

SECURITIZING RUSSIAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

Diana BORIMECHKOVA

Rakovski National Defence College, Sofia, Bulgaria

d.borimechkova@rndc.bg

Abstract: *In contemporary geopolitical and security environments, foreign languages are increasingly viewed through the lens of strategic relevance and risk. This paper examines how Russian is discursively repositioned from an educational resource to a security-sensitive subject within military learning contexts. Drawing on securitization theory and language policy, it demonstrates that ongoing geopolitical developments and security-related narratives reshape the framing of Russian as a strategically significant language. Rather than diminishing its operational value, this shift transforms the conditions under which Russian is taught. The analysis highlights emerging tensions between military requirements and perceived ideological sensitivities, shaping curricular choices, content filtering, and instructional practices. Using the Bulgarian military educational context as an illustrative case, the paper identifies adaptive teaching practices that respond to these constraints and support educational resilience in BANI-type environments.*

Keywords: securitization; Russian language; military education; adaptive teaching

1. Introduction

Foreign language learning is generally framed as a culturally and ideologically neutral activity, and a resource for communicative and intercultural competence. In civilian settings, the act of teaching Russian does not inherently position learners or instructors within political identity structures, nor does it imply alignment with Russian state interests or geopolitical narratives. Like any major world language, Russian primarily serves as an instrument of access—to literature, diplomacy, technical knowledge, and international communication.

However, the meaning of Russian shifts when the instruction takes place within military institutions operating in security-sensitive environments. In military education, languages are not learned solely for cultural purposes, but for strategical functions such as interoperability, intelligence, professional communication,

threat assessment, and regional expertise. In such contexts, foreign languages become entangled with national security priorities and geopolitical alignments. Russian, in particular, is increasingly reframed as a strategic asset with dual implications: it offers clear operational advantages, while simultaneously evoking the language of a current adversary. As a result, the teaching of Russian in some NATO countries may become securitized—not because of its linguistic content, but because of the institutional and political constraints within which it is embedded.

This transformation occurs through several mechanisms. First, the language may be discursively associated with hostile state behavior, hybrid threats, or ideological influence, raising concerns about the legitimacy of maintaining or expanding Russian-language training. Second, the mere presence of Russian in the curriculum may generate questions about institutional

priorities and learner sensitivities. Third, at the level of teaching practice, curricula may be adjusted to avoid politically sensitive topics. In this sense, the military setting acts as a securitizing amplifier: the context in which the foreign language is learned redefines its symbolic and practical implications.

2. Theoretical Framework

Securitization theory, as developed by Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan, conceptualizes security as a speech act through which political actors construct certain issues as existential threats that legitimize exceptional measures. Its central premise is that threats are not objective conditions but socially produced claims whose success depends on audience acceptance [1]. Within this framework, securitization captures how domains conventionally understood as neutral can be rearticulated through logics of risk, urgency, and exceptionality.

Extending this perspective, recent work in applied linguistics has shown that foreign language education is, to a large extent, subject to alignment with national and security goals, whereby languages are reframed not only as pedagogical or cultural resources but also as objects of securitization [2]. Ben Rampton and his research circle analyze the securitization of foreign language education in different contexts of political and military conflict, as well as its desecuritization in post-conflict settings, foregrounding the interplay between local language ideologies and situated communicative practices [3, 4].

The transformation of educational objectives concerning the Russian language, and its reconceptualization as a strategic language motivated by national security needs, can be traced back to the Cold War period, when the UK shifted from a model of cultural engagement to military- and intelligence-oriented language training, prioritizing Russian for wartime preparedness [5].

In the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, the Russian language has become

increasingly politicized, as its use is linked to concerns about societal security and Russian geopolitical influence [6].

Existing research on the securitization of Russian has predominantly focused on language communities and macro-level policy dynamics, including Russian-speaking minorities in Ukraine, Baltic states, and Moldova [7-10], as well as Russian-language disinformation within European policy debates [11]. While these studies provide important insights into Russian as a marker of identity, influence, and geopolitical contestation, they rarely address how securitizing logics operate within educational contexts, particularly in institutional settings where foreign language learning is embedded in security-related functions.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines foreign language teaching in highly institutionalized and strategically oriented environments by analysing how Russian is discursively constructed as an object of securitization within military educational contexts, and how this construction shapes pedagogical choices, curricular design, and instructional strategies margins.

