

Anna Shibarova, Institute of Slavic Philology, University of Munich (LMU)

Audiovisual Formats Made by Students: The Website *Into Russian*

The Story of the Project before and after 24 February 2022

This article presents the project *Into Russian*, a publicly accessible website provided by the Institute of Slavic Philology at the LMU Munich to learners for the Russian language. The website is based on various projects which were created by students under the teachers' guidance: from first animations (at CEFR levels A0–A1) to short documentaries (at CEFR levels A2–C2), and the creation of a collection of literary texts (at CEFR levels A1–C2). The article also reflects on how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 has affected this work and explains why, in our view, it is not possible to "stay clear of politics" in Russian language teaching in the current situation.

Keywords: animated alphabet, basic grammar in video, animated short texts, documentaries, listening and reading library, teaching of Russian after 24.02.2022

Im vorliegenden Artikel wird die öffentlich zugängliche Webseite *Into Russian* vorgestellt, die am Institut für slawische Philologie der LMU München erstellt wurde. Es wird berichtet, wie sich diese Online-Plattform aus Projekten entwickelt hat, die die Studierenden unter Anleitung der Lehrperson realisiert haben: von den ersten Animationen (auf GERS-Niveau A0–A1) über Kurzfilme (auf GERS-Niveau A2–C2) bis hin zur Erstellung einer Sammlung literarischer Texte (auf GERS-Niveau A1–C2). Zudem geht es darum, wie sich der Großangriff Russlands auf die Ukraine am 24. Februar 2022 auf diese Arbeit ausgewirkt hat und warum es nach unserer Überzeugung in der gegenwärtigen Situation nicht möglich ist, im Russischunterricht einen „unpolitischen“ Ansatz zu verfolgen.

Keywords: animiertes Alphabet, Grammatikgrundlagen in Video, animierte Kurztexte, Dokus, Literatursammlung zum Hören und Lesen, Russischunterricht nach dem 24.02.2022

1. Introduction

Audiovisual formats such as podcasts, videos, and others have become an integral part of foreign language teaching. As teachers, we must carefully choose which types of media to use and how to integrate them effectively in the classroom. This also includes encouraging students to create their own audiovisual media as part of project work, an approach that has become increasingly common in academic instruction.¹ At the Institute of Slavic Philology at the LMU Munich, we, lecturers in Russian Studies, have had very positive experiences with these methods and find them highly productive.

¹ See e.g. this list of project courses carried out by students of the Elite Graduate Programme in Eastern European Studies at the LMU Munich: <https://www.osteuropastudien.uni-muenchen.de/lehrveranstaltungen/projekt-kurse/index.html> (15.12.2024). In recent years, most of these projects have been realized using audiovisual media.

The following is a description of the development of our website *Into Russian*: from first animations (at CEFR levels A0–A1) to short documentaries (at CEFR levels A2–C2), and ultimately to a creation of a collection of literary texts (at CEFR levels A1–C2). Originally, these modules were realized as separate projects in collaboration with language students of different levels. The results would then be used as training material for subsequent students. During the Covid pandemic, we came up with the idea of developing these projects into a unified platform for Russian language learners and making them accessible to a global online audience. The result of this endeavor is the website *Into Russian*.

Russia's large-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022 has not only had a profound personal and emotional impact on us as professionals researching and teaching Russian language and culture, it has also forced us to take a new look on our work.² Following the outbreak of the war, the focus of our project has been recalibrated. Section 4 of this article elaborates on that point using specific examples.

2. The Website *Into Russian*: Structure and Content

Today, the website *Into Russian* is a publicly accessible online-platform which is provided via the server of the University of Munich (LMU). The site is not intended as a replacement for a textbook. It offers Russian learners of all levels a variety of materials, which can be used in classroom as well as by self-learners who wish to acquire knowledge of the Russian language, train their skills or enhance their native language competence as heritage speakers. The overarching approach is to convey a learning experience which is based on authentic life situations and language usages. To emphasize the authenticity of our language materials, we adopted the slogan: "Discover the Real Russian Language. Listen, Watch, Read, and Learn: From the Basics to Tolstoy."

