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## **WHY SHOULD AMERICANS STUDY RUSSIAN TODAY?**

## **ЗАЧЕМ АМЕРИКАНЦЫ ДОЛЖНЫ ИЗУЧАТЬ РУССКИЙ СЕГОДНЯ?**

### **Abstract:**

Over the past 75 years, there have been fluctuations in the study of the Russian language in higher education, primarily related to the impact of geopolitical events and shifting educational priorities. A surge of interest during the Cold War, driven by a desire for understanding and peaceful resolution of conflicts, was followed by a decline of interest after the fall of the Soviet Union. Currently there are challenges, including political tensions due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, ethical concerns, and competition from STEM fields, that have limited opportunities for study in Russia and further reduced enrollments. Despite these difficulties, there is an enduring value for the study of Russian language skills. Motivations for studying Russian include its global reach, the cultural richness of the language and people, and potential for government and international careers. By maintaining a historical perspective, contextualizing the long-term cyclical nature of U.S.-Russia relations, and the ongoing importance of cultural understanding, access to diverse information, and the hope for renewed engagement in the future, there are ample reasons for continued investment in Russian studies to foster a balanced and necessary relationship between the two nations.

**Keywords:** Russian language study, ongoing interests, cultural appreciation, enrollment pressures

### **Аннотация:**

За последние 75 лет наблюдались колебания в изучении русского языка в высшем образовании США, в основном связанные с влиянием геополитических событий и меняющихся приоритетов высшего образования. Во время холодной войны наблюдался всплеск интереса, обусловленный стремлением к пониманию и мирному

разрешению конфликтов, за которым последовал спад после распада Советского Союза. В настоящее время существуют проблемы, включая политическую напряженность из-за российско-украинского конфликта, этические соображения и конкуренцию со стороны STEM-областей, что ограничило возможности для обучения в России и еще больше сократило число студентов, желающих изучать русский язык. Несмотря на эти трудности, изучение русского языка сохраняет свою непреходящую ценность. Мотивации для изучения русского языка включают его глобальный охват, культурное богатство языка и народа, а также потенциал для карьеры в правительстве и международных организациях. Сохраняя историческую перспективу, контекстуализируя долгосрочную циклическую природу отношений между США и Россией, а также постоянную важность культурного понимания, доступа к разнообразной информации и надежды на возобновление взаимодействия в будущем, мы замечаем, что существует множество причин для продолжения инвестиций в изучение русского языка с целью поддержания сбалансированных и необходимых отношений между двумя странами.

**Ключевые слова:** изучение русского языка, понимание культуры, проблемы набора студентов

### **Introduction**

There is always a temptation to consider the challenges of the day to be unique. There is little doubt that the study of Russian in the United States currently faces a number of serious and ongoing obstacles. Nonetheless one should not forget that over the past 75 years there have been any number of geopolitical, ethical, cultural situations that have impacted the study of Russian. I want to attempt an overview of this cyclical nature for those who teach and those who choose to study Russian as a second language, examining where we have been, where we are, and where we might be going as well as offering some words of encouragement.

It was in the 1960s at the height of the Cold War between United States and Western nations and the Soviet Union and the Eastern block nations that the study of Russian began to attract greater interest in secondary and higher education in the United States. These efforts were supported in part by the United States government with funding opportunities to open exchanges of teachers and by the mid 1960s exchanges of students, albeit very limited or occurring. The government investment was driven in large part by concern for Soviet technological advances, including space exploration. Universities and colleges began to augment or create new programs at both the undergraduate and graduate level and at one time there were more than 400 programs offering Russian language and studies across the United States. The Cold War era (1960s-1980s) marked the zenith of Russian language study in the U.S. Geopolitical competition with the Soviet Union, coupled with events like the space race, spurred significant federal funding through initiatives like the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), leading to a surge in enrollments. Russian was perceived as crucial for national security, diplomacy, scientific research, and understanding the ideological adversary.

