

# Culture in Russian as a foreign language (RFL) textbooks in Italian universities: Critically analyzing concepts of culture and intercultural competence

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examined the representation of culture in Russian as a foreign language (RFL) textbooks to understand the problem of creating a theory of intercultural textbooks, with Italy as a case study. The four most popular RFL textbooks used by first-year students in Italian universities were studied: *Poyekhali*, *Molodets*, *Mir tesen*, and *Davayte*. A comparative content analysis of the chosen sample was performed to test how Russian culture is represented in RFL textbooks. The results reveal that such textbooks reflect only a partial and sometimes stereotypical image of Russian culture, with a strong correlation between ideologies and bias derived from RFL theories and textbook creation. In other words, these textbooks convey essentialist and/or reductionist views of the culture of Russia (e.g., poor attention paid to the Russophone dimension, stereotypes, and lack of opportunities for intercultural dialogue). The cultural topics contained in the textbooks evaluated do not quite contribute but rather hinder the formation of students' intercultural communicative competence. Therefore, it is argued that the content of an RFL textbook should help students create complex, multilayered notions of Russian and Russophone cultures for themselves.

**KEYWORDS:** Russian language teaching; foreign language learning; teaching materials; cultural aspects; intercultural communicative competence; Russophone

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## 1. Introduction

Recently, we have observed a growing interest in questions regarding the creation and characteristics of textbooks meant to teach Russian as a foreign language (RFL), which had already emerged in methodological research in the 1970s and 1980s. Drawing on numerous works devoted to the selection, orientation, and didactic principles of educational materials (including RFL textbooks), as well as reflections on the theory of the textbook itself (see, among others, Arutyunov, 1987, 1990; Berdichevsky and Golubeva, 2015; Bim, 1977; Dedova, 1992; Krayevsky, 1978; Shchukin, 2018; Trushina, 1981; Tupalsky, 1976; Vyatyutnev, 1984), scholars have discussed—and are continuing to discuss—the place of such textbooks in the field of RFL.

A large number of studies—from the 1970s (Vereshchagin and Kostomarov, 1973) up until the present (e.g., Amelina, 2022; Nemtchinova, 2020)—have focused on theories and methods for teaching the culture of Russia. However, the problems related to the theorization of the concept of “culture” itself and the representations of culture in RFL textbooks remain unclear and under-researched by RFL experts (on these aspects, see, e.g., Dzyuba et al., 2019; Torresin, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2023a, 2023b)

compared with the international area, where cultural issues in foreign language teaching have been widely examined (see, e.g., Kramsch, 1993, 1998; Krasner, 1999; Seelye, 1984; Stockwell, 2018; Sun, 2013; Villavicencio, 2004).

Therefore, the aim of the present study is to fill this research gap by analyzing the representation of culture in RFL textbooks as part of the problem of creating a theory of intercultural textbooks, with Italy as a case study. In particular, in this article, we would like to focus on the issue of the RFL textbook as a “representative of Russian culture” (in fact, this is how an RFL textbook is often portrayed in the abovementioned literature on RFL, as will be seen later).

The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

- 1) How is Russian culture represented in the considered RFL textbooks?
- 2) What are the educational/pedagogical consequences of such representation?

To answer the research questions, we examined how Russian culture is represented in popular RFL textbooks commonly used by first-year students in Italian universities. This allowed us to unveil possible ideologies and biases in textbook creation.

The remainder of the article is divided into six sections. The next two sections (§2 and §3) introduce the concept of intercultural RFL textbooks and problematize the notion of culture in such textbooks. Section 4 (§4) provides a description of the research method used in the study, including a comparative content analysis of a sample of four RFL textbooks used in Italian universities. Section 5 (§5) focuses on the results of the textbook analysis. These are discussed and interpreted in Section 6 (§6) and Section 7 (§7), respectively.

## **2. The RFL textbook and its intercultural aspects**

We define an RFL textbook, after all the methodological literature, as “the main means of teaching”, which serves as “a guide in the work of the trainer and the trainees” and which implements “the concept of teaching method” (Azimov and Shchukin, 2009, p. 332) in the field of RFL. Given that the language textbook presents goals, content, methods, and means of teaching, researchers have suggested that it should be considered an “adapter-adaptive system” (Bim, 1977, p. 267) consisting of interconnected elements and reflecting the state of learning theory and practice in a particular historical period (Berdichevsky and Golubeva, 2015, p. 20). In this respect, the modern RFL textbook, which has already emerged at the “post-communicative” stage (p. 14), is generally defined as an “intercultural” textbook. It is built on the principle of “intercultural education”, which aims to form students’ intercultural competence (IC), that is, “the ability of a person to exist in a multicultural society, to achieve successful understanding of representatives of other cultures and representatives of their own culture” (Azimov and Shchukin, 2009, p. 134). A modern RFL intercultural textbook should be aimed at giving learners opportunities for intercultural dialogue/dialogue of cultures, which may be described as “an open exchange of views, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect, between individuals or groups who perceive themselves as having different cultural affiliations from each other” (CoE, 2018, p. 31).

The main component of a modern RFL intercultural textbook is the integration of the culture of the country of the studied language into the theory and practice of RFL teaching, as reflected in Passov’s formula of “culture through language, language through culture” (Passov and Kuzovleva, 2010). In this regard, there is a generally accepted opinion that an intercultural textbook is the embodiment of the cultural features of “the Russian people” and its image in the world (Miloslavskaya, 2008). In other words, what is required of today’s RFL textbook is that it should allow learners “to get to know the mentality of

the people of a given country” or that it should become “a representative and retranslator of that particular culture” (Berdichevsky and Golubeva, 2015, p. 51).

Summarizing the above, it can be argued that because the essence of intercultural education in RFL classes is to teach to master IC and to foster the intercultural dialogue with Russian-speaking people, and because familiarization with a foreign language and culture comes mainly through a textbook (as we have seen above), according to the methodological literature, the RFL textbook is supposedly not only a means of knowledge but also a “mirror” of Russian culture. However, it is worth asking ourselves the question: What type of Russian culture does it mirror? The issue posed by culture in the field of RFL and its reflection on didactic theories and textbooks will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

### **3. The cultural issue in RFL: From theories to textbooks**

Without cultures (native and foreign) and dialogues among them, intercultural education in RFL cannot exist. Berdichevsky and Golubeva (2015, p. 48) distinguished two main stages of mastering IC: “awareness of the system of orientation characteristic of native culture (self-awareness)” and “awareness of the importance of cultural factors in the process of communicative interaction (cross-cultural awareness)” with knowledge of the various components (facts) of culture, including “linguistic”, “pragmatic”, “historical”, “aesthetic”, “ethical”, “stereotypical”, and “reflexive” (p. 68).

However, despite the never-ending interest of RFL experts in intercultural aspects, as evidenced by publications in the last decade (see, among others, Berdichevsky et al., 2011; Berdichevsky et al., 2020; Petrikova et al., 2015), the common view of culture in RFL—and, therefore, of intercultural dialogue and intercultural education—is rather limited. As for the concept of culture itself, most RFL scholars define it, according to the approach of 19th-century British anthropologist Tylor, as a set of objects and phenomena (e.g., knowledge, beliefs, and laws) peculiar to humans as a species. Within this “aged” vision in RFL, one can see culture as a set of unchanging traditions passed down from one generation to another (see Torresin, 2023c).

