

Russian joins list of language electives on offer at NTU



Russian ambassador to Singapore, Mr Andrey Tatarinov, addressing Nanyang Technological University Russian-language elective students on March 14. PHOTO: SHAHRIYA YAHYA

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The Russian Far East and Siberia, "endowed with huge energy and natural resources", present an economic mine for those willing to take the plunge.

This was the message the Russian ambassador to Singapore, Mr Andrey Tatarinov, had for a group of 40 Nanyang Technological University (NTU) students last week. These students are the first to take up Russian, the 14th and latest language elective to be introduced at NTU, which is believed to be the only local university now offering it.

Mr Tatarinov touched on the need for his country to deepen cooperation with Asean and growth opportunities for Singapore companies in rural Russia. He cited examples of local firms that already have a foothold there, such as Changi Airports International, which brought its management capabilities of such facilities into regional airports.

"Singapore companies expanding into Russia will need people who speak Russian, know Russian culture and traditions, and legislation," he told The Straits Times. "There will be demand for Singaporean students who are fluent in Russian and who have a good understanding of what Russia is like."

He predicted more and more Singapore firms will go to the Russian Far East in the years to come.

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A lingering fascination with modern Russian history was what spurred one of the students, Mr Seah Xiang Yu, to sign up for the new elective. The final-year maritime studies student already has a favourite word - babushka.

"It means grandmother," the 25-year-old said. "Babushkas have a significant role in Russian families. They may look stern but they care a lot for others."

The 36-hour course is conducted by Ms Elena Ermilova, 26. Hailing from Moscow and having lived in Singapore for the past five years, the graduate of Moscow State Regional Social Humanitarian University is the only Russian lecturer at NTU.

"They are incredibly motivated and hardworking," she said of her students, adding with a grin: "They do not really complain about the demands of homework."

She explained that the classes follow an interactive model in which she tries to speak less and let her students do most of the talking, with an emphasis on group work.

"We are focusing a lot on authentic speech such as dialogues or contemporary Russian comedies so that students get a sense of Russia as a living language and not something in books only."

The language has its challenges.

"It is tough for English speakers in terms of grammar," said Ms Ermilova. She also cited the use of the Cyrillic alphabet and Russian vocal stress patterns as some of the tougher hurdles. "But it is a beautiful language and is really fun to learn."

Other electives on offer at NTU include Singapore Sign Language, Arabic and Thai.