

## THE STUDY OF THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE AS A MEAN TO DEEPEN THE RUSSIAN-NIGERIAN RELATIONSHIP

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Modern diplomacy, intelligence gathering and data collection require the use of language to communicate. Miscommunication creates mistrust and results in failures of diplomacy between partners and allies. We argue that Nigeria should invest more resources and efforts in the study and use of the Russian language for collaboration with Russia and Russian-speaking countries.

**Keywords:** Islamic State of West Africa; Boko Haram; Russian language; intelligence; weapons; insurgency; insecurity.

## ИЗУЧЕНИЕ И ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЕ РУССКОГО ЯЗЫКА КАК СРЕДСТВА УГЛУБЛЕНИЯ РОССИЙСКО-НИГЕРИЙСКИХ СВЯЗЕЙ

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Языковая коммуникация играет первостепенную роль в современной дипломатии и установлении информационных контактов. Сбои в коммуникации приводят к нарастанию недоверия и подрывают эффективность дипломатических контактов между партнерами и союзниками. Автором статьи обосновывается необходимость для Нигерии наращивать усилия в области использования и изучения русского языка как средства общения с представителями Российской Федерации и других русскоязычных стран.

**Ключевые слова:** Исламское государство западной Африки; Боко харам; русский язык; данные разведки; оружие; повстанческие движения; угрозы безопасности.

### Introduction

The level of insecurity in Nigeria has increased in recent times. The Islamic State of West Africa (ISWAP) or Boko Haram insurgency is raging in the Northeast, criminal gangs are operating extensively in the Northwest, Northcentral, Southwest and Southeast of the country. Over 35,000 people have died in the Boko Haram

insurgency since it began in Borno state in 2009. Furthermore, GIABA, the economic arm of the Economic Community of West African States, estimates that the Islamic State of West Africa moved 36 mln US dollars of tax and trade revenue from Lake Chad region through Nigeria's financial system in 2021<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Adepegba A. ISWAP moves N18bn annual revenue through Nigeria's financial system [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://punchng.com/iswap-moves-n18bn-annual-revenue-through-nigerias-financial-system-ecowas-body/22> (date of access: 27.02.2022).

### Образец цитирования:

Абимбола ДУ. Изучение и использование русского языка как средства углубления российско-нигерийских связей. *Журнал Белорусского государственного университета. Международные отношения*. 2022;1:37–42 (на англ.).  
<https://doi.org/10.33581/2521-6848-2022-1-37-42>

### For citation:

Abimbola DW. The study of the Russian language as a mean to deepen the Russian-Nigerian relationship. *Journal of the Belarusian State University. International Relations*. 2022;1:37–42.  
<https://doi.org/10.33581/2521-6848-2022-1-37-42>

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By the end of 2018 Nigeria had spent 6 trln local currency units on military hardware to battle various armed groups operating across the country<sup>2</sup>. However, this tremendous expenditure was not matched with military successes at the front due to a lack of intelligence and insufficient cooperation among the field commanders and intelligence agencies (IA). The struggle against an insurgency such as the one of Boko Haram can also be helped by cooperation with countries with significant intelligence capabilities, such as the Russian Federation and other Russian-speaking countries, including in the exchange of information on terrorists and trafficking in arms. It has been revealed, for example, that the Boko Haram insurgents sourced most of their

weapons stolen from the military stocks at the battlefields, or acquired them from the thriving central African black market<sup>3</sup>. In every successful raid the Nigerian security forces have seized AK-47s and other Soviet-era weapons sourced from Russia, Ukraine, or Eastern Europe. Nigeria can leverage the existing friendship between Abuja, Moscow and possibly Minsk to block and disrupt the arms flows before they reach the insurgents and criminal gangs in Nigeria. Policymakers in the area of national defence should consider collaborating with Russia, Belarus and other Russian-speaking countries in the gathering of intelligence, and the supply of aircraft parts, tanks, and also in cyber security and production of unmanned aerial vehicles [1].

