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Russian-friendly: how Russian became a commodity in Europe and beyond

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this paper is to examine how Russian became a commodity in the global service industry in the decade between 2004 and 2014 and, in some places, much earlier. I will begin with a discussion of sociolinguistic theory of 'commodification of language', focusing on aspects critical for this case study. Then, I will trace the process of commodification of Russian, starting with *why* (reasons) and *when* (timeline), proceeding to *where* (locations) and *how* (forms), and ending with the *so what*. I will also talk about *what next*, identifying the opportunities for research on global Russian and the many gaps that are waiting to be filled.

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Traveling in Europe in the summer of 2009, I have noticed a striking increase in Russian-language signs and signs advertising the need for Russian-speaking personnel (e.g. see Figure 1). These sightings suggested that it was time to take global Russian seriously. In the years that followed, I have conducted research in several European countries to understand who uses Russian beyond Russia's borders, where, and why. In what follows, I will use this data to tell a story of how Russian became a commodity in the global service industry in the decade between 2004 and 2014 and, in some places, much earlier.

I will begin with a discussion of sociolinguistic theory of 'commodification of language', focusing on aspects critical for this case study. Then, I will examine commodification of Russian, starting with *why* (reasons) and *when* (timeline), proceeding to *where* (locations) and *how* (forms), and ending with the *so what*. I will also talk about *what next*, identifying the many gaps that are waiting to be filled and the opportunities for research on global Russian in the context of the economic downturn that began in Russia in 2014. Throughout, my aim is to be as clear and informative as possible in describing a new, previously unexplored, phenomenon relevant to different disciplines – including business, economics, marketing, and tourism – and not to over-theorize it in terms comprehensible only to a narrow sociolinguistic audience.

1. Money talks: commodification of language in the global marketplace

To understand how a language becomes a commodity in the global economy, I turn to the work of Heller and Duchêne (2012; Duchêne and Heller 2012a, 2012b; Heller 2010) who build on Bourdieu's (1991) notion of *linguistic marketplace*, where certain linguistic skills can be converted into symbolic and economic capital, and discuss the shift from modernity to late modernity in terms of five interconnected processes: tertiarization (the development of the service sector), flexibilization (the ability to shift sites and modes of work), market saturation, market expansion, and distinction (added value).

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Figure 1. 'Looking for an apprentice saleswoman Russian language x week-end'. Via Cavour, Rome, April 2013.

They argue that while language can always be analyzed as a commodity, the political economy of late capitalism has increased the importance of languages and their salience as resources with exchange values linked to particular markets. The corollary of this trend is a shift from the discourses of 'pride' that tie languages to identities, territories, and nation-states to the discourses of 'profit' that frame languages in economic terms as commodities useful for production of resources.

Heller (2010) identifies several sites, including tourism, marketing, language teaching, and communications, where economic conditions of late capitalism have a commodifying effect on languages. Research in these sites shows that while English is still a prerequisite for entering the global market, it is no longer sufficient for a competitive edge: to reach new markets, global corporations, from IKEA to Tripadvisor, adopt the languages of potential consumers, both *in situ* and in the virtual space (Duchêne and Heller 2012b; Kelly-Holmes 2006). Following this line of argument, in the present paper I will examine commodification of a single language, Russian.

The term *commodification of language*, introduced by Heller (2010), will refer here to the process where a new value is accorded to linguistic resources and is made commensurable across a set of exchangeable things. Exchangeable things refer to salaries and other forms of financial compensation received by speakers of Russian in functioning markets in expectation of greater profits. The resources involve Russian as a technical skill, used to interact with Russian-speaking customers, produce Russian-language signs, or translate materials into Russian. These skills may range from native to basic, depending on the needs and requirements of a particular workplace. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate two links in such commodification chain in the retail industry in Rome. The aim of the ad in Figure 1 is to recruit a salesperson with the required commodity, namely Russian skills. In Figure 2, a store that succeeded hiring such staff uses its availability to attract Russian-speaking customers and, thus, potentially, to increase profits.

To place commodification of Russian in the larger social context, I will also discuss other strategies used to attract and accommodate Russian visitors, ranging from simplification of visa procedures to acceptance of rubles. The term *preferential accommodation* will be used to describe contexts, where special arrangements are made for Russian visitors and settings where Russian is used alongside the national language(s) and English, in the absence of other languages of potential visitors and customers. My focus, throughout, will be on conditions that have made such preferential accommodation the norm in certain contexts, rather than on figuring out whether each individual instance of accommodation did or did not pay off. To understand these conditions, I will triangulate data from the following sources:

Figure 2. Top sign: ‘We speak Russian’. Below: ‘New Collection’. Via Nazionale, Rome, August 2014.

(1) fieldwork (interviews, participant observation, collection of Russian-language materials, and documentation of linguistic landscapes) conducted in Cyprus (with Natalya Eracleous, August 2011, Limassol) and Finland (with Sari Pietikäinen, Alexandre Duchêne, and Maimu Berezkina, January 2014, Helsinki, Samiland), and linguistic landscape studies, collection of materials and interviews conducted in the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Montenegro, Poland, Spain, and Turkey between 2009 and 2015;
(2) reports of the numbers of Russian visitors in the years 2008–2015 by the Federal State Statistics Service of Russia (Rosstat), Russian Federal Tourism Agency (Rostourism), and United Nations World Travel Organization (UNWTO);
(3) 40 consecutive issues of the Russian magazine *Turbiznes* [Tourism business], published between the years 2012 and 2015 (www.tourbus.ru);
(4) travel-oriented websites, such as Tripadvisor, global shopping-oriented websites, such as Global Blue, and Russian foreign investment/real-estate-oriented websites, such as prian.ru;
(5) articles about Russian tourists published in Russian-, Bulgarian-, English-, French-, Italian-, Spanish-, and Polish-language media between 2009 and 2015;
(6) research on Russian tourism and foreign investments in the fields of business, economics, marketing, and tourism, including peer-reviewed articles, bachelor’s and master’s theses, and studies commissioned by the travel industry in English and Russian;
(7) research and media articles on the study and use of Russian as a foreign language around the world in English and Russian.