The main consequence of such an outdated approach to cultural topics is a certain fixed, static, and essentialized view of culture in the RFL area—something that is beginning to be detected by recent critical studies (see, e.g., Torresin, 2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). For RFL experts, culture is primarily a form of “national culture” (Torresin, 2022a, 2022b, 2023b, 2023c). It is difficult to imagine a more unfortunate definition. In fact, when using the term “national”, scholars exclude all other cultures that express themselves through the Russian language but are not Russian (as is the case in the former Soviet republics, in diaspora and emigration contexts, or in bilingualism/multilingualism contexts, such as the Russian language spoken in Belarus or Lithuania).

After all, the study of the Russian language implies familiarizing oneself with the rich culture of not only Russians, but also Russophone people, that is, Russian-speaking peoples who are not ethnic Russians (e.g., Azeris, Kazakhs, Mongolians, and Ukrainians). However, within Russian language learning/teaching, the RFL literature still does not recognize the possibility of a person belonging to different cultures and traditions. In other words, the Russian language is linked exclusively to Russian culture, whereas in the case of the abovementioned Russophone people, it calls into play not the Russian (ethnic, national) culture but the Russophone (non-ethnic, non-national or transnational) culture of those same people, who express themselves in Russian aside from (and like) Russians (Torresin, 2023d). In the RFL field, we can overcome such a narrow conception of culture now established by learning/teaching

RFL, by which we mean learning/teaching (besides the Russian language) Russian, as well as Russophone cultures, conceived as above.

In the current article, we define culture in accordance with the guidelines and policies of UNESCO and the Council of Europe, that is, we refer to culture as a set of spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional characteristics of a society or social group (UNESCO, 1982, p. 41; 2001), consisting of “material resources” (food, clothing, and tools), “social resources” (language, religion, and rules of social behavior), and “subjective resources” (values, attitudes, beliefs, and customs) (CoE, 2018, p. 30) from a nonessentialist and constructivist perspective (see also Torresin, 2022a, pp. 23–24; 2022d, pp. 274–275).

In our understanding, cultures (Russian and Russophone) change in time and space, they develop and transform themselves, and may meet and/or collide due to their dynamic nature. Cultures themselves are not internally homogeneous but “multiple” (UNESCO, 2013, p. 10), along with the individuals who partake in them; in fact, we can easily agree that “no person belongs to only one culture: everyone has multiple identities” (p. 12), both “personal” and “social” (CoE, 2018, p. 29).

It follows, then, that the dynamicity, complexity, and multiplicity of cultural notions play an important role in the achievement of IC in the RFL area, and conversely, there is no (or rather, should not be) room for cultural reductionist and essentialist categories. In this sense, we are very close to Berdichevsky and Golubeva (2015, p. 49), according to whom “intercultural education highlights the individuality of the other and does not limit it to the function of a representative of a particular culture”.

IC can be achieved “through education and life experiences” (UNESCO, 2013, p. 38). The implication, then, is that formative opportunities in the RFL class must be ensured to enable the learner to develop her/his IC within the vision of culture that we have outlined. The tools for developing IC, which enable the foundation for intercultural dialogue, are knowledge of others’ cultures (which it is natural to link to the objectives of an RFL lesson) and knowledge of one’s own culture. This “self-reflection” (p. 26) is central and implies the “knowledge and critical understanding of one’s own cultural affiliations” (CoE, 2018, p. 52) as well as “knowledge and understanding of the assumptions and preconceptions which underlie one’s perspective on the world” (p. 53).

In essence, IC is developed and intercultural dialogue takes place in the presence of a “knowledge and critical understanding of culture and cultures”, which includes:

- 1) Knowledge and understanding of how people’s cultural affiliations shape their world views, preconceptions, perceptions, beliefs, values, behaviours and interactions with others.
- 2) Knowledge and understanding that all cultural groups are internally variable and heterogeneous, do not have fixed inherent characteristics, contain individuals who contest and challenge traditional cultural meanings, and are constantly evolving and changing (p. 55).

The strengthening of learners’ knowledge and awareness of other’s and one’s own cultures, involving the understanding of cultures’ variability and heterogeneity, requires a new conception of the RFL intercultural textbook, different from the RFL textbook theory established by existing literature (§2), which should be based on the following principles:

- Principle 1. A modern RFL intercultural textbook should give cultural topics the space they deserve, either reserving specific sections/parts for them within the textbook, or treating them within the units of the textbook (e.g., in texts, exercises, and activities).
- Principle 2. A modern RFL intercultural textbook should preferably provide explicit treatment of cultural aspects: that is, cultural information should not be expressed as a subtext, implicit and undisclosed (without specific materials and activities), but should be addressed overtly, with

specific intercultural exercises and activities, which can come in form of “paper-and-pencil assignment[s]” on cultural topics (Landis et al., 2004, p. 64) or entail more dynamic techniques, such as “group discussion” (Landis et al., 2004, p. 64), “shared experiences, conversations, and storytelling” (UNESCO, 2013, p. 17) fostering intercultural dialogue.

- Principle 3. A modern RFL intercultural textbook should represent in equal ways both Russian and Russophone cultures (e.g., providing literary texts written not only by Russian national writers but also by Russophone transnational ones; Torresin (2022d, pp. 280–281)).
- Principle 4. A modern RFL intercultural textbook should offer various cultural topics of the Russian and Russophone sphere (e.g., from literature to art, history to science, geography to sports) without forgetting the contemporary Russian-speaking world (Torresin, 2022d, pp. 281–283).
- Principle 5. A modern RFL intercultural textbook should make students understand that Russian and Russophone cultures, as well as learners’ own cultures, are a historically and socially determined, internally complex, multiple, and fluid “human construction” (UNESCO, 2013, p. 26). Therefore, from the perspective of language education, no essentialist views of culture, such as the myth of the “Russian soul” (see Torresin, 2022c), are acceptable.
- Principle 6. A modern RFL intercultural textbook should provide learners opportunities to learn about Russian and Russophone cultures (target cultures) as well as about their own cultures, drawing from the above nonessentialist and constructivist theoretical foundations of the idea of culture.
- Principle 7. A modern RFL intercultural textbook should enable learners who have achieved knowledge and awareness of Russian and Russophone cultures and their own cultures, to put into practice the intercultural dialogue, whose precondition is the meeting and exchange of all the cultures involved through comparison and sharing of cultures within specific intercultural exercises and activities.

To sum put, what an intercultural RFL textbook should do today is first to bring the attention of learners to the dynamism, complexity, and multiplicity of the concept of culture (Russian and Russophone), to help them to know better Russian and Russophone cultures as well as their own cultures, to make them compare their own cultures with Russian and Russophone cultures, and to pave the way for the intercultural dialogue between these cultures. This can be done through intercultural exercises and activities. Such work on IC should be conducted from the above nonessentialist and constructivist theoretical foundations of the idea of culture.