3. From Resource to Security Concern: Reframing Russian in Military Education

The distinction between Russian as a resource and as an object of securitization reflects a shift in how the language is positioned within institutional and strategic logics. These framings coexist in tension, reconfiguring the language's functional and symbolic status.

Traditionally, Russian has been treated as a strategic resource, valued for its operational utility in intelligence and situational awareness. Its inclusion in military curricula has therefore been justified on predominantly pragmatic grounds, where language functions as a neutral instrument of professional competence. Under conditions of intensified geopolitical

tension, however, this instrumental framing becomes destabilized, as Russian comes to be associated with strategic rivalry and perceived as a potential channel of ideological influence. While its operational relevance persists, its curricular presence is reinterpreted as politically sensitive, prompting institutions to limit or strategically reframe its instruction. The language thus shifts from an instrument for communication to an object of institutional management and regulation.

This dynamic can also be understood through Bernard Spolsky's model of language policy as the interaction between practices, beliefs, and planning [12]. From this perspective, the changing status of Russian is reflected not only in learners' attitudes but also in its prestige, curricular positioning, and regulatory treatment within institutional settings.

From a securitization perspective, the analytical focus shifts from what the language enables actors to do to what its use signals within a given security environment—a dynamic that becomes particularly salient in military education. These patterns are especially pronounced in national contexts where historical, geopolitical, and institutional factors intersect—such as in Bulgarian military education.

4. Contextual Background: Bulgarian Military Education

The Bulgarian military educational context provides a particularly illustrative case for examining the securitization of Russian in institutional language training. Although not formalized in a single policy document, language policy within the Bulgarian Armed Forces strongly prioritizes English-language training, reflecting NATO interoperability requirements.

At the same time, despite ongoing needs related to intelligence and military-technical domains, the system continues to rely largely on the residual Russian-language competence of older generations of personnel. Institutional investment in

maintaining or developing these capabilities remains limited, contributing to gradual attrition of Russian-language proficiency across personnel [13].

In parallel, recent geopolitical developments have further reshaped the status of Russian. While the language has not been formally removed from military education, its presence is significantly reduced. At the same time, it is increasingly constructed as an object of securitization, associated with strategic risk rather than operational utility. This shift is not enacted through explicit prohibition but emerges through institutional practices, contributing to the marginalization of a strategically relevant language.

5. Emerging Tensions in Language Teaching

The dynamics outlined above become most visible at the level of teaching practice, affecting not only what is taught, but how it is taught and how it is perceived by both instructors and learners.

A first tension emerges between operational necessity and perceived ideological risk. On the one hand, Russian remains relevant for specific military functions. On the other hand, its association with a strategic adversary introduces a layer of sensitivity that constrains its curricular promotion. Instructors may therefore find themselves navigating an implicit contradiction: teaching a language that is simultaneously needed and problematized.

A second tension concerns the selection and framing of instructional content. Russian-language resources often include cultural, historical, or political references that may be perceived as sensitive in the current security environment, particularly when based on contemporary materials produced within the Russian Federation, which may reflect or reproduce official state narratives. As a result, educators may engage in forms of selective filtering—avoiding certain topics, adapting authentic resources, or focusing primarily on formal linguistic features, thereby decontextualizing the

language and reducing engagement with its sociocultural dimensions, as observed in research on teaching the language of the “enemy” [3]. While such strategies aim to mitigate perceived risk, they may also narrow the scope of language learning and limit exposure to diverse forms of authentic language use.

A third tension relates to learner perceptions and classroom dynamics. Students may approach the study of Russian with ambivalence, shaped by broader societal narratives and circulating representations in media and public communication. This can affect motivation, participation, and the depth of linguistic and cultural engagement.

Taken together, these tensions illustrate how the securitization of language extends beyond policy and discourse into the micro-level of teaching practice, highlighting the need for adaptive pedagogical responses that reconcile operational requirements with the constraints of the security environment.