2. When and why: Russian reentry into global economy

After the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, the prognosis for the future of Russian outside Russia was rather grim. The newly independent successor states began their national identity projects by downgrading the status of Russian and, in some cases, by legislating it out of the education system (Pavlenko 2008). Enrollments in Russian-language programs declined both in and outside the CIS and, in Eastern Europe, Russian as a foreign language was briskly replaced by English. As a consequence, the estimated number of speakers of Russian around the world decreased from approximately 312 million in 1990 to 278 million in 2004 (Aref’ev 2012).

These developments were undoubtedly disconcerting for the Russian establishment but it had bigger problems to deal with: the post-1991 institutional collapse, disruption of traditional production links, mass privatization, and transition from central planning and state ownership to market economy plunged Russia into transformation depression that led to a major decline in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and living standards (Myant and Drahokoupil 2011; Panibratov 2012). Yet the transfer of assets into non-state hands had also created a wealthy upper class, known as *new Russians*, and when the government abolished the requirement for exit visas for foreign travel on 1 January 1993, the newly rich took advantage of the open borders.

The travel flow of the early 1990s consisted of three groups: (a) *upmarket travelers*, the super-wealthy elite whose preference for luxury travel, opulent hotels, and exclusive restaurants revitalized traditional tourist destinations, such as Courchevel and the Côte d'Azur (Gardner 2011; Kovshanova 2007; Ksenofontova 2013); (b) *mid-market travelers* and real estate investors who 'discovered' Cyprus, Finland, Egypt, and Turkey, and (c) *chelnoki*, shuttle traders who made regular trips to China and Turkey to buy goods for resale (Papadopoulos and Axenov 2006; Parfenov 2015). The one thing the three groups had in common was the lack of foreign language skills. To do business with them, luxury hotels began hiring Russian-speaking staff (e.g. Kovshanova 2007) and enterprising middle-men and shopkeepers in China, Dubai, Egypt, and Turkey began learning Russian – just enough to haggle (Osbourne 1995; Parfenov 2015).

The financial crisis of 1998 created new conditions for economic recovery in Russia. In 1999, new president Putin began the efforts to recentralize political control and administration, reorder fiscal relations, tighten budget control, update customs policies, and improve tax enforcement. The surge in the oil prices, in conjunction with these reforms, led to the rapid rise of the GDP and cross-border expansion of Russian companies that transformed into regional and then global transnational corporations (TNCs). Lukoil, for instance, expanded to 24 countries, including Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Finland, Italy, Montenegro, Poland, Turkey, and USA, where by 2003 a number of Getty stations were converted into Lukoil. The rapid rise of Russian outward foreign direct investments (FDIs), from $ 20.1 billion in 1999 to $ 433.6 billion in 2011 made Russia the world's 3rd fastest growing and 15th most important economy (Kuznetsov 2010; Myant and Drahokoupil 2011; Panibratov 2012).

The economic recovery also dramatically increased the average income, from 1051 rubles in 1998 to 32,600 in 2014 (www.gks.ru), making foreign travel affordable even for budget travelers: if in the 1990s $300–400 for a week in Turkey represented three to four monthly salaries, by 2014, trips costing $450–650 equaled two to three weeks of the average income. The expansion of the middle-class with disposable income and disposable time (28 vacation days plus 12 legal holidays) made Russia one of the world's fastest growing outbound tourism markets (Figure 3, see also www.untwo.org). At the heart of this mass tourism was the view of worldliness as a symbol of prestige, the thirst for foreign consumer goods, and, for budget travelers, a realization that all-inclusive vacations in Bulgaria, Egypt, or Turkey offered greater levels of comfort at more competitive prices than Russian resorts, where prices were higher, accommodations outdated, the service rarely up to the international standard, and transportation infrastructure limited and in great need of modernization.

As more and more Russians began traveling abroad, businesses in locations favored by Russian tourists discovered that Russians need linguistic accommodation – their low levels of foreign-language skills are noted by the international press (e.g. Adinolfi 2015) and continuously bemoaned by Russian media (Terekhova 2013, 2015). The increased flows of people with low levels of foreign language skills created favorable conditions for accommodation of Russian in settings that wanted to attract more Russian customers.

Yet the key reason for accommodation of Russian is not the number of Russian tourists but their pattern of expenditures, closely followed and widely publicized in the tourism industry and international media, to the point of stereotyping. By 2004, Russians were among the world's top 10 biggest spenders, and, in 2013, $53.5 billion spent abroad placed them fourth after tourists from China, US, and Germany (UNWTO 2014). Host country statistics reveal that individual Russian visitors also tend to spend significantly more than others: in Cyprus, for instance, in 2013 Russian tourists