Building on these new principles for the RFL intercultural textbook theory, grounded in the dynamic, complex, and nonessentialist concept of culture and intercultural education described above, in the next section, we will try to analyze, interpret, and evaluate some modern intercultural RFL textbooks used in Italy, where the theoretical problem of culture highlighted is encountered in practical terms.

## **4. Data and methods**

The article provides an in-depth comparative content analysis of the cultural content included in the four most popular RFL textbooks for first-year students used in Italian universities, with the goal of identifying the roles and ways in which Russian culture is presented and conveyed to learners. In what follows, a description of the chosen textbook sample is provided (§4.1). Then, we explain the research methods employed and the types of data collected (§4.2). Finally, we illustrate the procedure and tools used for data collection, analysis, and interpretation (§4.3).

#### 4.1. Research sample

The RFL textbooks for analysis were chosen through purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique based on the judgment of the researcher, wherein “the sample is specifically selected intentionally to gather the data necessary for the study” (Willes, 2017, p. 1545). The sample consisted of four RFL textbooks, which—judging by the 2021/2022, 2022/2023, and 2023/2024 syllabi published on university websites—are currently the most common language textbooks for first-year students in Italian universities, assigned for practical RFL classes: *Poyekhali*, *Molodets*, *Mir tesen*, and *Davayte*. *Poyekhali* is a widely adopted textbook, being generally used (to give some examples) in the Russian-1 course at the University of Bologna, at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, at G. d’Annunzio University of Chieti-Pescara, and at the University of Naples L’Orientale (RU-1 CS–Venice, 2022/2023; RU-1 CS–Bologna, 2022/2023; RU-1 CS–Chieti-Pescara, 2022/2023; RU-1 CS–Naples, 2021/2022). Even higher popularity is enjoyed by *Davayte*, which is employed, among others, at the University of Milan, the University of Turin, the University of Padova, the University of Florence, the University of Siena, and the University of Salento (RU-1 CS–Milan, 2022/2023, 2023/2024; RU-1 CS–Turin, 2021/2022; RU-1 CS–Padua, 2021/2022, 2022/2023; RU-1 CS–Florence, 2022/2023; RU-1 CS–Siena, 2022/2023; RU-1 CS–Salento, 2023/2024). *Mir tesen* is assigned to language students at the University of Siena as well as at the G. d’Annunzio University of Chieti-Pescara and at the University of Macerata (RU-1 CS–Siena, 2022/2023; RU-1 CS–Chieti-Pescara, 2021/2022; RU-1 CS–Macerata, 2021/2022). This textbook is also commonly used with Russian-Italian translation students, for example at the University of Bologna (RU-1 CS–Bologna, 2021/2022). Finally, *Molodets* has traditionally been employed by the University of Genoa and the University of Bari Aldo Moro (RU-1 CS–Genoa, 2021/2022; RU-1 CS–Bari, 2021/2022, 2022/2023), but also—like the previous textbooks—by various schools of translation and interpretation offering degree programs throughout Italy.

The data above indicate that these textbooks are used by many Italian universities in first-year RFL courses, which is why they were included in our sample.

The details of the analyzed textbooks are reported in **Table 1**.

**Table 1.** Research sample.

Analyzed RFL textbooks	
1. <i>Poyekhali</i> , vols. 1; 1.1, 1.2 [A1/A2] a) Old edition: Chernyshov SI (2009). <i>Let’s Go! 1</i> (Russian). Zlatoust. b) New edition: Chernyshov S, Chernyshova A (2019). <i>Let’s Go! 1.1, 1.2</i> (Russian). Zlatoust.	3. <i>Mir tesen</i> [A1/B1(+)] a) Old edition: Bonciani D, Romagnoli R, Smykunova NV (2016). <i>It’s a Small World. Basics of Russian Culture</i> (Italian). Hoepli. b) New edition: Bonciani D, Romagnoli R (2023). <i>It’s a Small World. Basics of Russian Culture, History, and Literature</i> (Italian), 2nd ed. Hoepli.
2. <i>Molodets</i> , vol. 1 [A1] Langran J, Vesnieva N, Magnati D (2011). <i>Well Done! Let’s Speak Russian 1</i> (Italian). Hoepli.	4. <i>Davayte</i> , vols. 1, 2 [A1/A2] Magnati D, Legittimo F (2017). <i>Let’s Communicate in Russian 1, 2</i> (Italian). Hoepli.

Notably, the textbooks were written by Russian/Russophone and non-Russian/Russophone authors. Only in one case, given the fact that it is a generalist textbook (not oriented to learners with a specific mother tongue), are the authors exclusively Russian (*Poyekhali*). For all the other textbooks, which are oriented toward Italian-speaking learners, the authors are generally mixed (Italian and Russian/Russophone). Furthermore, all textbooks are built on a communicative approach.

A special note should be made for *Davayte* and *Mir tesen*. First, *Davayte* is a textbook originally meant for a school setting, but is now generally used in the university. As for *Mir tesen*, this textbook is designed

for students from the A1 to B1 level (old edition) and from the A1 to B1+ level (new edition). We will focus especially on the A1/A2 levels, but also on some parts of the B1(B1+) level, which are important for understanding the textbook's cultural orientation. Finally, in cases when the old editions of textbooks were no longer adopted by teachers because they were replaced by new editions (as in the case of *Poyekhali*; see Chernyshov (2009)), or when brand new editions were adopted even before publishing (contextually with the compilation of syllabi) but *de facto* had not yet entered massively into the course syllabi (as in the case of *Mir tesen*; see Bonciani and Romagnoli (2023)), these were also analyzed along with the other ones to ensure completeness of the information.

#### 4.2. Research methods and types of data collected

The research method used to examine the cultural content in the selected textbook sample is content analysis, which is commonly defined as a “technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (Holsti, 1969, p. 14). In particular, the methodological approach adopted in the present study is based on comparative content analysis (Rössler, 2012), which allows the researcher to extend the content analysis method to a wide range of research objects, thus embracing a comparative perspective that “attempts to reach conclusions beyond single cases and explains differences and similarities between objects of analysis and relations between objects against the backdrop of their contextual conditions” (Esser and Vliegthart, 2017, p. 2). In other words, by including a comparative component in the content analysis, we have the opportunity to compare the textbooks we are looking into. For the purposes of our investigation, we focused our comparative content analysis of the selected RFL textbooks on qualitative data collection.