### Theoretical approach

Traditional diplomacy relates to language, security and territory. Its actors are sovereign nation-states, with clearly defined borders or limits, even in the absence of a marked boundary [1]. Traditional diplomacy theory is concerned with “geography and territory”. The tenets of traditional diplomacy do not apply to situations where territory is not the defining principle [2].

There are several criteria to be met for traditional diplomacy: there must be more than one state, and the states must be sovereign and independent political units capable of exercising supreme authority. As argued by P. Sharp [2], the demand for diplomacy and insights into diplomatic theory is fast

on the rise. The diplomatic tradition and the idea of diplomacy are premised on the way people live in groups, the notions of intra- and inter-group dynamics, and the history of the settlement of international disputes. Overall, sovereignty, national interest and national security lie at the heart of traditional diplomacy. These three elements are also key policy objectives for Nigeria and Russia, and principal considerations in their bilateral relationships. Traditional diplomacy is formal, the parties follow diplomatic protocols as goodwill gestures. We consider the traditional diplomacy theory to be applicable to the relations between Nigeria and Russia as two sovereign states.

### Causes of the insurgency: multiple narratives

Conspiracy theorists assert that the political elites of the North unleashed the Boko Haram and other insurgencies to make the country ungovernable for the then-president Goodluck Jonathan, a member of the Southern Christian minority. However, the conflict lasted well beyond the change of government, even though Nigeria has been spending almost one-half of its budget on military equipment. This puts the veracity of the explanation in serious question.

Weakened by the constant bombardment of the area, the Boko Haram insurgents split into two factions over disagreements about operational issues and religious doctrines [3]. Abubakar Shekau was killed in March 2020 in a clash with the son of the movement's late founder, Abubakar Al-Barnawi, also killed in a military attack. He proceeded to create a more aggressive faction of the insurgents that pledges loyalty to ISWAP.

The insurgency engulfed the once peaceful Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state [3].

In an alternative explanation, Brookings<sup>4</sup> emphasised the name by which the insurgents preferred to be called – *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad*. Translated literally from Arabic, it means *people committed to the propagation of the prophet's teachings and jihad*. The residents of Maiduguri in Northeast Nigeria, where the insurgent movement originated, nicknamed its members “Boko Haram”. In the Hausa language, *Boko* means *Western education* and *haram* is the Arabic word for *forbidden* or *sinful*. The insurgents rebelled against Western civilisation (including Western education), and also the secularisation of the Nigerian state [4].

The Boko Haram movement was established in 2002. According to its leader, Muhammed Yusuf, its sole aim was to purify Islam in Northern Nigeria. The Nigerian

<sup>2</sup>Ndujihe C. Security: FG spends 6 trillion on defence in 11 years [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/07/security-fg-spends-n6trn-on-defence-in-11-years/> (date of access: 27.02.2022).

<sup>3</sup>Windrem R. Missing Nigeria school girls: where Boko Haram gets its weapons [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/missing-nigeria-schoolgirls/missing-nigeria-schoolgirls-where-boko-haram-gets-its-weapons-n104861> (date of access: 27.02.2022).

<sup>4</sup>Jideofor A. Explaining the emergence of Boko Haram [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2014/05/06/explaining-the-emergence-of-boko-haram/> (date of access: 27.02.2022).

military detained Muhammed Yusuf and handed him over to the police for prosecution. In 2009 the Nigerian police killed him in detention [4]. His followers mobilised in 2010 to launch an armed struggle against the Nigerian state to avenge his killing. In their first attack on the Nigerian state infrastructure, they targeted the Bauchi prison, setting free about 730 prisoners. Simultaneously, another insurrection began in the Northwestern states of Zamfara, Kaduna and Sokoto, spilling over to Niger state<sup>5</sup>, with large numbers of reported mass killings, kidnapping and stealing of livestock.

Intimidated by the insurgency, the state governments of Zamfara, Sokoto and Katsina negotiated with

the rebels. Historically speaking, in Zamfara, the insurgency started as a modern farmer-herder conflict before it escalated and spilled over to the entire Northwest. At least 12,000 people were killed and over 250,000 livestock was stolen in 2011<sup>6</sup>. However, the insurgents were most active in Zamfara, where large quantities of gold and solid minerals were discovered. Elsewhere in the Northwest, the intensity of the conflict was much lower. When the level of violence increased in 2016, the Nigerian government set up a military task force to suppress it<sup>7</sup>. Growing military presence pushed the insurgents from the Northwest to the Southwest, where cases of rape and destruction of farm produce were reported daily.