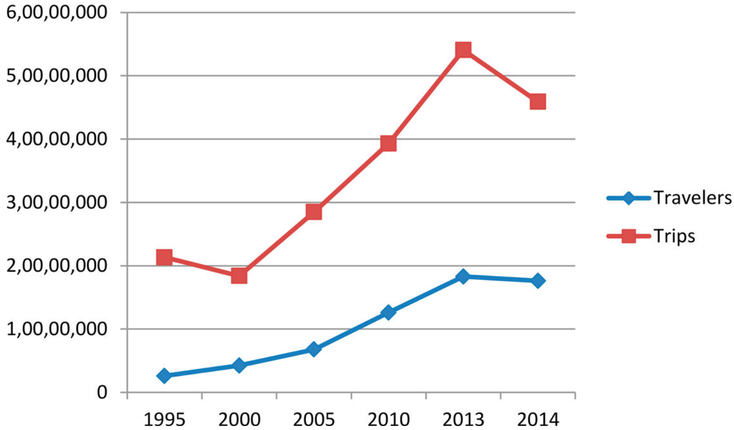

Figure 3. Russian outbound travel in the years 1995–2014, based on Rostourism statistics.

spent 107.5 euros per person per day, while Germans spent 77.5 euros and other tourists spent an average of 84.5 euros (Statistical Service of Cyprus 2013). In Italy, in the same year, they spent an average of 200 euros daily, while the second biggest spenders, the Japanese, spent only 150. It was this pattern of expenditures that led Andrea Babbi, general director of the Italian tourism agency Enit, to say in an interview 'The Russian tourist is an ideal tourist *par excellence*: rich'[1] (Zini 2013). But does everyone feel the same way? Are there countries attractive to Russian visitors where Russian is not accommodated in the tourism and retail industry? And if so, which countries are most likely to both attract and accommodate Russian tourists and shoppers?

3. Where: Russian-friendliness as a national and local policy

To provide preliminary answers to these questions and to facilitate future research on global Russian, I have compiled a list of 20 countries most popular with Russian visitors in the years 2012–2014 (see Table 1). This list excludes other post-Soviet countries and Israel, where part of the population already speaks Russian, which makes the use of Russian unremarkable, and Tunisia, which is only beginning to accommodate Russians (Martynova 2014). To facilitate comparisons I have added information on the share of travel and tourism in the country's GDP in 2013 and on the visa regime with Russia. To direct future ethnographic studies, I have included some locations favored by Russian visitors, often referred to as Little Moscow (e.g. Adinolfi 2015; Branigan 2014; Harding 2007, 2012; Hjelmgaard 2015; Radio Bulgaria 2013; Thanh Nien News 2014), yet the listing is only partial as tastes change and new places become popular.

Both Table 1 and Figure 3 rely on the data provided by Rostourism. The methodological uniformity of this data facilitates diachronic and cross-country comparisons, at the same time, the data underrepresents the number of Russian-speaking visitors for two reasons. The first involves Schengen visas: a visa from any country bound by the Schengen agreement[2] allows Russians to travel to other Schengen countries without being recorded in Russian statistics. As a consequence, case studies of individual countries should also consult numbers reported by the national tourism offices and the UNWTO. Secondly, the data does not present the full picture because speakers of Russian as a first or second language also come from other post-Soviet successor states. To give but one example of the magnitude of the difference, in Turkey in 2013–2014 Russian visitors constituted 12% of the total tourism flow, while visitors from all post-Soviet states combined constituted 24% (www.turizm.gov.tr).

Another issue to pay attention to is the fact that the data refers to trips, rather than people. Rostourism differentiates between *tourist trips* (leisure, holiday tourism), *personal trips* (family visits, medical, educational, and shopping tourism), and *business trips* (work-related travel, including

Table 1. Top twenty countries visited by Russian travelers in the years 2012-2014 (excluding other post-Soviet countries, Israel and Tunisia) based on the data by Roustourism (www.russiatourism.ru) and the Russian Federal State Statistics Service (www.gks.ru)

Country and the share of travel and tourism in the GDP in 2013*	2012	2013	2014	Visa regime** and preferred locations
Finland				Schengen visa
visitor trips	5,118,780	5,525,064	4,799,142	*Shopping*: Helsinki, Laappenranta
tourist trips	512,547	904,730	379,242	*Holidays*: Levi, Rovaniemi, Saariselka
GDP share 6.8%				
Turkey				Visa-free for up to 60 days
visitor trips	3,334,727	4,108,196	4,380,558	*Shopping*: Istanbul
tourist trips	2,516,136	3,078,563	3,278,405	*Holidays*: Antalya, Kemer
GDP share 12.3%				
Egypt				Visa on the border
visitor trips	2,246,440	2,212,662	2,994,984	*Holidays*: Hurghada, Sharm El Sheikh
tourist trips	1,906,637	1,909,240	2,565,726	
GDP share 12.6%				
China				Visa on the border, some cities visa-free
visitor trips	2,312,199	2,057,810	1,923,473	*Holidays and shopping*: Beijing
tourist trips	1,328,850	1,067,542	766,306	*Shopping*: Manzhouli, Suifenhe
GDP share 9.2%				
Poland				Schengen visa
visitor trips	1,014,622	1,647,854	1,663,730	*Business and shopping*: Warsaw, Gdansk
tourist trips	48,855	44,344	39,247	*Holidays*: Sopot, Zakopane
GDP share 5.3%				
Germany				Schengen visa
visitor trips	1,385,363	1,575,714	1,535,410	*Shopping*: Berlin, Dresden, Munich
tourist trips	713,096	830,907	820,096	*Holidays*: Garmisch-Partenkirchen
GDP share 4.7%				*Spa/medical tourism*: Baden-Baden
Thailand				Visa-free for up to 30 days
visitor trips	1,112,253	1,452,922	1,305,982	*Holidays*: Pattaya, Phuket
tourist trips	885,113	1,034,977	933,759	
GDP share 20.2%				
Greece				Schengen visa
visitor trips	834,355	1,388,708	1,214,863	*Holidays*: Athens, Rhodes
tourist trips	690,412	1,175,629	1,016,083	
GDP share 16.3%				
Spain				Schengen visa
visitor trips	990,637	1,270,408	1,195,968	*Holidays and shopping*: Barcelona, Madrid
tourist trips	792,084	1,012,811	982,256	*Holidays*: Balearic Islands, Costa Blanca (Alicante, Benidorm, Torrevieja), Costa Brava, Costa Daurada, Costa Del Sol (Marbella, Puerto Banus)
GDP share 15.7%				
Italy				Schengen visa
visitor trips	794,323	1,038,820	1,056,144	*Holidays and shopping*: Rome, Florence, Milan, Venice, Rimini
tourist trips	570,764	725,841	747,379	
GDP share 10.3%				*Holidays*: Forte dei Marmi, Terme Montecatini
United Arab Emirates				Simplified procedures through visa centers or on-line
visitor trips	649,428	803,096	754,502	*Holidays and shopping*: Dubai
tourist trips	549,382	653,384	597,373	
GDP share 8.4%				
Cyprus				Visa on-line or on the border, Schengen visa
visitor trips	477,106	668,185	708,336	*Holidays*: Limassol, Paphos
tourist trips	404,741	579,702	549,177	
GDP share 20.6%				
Czech Republic				Schengen visa
visitor trips	505,163	620,293	540,743	*Holidays*: Prague, Karlovy Vary
tourist trips	379,723	473,587	413,273	
GDP share 8.4%				
Bulgaria				Simplified procedures
visitor trips	469,122	587,622	586,309	*Holidays*: Burgas, Black Sea resorts
tourist trips	389,424	498,622	497,661	
GDP share 13.3%				