#### 4.3. Data collection, analysis, and interpretation: Procedure and tools

For the comparative content analysis of the selected sample of RFL textbooks, the parameter “cultural content of the textbook” was used. The evaluation of each textbook was guided by eight questions, drawing from the dynamic, complex, and nonessentialist concept of culture and from the principles for a modern intercultural textbook explained in §3:

- 1) Where is culture represented in the textbook (in a separate section and/or texts, exercises, activities, and/or others)? (Principle 1 in §3)
- 2) How is culture presented in the textbook, explicitly (in an explicit manner, overtly, and with specific materials, exercises, and activities) or implicitly (cultural information is expressed as a subtext, implicit and undisclosed, without specific materials, exercises, and activities)? (Principle 2 in §3)
- 3) What culture(s) is/are represented in the textbook—Russian and/or Russophone (according to the definitions and theoretical framework we provided in §3)? (Principle 3 in §3)
- 4) What aspects/themes of culture(s) are presented in the textbook? (Principle 4 in §3)
- 5) What concept of culture underlies the cultural representations offered by the textbook? To what extent does the textbook recognize the complexity of the concept of culture (which changes over time and internally diversifies [according to the nonessentialist viewpoint discussed in §3], outside essentialist views of culture, such as the myth of the “Russian soul” [on this topic see Torresin (2022c)])? (Principle 5 in §3)
- 6) To what extent does the textbook provide an opportunity (e.g., suggested readings and exercises) designed explicitly to learn about the culture(s) of the target language? (Principle 6 in §3)
- 7) To what extent does the textbook enable learners to learn about their own cultures? (Principle 6 in §3)

- 8) To what extent does the textbook provide an opportunity for a dialogue of cultures? (Principle 7 in §3)

The above questions were answered based on the theoretical framework outlined in §3, with particular attention to the concepts of culture, Russian culture, and Russophone culture, as well as to the principles established for a modern RFL intercultural textbook. In other words, we aimed to see the extent to which cultural representations in the RFL textbooks examined were complex, dynamic, and realistic and not essentialized, static, and stereotyped, on the one hand. On the other hand, we intended to understand the extent to which these textbooks allowed space for a dialogue between cultures which takes complexity into account (i.e., they give the place for cultures to confront each other in an environment of exchange and sharing, and are not the resonance forum of closed and isolated cultures that leave no room for intercultural dialogue).

Data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted with the combined use of manual coding and qualitative data analysis software, QDA Miner Lite, which allowed for greater control over the data management itself and a faster research process.

## 5. Results

In this section, we present the results of the comparative content analysis of the selected sample of RFL textbooks with reference to the eight questions for textbook analysis.

1) Where is culture represented in the textbook (in a separate section and/or texts, exercises, activities, and/or others)?

- *Poyekhali*

The textbook does not contain sections devoted to culture, nor is culture represented in other parts of the textbook.

- *Molodets*

*Molodets* does not offer a special section on culture. However, cultural topics can be found in the “Information” (after the dialogues of each lesson) and “Texts, songs, and poems” sections. Translations or short explanations of cultural concepts are also provided in some dialogues and exercises (see, e.g., the box with the Italian translation of the word *banya* in Langran et al. (2011, p. 169, exercise 10)).

- *Mir tesen*

In the textbook, culture is presented both in the texts and in the corresponding exercises. All lessons are built around specific cultural themes (e.g., education in Russia; music, theater, and ballet; and Russian holidays), which are also the objects of specific exercises.

As the authors themselves announced in the preface of the old edition, *Mir tesen* is designed for the learning of Russian culture and the development of learners’ IC (Bonciani et al., 2016, p. VII). This is also allowed by the special section “We are different, but we are similar” at the end of each lesson, thus fostering intercultural dialogue. *Mir tesen* even has a specific section about curiosities of Russian culture called “This is interesting”.

Moreover, to conform more closely to the RFL curriculum for Italian schools, three new sections are specifically devoted to history, literature, and civic education, respectively, in the new edition. Most of the pre-textual (the “Getting ready to work” section) and post-textual (the “Check yourself” section) activities aim to develop learners’ IC. Furthermore, *Mir tesen* offers additional work with cultural texts



and topics in the section “If you want to know more”. Further cultural information is provided by the section “Remember!”. The textbook also contains appendices devoted, for example, to Russian dishes and (in the new edition) Russian/Russophone literature.

- *Davayte*

Culture is presented in the special section “Our culture”, as well as in texts and mock tests for the TEU and TBU certification exams. However, there are no specific cultural assignments.

2) How is culture presented in the textbook, explicitly (in an explicit manner, overtly, and with specific materials, exercises, and activities) or implicitly (cultural information is expressed as a subtext, implicit and undisclosed, without specific materials, exercises, and activities)?

- *Poyekhali*

Culture is implicitly presented in the textbook. As the author himself admits in the preface to the old edition, “The grammar exercises contain ‘hints’ to various historical events, cultural peculiarities, situations of daily life, etc.” (Chernyshov, 2009, p. 6). The old version of the textbook does not offer any *realia* or authentic pictures. In this respect, the new edition has been greatly improved by the introduction of authentic pictures and images.

- *Molodets*

Culture is sometimes explicitly, but more often implicitly, presented in the textbook. In particular, the “Exercises” section introduces numerous *realia* in the form of authentic photos (see, e.g., Langran et al. (2011, p. 157, exercise 6: *Russian passport and vodka*)), but it does not provide any cultural explanations, inputs, or activities to establish intercultural comparisons. Even in the aforementioned section called “Texts, songs, and poems”, the suggested supplementary materials (adapted and original texts, songs, and poems) are not used to work on IC.

- *Mir tesen*

Culture is explicitly presented in the textbook. Notably, according to the communicative approach, the development of learners’ communicative skills and abilities is closely related to the cultural content of the lessons within each lesson’s index. Thus, cultural topics are completely integrated into the learning process.

In general, all suggested readings aim to stimulate students’ motivation and help them develop IC. *Mir tesen* also contains exercises specifically designed to develop textual competence, especially related to translation (e.g., exercise 25 in Bonciani et al. (2016, p. 92), corresponding to exercise 31 in Bonciani and Romagnoli (2023, p. 64)), but in the end, these activities also benefit students’ IC. Furthermore, the section on the curiosities of Russian culture called “This is interesting” and the section “If you want to know more” also provide implicit cultural content for students’ additional work (see, e.g., the anthem of the Russian Federation in Bonciani et al. (2016, p. 38)).

- *Davayte*

Culture is explicitly presented in the textbook. Notably, the organization of the lessons in *Davayte* involves the integration of cultural topics with communicative knowledge and skills. Furthermore, explicit cultural information is provided by the special section “Our culture”, by texts and mock tests for the TEU and TBU certification exams, as well as by boxes with explanations in the grammar section (see, e.g., the explanation of *marshrutka* in Magnati and Legittimo (2017, 1, p. 176)). In addition, there is an

implicit representation of culture made possible through the use of authentic images and materials in texts and exercises without explicit explanations (e.g., the conference program in exercise 20 on p. 140 or pictures of timetables in exercise 8 on p. 146).

3) What culture(s) is/are represented in the textbook—Russian and/or Russophone (according to the definitions and theoretical framework we provided in §3)?