The homepage features four large clickable images, each leading to a different section:

1. *First Steps*: For beginners, with an animated alphabet and basic grammar (A0+).³
2. *Stories*: For novice and intermediate learners (A1/A2+), featuring animated fables, tales, and short texts.⁴
3. *People*: For learners from novice (A1+) to advanced (C-levels), containing videos about people and their lives.⁵
4. *Literature*: For all levels, offering a listening and reading library.⁶

² There are numerous publications on this topic. Here are just a few examples: Bergman, A. (2023), Böhmer, J. and Dornicheva, D. (2023), Batuman, E. (2023), Herlth, J. (2022), Grob, T. (2022), Tietze, R. in an interview with Helg, M. (2024). The German video portrait series *Werke und Tage* contains short statements by various translators of Russian and Ukrainian literature into German on the personal and professional impact that the Russian full-scale invasion has had on them (see the last section in the respective videos): <https://www.toledo-programm.de/talks/6062/werke-tage> (15.12.2024)

³ <https://www.intorussian.slavistik.uni-muenchen.de/basics>

⁴ <https://www.intorussian.slavistik.uni-muenchen.de/stories>

⁵ <https://www.intorussian.slavistik.uni-muenchen.de/people>

⁶ <https://www.intorussian.slavistik.uni-muenchen.de/literature>

Figure 1: The frontpage of the website *Into Russian*Source: <https://www.intorussian.slavistik.uni-muenchen.de> (15.12.2024)

The website is designed as a platform for creative collaboration between teachers and students. The opportunity to participate in the project encourages students to take an active role as co-creators of the learning process. To make this work, it is an important prerequisite that the learner is intrinsically motivated, and that the teacher is prepared to provide him/her with individual and targeted support.

3. The Story of the Project

3.1 Animated Alphabet for Beginners

The very first project, an animated alphabet, was created by senior-year student Michael Winkert. He used Adobe Photoshop to design animations for beginners with no prior knowledge. With kind permission of Schmetterling Verlag, he incorporated illustrations by Philipp Yarin from the picture alphabet, as well as audio from the textbook “Davaj pogovorim” (Shibarova & Yarin, 2018). Visualizing graphemes in this way has a positive impact on learning: the alphabet becomes easier to memorize, vivid associations are formed, and students quickly learn simple sentences and questions, leading to an early understanding of phonetic phenomena. These animations have proven to be highly effective in our beginner courses as we have received positive feedback from the students.

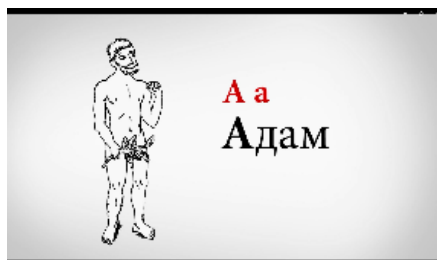


Figure 2: Kto èto? – Èto Adam.

Source: <https://www.intorussian.slavistik.uni-muenchen.de/basics?step=1> (15.12.2024)

3.2 Easy Readings as Animations: A1–A2 levels

Animations of fairy tales, primers, and short poems read in the A2 course during the first and second semesters were then created in a similar style. Once again, we were allowed to use

Philipp Yarin’s black-and-white drawings along with the existing audio files. Two students interested in learning animation, Nikola Gronostay and Paula Ruppert, were supervised and guided by Natal’ja Arnautova, a professional animation director we hired. This project was carried out as an online workshop during the pandemic, which also helped to alleviate feelings of isolation during this challenging time – an important secondary benefit. Over time, we have developed a small collection of 3–5-minute animated films for A2-level students. These films can be used both inside and outside the classroom.



Figure 3: Skazka pro Kuročku Rjabu

Source: <https://www.intorussian.slavistik.uni-muenchen.de/stories?story=1> (15.12.2024)

3.3 Short Documentaries: A2–C2 levels

Another project had a different aim, with the original idea being to interview people who work professionally with the Russian language and culture. We started this in 2019 as part of one of our Russian courses, in collaboration with the University of Television and Film Munich (HFF). Elizaveta Snagovskaja, then a student and now a graduate of the documentary film department, was responsible for the camera work and editing. With her help, we produced several 10–15-minute video portraits of enthusiasts in their fields, from different generations, who, after studying Slavic studies, connected their lives with Eastern Europe and Russia. Notable figures included literary translator Olga Radetzkaia and long-time Greenpeace activist Tobias Münchmeyer, both of whom were happy to share their experiences, talking about their studies, early careers, and first trips to the USSR during perestroika. Suzanna Frank-Kilner talked about her work for Radio Free Europe in Munich during the Cold War and shared stories of her Russian in-laws, the philosopher Semyon Frank and his wife, who were exiled from Russia after the 1917 revolution.



Figure 4: Short film about Olga Radetzkaia.