### The effects of the Nigerian insurgency

As a Nigerian saying goes, *a malady that strikes the eye will spread to the nose*. The instability spread from the Northwest to the economic heartland of Nigeria in the South. The displaced insurgents soon reinvented themselves as Fulani herdsman, occupying Southern forests, and engaging in kidnapping for ransom, rape and disruption of farming operations<sup>8</sup>. With an increase in violence and instability in the South, food insecurity grew<sup>9</sup>. In the Oyo area alone, more than ten

people died in skirmishes between farmers and herders<sup>10</sup>. Food shortages became acute, but the biggest source of tensions was the widening ethnic divisions, exacerbated by the anti-Fulani posture of the insurgents. Ethnic nationalism strengthened, and soon the ethnic warlords of the Yoruba and Igbo communities called for secession from Nigeria, upset by the central government's failure to address the violence and instability<sup>11</sup>.

### Language defined

According to R. A. Zirin [5], language is a speech sound system created by human beings to express ideas, emotions, thoughts, desires, and feelings. In light of the recent advances in linguistics, psychology and biology [5]. Language may be defined as the inherent capability of native speakers to understand and form grammatical sentences. They are essential components of individual and common human heritage. They are the first and foremost vehicle for expressing identity, communicating ideas, attaining educational, economic and political autonomy, and promoting peace and sustaina-

ble human development [6]. It is also a set of statements constructed from a limited set of elements. Languages are important for sharing information for intelligence and knowledge and for transmitting unique cultural wisdom, including across generations and nations. They form an intrinsic part of the identity of individuals and people, and they are of vital importance to manage the cultural diversity of our world. They open opportunities for dialogue, cooperation and mutual understanding [6]. Overall, language is at the centre of communication, and consequently, negotiation and international diplomacy.

### The Russian language

The Russian language, also known as *ruskii yazyk* is an East Slavic language native to Russia in Eastern Europe, it is part of the Indo-European language family

[7, p. 8]. As the Indo-European tribes moved to the West and the East, the Slavic tribes became separate from the other tribes and developed their language, called

<sup>5</sup>Rufai A. I am a bandit: a decade of research on armed banditry in Zamfara state // Semin. pap. at the dep. of hist. Sokoto : Usman Danfodio Univ., 2021. P. 5–10.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Tanko A. Nigeria's Mohammedu Buhari sends task force to Zamfara [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36784542> (date of access: 27.02.2022).

<sup>8</sup>Duru P. Herdsmen attacks: food shortage hits Benue as prices soar [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.vanguardngr.com> (date of access: 27.02.2022).

<sup>9</sup>Agboluaje R. Agitation for the Yoruba nation has great consequences, scholars warn [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://guardian.ng/news/agitation-for-yoruba-nation-has-great-consequences-scholars-warn> (date of access: 27.02.2022).

<sup>10</sup>Zamfara government negotiating with bandits for schoolgirls' safe return [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/03/zamfara-govt-negotiating-with-bandits-for-abducted-schoolgirls-safe-return-%E2%80%95-source/amp> (date of access: 27.02.2022).

<sup>11</sup>Agboluaje R. Agitation for the Yoruba nation has great consequences, scholars warn [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://guardian.ng/news/agitation-for-yoruba-nation-has-great-consequences-scholars-warn> (date of access: 27.02.2022).

common-Slavonic or proto-Slavonic. The Slavs settled in the heart of present-day Eastern Europe and continued to use mutually intelligible dialect forms for centuries. Another school of thought believes the speakers of Rus-

sian migrated to their present home from Istanbul. As of 2020, there were over 258 mln speakers of the Russian language. Large numbers of Russian speakers are residents of other countries, such as Israel and Mongolia<sup>12</sup>.