- *Poyekhali*, *Molodets*, *Mir tesen*, and *Davayte*

Both Russian and Russophone cultures are represented in all textbooks. However, only in two of them (*Davayte* and *Mir tesen*) has proper space been given to Russophone culture; it is enough to think, for example, of the attention paid in *Davayte* to the varieties of appearances among Russophone people or to the treatment of the topic of the different nationalities of Russia in *Mir tesen* (see Bonciani and Romagnoli (2023, pp. 234–235); Magnati and Legittimo (2017, 1, pp. 129–130)). Whereas, the other textbooks mainly present Russian culture; for example, in *Poyekhali*, along with international celebrities, only Russian celebrities are named, while in *Molodets*, the Russian classical writer Pushkin is the only literary input provided (see Lesson 38 and Lesson 39, exercise 6 in Chernyshov and Chernyshova (2019, 1.2, pp. 52–53, 57); Langran et al. (2011, p. 60)).

However, it should be noted that only in *Davayte* has Russophone culture been emphasized in line with a dynamic, complex, and nonessentialist idea of culture (§3), since this textbook recognizes the varieties and great diversity of Russia and its citizens while dispelling myths and stereotypes (see for more details the answer to Question 5). What concerns *Mir tesen*, although the textbook promotes the intercultural dialogue between Russian/Russophone and Italian cultures through constant comparison of these cultures (see for more details the answer to Questions 4 and 8), this intercultural dialogue is ultimately undermined by adherence to a stereotypical view of Russian and Russophone cultures, since it builds on the myth of the “Russian soul” (see for more details the answer to Question 5).

4) What aspects/themes of culture(s) are presented in the textbook?

- *Poyekhali*

The main cultural aspects presented in the textbook are geography, tourism, history, Russian names, weather, famous writers and composers, historical personalities (in the new edition, also various cultural celebrities, and politicians), theater and music (drama, ballet, opera, and musical instruments), military affairs (Kalashnikov), sports, television, food, holidays, superstitions, and cultural stereotypes.

Despite the author’s declaration of his attempts to depict “contemporary Russian life” (Chernyshov, 2009, p. 7), in the old edition of the textbook, contemporary cultural themes are quite absent. They are present only in the new edition (e.g., progress, immigration/emigration, and investments).

Given that an implicit representation of culture is maintained from the old to the new edition, most often, these aspects are just “hints” (by the author’s aforementioned own admission) that are only mentioned and/or used for grammar/conversation activities. For example, the personal data of Pushkin (Chernyshov and Chernyshova (2019, 1.1, p. 52, exercise 5)) are used to reinforce the grammar topic of possessive pronouns, without any mention of the biography and works of the poet. In another example, the weather theme (Chernyshov (2009, p. 59, exercise 70)) is only an excuse for conversation, without any mention of the eleven time zones of Russia. Sometimes, the textbook also contains cultural images that are not explicitly explained as well (e.g., drawbridges in St. Petersburg, whose pictures are shown on pp. 75 and 186, are not mentioned in the corresponding texts about the city).

- *Molodets*

The main cultural aspects touched upon in the textbook include the following: history, tourism and geography (especially cities and landmarks), city life (television, cinema, theater, and ballet), Soviet-era cars, speech etiquette, the system of names, celebrities (especially cultural and literary figures and politicians), military affairs (Kalashnikov), sports, national holidays, food, telephone numbers, famous graveyards, Russian time zones, houses, and musical instruments (including, among others, *balalaika* and *bayan*).

Similar to *Poyekhali*, in *Molodets*, the abovementioned aspects are generally not the object of (inter)cultural activities but are only mentioned in the textbook and/or used for grammar activities. For example, let us take the topic of Russian literature. The reading exercise 14z (Langran et al., 2011, p. 138) builds around Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*, but not a single word mentions the structure and themes of the novel itself within the entire textbook.

Furthermore, the authentic black and white pictures and photos featured in *Molodets* are only ornamental and do not convey any cultural information (as is the case with *Poyekhali*'s images, which we discussed earlier). Nevertheless, the textbook should be recognized for the great attention it has paid to geographical descriptions of the Russian Federation, as well as the strong connection to modernity (e.g., p. 228 mentions the Chechen War).

- *Mir tesen*

The main cultural aspects presented in the old edition of the textbook are as follows: history and evolution of the Russian language; geography; education; great Russians and Italians; superstitions; sports and leisure; music, theater, and ballet; media; holidays; food; literature; painting; history; society; economy; cinema; Russian national character; and greetings, wishes and toasts.

In the new edition, cultural themes are further expanded, with the deepening of old topics (e.g., mass media and social network) and the addition of new ones (e.g., science, technology, and ecology), as well as with three specific sections devoted to history, literature, and civic education, in line with the Italian RFL school syllabus.

*Mir tesen* contains many cultural texts and culturally oriented exercises designed to develop students' IC (see, e.g., exercises 7 and 12 in Bonciani et al. (2016, pp. 5, 143); Bonciani and Romagnoli (2023, pp. 32, 93)). Additional cultural content and information are offered in the sections "If you want to know more" and "Remember!".

Finally, the textbook focuses on a comparison of the Russian/Russophone and Italian worlds. Therefore, on its pages, learners can find cultural topics of both cultures, from antiquity to the present. For example, as far as Russian and Russophone cultures are concerned, the Russian printer Ivan Fyodorov is presented, along with the modern program *Let's Get Married!* As for Italian culture, students learn about Italian architects working in Russia in the 15th–18th centuries, as well as about the popularity of the San Remo Festival in Russia (Bonciani et al. (2016, pp. 16–17, 32–34, 105, 109–110); Bonciani and Romagnoli (2023, pp. 12–14, 39, 76, 80–81)).

- *Davayte*

Among the main cultural aspects addressed in the textbook are the following: Russian and Slavic languages; history and society; names (also in diminutive forms), patronymics, and surnames; leisure and free time; Siberia, Moscow, and St. Petersburg; Moscow Metro; the great people of the Russian

Federation; Russian cuisine; Russian art and literature; appearance of the people of the Russian Federation; school; sports; *banya*; ballet; holidays; and the Russian-speaking world.

In addition to the presentation of these topics in the special “Our culture” section and in the texts, there are also brief cultural explanations (in special boxes) that illustrate the images presented (see, e.g., the explanation of Red Square in Magnati and Legittimo (2017, 1, p. 19), or the explanation of Soviet propaganda posters in Magnati and Legittimo (2017, 2, p. 110)).

5) What concept of culture underlies the cultural representations offered by the textbook? To what extent does the textbook recognize the complexity of the concept of culture (which changes over time and internally diversifies [according to the nonessentialist viewpoint discussed in §3], outside essentialist views of culture, such as the myth of the “Russian soul” [on this topic see Torresin (2022c)])?

- *Poyekhali*

*Poyekhali* does not allow students to encounter the complexity of the concept of culture. On the contrary, the textbook often presents cultural stereotypes in grammar exercises intended as “provocations” (Chernyshov and Chernyshova, 2019, 1.1, p. 169; 1.2, p. 166) to encourage students to actively engage in conversation (see, e.g., Chernyshov and Chernyshova (2019, 1.2, p. 41, exercise 5, sentences *Men like to watch soccer* and *Women don’t like to hear compliments*, to name a few)). However, such provocations end up presenting stereotypical images of cultural traits as essential and unchangeable (see, e.g., p. 138, exercise 5, questions *What clothes do the rich people wear, and what clothes do the poor people wear?* and *What do women wear, and what do men wear? Why?*).

