

Item 10.i: Slavonic and East European Languages

This is a report on Slavonic and East European (SEE) Languages in UK Higher Education, covering the period December 2021 – April 2022. This report is based on consultation with the British Association of Slavonic and East European Studies (BASEES) and with academics in the field. I surveyed representatives from 15 institutions teaching SEE Languages at degree level and received 7 responses.

1. War in Ukraine

Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, marking a major escalation in the Russia-Ukraine war. The war has had catastrophic human consequences for Ukraine, with casualty figures unclear at the time of writing, but estimated to run into tens of thousands already. Over 5 million Ukrainians are estimated to have fled the country and an even larger number have been internally displaced. The invasion of Ukraine has been accompanied by a crackdown on dissenting voices within the Russian Federation, prompting an exodus from Russia: again, numbers are unclear, but estimates suggest over 200,000 Russians may have left the country.

Many UK institutions have published statements condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and expressing concerns at the breaches of human rights in Russia. BASEES issued [such a statement](#) on 24 February. A [UCML statement](#) followed on 28 February.

Many UK institutions have also sought to provide practical assistance. BASEES has established a financial support scheme for displaced Ukrainian students based in the UK or coming to the UK; Russian and Belarusian students who cannot return home for political reasons are also eligible to apply. BASEES has partnered with the Royal Historical Society and the Past and Present Society to fund three short-term fellowships for scholars from Ukraine. More information is available at <http://basees.org/ukraine>.

[The University of New Europe](#) is a pan-European initiative responding to the invasion of Ukraine and the new wave of authoritarianism seen in Russia and Ukraine. The long-term plan is to establish an accredited university, but at the moment the university offers a mentoring scheme for displaced Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian students and scholars.

Many UK universities have held fundraiser events to support humanitarian relief in Ukraine, as well as scholarly events to raise awareness both about the current war and the history and culture of Ukraine. On 30 April, the Cambridge Union will host a full day '[Ukraine Teach-In](#)' featuring scholars from across the UK and beyond speaking on Ukrainian issues.

The larger ramifications for our field are significant. It is likely to be difficult or impossible for UK citizens to carry out research in Belarus, Russia and Ukraine for years to come. The UK Foreign Office currently advise against all travel to all three countries. Many leaders of Russian higher education institutions have publicly stated their support for Russia's war, and the Russian Union of Rectors issued [a statement supporting the war](#) on 4 March. UK-based institutions thus have to consider the ethics of

partnerships with Russian organizations, while simultaneously recognizing that many individual Russian academics may oppose the war.

The war in Ukraine has also led colleagues to recognize that our field may have to change in some of its foundational assumptions. Questions of terminology have long been problematic for our field, even before the war. What do the diverse languages, societies, and cultures that fall under the umbrella of 'Slavonic and East European (sometimes Eurasian is now added) Studies' really have in common? This label, largely a product of the Cold War divide, arguably no longer holds water. Many of the countries and peoples grouped as 'East European' dislike the label. 'Slavonic', too, is problematic in the light of the current Russian leadership's co-optation of the term as part of its justification of the invasion of Ukraine. The need for our field to de-centre Russia and Russian Studies, and to decolonize more broadly, has gained a new urgency in the light of current events.

2. Year Abroad

One of the most pressing practical questions concerns the Year Abroad provision for students studying Russian and Ukrainian. These students typically spend 4-8 months in-country as part of their programme. Colleagues had to act quickly to evacuate Year Abroad students in Russia after the outbreak of war in February 2022; once flights between Russia and the UK were suspended, then students often had to make their way out via third countries.

Institutions then had to make alternative arrangements at short notice for these students. As placements in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus are impossible, many UK institutions have Russian-language programmes in the Baltic states of Estonia and Latvia (where there is still a sizeable minority of Russian speakers, though Russian has no official status), the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (where Russian remains an official language and is still widely spoken), and the Caucasian republics of Armenia and Georgia (where some Russian is still spoken but the language has no official status). Over the next few years, UK universities will be establishing new contacts with these programmes. Some UK institutions are also exploring the ability of three-year degree programmes without the Year Abroad.