### History of the Russian language in Nigeria

The study of the Russian language in Nigeria would not have been possible without the socialist approach of the then Soviet Union and its policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of the host country. The teaching of the Russian language in Nigeria began in 1960 when the University of Nigeria, Nsukka was established and the course was introduced – first as a minor, and later, as a full course [8]. Initially, the Russian language course had only six undergraduate students bold enough to explore a new area of study. At the time, only English and French were being studied in primary and secondary schools in Nigeria. Following the introduction of a Russian language course at the University of Nigeria,

Nsukka, Premier University of Ibadan followed suit and offered a Russian language course in the academic year 1963/64. Enrolment figures were discouraging, however, as few students were prepared to venture into this new field of study, and the ones who enrolled did so mainly out of curiosity [8]. After a successful launch of the Russian language programme at the University of Nigeria, other universities began to offer Russian language courses, notably, the University of Ibadan, University of Lagos (1970) and University of Ife (now it is called Obafemi Awolowo University). Unfortunately, the latter university discontinued the course after several years, due to a shortage of staff and resources [8].

### Russian and a language of research and intelligence

Russian is one of the most geographically widespread and most widely spoken Slavic language in Eurasia and Europe. With 60–70 % of all information published in Russian and English, Russian is an international lan-

guage of science and information [9]. It is one of the world's eight most spoken languages by the total number of speakers, and the second most widely utilised language on the Internet after English as it is shown in the table.

Most commonly used languages on the Internet

Rank language	Share of top 10 mln websites, %	Share of speaking population, %
English	60.4	16.2
Russian	8.5	3.3
Spanish	4.0	6.9
Turkish	3.7	1.1
Persian	3.0	0.7
French	2.6	3.5
German	2.4	1.7
Japanese	2.1	1.6
Vietnamese	1.7	1.0
Simplified Chinese	1.4	14.3

Source: [10].

Russian is a language of the world media and communications, including the broadcast media, air and space transmissions. It is one of the two official languages aboard the International space station [9].

As one of the six official languages of the United Nations (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Spanish and Russian) the Russian language has geopolitical significance<sup>13</sup>. Incidentally, correct interpretation and translation of speeches and texts in these six official

languages is critical to effective multilateral diplomacy at the United Nations<sup>14</sup>. Russian is the official language in Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and it is used widely as a lingua franca throughout Ukraine, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and to some extent in the Baltic states. Russian was the *de facto* language of the Soviet Union until its dissolution and continues to be used in public life to varying degrees throughout the post-Soviet states<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>12</sup>Russian [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/rus> (date of access: 21.02.2022).

<sup>13</sup>Official languages [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.un.org/en/our-work/official-languages> (date of access: 20.01.2022).

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Why learn Russian? [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/lcahm/departments/languages/sections/lfa/about/russian.aspx> (date of access: 20.01.2022).



## Nigerian-Russian diplomatic rapprochement

The diplomatic rapprochement between Nigeria and Russia began in 1961. As the successor state of the Soviet Union after its dissolution in December 1991, Moscow opened its embassy in Lagos and assigned Ambassador F. Dolya as its head of mission [1]. Nigeria sent C. O. Ifeagwu to Moscow as its ambassador in 1962. In the 1960s, the Nigerian ruling classes were openly pro-Western from the beginning of the Nigerian-Soviet diplomatic relations. Reportedly, the Nigerian government restricted the size of the Soviet mission in Lagos and was unwilling to accept aides. The Nigerian ruling elites were mostly anti-Soviet, but there were always actors from the political and organised labour elites who advocated for closer ties with the USSR and Russia. Communist literature was prohibited, and no student from Nigeria was allowed to study in Moscow unless they reached the Soviet Union via a third country [1, p. 48].

