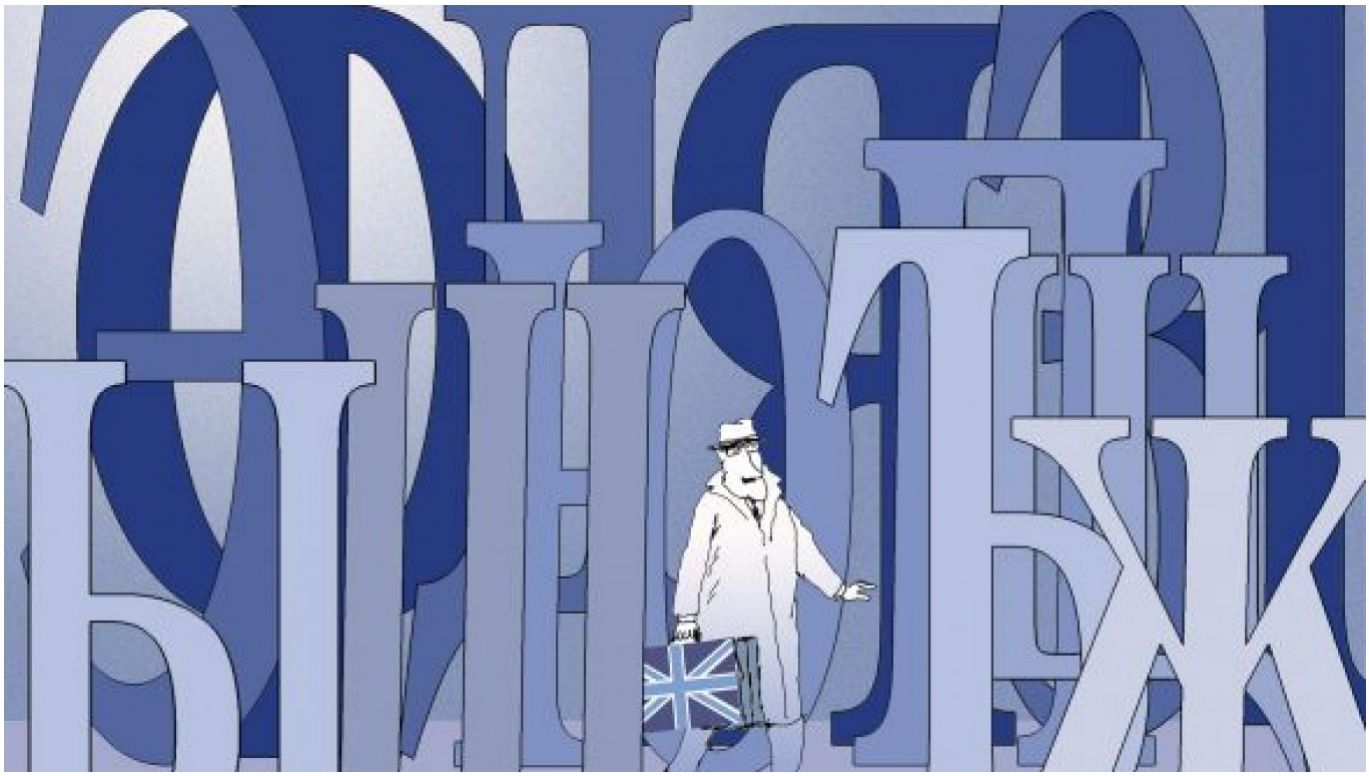
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When in Russia, Talk the Talk

By Luc Jones

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Question: What do you call someone who speaks several languages?
Answer: A polyglot.
Question: What do you call someone who speaks two languages fluently?
Answer: Bilingual.
Question: What do you call someone who speaks only one language?
Answer: A native English speaker.

There is more than a modicum of truth in this joke, although when we foreigners do make the effort to speak Russian, nearly everyone seems to reply in English anyway. But this is less likely to happen outside of the Garden Ring.

There is a case to be made for learning the local language whenever you spend a reasonable amount of time in a foreign country, especially when you are working there. Russia is an especially relevant example of this, yet few expats ever master more than the odd word or phrase, despite the difficulty of completing even basic tasks without some command of Russian.

I have been asked on numerous occasions by Russians why so few foreigners master even conversational Russian.

While many foreigners have told me that knowing some Russian would ease their personal and working lives, they say they have little incentive. Many foreigners in Russia are here on relatively short-term contracts, ranging from a few months to three years. In almost all cases, they have been sent here by their parent companies, and no prior knowledge of Russia or the Russian language is required for them to do the job. They know in advance that they will be posted to another country immediately afterward. Shorter assignments are often IT-related, while longer periods are reserved for more senior postings, usually in finance, operations or general management, for multinational corporations here.

Without incentives, foreigners remain in their expat bubble, and the standard excuse is: "I'd love to, but I can't find the time."

The Russian language looks extremely daunting to start learning just because it's written in Cyrillic. Then the student must master a fair amount of grammar just to say basic things. Unlike some languages, where you can substitute one word for another, you can't generally do this with Russian. Add to this the fact that there are six cases and three genders making for a grand total of 108 endings for regular Russian nouns — not to mention the fact that there are always exceptions to the rules — and you can see why overworked executives arriving in Moscow with the best of intentions simply give up early on.

But I would like to offer a few points to help relieve the initial stress for those expats who are trying to learn Russian:

- The Cyrillic alphabet is surprisingly easy to master — many letters are the same as or similar to English, and the letters keep the same form no matter whether they are upper or lower case. Russian is also phonetic, so you pronounce words as you see them written. (Ask a foreigner to pronounce British place names such as Slough, Leicester, Worcester, Loughborough and Fowey, and you'll see where I'm coming from.)
- Bizarrely for a country of its size, Russia has practically no regional accents. You can be in Kaliningrad, Kamchatka or Kalmykia, and everyone speaks almost identically — even if Muscovites do have a slight drawl, especially when they pronounce an unstressed "o" as "a," resulting in "Maaaskva" for their capital. By contrast, notice the difference in accents traveling the short distance between Liverpool and Manchester; and pity the Russian student arriving in Glasgow or Texas and trying not only to make themselves understood, but also comprehending the reply.
- Russians love to tell any learner of their language (and even those who aren't) that it's the richest in the world. While the claim makes for a separate debate, the language does have a huge number of sayings, expressions and colloquialisms. But in everyday speech, the bulk of what you'll hear is fairly standardized. Listen to what your colleagues and friends say and how they respond in certain situations, and you'll be surprised at how often the same phrases are repeated.
- Everyday speech contains considerably fewer words than English and is much more direct. So "Nadenu palto" translates as "I am going to put my coat on," while "Would you be so kind as to open the window, please" in Russian would simply be "Otkroite okno." Consequently, Russians can appear brusque, or even rude, without meaning

to be. Being aware of this will definitely help avoid any misunderstandings.

On the whole, Russians don't expect foreigners from outside of the former Soviet Union to speak much — if any — Russian at all. So if you invest some time into the language, you will not only find your daily life becoming a lot easier, but also find more doors opening to you at work and in your personal life.

Udachi — ne pozhaleyesh! (Good luck, you won't regret it!)

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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