UCML hosted a meeting with colleagues in SEE languages to discuss and share ideas in relation to the future of the Year Abroad. This meeting took place on 18 March and colleagues agreed that it was very helpful to collaborate with one another.

3. Admissions

There is some uncertainty about how the war may affect admissions to SEE languages programmes. On the one hand, the war has revealed the continued geopolitical importance of our region. Russian and Ukrainian speakers are likely to be in high demand for diplomacy and security work for some years to come. On the other hand, there are likely to be fewer opportunities in business as sanctions intensify and the Russian economy weakens. The lack of accessibility to Russia may also deter students, which is another reason why establishing alternative Year Abroad provision must be a priority.

The cohort of students who begin university in September 2022 will have made their initial application to UCAS before the outbreak of the war, but their final choice of which course and university to take up afterwards. Anecdotal evidence from colleagues suggests that those students who chose to apply for Russian remain keen to take up their places. At our post-offer visit days in Bristol, I spoke to many offer-holders who were still keen to study Russian, but who understandably had many questions about how the Year Abroad would be handled.

It will be interesting to see the number of students who enter first year in SEE languages in September 2022, and even more revealing to see the number of UCAS applications to SEE language degrees for a 2023 start.

4. BASEES Strategic Review

BASEES undertook a major strategic review in 2021-22, with the results published in early 2022 before Russia's invasion of Ukraine began. A number of key issues were identified:

- (a) To attract more postgraduates and early-career academics to the organization and better cater to their needs. To this end, a separate membership rate for postgraduate students will be introduced.
- (b) To commit to equality, diversity, and inclusion in a meaningful and visible way; to develop an EDI statement to be posted on the website and to investigate updating the constitution to include this commitment.
- (c) To update the organization's communications strategy, particularly the BASEES website, which needs a makeover.
- (d) To continue the advocacy work that has become a more important part of BASEES activity in recent years, with the weaponization of history and scholarship and ongoing attacks against academic freedom in Russia, parts of Eastern Europe, and even in the UK. The BASEES website should have a dedicated Advocacy and Policy section and the importance of this work should be highlighted.

5. BASEES Advocacy

In relation to advocacy, BASEES was one of the first scholarly organizations internationally to issue a statement criticizing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as noted above.

Together with the American organizations ASEES and AATSEEL, BASEES co-issued a Joint Statement on Opposition of Banning Scholars Based on Citizenship on 10 March.

BASEES also issued a number of statements in November 2021 in relation to the Russian state's attack on Memorial International, a civil rights organization and historical society closely associated with documenting the atrocities of the Stalinist Terror.

6. BASEES Conference

BASEES hosted its first in-person conference since the start of the pandemic on 8-10 April 2022 in Robinson College, Cambridge. Inevitably, the outbreak of war cast a heavy shadow over the conference, and many delegates had to withdraw in the weeks leading up to the conference because they were unable to travel or secure visas. Nevertheless, the conference was a success in difficult circumstances. Colleagues obviously felt the benefit of an in-person event, and remote presentation remained an option for those who could not attend in person. The 2023 conference is planned to take place in Glasgow, representing a move away from Cambridge for the first time.

7. Vacancy for SEE representative on the UCML Executive Committee

In July 2022, my term as representative for Slavonic and East European Languages on the UCML Executive Committee will come to an end. I have greatly enjoyed serving on the committee and have learned a lot in the role. Throughout my tenure in the role, I have tried to enhance the visibility of UCML among scholars of Slavonic and East European languages in the UK, to professionalize the role of the SEE Languages representative, and to build closer connections between BASEES and UCML.

In the next few months, UCML will be seeking nominations for a new representative for Slavonic and East European Languages. Colleagues in the field should consider applying and alerting others to this opportunity. There will be a formal nomination process but anyone wishing to discuss the role informally is welcome to get in touch with me.