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued.

Country and the share of travel and tourism in the GDP in 2013*	2012	2013	2014	Visa regime** and preferred locations
France				Schengen visa
visitor trips	457,083	575,356	557,899	*Holidays and shopping*: Paris
tourist trips	299,313	374,878	361,732	*Holidays*: Côte d'Azur (Cap Ferrat, St. Tropez), Rhône-Alpes (Courchevel)
GDP share 9.5%				
Austria				Schengen visa
visitor trips	320,537	396,860	348,347	*Holidays and shopping*: Vienna, Innsbruck
tourist trips	219,408	272,564	229,028	
GDP share 13.4%				
United Kingdom				Standard visitor visa
visitor trips	295,708	351,701	343,317	*Holidays and shopping*: London
tourist trips	163,964	187,074	182,245	
GDP share 10.5%				
Switzerland				Schengen visa
visitor trips	265,747	293,872	299,157	*Holidays and shopping*: Geneva
tourist trips	177,508	203,137	209,162	*Holidays*: Interlaken, St. Moritz
GDP share 7.8%				*Spa/medical tourism*: Bad Ragaz, Lakerbad
Vietnam				Visa-free for up to 15 days
visitor trips	188,951	284,032	368,781	*Holidays*: Phan Tiet (Mui Ne), Nha Trang
tourist trips	149,711	212,828	276,703	
GDP share 9.6%				
Montenegro				Visa-free for up to 30 days
visitor trips	217,694	273,535	275,444	*Holidays*: Budva
tourist trips	192,382	248,705	250,416	
GDP share 21.9%				

* Information on the share of travel and tourism in the GDP in 2013 based on the data from the World Travel and Tourism Council (www.wttc.org)
** Visa regime information is based on the 2014 data on www.travel.ru

travel as service staff). Given that more and more Russian tourists travel solo, I have included both tourist and overall trip data as a more accurate representation of Russian visitor flow. The comparison between the two sets of numbers also allows us to distinguish between tourism or holiday destinations, such as Egypt, Greece, or Turkey, and countries, where the primary purpose for many visitors is business or shopping, like China, Finland, or Poland.

Next, I have compared the countries in Table 1 with those that have similar profiles but do not attract large numbers of Russian visitors (e.g. Montenegro vs. Croatia, Thailand vs. Indonesia) and found a difference in the ease of access. Montenegro, Thailand, Turkey, and Vietnam are among more than 70 countries that offer visa-free access to Russians, while Croatia and Indonesia do not. Other countries among the top 20, including China, Cyprus, Egypt, and United Emirates, do require visas but have simplified procedures, such as visas online or at the border (www.travel.ru). Schengen countries, including Finland, France, Italy, and Spain, compete by offering Russians multi-visas, shortening processing time, opening more visa centers outside Moscow and St Petersburg, and providing visa courier services.

Russians also tend to invest in real estate in their favorite holiday places, with the top choices being Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Montenegro, Spain, Turkey, and the UK (Kuznetsov 2010; www.prian.ru, www.tranio.ru). Some countries encourage such investments through *golden visas*, residence permits offered to real-estate investors, with the price tags ranging from €500,000 in Spain and Portugal to €300,000 in Cyprus and €250,000 in Greece (www.goldenvisas.com, www.prian.ru).

These visa and residence policies suggest that accommodation of Russian visitors often begins at the top, with government policies that aim to encourage the influx of Russian tourists, shoppers, and investors. The importance of Russian tourism to some economies was further confirmed in 2015, when the economic downturn reduced the number of Russian travelers. To attract Russian visitors, Bulgaria simplified visa procedures, Turkey offered subsidies of up to $6000 per charter flight, and Egypt cancelled the $25 visa fee for Russians and offered subsidies to tour operators organizing charter flights (Glushenkova 2015; Smirnova 2015).