- *Molodets*

*Molodets* does not allow students to confront the complexity of the concept of culture. Only at one point do we encounter a Ukrainian accent (Langran et al. (2011, p. 163, exercise 19)), but the textbook does not explain why Vasily Vasilyevich from Kiev pronounces the letter “r” this way and, in general, what the relationship is between the Ukrainian and Russian languages and cultures.

- *Mir tesen*

The old edition of *Mir tesen* does not allow students to confront the complexity of the concept of culture. Only Lesson 9, which is devoted to the diversity of the landscape of the Russian Federation, suggests that there is something beyond traditional stereotypes about the Russian Federation (see, e.g., information about the Buryats in the section “This is interesting” in Bonciani et al. (2016, p. 161)).

On the contrary, the old *Mir tesen* is based on a stereotypical view of Russian and Russophone cultures. This is especially clear when considering Lesson 15, which, from its very title (“Features of the Russian national character”), is linked to the concept of the “Russian soul” (p. 285). All suggested readings and respective exercises—from Tyutchev’s poem about the “mysteriousness and unpredictability of Russia” (pp. 287–288) to the statements of Berdyaev and Lossky about the positive and negative properties of the Russian character (pp. 288–290) and kitchen conversations (pp. 292–293)—create an impression of the immutability and superiority of Russian culture over the rest, feeding into the stereotypical view of Russian culture and identity (for a detailed analysis of the myth of the “Russian soul” in *Mir tesen*, see Torresin (2022c, pp. 457–458)).

From this perspective, the new edition has been greatly improved with the introduction of elements of complexity. However, given the preservation, in Lesson 15, of the topic of the Russian national character—understood as fixed and homogeneous—and of the myth of the “Russian soul”, there is no

doubt that static and stereotypical ideas about Russians remain.

- *Davayte*

The “Our culture” section offers learners a comprehensive look at Russian-language culture, including both classical and modern cultures, from geography to history, from literature to painting, from football to cooking, etc. (see, e.g., “Our culture” section with a cultural test about Russia in Magnati and Legittimo (2017, 1, pp. 13–14)).

The textbook also presents a complex picture of the country, including its diversity and contradictions, without falling into an essentialist or idealist discourse. For example, in Vol. 1, Lesson 4 (pp. 57–58) talks about the great diversity of geography, economy, ethnic composition, time zones, traditions, and so on of the Russian Federation. In another example, Lesson 5 (pp. 77–78) discusses how Russians relax in their free time and supports the idea that “of course, people in Russia, like everywhere else, are different” (p. 77). Moreover, “people from Italy, Germany, UK, France, and Japan have the same leisure time” as Russians. After all, “we all live almost identically; this is the result of globalization” (p. 78). In another example, in Lesson 6 (pp. 95–96), the learner is presented with an authentic picture of Siberia, which also dispels stereotypes about this territory (i.e., “it is not always cold”) and its people (p. 95). In conclusion, Lesson 8 (pp. 129–130) dispels another myth: that all Russians/Russophones are tall, blond, and blue-eyed, further explaining that Russia is home to “different nationalities and different appearances” (p. 129).

6) To what extent does the textbook provide an opportunity (e.g., suggested readings and exercises) designed explicitly to learn about the culture(s) of the target language?

- *Poyekhali*

The textbook does not provide an opportunity for students to learn about Russian and Russophone cultures. At best, the proposed activities allow only a general and superficial comprehension of the Russian-speaking world. As we have seen, the so-called “provocations” intended for oral practice are based on cultural stereotypes.

Moreover, while it has the merit of bringing the Russian language closer to learners, the extensive use of international vocabulary due—in the author’s words—to the need to overcome “the psychological barrier associated with the reputation of Russian as ‘exotic’, ‘oriental’, and therefore ‘difficult’” (Chernyshov, 2009, p. 6) also flattens the Russian language and culture, taking away its specificities. After all, this corresponds to the stated intentions of the textbook, which is not intended to give students detailed cultural information about Russia, but mainly to activate and develop their communicative skills.

- *Molodets*

While the textbook introduces learners to the Russian-speaking world, it does not introduce them to all aspects of Russian and Russophone cultures. By studying using *Molodets*, students can be oriented to the center of Moscow and easily recognize all the notable things the textbook talks about. However, they may not be equipped to navigate, for example, the literary or sociological issues of the modern Russian Federation.

- *Mir tesen*

Thanks to *Mir tesen*, students will become familiar with Russian and Russophone cultures. In the textbook, much attention is given to the little-known and/or curious aspects of the Russian-speaking world. For example, the section “This is interesting” presents the origins of the names of the Russian

months as well as the 1980 Summer Olympics (Bonciani et al., 2016, pp. 10–11, 77; Bonciani and Romagnoli, 2023, pp. 36, 52). Further cultural information is provided by the section “Remember!”.

*Mir tesen* also contains ludic cultural activities (see, e.g., the crossword puzzle on Russian cities in exercise 5 in Bonciani et al. (2016, p. 22); Bonciani and Romagnoli (2023, p. 3)). However, as we have seen, the textbook adheres to a static, standardized view of Russian and Russophone cultures, which is reflected by the proposal of reading texts on a “typical Russophone person” (Lesson 15) and, in general, by its attachment to the myth of the “Russian soul”.

- *Davayte*

Through the story of Nastya Gromova’s Russian family, *Davayte* introduces the student to Russian-speaking culture. The “Our culture” special section also provides interesting details about Russian and Russophone cultures. For example, this section of Lesson 2 (Vol. 1) describes diminutive and affectionate forms of Russian names (Magnati and Legittimo, 2017, 1, p. 27) and illustrates the family of Slavic languages, focusing on the diatopic varieties of the Russian language (p. 28). The “Our culture” section also helps learners fight stereotypes, enabling them to form a multidimensional picture of Russia and its inhabitants (e.g., pp. 95–96 on Siberia; text “What do Russophone people look like” on pp. 129–130; text on Moscow as a “city of contrasts” on pp. 193–194; and text “Where Russian language is spoken” on pp. 269–270).

Notably, cultural work is not always done in the texts or authentic materials on cultural topics presented by the textbook. Some are intended only for grammar work (see, e.g., text 1 about St. Petersburg on p. 36 and rules of conduct in the library on p. 163).

As for the exercises and activities, aside from grammar activities with a cultural background, which are mainly intended for specific work on grammar (e.g., exercise 22 on p. 312 about the most popular sports in Russia and exercise 24 in Magnati and Legittimo (2017, 2, p. 114) about the rules of conduct in the *banya*), *Davayte* features activities that allow students to decentralize from their own cultures and put themselves in the place of the Russians/Russophones (see, e.g., exercise 8 in Magnati and Legittimo (2017, 1, p. 40), where students are invited to choose a fictional Russian identity for themselves). However, it must be said that the limited number of authentic intercultural activities is only focused on literature (see, e.g., exercise 1 on p. 41 and exercise 10 on p. 126).

7) To what extent does the textbook enable learners to learn about their own cultures?