Those of us who were studying Russian in the 1960s were driven, I believe, as it was in my case, by a firm conviction that only by finding a “common language” could we help to resolve many of the prevailing geopolitical crises that we were facing. That enthusiasm was also accompanied by an increased desire to study Russian both at home and in the Soviet Union, but such opportunities were severely limited. There were summer programs sponsored by the Council of International Educational Exchange (CIEE) that provided summer study in Leningrad for approximately 150 American students. It was only in the fall of 1968 that those summer opportunities expanded to include a semester of study in Russia. Here too the number of places, approximately 25 per semester, fell far below the desire of American students to participate. The 1970s did see an increase, although still rather modest, maybe as many as 200 additional places that opened up primarily for study at the Pushkin Russian Language Institute

in Moscow. Opportunities to work in the Soviet Union were largely constrained by the lack of economic possibilities and were limited to work with the United States government either with the State Department or on cultural exchanges that took place under the United States Information Agency (USIA).

It was only with the increase in economic activity in the late 1970s, in part the result of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment to the Trade Act of 1974, that opportunities arose for those who knew Russian to participate with American or other Western firms doing business in the Soviet Union itself. Here too geopolitical events intervened as this activity came to a halt with what was perceived from the Western perspective as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The situation remained icy and limited by United States sanctions, a condition that continued until the gradual opening of business opportunities once again under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid 1980s. The fall of the Soviet Union and the economic turmoil in the 1990s was curiously accompanied not by a dramatic increase in Russian enrollment, but rather by a decrease. The economic opportunities did not seem to hold the same sway as the idealism of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet the agreements that were reached between both countries were in no small part due to the increased number of contacts that had been established between Russians and Americans over the course of the previous 25 years.

By 1990, nearly 44,500 students were studying Russian, driven by the need for experts in these critical fields. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 dramatically altered the landscape. As the perceived threat diminished, so did interest in the language, resulting in a sharp decline in enrollments throughout the 1990s. This decline was further influenced by a shift in focus from strategic concerns to cultural and economic interests in the newly independent post-Soviet states. The economic turmoil of the 1990s in Russia, surprisingly, did not lead to a surge in enrollments, highlighting the complex interplay of factors beyond simple economic incentives. Students may have been hesitant to invest time and resources in a language whose future relevance seemed uncertain amidst the instability in Russia. As the database of the Modern Language Association indicates, a high point in enrollment in 1990 has never again been achieved.



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LANGUAGE ENROLLMENT DATABASE, 1958–2021

**Note:** In early MLA enrollments surveys, some languages were recorded in aggregate form only. [Click here for additional information.](#)

Language Enrollment Database, 1958–2021

**Note:** If drop-down icons appear, expand rows to see enrollments by state and institution. You can revise your search, or you can start over.

**RUSSIAN**

	2021 Fall	2016 Fall	2009 Fall	1998 Fall	1990 Fall	1980 Fall	1968 Fall	1958 Fall
Entire US	17,598	20,302	26,740	23,791	44,476	23,987	41,280	16,042

The decreases in enrollment that have been noted since 1990s have continued for the past 35 years. They are driven not only by political considerations, but by the overall situation in higher education in the United States, where the number of college students has decreased, the percentage of high school seniors choosing to go into high education has decreased, and demographically the actual number of high school aged seniors will decrease. “Changing Demographics Will Impact Higher Education for Years” points to the actual decrease in the number of college aged students. An additional factor is the decreasing percentage of high

school students choosing to pursue higher education. All of this was exacerbated by the isolation that we all experienced during the Covid. In addition to these democratic factors, shrinking government support for education has led to a severe restriction of the number of institutions that even offer Russian as a foreign language. The study of Russian like many of the humanities has fallen victim to the newfound enthusiasm for STEM subjects (science, technology, economics, and mathematics) that has appeared to prevail at least over the past decade.

The early 2000s saw a brief and modest resurgence driven by renewed geopolitical concerns related to terrorism and Russia's re-emergence on the world stage, as well as growing economic ties. This revival, however, proved short-lived. By 2016, enrollments began to decline again, a trend exacerbated by a confluence of factors. Russia's actions in Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea, significantly impacted perceptions of the country and led some students to distance themselves from Russian studies due to ethical concerns. Simultaneously, shifting student interests towards other languages, particularly Asian languages like Chinese and Korean, further contributed to the decline. Institutional budget cuts, the overall decline in humanities enrollments across American universities, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted education globally, further compounded the problem. By 2024, Russian language enrollments had plummeted to approximately 13,600, a stark contrast to the over 46,000 students enrolled in 2002. This decline has been further intensified by the current political climate, with ethical concerns surrounding engagement with Russian culture and institutions deterring some potential students. The near-complete cessation of academic exchanges, a crucial motivator for many students, has also significantly impacted enrollments, depriving students of the immersive experience that is so vital for language acquisition. There is nothing on the horizon that leads one to believe that these numbers will be significantly reversed or even that the decline to be halted.