At the same time, not all countries – not even all of the top 20 – are similarly interested in attracting Russian tourists. To understand why, we need to consider their economies, starting with the share of travel and tourism in the GDP. Countries, where tourism contributes more than 20% of the GDP, such as Cyprus, Montenegro, and Thailand, are more likely to be committed to accommodating Russian visitors, as is Finland, whose economy is dependent on trade with Russia, and Cyprus and Montenegro, dependent on Russian investments (Delanoe 2013; Harding 2012; Zaikina 2011). In contrast, countries with strong economies, such as Switzerland or the UK, and countries with high levels of anti-Russian sentiment, such as Poland, do not necessarily aim to attract larger numbers of Russian visitors.

Yet accommodation of Russian happens in such countries as well, if only on the local level. As seen in Table 1, Poland has a low number of tourists but a high number of Russian visitors. This is a result of the 2012 agreement on visa-free border-crossing from Kaliningrad that brought scores of Russian shoppers to Gdansk. To make the city more welcoming, the authorities translated the city portal (www.gdansk4u.pl/ru/) and promotional materials into Russian and considered adding Russian to informational signage, prompted by the city president (mayor), Paweł Adamowicz, who prides himself on his fluent Russian (Kołodziejska 2013; Rokossovskaia 2013). Similar visa-free agreements link Russia with the Norwegian city of Kirkenes, where municipal authorities added Russian to road and street signs (Gardner 2015; Seliverstova et al. 2015) and with several Chinese cities, such as Suifenhe and Manzhouli, where some shopping streets are dominated by Cyrillic signage (e.g. Branigan 2014).

Undoubtedly, Russian language is not the primary attractor for Russian tourists – like everyone else they are attracted by location (with the preference for beach holidays), activities, reputation, the lack of visa restrictions, and, in the case of budget travelers, affordable prices. A cross-year comparison in Table 1 shows that in 2014, when the fall of the oil prices and Western sanctions triggered a downturn

Figure 4. '1 or 2 days Santorini [tours]'. Heraklion, Crete, May 2015.

Figure 5. 'A walk around winter-time Helsinki'. Central Train Station, Helsinki, January 2014.

in Russian economy, the number of trips dipped but not across the board – instead, the travelers reoriented towards more affordable sunny locations: Egypt (up by 35%), Turkey (up by 7%), and Cyprus (up by 6%). At the same time, research in tourism and marketing shows that when location and price are held equal, Russian visitors do favor places that employ Russian-speaking staff and offer Russian-language services and materials (e.g. Kouzmal 2013; Lertputtarak, Lobo, and Yingyong 2014; Svanström 2013; Zaikina 2011).

4. How: Russian-friendly accommodation

In what follows, I will survey the forms of linguistic accommodation across different areas of the service industry, following a traveler's journey and thus beginning with tourism agencies. While

Figure 6. Advertisements of tours with Russian-speaking guides. Rimini Train Station, Italy, August 2015.

Figure 7. Menu in Italian, English and Russian. Rimini, Italy, August 2015.

Russia has many tourism agencies and popular websites, such as travel.ru or oktogo.ru, in the past decade, several global travel service providers, including Booking, Expedia, Hotels, Kayak, and Tripadvisor, have invested in Russian translation and Russian-language support, opening Russian-language versions of their websites. Hotels.com, for instance, opened the Russian version of their website in 2006 and followed with a Russian-speaking call center and a Russian-language newsletter (Svanström 2013). Some companies, such as Finnish Lomarengas, also invested into research on the best ways to reach Russian consumers through the internet (e.g. Andreeva and Kuzmina 2013).

Tourism agencies in countries popular with Russian tourists commonly invest in Russian-language materials and websites (e.g. visitfinland.com/ru, visitbritain.com/ru), Russian-speaking personnel in call centers supporting such websites (e.g. www.lomarengas.fi/ru), Russian-speaking staff in tourism bureaus and Russian-speaking tour guides (Martin 2014; Pavlenko, Pietikäinen, and Duchêne, Forthcoming; Protassova 2011). The availability of such Russian-language tours is widely advertised by the agencies, both online (e.g. www.breeze.ru) and *in situ* (Figures 4–6).

Airlines and train and bus companies that aim to attract greater numbers of Russian travelers have also added Russian, as seen in the case of flydubai, an airline whose website (www.flydubai.com) and personal inflight screens appear in Arabic, English, and Russian. Russian-language pages have also been added by many airports with high numbers of Russian travelers, e.g. Frankfurt (www.frankfurt-airport.de), Heathrow (www.heathrowairport.com/ru), and Karlovy Vary (www.airport-k-vary.cz/ru/). Among them is the Federico Fellini Airport in Rimini, which started a campaign to become the first Italian hub for charter flights from Russia back in 1993 and introduced a variety of accommodations, from the Russian-language webpage to the special system for checking excess baggage. In time, Rimini did become one of the favorite holiday and shopping locations for Russian travelers: in 2013, 462,169 Russians constituted 82% of all arrivals at the Fellini airport (Montanari 2014) and generated 93% of all tax-free sales in Rimini (UNWTO 2014). As a result, Russian is visible throughout Rimini, from the train station (Figure 6) to the restaurants in the historic center (Figure 7).

The most Russian-friendly airport is undoubtedly the Helsinki Airport, an affordable and convenient transit point for many Russian travelers. Every year, over 600,000 Russians travel via Helsinki: some arrive by plane and others by car, which they leave at the airport parking for the duration of the journey (Finavia 2013). To manage this flow, Russian has been added to Finnish, Swedish, and English on the airport portal (www.finavia.fi/ru/), in tourism information bureaus, in the airport informational signage and, for the convenience of the drivers who park at the airport, on parking machines.

