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Review: Political Russian: An Intermediate Course in Russian Language for International Relations, National Security, and Socio-Economics

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subjected to elicited judgments. Discussing the results of the two studies where heritage speakers of Russian were subjected to GJT or a comprehension task, the authors draw on statistical measures to point out the limits of acceptability judgment testing procedures.

Overall, the volume lives up to the stated goal of presenting “current trends in researching Russian quantitative linguistics, to evaluate the research methods vis-à-vis Russian data, and to show both the advantages and the disadvantages of the methods” (3). The papers are written in a user-friendly and accessible way, making the collection a great resource for anyone looking to expand their knowledge of current trends in linguistic research.

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References


The newest, seventh edition of Political Russian continues to serve the needs of students specializing in international relations, Russian affairs, politics, economics, government, national security, and related fields who wish to improve functional proficiency in reading, listening and speaking at the intermediate and advanced levels. However, the book’s reach is much wider. Several features of this course, including those new to this edition, make it a great resource for Russian-language instructors teaching a variety of courses and proficiency levels.

The book is organized into two main parts, or “concentric circles,” that target learners at different starting proficiency levels, beginning with novice for second-year students in Circle 1. Circle 2 builds on and expands the skills and competencies acquired in Circle 1. The book aims to develop students’ functional proficiency in reading, listening, and speaking; teach them effective strategies for working with authentic texts;
expand students’ active and passive vocabulary; and bring students to partial or full control over basic and more complex grammatical concepts and structures, especially those most common in news reports. Each of the 13 thematic units contains rich material on topics frequently encountered in contemporary Russian news sources: official visits and negotiations, elections, economic cooperation and recession, and terrorism and military conflicts, just to name a few.

While this course can be taught from beginning to end as designed, its “circular” organization and modular structure allow instructors the freedom to use elements of the course in a way that best fits the goals and structure of their existing curriculum. Instructors can choose the appropriate starting point in the book based on the level of incoming students’ proficiency level and grammar competence. They can also pick and choose the topics to cover and decide on appropriate sequencing. All activities within each unit are carefully scaffolded and integrated, yet the abundance of activities and tasks allows the instructor to choose which activities and how many to use, giving them the ability to emphasize a particular set of skills or competencies over others. Even though each unit or “lesson” is split into sections called “Grammar Exercises,” “Speaking Exercises,” “Listening Exercises,” and “Reading Exercises,” instructors can use the activities in an integrated way “without fear that the structure of the book will topple” (xix).

Beyond being a course on its own, the textbook and its ancillaries can be easily and effectively adopted in a variety of Russian-language courses, including courses on Russian mass media, reading and translation-focused courses, and any traditional intermediate or advanced course as a tool for teaching students to work effectively with news sources on a variety of topics.

Several features of the book make it particularly attractive. First, the course offers a rich collection of authentic Russian texts and authentic audio recordings and specifically trains students to work with such texts, focusing on different reading and listening skills, such as global and close reading and listening, skimming, scanning, discerning the structure of the Russian sentence, guessing from context, recognizing and using stylistic devices, such as the natural redundancy in expository prose. The course benefits greatly from the web-based materials, including recordings of texts and dialogues, authentic news reports, as well as Quia® online exercises with autocorrected answers, which allow students to receive immediate feedback on grammar-focused activities while saving instructors time in grading. These materials are available at http://www.gwu.edu/~slavic/
political russian. Speaking exercises and dialogues are new to this edition and provide a variety of discussion questions and tasks, such as retelling and creating news reports, as well as role-play situations—for example, participating in negotiations on a particular issue or giving a speech on an issue as part of an official delegation.

Instructors might find useful several features of the book, including succinct and easy-to-follow grammar explanations, tables, and appendices, with a caveat that all examples are grounded in the context of the thematic units in which they appear. Other useful sections include expressions for quoting sources (for example, “this article deals with,” “according to,” etc.), lists of useful expressions and idioms, such as the one on page 41, which includes such expressions as “in the course of,” “with the support of,” and “under what conditions,” among others). The introduction to reading strategies on pages 28–32 is a great model of how to approach reading with students in any class. In general, the activities, both pre-reading/listening and post-reading/listening, offer a great model that instructors can easily adapt to their own materials.

As the authors acknowledge, due to the nature of the course, instructors will need to regularly supplement the existing materials with new, more current publications and reports that reflect contemporary realities and language use. However, the activities presented in Political Russian give students the appropriate set of tools in order to deal with new materials and even to explore the news and the topics covered on their own. The scope of speaking exercises is limited in Circle 1 to account for students’ level of proficiency, but the instructors should use their judgment in pushing students to create with the language as early as possible and as much as possible.

A few typos notwithstanding, Political Russian in its new revised form continues to serve as a rich, diverse, and tremendously useful resource for Russian-language students across different fields of specialization and proficiency levels. It can give instructors what they are looking for, a greater degree of guidance or a greater degree of freedom, depending on the needs and goals of each course and program.

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