- *Poyekhali*

*Poyekhali* does not provide students with insights into their own cultures. Even if the textbook has a definite target audience—although a broad one—given by students of the “European cultural-linguistic world” (Chernyshov, 2009, p. 6), the textbook does not offer room for students to rethink their cultures.

In comparison, in the new edition, some exercises allow learners to learn/reflect about their own cultures (Chernyshov and Chernyshova (2019, 1.1, p. 105, questions to the text “Two cities, two capitals!”: *Do you have cultural capital in your country? Where is the financial center? and When is your most romantic season?*); see also Chernyshov and Chernyshova (2019, 1.2, p. 11, exercise 8, question *Do people smile a lot in your country?*)), but these are the minority and are always aimed at communication rather than IC development.

- *Molodets*

This textbook only partially enables learners to learn about their own cultures through moments of

comparison between Russian and Italian languages and cultures (see, e.g., Langran et al. (2011, pp. 1–2, 21, 23, 150–151)).

- *Mir tesen*

*Mir tesen* allows learners to learn about their own cultures. For example, Bonciani et al. (2016, p. 31), Bonciani and Romagnoli (2023, p. 9) present Brodsky’s poem “Lagoon”, which reveals the Russian poet’s relationship to Venice, thus giving Italian students a new perspective on the city. Other examples include students being asked to explain how the Italian educational system of school and university works and to recall the ingredients of the Italian Easter cake *colomba pasquale* (see, e.g., exercises 5, 11, and 12 in Bonciani et al. (2016, pp. 43, 47, 125) and exercises 5, 14, and 17 in Bonciani and Romagnoli (2023, pp. 18, 21, 117)).

In summary, in using the textbook, students are constantly rethinking their own cultures, thanks to the textbook’s interest in intercultural aspects and the intercultural activities it offers (see, e.g., exercise 17 in Bonciani et al. (2016, p. 131) and corresponding exercise 22 in Bonciani and Romagnoli (2023, p. 122, questions: *What Italian holiday is similar to the Russian holiday of June 12?* and *What Italian holiday is similar to the Russian holiday of May 9?*), which are even intensified in the new edition).

- *Davayte*

Unfortunately, *Davayte* does not give students insights into their own cultures. The textbook does not create opportunities for reflection on the students’ source cultures even though it is actually addressed to Italian-speaking learners (it has, among its characters, the Italian Federico) and contains some references to Italian culture and Italian cultural-based activities (see, e.g., dialogues and exercise 34 in Magnati and Legittimo (2017, 2, pp. 35–36, 51)).

8) To what extent does the textbook provide an opportunity for a dialogue of cultures?

- *Poyekhali*

In the old edition, there are no texts or exercises for developing a dialogue of cultures. As we have seen, all the texts and exercises offered are designed only for work on grammar or speaking. In general, it could be argued that the old *Poyekhali* is not interested in promoting IC and misses all opportunities for working on IC (which could be provided, for example, by the textbook’s characters, such as the Russian family, the Swedish friend Sven, and the Martian, among others).

Furthermore, intercultural dialogue is not the main focus of the new edition of the textbook. Nevertheless, we can find activities that allow teachers to work on cultural dialogue (e.g., in Chernyshov and Chernyshova (2019, 1.1, p. 39, exercise 11: *Search the Internet for portraits of people from your country or from Russia (an actor, writer, politician, musician, athlete...) and ask the group: Do you know him/her?*)). However, these activities are always connected with conversations, and explicit cultural information is never provided.

- *Molodets*

In this textbook, no texts or exercises are provided to promote a dialogue of cultures. Instead, learners are offered only some pre- and post-text activities that allow implicit comparisons between Italian and Russian/Russophone cultures (e.g., Langran et al. (2011, p. 36, exercise 5; p. 43)) or of different world cultures (p. 67, exercise 4).

However, the dialogue between Italian and Russian/Russophone cultures may be partially fostered through role-plays concluding each lesson, enabling learners to decentrate by putting themselves in

someone else's shoes. Moreover, the use of authentic images and photos in the "Exercises" section probably helps students familiarize themselves with the target culture(s) and implicitly rethink their own cultures.

- *Mir tesen*

*Mir tesen* promotes a dialogue of cultures because its goal—according to the authors—is to help students “perceive Russia as ‘different’, not ‘alien’, and to understand that events, facts, and phenomena from one country can become the object of a dialogue of cultures” (Bonciani et al., 2016, p. VII). While working on the textbook, students are given plenty of opportunities to encounter Russian and Russophone cultures, as well as reflect on and discuss their own cultural history. For example, in exercise 1 on p. 2 (see also Bonciani and Romagnoli (2023, p. 30)), learners are invited to search the genealogical tree of the Indo-European languages for their native language as well as the languages they are studying.

For the intercultural dialogue between the Italian and Russian/Russophone worlds (*Mir tesen* is designed for Italian-speaking students), the special section “We are different, but we are similar” is devoted to comparisons between the two worlds (see, e.g., the comparison of *maslenitsa* and the Italian Carnival, respectively, in Lessons 7 and 8 of the old and new editions). A section called “This is interesting” also presents information about the curiosities of Russian culture, through which students can learn, as we have seen, about the origin of the names of the months in the Russian, native, and other languages, among other examples.

In this sense, we agree with Lasorsa Siedina (2016, p. XII) that “the strength of this textbook on Russian culture is the comparison aspect of the two cultures and peoples, Russian and Italian”. Unfortunately, as we have already discussed, because the textbook is based on the stereotype of the “Russian soul”, the intercultural dialogue is here, in the end, entirely incomplete.

- *Davayte*

Although the textbook encourages continuous comparisons between Russian and Italian cultures (see, e.g., the section “Our culture” in Magnati and Legittimo (2017, 1, pp. 151–152), which deals with the Russian school system and comparisons between Russian and Italian grades), no texts or exercises are provided to develop dialogue between cultures. Furthermore, all the proposed activities are designed to develop oral speech (see, e.g., the activity about stereotypes associated with different peoples in exercise 7 on p. 76, or the activity focused on comparisons of different objects, places, and situations in exercise 17 in Magnati and Legittimo (2017, 2, p. 65)).

In summary, despite the complex and nonessentialist image of Russia offered by the textbook, *Davayte* does not give students adequate opportunities for intercultural comparisons. On the contrary, in some places, the textbook reiterates stereotypical views of culture (see, e.g., exercise 22 in Magnati and Legittimo (2017, 1, p. 162: *Who is better at cooking, working on a computer, swimming, waiting, loving, speaking English, writing poetry, choosing food, playing football, hockey, or tennis? Men or women? Italians or Russians?*)).

## 6. Discussion

This section provides a summary of the results and an interpretation of the data collected (§6.1). Then, it describes the implications of the results (§6.2) and their limitations (§6.3). Finally, the section presents some recommendations for further studies or analyses (§6.4).