Figure 8. 'We speak Russian'. Berlin, May 2014.

Russian-language signs also appear in other Finnish airports that serve Russian travelers, such as the Ivalo Airport (Pavlenko, Pietikäinen, and Duchêne, Forthcoming). Such signs have informational, rather than commercial, functions, yet it would be misleading to make a principled distinction between the two types of signs: both require language labor and contribute to the effort to make the location an attractive and user-friendly destination for Russian travelers.

Figure 9. Left: 'Great service, yummy food. Gulnara, Kazakhstan, Astana'. Right: 'They really cook amazingly well here!!! Svetlana, Astrakhan'. Istanbul, December 2014.

Figure 10. 'Sberbank/Denizbank Always with you in Turkey!' Istanbul, December 2014.

The same goal is espoused in the hotel industry, where Russian preferences have been tracked and analyzed for more than a decade (e.g. Aksu and Güngören 2004; Kouzmal 2013; Kovshanova 2007; Messe Berlin 2006; Svanström 2013). According to the survey of 2500 global hotels, approximately 50% of Russian travelers request Russian TV channels, 39% require in-house Russian-speaking staff, and 35% expect a Russian-language website and guides (Svanström 2013). To facilitate the match between Russian customers and hotels, hotel industry created new classifications and certificates, such as the Russian-friendly certificate in Poland (http://russian-friendly.com/). The best-known classification is *Russkiy Kliuch* [Russian Key], similar to the star system (www.rusklu.com) and the most

Figure 11. 'Oblstroy: With us it is clear'. Marbella, Spain, March 2014.

demanding is the certificate designed in 2014 by Italian and Russian tourism experts (http://wonderfulexpo2015.info/en/russia-friendly), whose criteria include Russian-style dishes and acceptance of Russian credit cards.

Yet the majority of the criteria used by Russian-friendly certificates are language-based. They include a Russian version of the website, Russian-speaking staff, Russian TV channels, and Russian-language menus, newspapers, magazines, maps, travel guides, and information about the hotel. Hotels awarded four to five Russian keys may also offer Russian-language interpreters, babysitters, and shopping guides. In Finland, many hotels added Russian to registration forms in order to facilitate the check-in. Popular resorts also employ Russian-speaking staff in spas, tennis courts, diving clubs, equestrian clubs, skiing schools, and children's clubs (e.g. Harding 2007; Husarska 2014; Kochetov 2015). The chains and resorts offering such services continue to expand: in 2014, Carlson Rezidor Hotel Group launched a 'Welcome Russia' program in its Radisson Blu and Park Inn hotels, adopting Russian TV channels and a wide range of Russian-language services and materials, while Intercontinental Hotel Group invested in Russian-language call centers and mobile apps (Carrington and Tomkins 2014).

Russian-friendly certificates also require Russian-language menus in hotel restaurants and cafes. During fieldwork, I found such menus in all locations popular with Russian visitors (e.g. Figure 7). In particularly popular cities, such as Berlin, Helsinki, or Limassol, restaurants also employ Russian-speaking waiters, announcing their presence via signs 'Говорим по-русски' [We speak Russian] (Figure 8). Not all of them are native speakers of Russian – in Limassol, the waiters included Russian-speaking Cypriots and Bulgarians and in Helsinki, Russian-speaking Finns and Estonians (Eracleous and Pavlenko, Forthcoming; Pavlenko, Pietikäinen and Duchêne, Forthcoming). In the touristy area of Istanbul, Sultanahmet, restaurateurs also employ an additional marketing strategy: a display of positive comments made by Russian customers (Figure 9).

In banking services, accommodation may involve both linguistic support and acceptance of Russian rubles and/or bank and credit cards. In Cyprus, for instance, Russian-language billboards advertise local subsidiaries of the Russian Commercial Bank and Promsviaz'bank, while in Turkey advertisements invite Russian visitors to use Denizbank, a subsidiary of the Russian Sberbank

Figure 12. 'We are open across the street'. Via Veneto, Rome, August 2014.

Figure 13. Top sign: 'Fur coats/Furs'. Below: 'Greek fur coats Castoria'. Heraklion, Crete, May 2015.

(Figure 10). In real estate, willingness to negotiate in Russian is signaled by offices entitled Недвижимость [Real estate] and Russian-language billboards advertising construction companies and luxury real estate that mushroomed all over Europe, from the French Riviera, Calabria, and Marbella to Baden-Baden, Budva, Karlovy Vary, and Limassol (e.g. Adinolfi 2015; Eracleous and Pavlenko, Forthcoming; Gardner 2011; Hjelmgaard 2015). Such companies are frequently owned by Russians, who trade on their linguistic and cultural advantage, telling their customers that with them communication will be clear (Figure 11).

5. Less is more: the discrete charm of concealment

So far, this discussion treated Russian signs as a key signal of accommodation of Russian language, yet the absence of Russian in the signage does not necessarily signal the lack of linguistic accommodation. Some places that employ Russian-speaking staff may not display Russian signs, especially if they cater to the upmarket clientele. On the upscale Via Veneto in Rome, for instance, in August of 2014, traces of Russian were limited to the announcement about the relocation of the store Zilli (Figure 12) and the Russian subtitle 'Детский мир' [Children's world] on the banner for the children's store 'Carry on junior'. These signs communicated discretely but unambiguously that the stores were ready to meet the linguistic needs of their wealthy Russian customers. In contrast, stores on Via Nazionale and other streets popular with mid-market shoppers displayed prominent ads about sales, new collections, and Russian-speaking staff (Figure 2), as do stores elsewhere, like the fur shop in Heraklion, Crete (Figure 13).