Source: <https://www.intorussian.slavistik.uni-muenchen.de/people=22> (15.12.2024)

A key theme in these short films was the intersection of personal lives with historical events. Emigration and life abroad were frequently discussed. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the topic became even more prominent as a new wave of emigration from Russia began. We

had the privilege of talking to people who had left Russia. We explored questions such as “What does it mean to start over abroad?”, “What are the challenges and opportunities?” and “How does emigration affect one’s language?” These were the questions we asked our interviewees in 2019. At the time, we did not yet foresee how much this topic would evolve three years later, following the events of 24 February 2022.

We also spoke with individuals who intended to stay in Russia. All were socially engaged and wanted to contribute to their communities. Linguist Natal’ja, for example, told us how she volunteers to teach Russian to migrant children. Entrepreneur Sonja vividly described her start-up, a vegan pastry shop in St. Petersburg, and her work as an election observer. Stressing that isolation would be the worst outcome for Russia, she concluded: “Учите русский язык, приезжайте к нам, разговаривайте с нами, читайте наши новости, реагируете там у себя.” Her friend, human rights activist and feminist Varja Michajlova from St. Petersburg, reflected on how politics became part of her life and what it means to be a feminist in Russia.



Figure 5: Short film about Varja Michajlova.

Source: <https://www.intorussian.slavistik.uni-muenchen.de/people=19> (15.12.2024)

When recording these video conversations, the interviewees were aware that they were speaking to an audience of language learners, but they spoke freely and naturally, without rehearsal. During editing, we shortened the material but did not alter its style. This allowed us to retain the authentic characteristics of spoken language, such as interjections, specific syntax, and elliptical constructions. In the narratives of non-L1 and heritage speakers, occasional deviations from the norm — such as accents or minor grammatical inaccuracies—were corrected in the transcriptions but preserved in the videos. The naturalness of the language material was paramount to us. Finally, in collaboration with our heritage speaker students, the videos were categorized by difficulty level, from A2 to C2, to facilitate their use in the classroom, and subtitles, transcriptions and bilingual glossaries of selected vocabulary were added.

3.4 Poetry in Sound: A Collection of Literary Texts

Analytical reading is an essential part of language instruction, as it is in literary studies.⁷ Close reading of a complex text to uncover its meaningful elements is an exciting and valuable classroom activity. This is especially true of poems: As they are short and artistically dense, they can be thoroughly analyzed in class and the experience is rewarding.⁸ At the same time, this also

⁷ For contributions, see e.g. the 5th issue of *DiSlaw – Teaching Reading and Literature* (2023).

⁸ See, for example Burghardt (2023), Schultz (1996). For basic ideas and examples of the analysis of poetic texts, see e.g. Jakobson (2007), Gasparov (1997) and Lotman (1970; 1972).

supports essential goals of language learning such as phonetics, vocabulary acquisition, and listening comprehension. Importantly, poems should be read aloud, allowing learners to appreciate the melody of the language. Beyond their aesthetic value, poetic texts can evoke emotions and pose unexpected questions for readers.

Inspired by these reflections, we developed the idea of creating an audio anthology of literary works, primarily poems, for classroom use. We wanted an application that would allow students to read and listen to the text simultaneously. Thanks to our skilled programmer Gábor Ugray, the application was fully coded and launched in the winter of 2019. We tested and optimized the tool in the seminars and received positive feedback from our students.

The interface of the player includes buttons for “play,” “pause,” “back,” and “forward,” as well as the title and names of the author and reader. When “play” is pressed, the corresponding line of the text is highlighted in bold, while an orange progress bar moves from top to bottom, synchronizing the visual and spoken word. The “back” button allows users to listen to individual lines (or sentences in prose) repeatedly. Clicking on any word provides translations into English, German, and Romance languages. Although the glossary is not comprehensive, it helps students to develop their own understanding of the text.



Figure 6: The audiovisual reading interface

Source: <https://www.intorussian.slavistik.uni-muenchen.de/episode/4303> (15.12.2024)

As of December 2024, our collection includes works by sixteen authors, ranging from Aleksandr Puškin (1799—1837) to Vsevolod Nekrasov (1934—2009). The text corpus has been selected by the teachers and some of the texts have been tested in our seminars in collaboration with the students. We hope to include more texts by contemporary authors in the future, as soon as copyright permissions have been obtained. The audio recordings have been produced specially for the website by volunteer students and colleagues, so there are no copyright issues. For each author, there is a card with short biographical information in Russian and English, and each text has a short introduction in Russian, accompanied by an image.