So to summarize the current challenges we see that Russian language studies currently face a multitude of interconnected challenges, including:

**Declining Enrollments:** This is the most pressing and fundamental issue, threatening the very existence of many Russian programs at universities. Low enrollments lead to program cuts, faculty reductions, and a diminished capacity to train future generations of Russian specialists.

**Funding Constraints:** Reduced institutional and government funding makes it difficult to maintain existing programs, develop new initiatives, and attract and retain qualified faculty. Competition for limited resources is fierce, and Russian programs often struggle to compete with larger, more established departments.

**Perception Issues:** Ethical concerns surrounding Russia's political actions, particularly the war in Ukraine, have deterred some potential students. The association of the Russian language with the current political climate creates a negative image for some, making it a less attractive option for study.

**Competition from Other Languages:** The rising popularity of other languages, especially Asian languages, which are often perceived as offering better career prospects, draws students away from Russian. Students are increasingly making strategic decisions about language study based on perceived career benefits.

**Changing Academic Priorities:** Reduced or eliminated foreign language requirements at many universities further diminish demand for language courses, including Russian. The emphasis on STEM fields and vocational training has led to a decline in support for humanities education in general.

**Limited Study Abroad Opportunities:** Current political tensions and logistical challenges have severely restricted opportunities for study in Russia, removing a key motivator for students and hindering their ability to develop advanced

language proficiency. The lack of immersive experiences makes it more difficult to achieve fluency and cultural understanding.

**Faculty Attrition:** As enrollments decline, universities may be forced to reduce faculty positions, leading to the loss of experienced and dedicated Russian language instructors. This attrition weakens programs and makes it more difficult to rebuild in the future.

In light of and despite these significant challenges, opportunities for growth and innovation exist:

**Continued Geopolitical Relevance:** Russia's ongoing role in global affairs, even amidst current tensions, ensures the continued importance of Russian language skills for diplomacy, intelligence, international relations, journalism, and national security. Understanding Russia's language, culture, and history is crucial for navigating the complex geopolitical landscape. Another reason for the study of Russian is, of course, the consideration for work inside the United States government with numerous opportunities for those who may be Russian language specialists in the area of security concerns, in the area of the justice department or commerce, and in any other positions where cooperation at the international level will call for people who both know Russian and understand Russians from a well informed cultural background and standpoint. While the economic sector at present is largely nonexistent, we have seen a seashore sway back-and-forth of the opening of opportunities subsequent sensation only to be followed by a newer set of opportunities for economic exchange and development.

**Interdisciplinary Potential:** Russian remains valuable in diverse and increasingly important fields like cybersecurity, energy policy, environmental studies (particularly related to the Arctic), and public health, offering opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaborations and attracting students from a wider range of academic backgrounds.

**Cultural and Artistic Legacy:** Russia's rich and globally recognized cultural heritage in literature, art, music, dance, and film continues to attract students interested in these fields. Exploring Russian culture through the lens of language study can be a powerful motivator. The Russian culture, Russian music, the great composers such as Tchaikovsky, the Russian ballet, which has enjoyed a well deserved. Well earned reputation for excellence in the arts also draws some towards the study of Russian. Even if currently our students are unable to study in Russia proper one needs to preserve a historical perspective that says that in a few years or a decade or even a generation that the situation may revert dramatically back to a time of a good relations when travel and exchanges will be possible and welcomed and supported by both sides.

**Global Reach of the Russian Language:** With an estimated 250 million speakers worldwide, a significant portion of whom reside outside of Russia in countries like Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Belarus, the language remains a valuable tool for communication, cultural exchange, and understanding diverse perspectives. This global reach extends beyond the current political context. One of the primary reasons for studying Russian is its position as one of the most spoken languages in the world with the assumption being that there are some 250 million people who are conversant in Russian yet only 2/3 of that number are found in the Russian Federation as it is currently constituted leaving well over 100 million Russian speakers spread throughout the rest of the world. Russian has been a language of the arts, the sciences for the past 2 1/2 centuries and is likely to remain so regardless of political considerations, so there are opportunities to engage with the Russian language, either actively or passively through the reading of literature.

More than one student has decided to learn Russian in order to read Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, or Chekhov in the original.

