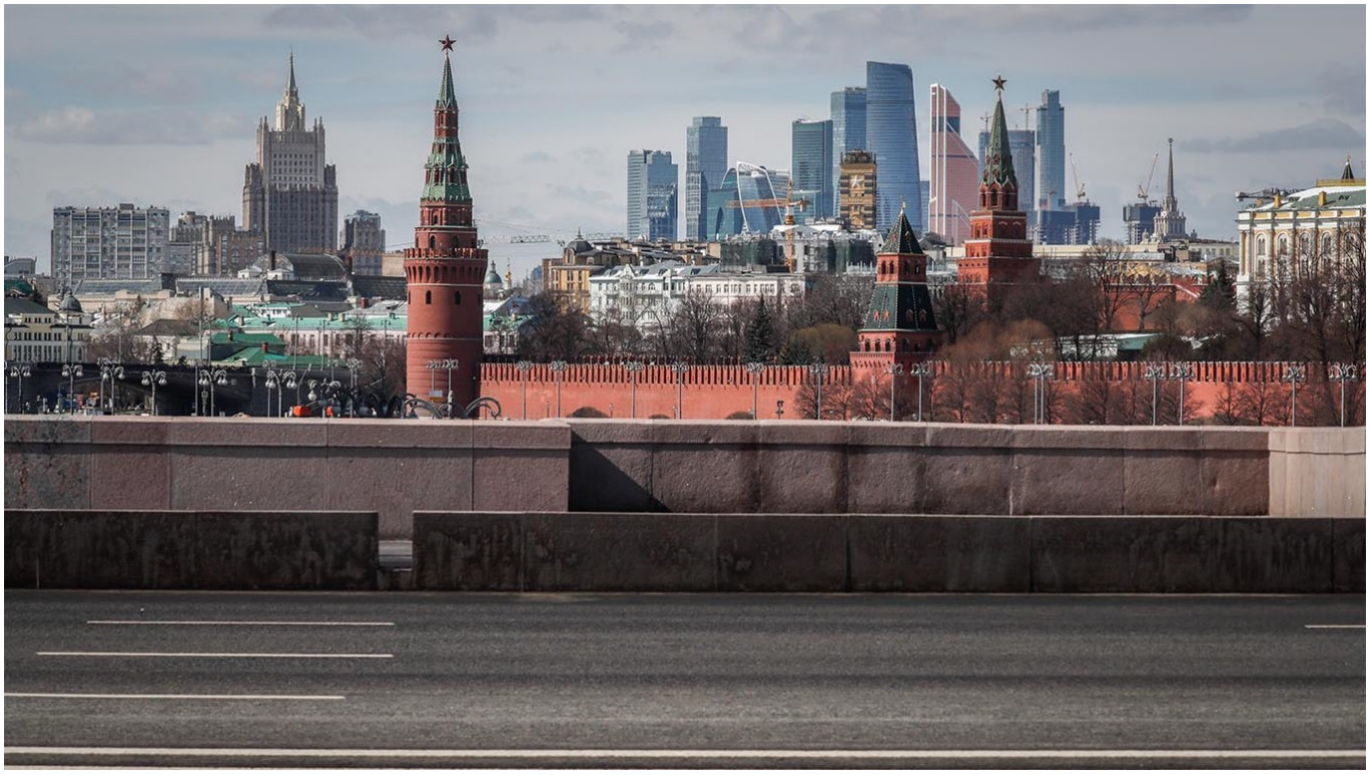
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The West's Russian Language Skills Are in Decline. That's a Strategic Mistake.

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Yuri Kochetkov / EPA / TASS

On March 31, a Russian An-26 transport aircraft crashed into a cliff in Crimea, killing 30 people. A week later, Reuters reported that among the dead was Lieutenant General Alexander Otroshchenko, whom it identified as the commander of the "45th Army of the Northern Fleet's Air Force and Air Defense."

But there was a problem with their report. The 45th has not existed since 2023. It was dissolved and replaced by the Composite Aviation Corps, which was the formation Otroshchenko commanded.

The language barrier appears to have been the decisive factor. Russia's Interfax news agency, citing Murmansk Governor Andrei Chibis, reported correctly that Otroshchenko was the commander of the Composite Aviation Corps of the Northern Fleet. The BBC Russian Service, reporting in Russian, got the designation right. The error was present in the media, from

which it rapidly spread to other countries, including Finland.

The dissolution of the 45th Air Force and Air Defense Army and the creation of the Composite Aviation Corps in its place were public information, having been reported by Izvestia in December 2023. However, the information available in English about Russian military reforms is scarce. The relevant Wikipedia pages contain outdated information, which could explain the misunderstanding in the English-language information environment. In this case, the fact-finding would have required Russian language skills, understanding of the military domain and investigative work.

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The scale of change undergone by the Russian Armed Forces is not fully understood in the West. Since 2022, Russia has reorganized its military districts, created new formations and restructured command relationships across every branch. Potentially even more significantly, it has established the Unmanned Systems Troops as a separate branch of arms in its Armed Forces.

Military language is a closed world with its own vocabulary and logic. Understanding another country's military reforms requires a combination of language skills and domain expertise. This requirement applies beyond military affairs: technical vocabulary makes all the difference in diplomacy, energy, law, or business, where words carry specific meanings. This is the primary reason that languages should not be considered a soft skill. You either get the meaning right, or you don't.

Currently, when the need for this expertise is greatest, the pipeline that produces it is under strain. Russia's invasion of Ukraine made Russian a language that few in the West want to study. In Finland, a country that shares the longest EU border with Russia and is now a NATO member, Russian-language enrollment has fallen at every level of education.

Finland's former ambassador to Russia, Mikko Hautala, warned that within five to ten years, the country's Russia expertise will be weakened significantly. Language skills, he argues, are the critical component: without them, deep understanding is impossible, regardless of how well English is spoken by the counterparty. The Finnish government and parliament both have acknowledged the need to maintain and develop national expertise in Russia's language and politics.

This pattern is not unique to Finland. Across NATO countries, the study of Russian is in decline. Enrollments in Russian language university programs are shrinking. Despite the persistent threat from Moscow, or because of it, the younger generations see little reason to invest years in mastering the difficult language. The reaction is human and understandable, but it is also a strategic liability.

Related article: Another Russia-Linked Nuclear Power Plant Is at Risk From War. This Time, in Iran.

Ukraine's success is not only a matter of weapons and will, but deep knowledge of the Russian language and culture that has given Ukraine direct advantages on the battlefield. Ukrainians understand the institutional culture and the mentality of the Russian military inside out. Most NATO countries do not possess and cannot quickly acquire this depth of knowledge.

Technological solutions offer only a limited remedy. Machine translation and large language models can produce a usable translation, but they do not comprehend meaning. Relying on these tools without a qualified person to verify the output means outsourcing independent thought to technology, which is especially unreliable when specialized knowledge is required.

Language learning and capacity building are slow processes and they cannot be improvised in a crisis. A decision not to invest today will produce its consequences years down the line.

The countries that invest in foreign language capabilities will hold significant advantages. They will be able to understand foreign countries and actors at a deeper level and calibrate their foreign and security policies accordingly. The strategic value of mastering a foreign language applies to adversaries, competitors and allies alike.

The Russian language has not become less important since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Understanding the scale of changes inside the Russian Armed Forces, as well as its foreign and strategic deterrence policies, has become a necessity.

For anyone considering a career specialization, I would recommend learning a foreign language that carries strategic weight. These efforts will be a path to an independent and human understanding that is not available through technological shortcuts or modern tools.

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