Figure 7: Anna Achmatova

Source: <https://www.intorussian.slavistik.uni-muenchen.de/author/5407> (15.12.2024)

Ежовщина – период самых массовых и самых жестоких репрессий в СССР в 1937-38 годах, когда главой НКВД был Николай Ежов. Это время еще называют Большим террором. В 1938 году был арестован сын Ахматовой Лев Гумилев. 17 месяцев в ожидании приговора она провела в очередях в тюрьме, пытаясь выяснить судьбу сына, что-то ему передать или получить свидание. Там она пообещала женщине, которая узнала в ней поэта, описать это страшное время. Написав «Реквием», Ахматова выполнила обещание.

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В. Катарзини. Иллюстрация к поэме „Реквием“. Wikimedia Commons
Анна Ахматова. Из цикла Реквием (1935 - 1940). Внесло предисловия. 1957

Figure 8: A. Achmatova. Vstuplenie k poëme „Rekviem“

Source: <https://www.intorussian.slavistik.uni-muenchen.de/author/5407?book=8400> (15.12.2024)

3.5 Development of the Website

Many of these projects — animations, short films, and the reader—were ready and being used internally in various courses when the Covid-19 pandemic hit in 2020. During this time, we gained valuable insights into online formats, their limitations, and their possibilities (Šibarova, 2021, 361). The pandemic prompted significant reflection and momentum across Germany (cf. AEDiL & Kerres, 2022). For us, the pandemic provided the impetus to consolidate our various projects and make them accessible to a wider audience. This led to the creation of a website aimed at learners of Russian worldwide. We called the website *Into Russian*.

The website was developed with the help of an external agency and went live on the LMU Munich server at the beginning of the winter semester 2021/22. It brought together all our projects under one roof and categorized them by type and language level.

4. After 24 February 2022

The website had just been completed when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This posed two urgent questions for us: How should we, as a project dealing with Russian language, culture, and literature, respond to the Russian aggression? How does the war affect our view of our own work? We decided to use the website as a platform to make our voices heard. A few days after the war began, a group of students from various backgrounds—Croatia, Germany, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine—came together to discuss what would be the best way to express our anti-war stance. In close collaboration with us lecturers, the idea arose to sing a song in Ukrainian as a sign of solidarity with the country under attack. We chose the song “Ой у вишневому саду”. Our colleague Natalia Miller, a native from Kyiv, sang the solo, while students accompanied her, and I gave a brief introduction. In April 2022, at the beginning of the summer semester, the video was posted on the website and our YouTube channel. This experience has broadened our perspective, and while some aspects of our work were altered or shifted because of the war, the core principles have remained the same.



Figure 9: Students perform the song “Oj u višnevomu sadu”

Source: <https://www.intorussian.slavistik.uni-muenchen.de/people?person=5> (15.12.2024)

After the war began, many of us volunteered in Germany to help Ukrainian refugees. Some of the people who arrived in Germany were eager to share their stories, and we suggested that they record their testimonies on video. With the consent of the participants, we created new short films. These include portraits of individuals from different generations who were forced to leave Ukraine in 2022. For example, Svytlana Petrovska, the mother of the well-known German-language writer Katja Petrowskaja, recounted her journey from Kyiv to Berlin and reflected on her childhood escape from the German army in 1941. Ukrainian composer and conductor Volodymyr Runčak and his wife, music teacher Oksana Runčak, described how the war changed their lives and how they, as musicians, could contribute to the fight against the war. Solidarity and humanity were common themes in these reports. A new wave of emigration from Russia also began after 24 February 2022. We produced another short film with Varja Michajlova, an activist from St. Petersburg whom we already knew. Now living in exile in Georgia, she talked about people protesting the war in Russia and how she provides them with legal assistance. Mathematics student Vasja Rogov talked about how he volunteers in Berlin for the project “ОВД-Инфо”, which supports protesters in Russia. In another video, we included the final statement of Alla Gutnikova, editor of the student magazine “DOXA”, during her trial in Moscow in 2021. She was sentenced along with three other editors for publishing a video critical of the regime in support of Aleksej Naval’nyj. Now living abroad, Ms. Gutnikova has kindly given us permission to use her speech. All these short films contain words such as “обыск” (search), “задержание” (detention), “допрос” (interrogation), “суд” (court), “автозак” (police van), and “домашний арест” (house arrest)—vocabulary that has tragically become part of everyday Russian life.