An approach that reduces visible marketing to Russian customers while stepping up the actual linguistic accommodation is also found in other settings that serve well-to-do customers, such as stores belonging to the Finnish chain Stockmann (www.stockmanngroup.com), one of the first Western companies to enter the Russian market in 1989. Despite its recognizable brand, in Helsinki Stockmann competes for Russian customers with other centers, including Kamppi, Forum, and Galleria Esplanad. During the Christmas season of 2013–2014, all three centers displayed Russian-language signs announcing sales and most high-end stores we visited had Russian-speaking sales personnel. Kamppi also played Russian-language announcements throughout the day and had a centrally located information booth, marked by a Russian flag, where a Russian-speaker answered visitors' questions. To outdo their competitors, in December 2012, Stockmann began accepting rubles and opened a Visitor Center with Russian-speaking personnel to help Russian customers get tax rebates. The Visitor Center sign, however, is the only Russian sign in the whole store – all other signage appears in Finnish, Swedish, and English. At the same time, requests for a Russian-speaker were immediately accommodated on every floor and the Visitor Center was populated exclusively by Russian customers (Pavlenko, Pietikäinen and Duchêne, Forthcoming).

A similar approach is adopted in the Spanish shopping center that belongs to the chain El Corte Inglés and is located near the luxury resort Puerto Banus. The store does not flaunt Russian signage yet in the back a large sign on the elevator doors announces in Spanish and Russian that client services in the basement will serve their needs. This discrete, 'less is more' approach allows upmarket stores to accomplish three things at once. To begin with, they can accommodate Russian-speakers without eliciting resentment from other well-to-do customers. Secondly, by downplaying the need for such accommodation, they allow their wealthy customers to save face. Last but not least, by not displaying Russian prominently, the stores maintain their 'authenticity', a quality that attracted the shoppers in the first place.

The high premium placed on authenticity is also attested in other high-stakes domains, such as finance and healthcare. While some Russians do require linguistic support, the key reason they take their assets and health issues abroad is the lack of trust in the Russian system and other Russians. For a while, banks in Switzerland and elsewhere did try to accommodate their Russian clients by hiring Russian-speaking employees (e.g. www.gsl.org), yet the clients did not necessarily want to be served by native speakers of Russian. The same distrust is attested in Swiss clinics where Russian patients favor doctors and nurses with accented Russian that confirms their Western origins. This preference for second language (L2) speakers of Russian leads us to ask the most important question: Who performs the different forms of linguistic labor?

6. Russian as a commodity in the language teaching industry

The fieldwork to date suggests that a significant share of language work is performed by native speakers of Russian, including (1) Russian-speakers who reside in Russia and other post-Soviet states and work for global companies as translators or call-center staff; (2) Russian-speakers who reside in Russia and come to tourist locations during high season to work as waiters or guides; and (3) Russian-speakers who reside abroad, permanently or temporarily, and either own or are employed by businesses requiring Russian skills. The second group consists of L2 Russian speakers who learned Russian at an earlier point in life: (1) bilingual offspring of immigrant families; (2) arrivals from other post-Soviet countries, such as Armenia or Ukraine; (3) arrivals from other Slavic-speaking countries, such as Bulgaria; and (4) people who learned Russian in secondary or higher education (Eracleous and Pavlenko, Forthcoming; Pavlenko, Pietikäinen, and Duchêne, Forthcoming).

These two groups, however, do not completely fulfill the demand for Russian in the service industry, in particular in sites that require only basic competence. This demand triggered several forms of supply in the language teaching industry, including (1) business and tourism degrees with specialization in Russian, (2) language schools, with the focus on business Russian (e.g. Zaikina 2011), (3) workplace courses, like the ones offered by Stockmann to their employees (Pavlenko, Pietikäinen, and Duchêne, Forthcoming)), and (4) online courses, such as *Be My Guest: Russian for European hospitality* (http://russianonline.eu/). Some may also learn Russian informally, like Egyptian merchants who pass around notebooks with transcriptions of common phrases used to attract Russian customers and negotiate prices (Husarska 2014; Protassova 2011).

The increased interest in Russian is particularly visible in Turkey, where in the past decade the number of L2 Russian speakers increased from 60,000 to more than 600,000 people, and in Egypt, where the number increased from 20,000 to 35,000 people (Aref'ev 2012). These estimates, however, are based on enrollments in secondary and higher education, which do not reflect the study of Russian in the workplace. To get a better sense of global Russian, future fieldwork needs to examine the learning of L2 Russian in and for the workplace.

7. So what and what next: business vs. politics

The international tourism industry operates on the assumption that tourists who do not speak the local language can be accommodated in the global lingua franca English. But what happens when the visitors do not know English? The overview above shows that in the case of tourists who come in large numbers and tend to be generous spenders – like the Russians and more recently the Chinese – the tourism industry makes an investment in the language of the visitors. In the case of Russian, the process of language commodification in the service economy included several stages: (1) the recovery of the Russian economy that first created a wealthy upper class and then led to the expansion of the middle-class and a great increase in mass tourism; (2) mutual adjustment, whereby Russians 'discovered' attractive locations and businesses in these locations discovered that their Russian customers are generous spenders and prefer to be accommodated in Russian; (3) the development of a variety of accommodation strategies by governments, municipalities, corporations, and businesses interested in attracting the Russian money flow and hopeful that the use of Russian language may increase their chances in doing so; (4) increased demand for personnel with the knowledge of Russian as either L1 or L2; (5) investment into L2 Russian skills by people in the service industry and other fields.