6. Adaptive Teaching Practices

Instructors working within these conditions develop strategies that allow them to maintain the operational value of Russian-language instruction while addressing the sensitivities associated with its securitized status. These strategies can be understood as operating across three interrelated dimensions of language teaching: content selection, pedagogical framing, and the development of learners’ critical interpretive competence.

The first strategy, *selective filtering*, represents a structured pedagogical choice. Educators prioritize technical, professional, or functionally relevant content while limiting exposure to materials likely to be perceived as ideologically sensitive, including contemporary political discourse, particularly conflict-related narratives and reporting on ongoing military developments, as well as historically charged interpretations. While such filtering shapes the boundaries of linguistic input and may reduce exposure to broader

registers of authentic discourse, it functions as a contextually justified response that sustains instruction under institutional and political constraints. In this sense, what might be viewed as a limitation in conventional language pedagogy becomes a functional adaptation under securitized conditions.

A second strategy involves *critical framing of content*. Instructors contextualize language materials within broader geopolitical and informational environments, guiding learners to consider the source positioning, perspective, and potential bias alongside linguistic features. This approach structures how input is presented, enabling engagement with authentic material while maintaining analytical distance.

A third adaptive practice can be described as a *dual-perspective approach*, in which learners are encouraged to treat the language both as a functional tool and as an object of critical reflection. Rather than focusing solely on input framing, this approach develops a form of layered competence that combines communicative proficiency with awareness of how language operates within strategic narratives and information environments. For example, learners may analyze a news excerpt both for its grammatical structures and for its discursive framing of geopolitical events. This enables language use without uncritical alignment with embedded meanings.

Taken together, these practices illustrate a shift from traditional language teaching toward a more reflexive and context-sensitive pedagogy. They do not constitute a unified strategy, but rather context-dependent responses applied selectively and in varying combinations. Rather than avoiding the tensions associated with Russian, they transform constraints into structured learning conditions. In this sense, adaptation emerges not only as a practical necessity but as a core component of educational resilience in security-oriented environments.

7. Language in a BANI Environment

The tensions and adaptive practices identified in the previous sections can be further interpreted within BANI environments—brittle, anxious, nonlinear, and incomprehensible systems characterized by instability, uncertainty, and complex causality [14]. In such contexts, institutional responses are shaped not only by structural constraints but also by perceived risk, unpredictability, and informational ambiguity.

In the case of Russian language teaching in military education, *brittleness* is reflected in the difficulty of sustaining stable curricula, as rapidly changing geopolitical conditions require continuous revision and, at times, improvised adjustments to teaching content and priorities. *Anxiousness* permeates the entire process of Russian language instruction—from institutional decisions about whether and how to offer it, to the selection and use of teaching materials, and the interpretation of sociocultural content in the classroom. *Nonlinearity* is evident in the uneven relationship between operational demand and institutional response, while *incomprehensibility* is reflected in the coexistence of competing framings of Russian as a communicative resource, a form of soft power, a historical legacy, and an object of securitization.

Within this framework, adaptive teaching practices can be considered as mechanisms of resilience understood in functional terms: the capacity to sustain language instruction under conditions of persistent uncertainty and shifting security logics. The findings

suggest that adaptation occurs not as a coordinated systemic response to securitization pressures, but through localized and discretionary practices that allow instruction to remain operational under such conditions.

8. Conclusions

This paper has examined the repositioning of the Russian language within military education in a context of geopolitical instability. Drawing on securitization theory and language policy perspectives, it has shown that Russian is constructed simultaneously as a communicative resource and as an object of securitization, generating tensions between operational necessity and perceived risk.

These tensions are managed not through formal exclusion, but through gradual marginalization and implicit institutional constraints, alongside continued operational demand. In such settings, adaptive pedagogical practices emerge as key mechanisms for sustaining instructional viability.

Among these, practices such as selective filtering illustrate particularly clearly how pedagogical constraints can be reconfigured as contextually justified responses to securitized conditions.

More broadly, the study demonstrates that language securitization extends beyond discourse and policy into the micro-level of pedagogical practice, revealing how educational systems adjust when linguistic competence becomes both operationally necessary and politically sensitive.

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