Figure 10: Short film about Alla Gutnikova

Source: <https://www.intorussian.slavistik.uni-muenchen.de/people?person=23> (15.12.2024)

Our interviews also often touched on the relationship between Russian and the national languages of the former Soviet Union. In the immediate aftermath of the war, the focus was primarily on Ukrainian. Our interviewees spoke openly about their linguistic situation and their feelings. Seventeen-year-old Nikita, who came to Berlin from the town of Konotop near the Russian border, told us that he speaks Surzhyk, a mixture of Russian and Ukrainian, but that he plans

to switch to Ukrainian in the future. Svytlana Petrovska, who had been a teacher of history for 60 years, said that the Ukrainian poetry by Lesya Ukrainka was as dear to her heart as the Russian songs of Bulat Okudžava and Aleksander Galič. “Я не воюю с русской культурой. Я воюю с Путиным и русской армией”, said Petrovska. Such personal testimonies enrich our understanding and make us more sensitive to the complex contexts behind their words.

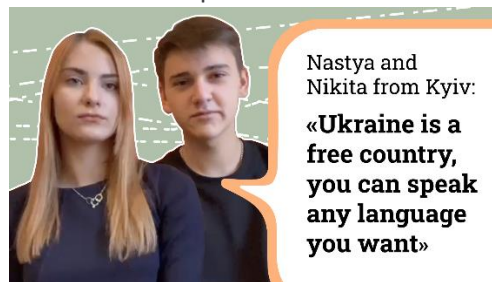


Figure 11: Short film about Nastja and Nikita

Source: <https://www.intorussian.slavistik.uni-muenchen.de/people?person=10> (15.12.2024)

The imperial war has also brought a new urgency to the topic of language policy in Russia’s multi-ethnic society.⁹ Since the winter semester of 2022/23, we have invited representatives from various ethnic groups of the former Soviet Union and present-day Russia to speak with us about these issues via Zoom. Speakers from Buryatia and Tatarstan shared their personal language histories. In the winter of 2023, we invited T’jan Zaočnaja, an Itelmen woman born in 1950 in Kamchatka, in the far north-east of Russia.¹⁰ T’jan only heard the Itelmen language, the language of the indigenous population of the Kamchatka Peninsula, from her stepfather as a child, but she never learned to speak it herself.¹¹ The family was forced to move several times in the 1950s and 1960s due to the USSR’s policy of forced resettlement in the north, and soon the stepfather had no one to speak Itelmen to. “Отец замолчал”, T’jan told us. The whole family switched to Russian. This is just one of many stories of people losing the language of their ancestors. Our student, Paula Ruppert, made a short film about T’jan’s fascinating life. We see great potential in continuing such projects.



Figure 12: Short film about T’jan Zaočnaja

Source: <https://www.intorussian.slavistik.uni-muenchen.de/people?person=6> (15.12.2024)

Since its creation in 2021/2022, we have consistently expanded the *Into Russian* website, adding new features on a regular basis. Among other things, we have designed and recently published a series of videos on elementary Russian grammar called “Grammar in Use”. This project was made possible by support from the LMU Munich Teaching Promotion Fund and was created by

⁹ The literature on languages in the USSR as well as language policy and language conflicts in the post-Soviet space is extensive. Here are some works we have used in the project: Avrorin (1975), Comrie (1981), Alpatov (2000), Fouse (2000), Vachtin & Golovko (2004), Pavlenko (2008) and Protasova (2016).

¹⁰ On Itelmens see e.g.: Volodin (2003), Kasten (1996), Orlova (1999) and the corresponding section on the portal to Siberia, created by E. Kasten: <https://dh-north.org/ethnie/itelmenen/de> (15.12.2024).

¹¹ On the dying Itelmen language, see Volodin (1976), Krasnaja kniga (1994), Vachtin (2001).

our young colleagues Ekaterina Afanas'eva, Elizaveta Čudnovskaja and Anna Tarasova, graduates of the HSE University Moscow in Russian as a foreign language. The grammar is presented in a series of videos with short scenes and dialogues, recorded in Russian during 2022/2023, and set in different cities. Some of these cities are recognizable—Tbilisi, Istanbul, and Belgrade among them. Why were the videos not shot in Moscow? The series subtly encourages learners to reflect on this question.



Figure 13: Grammar in Use (example)

Source: <https://www.intorussian.slavistik.uni-muenchen.de/basics?grammarId=4#grammar> (15.12.2024)

5. Conclusion

Five years have passed since the implementation of the first projects. The pandemic has led to a significant advancement of the endeavor, while Russia's large-scale attack on Ukraine has made us rethink some of the priorities of our work and given us important new impetus. However, the essential goals have remained the same: We want our project to provide an approach to Russia and the Russian language that is free of stereotypes and conveys the diversity rather than focusing exclusively on the imperial centers. Also, we do not intend to hide the complexity and tragedy of the current political situation by contending that language teaching should stay clear of politics. In the current situation, this idea seems delusional to us.

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