Such investment, even on the most basic level, can pay off in the job market. For instance, in a recent analysis of job openings in Berlin requiring Russian, Bergmann (2015) found that of 58 positions advertised in the Spring of 2012 only half required a high level of proficiency. These vacancies were for engineers and managers in medicine, the pharmaceutical industry, the building sector, and telecommunications. The other half, including vacancies for nursing staff and workers in the transport industry, required only basic knowledge.

Now, in and of itself the treatment of Russian as a commodity is by no means new: in tsarist Russia, for instance, promotion in the imperial service was a powerful inducement for acquisition of Russian by upwardly mobile Baltic Germans, Poles, Ukrainians, and other ethnic elites (Pavlenko 2011). Nor is it new to say that the use of Russian does not always indicate warm-hearted feelings towards its speakers: in the nineteenth century the key Russian government official in Poland Milutin argued against imposed russification measures because 'experience has shown that an excellent knowledge of the Russian language – and even with full external Russification – often conceals an irreconcilable hatred for Russia' (Thaden and Forster Thaden 1984, 164). Even the presence of Russian in European signage is not new: in the 1920s, Berlin, the cultural capital of Russian emigration, sported whole streets full of Russian-language signs, including 'Здесь говорят по-русски' [Russian is spoken here] (Budnitskii and Polian 2013).

What is new is the corporate – rather than individual – locus of decision-making about language use and the fact that when a promising new market does not communicate in English the service industry is willing to adopt Russian, Arabic, or Chinese. And what is particularly interesting in the case of Russian is its ambiguous status as a commodity that cannot be easily dissociated from the political identity of its putative speakers. The controversial nature of the topic became clear to me when I presented the first findings of this research at a conference in Poland. After the presentation, a colleague told me that some of the attendees found my talk distasteful. The objections did not involve my theoretical framework, research methodology, or the truthfulness of the claims (which, *inter alia*, did not include Poland). What was distasteful was the topic itself – the notion that money talks and that someone, somewhere, would accommodate the language of the country viewed as a political and ideological enemy of the West and of the people stereotyped as rude and uncouth.

It is true that Russians are often portrayed by the media as boorish, demanding, suspicious, unfriendly, arrogant, rude, and uncivilized. Russian men are associated with drunkenness, and women with overly provocative dressing, and some tourists may even look for 'non-Russian' locations and tours (Ageenko, Papazyan, and Apukhtin 2013; Rudya 2009; Squires 2014). A Pew Research Center (2015) poll of 26 nations also found that outside of its borders Russia does not have much respect or support: in Poland, for instance, 80% of the respondents had a negative view of Russia.

Yet this is precisely what I find fascinating: despite these negative stereotypes, in the past two decades, Finnish salespeople, Italian hoteliers, and Turkish merchants alike have been investing in Russian skills, as have some business people in Poland, including the creators of the website that gave the title to this article (http://russian-friendly.com/). At the same time, the very term, *Russian-friendly*, points to the 'non-normative' status of Russians as a group that may not be automatically welcome, similar to gays, children, and pets.

The investment in Russian, therefore, may require a cognitive adjustment because it creates a dissonance between personal pride and sense of integrity, on the one hand, and potential profit on the other. This dissonance is undoubtedly shaped by discursive processes discussed by Heller and Duchêne (2012), yet it is also experienced as an acute, immediate, and personal conflict. To resolve this conflict and to create a coherent narrative of the self, different individuals adopt different strategies. Some may decide to show that their pride is not for sale – among them is Salvatore Madonna, owner of luxury hotels in Tuscany, who, in 2014, produced a video clip whose aim ostensibly was to teach wealthy Russians the finer points of Italian etiquette but whose actual purpose was to make fun of the boorish nouveaux riches (Squires 2014). Others may deny negative stereotypes and state that Russians make polite and friendly guests (e.g. Svanström 2013) or even ideal tourists *par excellence* (e.g. Zini 2013).

It is my great hope that future ethnographic studies will go beyond documenting accommodation of Russian and examine ways in which different players resolve this cognitive dissonance: how do people who invest in Russian skills and provision of Russian services manage to see themselves and their efforts in a positive light? Do they develop a more positive view of Russia and Russian-speakers? Do they manage to depoliticize the Russian language? Is it, in fact, possible to depoliticize Russian, and if so, what are the consequences of such depoliticization for the interaction between business and politics?

The present time may seem less than advantageous for this kind of research. In the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the fall of the oil prices and Western sanctions, the flow of Russian tourists in Europe has decreased and so did their spending (www.unwto.org). This downturn, however, also offers a unique opportunity, namely to examine how, where, and when Russian skills become decommodified and what the consequences of such decommodification are for the parties involved.

Notes

1. Translation by the present author.
2. More information on the Schengen visa can be obtained at http://www.schengenvisainfo.com/, where information is available in English and in Russian or at http://www.travel.ru/formalities/visa/schengen/.

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Important websites

Association of Tour Operators of Russia, www.atorus.ru.
Be My Guest: Russian for European Hospitality, www.russianonline.eu.
Federal Agency for Tourism in Russia, www.russiatourism.ru.
Euromonitor International, www.euromonitor.com.
International Property (real estate abroad), www.prian.ru.
Russian Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat), www.gks.ru.
Russian Union of Travel Industry. www.rata.ru.
RATA news: Electronic newspaper of the Russian Union of Travel Industry, www.ratanews.ru.
United Nations World Tourism Organization, www.unwto.org.