Under the leadership of the late prime minister, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the United States maintained limited contact with Lagos, strengthening the non-alignment vector of its foreign policy. The United States and the Soviets reacted cautiously to the series of political crises in Nigeria during the formative years of its independence from 1960 to 1969. In 1965, Nigeria was on the verge of serious political anarchy after years of political conflict and decay [11, p. 60–64]. Despite its advantage as a superpower, the USSR (Russia) did not seek to benefit from Nigeria's times of trouble to install a pro-communist regime but stuck to a pragmatic policy course instead [1]. This approach enabled the USSR to take the side of the federal government of Nigeria during the war of 1967, and Nigeria proceeded to court Moscow. When the war ended in 1970, the Russian-Nigerian relations became more promising [9, p. 50–55].

## Nigerian-Russian bilateral agreements

After the end of the civil war in 1970, Nigeria signed the agreement on economic and technical cooperation in the construction of a metallurgical enterprise in 1976. It co-founded an intergovernmental commission on trade, economic, scientific and technical cooperation in 1989, and signed a protocol on political consultation in 1990 [1]. Joint venture agreements on oil exploration were signed. Technical assistance to Nigeria in space exploration, geological surveys, public health services and education gave rise to the establishment of a degree programme in the Russian language at the Premier University of Ibadan, and a free one-year immersion programme at Pushkin State Russian Language Institute in Moscow offered in the 1960s and early 1990s<sup>16</sup>.

The metallurgy plant in Ajaokuta, state Kogi, built under these agreements is not operational today [12]. However, the Russian arms exporter Rosoboronexport resumed deliveries of the Mi-35M attack helicopters to Nigeria. Under the 2014 bilateral agreement, Russia was obliged to sell two attack helicopters to the Nigerian Air Force to support its counter-insurgency operations<sup>17</sup>. Under the terms of the agreements, the full number of helicopters was to be supplied by 2017 [13].

Under president Muhammadu Buhari Nigeria signed the Military cooperation agreement in 2021, agreements on the delivery of equipment and training of military personnel, provision of after-sale services, and technology transfer among others<sup>18</sup>.

## Recommendations and conclusions

Nigeria and Russia have come a long way in building goodwill in their bilateral relationships. Faced with substantial threats to its security, Nigeria should leverage its diplomatic relations with Moscow, Belarus and other Russian speaking republics as a means of managing these threats. Nigeria should institutionalise the study of the Russian language, as it has already done with English and French. The example of Mali and the Central African Republic and their toxic relationships with France underlines the urgency of this move.

Beyond the study of the Russian language in select universities, Foreign Service and intelligence personnel

should be encouraged to learn and become fluent in it. According to the Defense World<sup>19</sup>, the Nigerian company "Proforce" signed a contract with Belarus worth several billion naira for the delivery of defence equipment, possibly, armoured vehicles. Nigeria should explore the option of training its personnel in Minsk.

Like Nigeria, Russia has had the difficult experience of addressing terrorist and insurgency threats. Both parties can share intelligence and exchange ideas on counter-terrorism, including in hostage-taking scenarios.

According to the Nigerian ambassador to Russia, the balance of trade between Nigeria and Moscow

<sup>16</sup>Obasekola B. Nigerian-Russian relations [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.buzinessafrica.com/expertspolicy> (date of access: 27.02.2022).

<sup>17</sup>Kornosov V. Nigerian air force orders more Russian helicopters [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.ainonline.com/aviation-news/defense/2016-09-20/nigerian-air-force-orders-more-russian-helicopters> (date of access: 27.02.2022).

<sup>18</sup>Nigeria signs military cooperation agreement with Russia [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/nigeria-signs-military-cooperation-agreement-with-russia-2021-08-25/> (date of access: 27.02.2022).

<sup>19</sup>Kay L. Nigeria's proforce to supply armored vehicles to Belarus [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.defenseworld.net/2022/03/13/nigerias-proforce-to-supply-armored-vehicles-to-belarus.html> (date of access: 27.02.2022).

increased from 300 to 600 mln US dollars in Russia's favour, mainly as a result of large-scale exports of Russian machinery [14]. The Nigerian government should seize the opportunity to train students, security and intelligence attaches in Russian speaking countries. Russia

could increase its scholarship aid to Nigerian students. There is also a possibility for partnerships with Belarus, a Russian speaking country with substantial expertise in metallurgy, in resuscitating its Ajaokuta steel works.

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Received by editorial board 29.03.2022