panorama matches the course goals, the work is definitely worthwhile. Overall, the book’s content provides a commendable platform for advanced language practice and, with adequate planning and foresight, can serve as a solid basis for classroom work with students of advanced proficiency.

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