### 6.1. Summary and data interpretation

The analysis of the selected RFL textbooks, which was carried out within the nonessentialist,



dynamic, and complex context of culture described in §3, showed that the degree of cultural representation of these textbooks, with respect to the principles for a modern RFL intercultural textbook outlined in §3, is, in some ways, poor, inadequate, and/or improvable in many respects. This is especially obvious in *Poyekhali*, which has no special section on culture and where culture remains implicit (i.e., Principle 1 on the space reserved for culture and Principle 2 on the need for explicit cultural input are not met). Indeed, in *Poyekhali*, we can only find hints about cultural themes that are only mentioned and/or used for grammar activities. Even in those cases in which culture is also presented explicitly (*Molodets*), the didactic materials are not used to work on IC. Moreover, contemporary cultural topics are generally absent (*Poyekhali*, new edition).

The exceptions seem to be the textbooks *Davayte* and *Mir tesen*. As we have seen, *Davayte* has a special section called “Our culture”, which is structured according to the integration of cultural topics with communicative knowledge and skills. However, despite the inclusion of this special section, the textbook does not offer specific cultural and intercultural activities (again, Principle 2 on the explicit treatment of cultural aspects through specific intercultural exercises and activities is not observed). Regarding *Mir tesen*, which is entirely built around cultural themes, this textbook has a rich and heterogeneous repertoire of topics, as well as specific sections devoted to culture (according to Principles 1 and 4, focused, respectively, on cultural space and variety of cultural topics). Nonetheless, because of its essentialist idea of culture based on the stereotype of the “Russian soul” (against Principle 5, dealing with the complexity of the concept of culture), even such a textbook provides a somewhat incomplete intercultural dialogue (i.e., Principle 7 on opportunities for a dialogue of cultures is not respected).

In summary, all these textbooks claim to be “mirrors” of Russian culture. However, at the same time, the idea of Russian culture promoted by such textbooks seldom includes the notion of this (and any) culture’s complexity and multifacetedness, without which—as we have already established (see §3 and Principle 5)—we cannot even talk about intercultural education.

One important point in recognizing the complexity of culture is the inclusion of both Russian and Russophone cultures in an RFL textbook (see Principle 3). Although all the analyzed textbooks look at both Russian and Russophone cultures, only two of them (*Davayte* and *Mir tesen*) pay proper attention to Russophone culture, and not just to purely Russian culture. Specifically, of the two, only *Davayte* acknowledges the multifaceted nature of Russophone culture. In fact, *Mir tesen* is rich in cultural topics and contains various exercises aimed at developing students’ IC through constant comparison of Russian/Russophone and Italian cultures. However, the appeal to a stereotypical representation of the “Russian soul” (Torresin, 2022c) thwarts *Mir tesen*’s intercultural potentiality (i.e., as we have seen, Principle 7 is not fulfilled).

Through the remaining textbooks, RFL students can perceive the same stereotyped representations of Russia. *Poyekhali* even uses cultural stereotypes to develop communicative skills (against Principle 5), thereby neglecting the development of learners’ IC.

In conclusion, two of the analyzed textbooks (*Poyekhali* and *Molodets*) allow learners only a general, superficial comprehension of Russian culture and the Russian-speaking world and, on the other hand, a zero (*Poyekhali*, old edition) or a partial (*Poyekhali*, new edition; *Molodets*) rethinking of their own cultures. The texts and activities in these textbooks are generally designed for work on grammar and are not intended to promote a dialogue between cultures (against Principle 2). In comparison, the other textbooks (*Davayte* and *Mir tesen*) introduce students to Russia’s culture in all its manifestations. Both textbooks also provide curious details about Russian and Russophone cultures.

In particular, *Davayte* does not hesitate to present the complexity of the Russian-speaking world, its diversity, and its contradictions (according to Principle 5). However, such a textbook, unlike *Mir tesen*, does not encourage students to think about their own cultures (against Principle 6) or feature effective intercultural activities (against Principle 2). In other words, although this textbook stimulates continuous comparisons between Russian/Russophone and Italian cultures, in the end, it does not facilitate intercultural dialogue (i.e., Principle 7 is not met).

As for *Mir tesen*, on the contrary, this textbook presents materials and activities specifically designed for work on IC, focused on comparing the Russian/Russophone and Italian worlds (according to Principles 2, 6, and 7). Nevertheless, such work cannot ultimately be carried out, as the proposed idea of Russian culture (against Principle 5) is based on an idealized, essentialist notion of the “Russian soul” (Torresin, 2022c).

Finally, none of the four textbooks guarantees the possibility of intercultural dialogue between the culture of Russia and the background cultures of Italian-speaking students. The results suggest that, apart from *Davayte*, an explicit, complex, and problematized treatment of Russian and Russophone cultures has not been found, and even where it is present (in *Davayte*), it is not put to good use with exercises and activities that stimulate the development of learners’ IC.

## 6.2. Implications

These results build on existing evidence of the centrality of textbooks in the RFL learning/teaching process (§1) and their importance in the construction of the learner’s IC (§2). The data contribute to a clearer understanding of the RFL textbook as a vehicle of Russian and Russophone cultures and of the risks associated with essentialist, reductionist, and/or stereotypical views of the culture of Russia itself (§3).

## 6.3. Limitations

The generalizability of the results is limited by the small sample size, which (due to the reasons explained in §4.1) is restricted to four RFL textbooks. Nonetheless, given that the selected textbooks are the most popular and widely used textbooks in Italian universities for first-year language students, the results obtained through the comparative content analysis of the sample are valid for the purpose of answering our research questions.

## 6.4. Recommendations

Future studies should consider the cultural content of RFL textbooks for Italian-speaking students on a larger sample, including all textbooks in use/traded in Italy for the university context and all levels/years of language learning (bachelor’s and master’s degrees).

Avenues for future research also involve the inclusion of textbook analysis in a deeper analysis of the context of Russian language learning/teaching in Italian universities in all its components (e.g., from textbooks to the role of the teacher and from the structure of courses to teaching strategies and learning environments). This would facilitate a broader reflection on the dynamics of RFL learning/teaching in Italy, which could benefit both field research and concrete teaching practice.

## 7. Conclusions

As textbooks have played an increasingly central role in shaping RFL teaching/learning processes, it is important to understand how authors’ views of culture (influenced by RFL essentialized conceptions)

may affect the development of learners' IC.

By testing the ways in which Russian culture is represented in popular RFL textbooks used at Italian universities with first-year students, this study established that, more often, textbooks reflect only a partial, essentialized, and sometimes even stereotypical image of Russian culture, with a strong correlation between ideologies and bias derived from RFL theories and textbook creation.

Future research into RFL textbooks employed in the Italian context should focus on establishing a clearer picture of Italian RFL teaching materials by examining a larger textbook sample that is as comprehensive as possible. Furthermore, while this study measured the role of textbooks in Russian language learning/teaching, more in-depth studies are required to gain further insights into different aspects of RFL learning/teaching in Italy. For instance, future works can investigate the teaching methodologies or teaching techniques most used by teachers, or determine whether learning environments facilitate or hinder RFL learning/teaching. This will make it possible to rethink the educational sphere of RFL in Italian universities (but not only) with positive implications for concrete teaching.

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## Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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