

Multilingualism in Russian journals: a controversy of approaches

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The global predominance of English in science and publishing raises concerns in non-Anglophone countries as more disparities in the publishing industry emerge globally between 'the center and periphery ... defined ... in linguistic terms'.¹ When researchers make their choice of the language for publishing, 'languages other than English mean restricting knowledge dissemination'.² Journals and national policymakers opt for English as the lingua franca in publishing 'to raise their international profile in the domain of academic research'.³ Moreover, visibility, such as citation levels, is consciously pursued by publishing research in reputable Anglophone journals. Consequently, linguistic imperialism is emerging as a 'convincing explanatory framework' for national policies in science publishing.⁴ In some countries, new language policies and approaches are being developed to promote national interests in advancing global research profiles.

However, with more journals in Russia indexed in Scopus and Web of Science databases, multilingualism as an issue of publishing policy in Russia's scientific journals is coming to the fore. Few journals in Russia are produced as English-only sources (and those that do are often not well regarded). Academics and science-related communities assert that English-only journals deny Russian academics full access to new knowledge, as English is far from being Russia's scientific lingua franca. Thus, the number of Russian journals in English does not exceed 2,200 (2,217 as of January 1, 2019 – some 15.2 percent of all Russia's journals, according to the authors' calculations based on the E-Library Official Statistics).⁵ The figure includes partly bilingual journals where Russian is the first or the second language, with some inaccuracies caused by the National Electronic Library reporting rules (a journal may be entered as both published in Russian/English or multilingual). Instead, the vast majority of scientific journals in Russia keep to Russian as the priority language for publishing (94.5 percent).⁵ Given the country's traditions and increasing state support of science, this stance is sure to remain in place. Limited English proficiency of Russian researchers also factors in to this trend.⁶

The recent changes in scientific and publishing policy in Russia are based on the understanding that publishing in world renowned journals indexed in trusted databases implies attracting international readers' attention that is ultimately translated into citation scores. When coming out in English, articles have a better chance of being visible and cited. It is clear to Russian policymakers and journals that to combine both the country's aspiration to promote national science on a global scale and its support towards the national language in research requires a variety of approaches.

Translating articles from Russian into English has not proved to be practical for most journals. Russian and English are semantically and structurally diverse. When translated, Russian articles, even those written to the best structured samples, are awkward to turn into English texts that are easily perceived by native readers or readers fluent in English. Proof-reading becomes a high cost in such journals. Some experts also maintain that the quality of publications in Russian social sciences are held back by obscure and changing writing traditions in academic Russian.⁷ The latter adds to misunderstandings when Russian authors have their manuscripts translated into English for further publishing.

In an attempt to internationally promote Russian journals, editing teams are increasingly switching to a bilingual or even multilingual mode, that is, a mix of articles published in Russian (especially those written by Russian authors) and articles in English or other languages. The latter are authored either by non-Russian speaking researchers or by Russian scientists with a good command of English. Bilingual or multilingual (three languages or rarely more) journals are getting more attention in international settings than their only-Russian peer sources. Moreover, attitudes to bilingual journals in Russian academic communities are more supportive and positive than to sources published totally in English.

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