**Technological Advancements:** New technologies offer innovative and engaging teaching methods, including virtual reality immersion, AI-powered language tutors, gamification, and online learning platforms, making Russian language learning more accessible and appealing to a broader student base. Already one can create an artificial interlocutor, tutor, conversation partner for practice in Russian. These opportunities are multiplying at a dizzying speed.

**Growing Recognition of the Importance of Language Skills:** In an increasingly interconnected world, there is a growing recognition of the importance of foreign language skills, including Russian, for global citizenship, international business, and cross-cultural understanding.

There are a number of existing initiatives along with a comprehensive blueprint for the future. Several initiatives are already working to promote Russian language studies, including government-sponsored programs like STARTALK, and others that provide funding for intensive language study and study abroad opportunities. University-led programs and initiatives, such as the Middlebury Summer Russian Intensive, offer immersive learning experiences and virtual instruction. These programs demonstrate a continued commitment to Russian language education. Their enrollments remain steady and with the disappearance of institutional and program abroad opportunities such programs have even flourished.

More work is needed, however, to revitalize and secure the future of Russian language studies, there should be a comprehensive and multifaceted strategy encompassing the following key areas:

1. **Emphasize Interdisciplinary Connections:** Actively seek partnerships and collaborations with other academic departments, such as computer science, international relations, business, environmental studies, and journalism, to demonstrate the practical applications and career relevance of Russian language skills. Develop joint programs and courses that integrate Russian language study with other disciplines.
2. **Leverage Technology for Enhanced Learning:** Integrate cutting-edge technology into Russian language instruction to create more engaging and effective learning experiences. Utilize virtual reality for immersive cultural experiences, AI-powered language tutors for personalized feedback, gamification to make learning more interactive, and online platforms for flexible and accessible learning.
3. **Expand Online and Hybrid Learning Options:** Develop high-quality online and hybrid programs to reach a broader student base, including those who may not have access to traditional classroom instruction. Offer flexible online courses, blended learning formats, and virtual exchange programs with Russian universities to accommodate diverse learning styles and schedules.
4. **Renew Focus on Career Relevance and Professional Development:** Actively promote the career benefits of Russian language skills by highlighting opportunities in government, international organizations, business, journalism, cybersecurity, and other fields. Organize career workshops, invite guest speakers from relevant professions, develop internship partnerships, and build strong alumni networks to connect students with potential employers.
5. **Promote Cultural Engagement and Appreciation:** Emphasize the rich and diverse aspects of Russian culture through film festivals, literary events, cultural celebrations, art exhibits, and discussions of contemporary Russian issues. Encourage students to explore Russian literature, music, film, and other forms of cultural expression to deepen their understanding and appreciation of the culture.
6. **Advocate for Institutional and Government Support:** Actively lobby for continued funding and support for Russian language programs at universities and from government agencies. Communicate the strategic importance of Russian language skills

to university administrators, policymakers, and the public. Highlight the need for continued investment in Russian language education to ensure national security and global competitiveness.

Going forward how do we convince 18-year-olds to either continue or to begin the study of Russian the first year university level? I would argue that perspective is key here to such discussions, a perspective that informs people of the long-standing history of ups and downs of relationship between our two nations and of the hope and indeed likelihood that at some point and a potential career span of some 45 years for these young individuals that opportunities to participate and engage in activities with Russians, can only increase from this point in time. Yes, we must continue to rely on those who are studying Russian for cultural reasons, who desire to read, appreciate that in one's own words to interact with the arts in Russia, both on the territory of the Russian Federation and abroad. To have access to the millions of writings by Russians on topics of shared interest and politically even from the simple ability to access new sources, etc., for an alternative vision to the news as it is presented in western outlets.

I think there's little that can be done to change the demographic situation or the ongoing pressures from college administrations other than to once again have them contextualize their focus. The fact that Russian studies have had ups and downs since well before their administration and are likely to continue well after their exit from the stage of administration; to make the case that the study of Russian is vital to our national interest. In moving forward it would be too easy to say that the reasons for studying Russian have essentially disappeared, to wash our hands and retreat in silence into oblivion. But too many of us have invested enormous amounts of time and energy to acquire a Russian expertise, to attempt to reach an understanding of the Russian soul and spirit, and the historical influences that have brought the country to this point in its history. Only such an enduring understanding offers hope for restoring a necessary and an enduring balance to the relationship between the United States and the Russian Federation.

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