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TWO LANGUAGES, ONE CRASH: ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN WIKIPEDIA ATTENTION TO AVIATION ACCIDENTS, 2015-2026

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Abstract: When an aircraft crashes, its Wikipedia article is often viewed hundreds of thousands of times within days. An earlier study of English and Spanish Wikipedia found that attention to aircraft crashes depends on the number of deaths and, for accidents with many deaths, on the region of the airline, and that it fades within about a week. This study repeats the comparison for English and Russian Wikipedia. All 99 aviation accidents in Wikidata dated from August 2015 to September 2026 with both an English and a Russian article were selected, and daily page views for the first 30 days were collected for each article. For accidents whose operator, or crash country, was outside the former Soviet Union, the Russian article was written within two days in only 34 of 70 cases; for post-Soviet accidents, in 20 of 25. In the 50 events where both articles existed from the start, the median ratio of English to Russian views was 19.0 for accidents outside the former Soviet Union and 1.7 for post-Soviet ones (Mann-Whitney test, $p < 0.001$). Because English Wikipedia as a whole received about 8.8 times as many views as Russian Wikipedia in the same periods, the ratios were also divided by this edition-size baseline: relative to its size, Russian Wikipedia gave post-Soviet accidents about five times the expected attention and other accidents about half of it. Attention faded at a similar speed in both languages: about three quarters of the 30-day views came in the first week, and daily views fell below a tenth of the peak after a median of 7 days. The results show that Russian-language attention to aviation accidents is concentrated on accidents close to the Russian-speaking world.

Keywords: Wikipedia, online attention, aviation accidents, Russian language, page views

1. Introduction

The author became interested in aviation as a child through his mother, who works as a dispatcher. Later, when he first flew on a plane at an age when he could understand it, he wanted to become a pilot. He usually learned about air crashes from short news summaries and sometimes from the BBC, and then read more on Wikipedia and other sources.

Wikipedia page views are a free and open record of what people look up, day by day. They have been used, for example, to monitor and forecast disease incidence [3]. For aviation accidents, Garcia-Gavilanes, Tsvetkova and Yasseri studied English and Spanish Wikipedia [1]. They found that the attention an accident receives depends on the number of victims, that for accidents with many deaths it also depends on the region of the airline, and that "a fast decay within about a week seems to be universal". They also measured how quickly editors created articles about accidents in different regions. A later study by the same group showed that a new crash also brings readers back to older crashes, a kind of collective memory [2].

These studies compared English with Spanish. Russian Wikipedia is written in the language shared by much of the former Soviet Union, where airlines, aircraft and news sources differ from those of Western Europe and America. This study asks three questions. First, does Russian

Wikipedia write about foreign aviation accidents as quickly as English Wikipedia? Second, how large is the gap in views between English and Russian, once the different size of the two editions is taken into account, and does it depend on whether the accident is post-Soviet? Third, does attention fade at the same speed in Russian as in English?

2. Data and methods

2.1. Events

Events were taken from Wikidata with a query for all items that are an instance of "aviation accident" or one of its subclasses, with a point-in-time date (property P585) on or after 1 August 2015, and linked to an article in both English and Russian Wikipedia. The query returned 99 events dated from 16 August 2015 to 15 September 2026. They include airline flights, cargo, military, helicopter, balloon and parachute flights. For each event, Wikidata gave the date, the number of deaths where recorded, and the operator and its country. Each event was assigned to one of three groups: post-Soviet, if the operator's country, or the country of the crash where no operator country was recorded, was one of the 15 former Soviet republics; other, if the country was known and not post-Soviet; and unknown otherwise. This gave 25 post-Soviet, 70 other and 4 unknown events.

2.2. Page views and article dates

Daily page views were collected from the Wikimedia Pageviews API [4] for each English and Russian article, counting only human readers (the "user" agent type) on all platforms. Day 0 is the date of the accident in UTC. Because articles are often renamed in the first days after a crash, the views of every redirect to the article were added to the views of the article itself. Every request had to succeed; a first data pull on 21 October 2026 had silently counted some failed requests as zero views, so all series were collected again on 23 October 2026 with no failed requests. One event, the 2026 Crimea Antonov An-26 crash, was linked in English Wikipedia to a redirect to the general article about the aircraft type, so it had no article of its own in English. The date each article was created was taken from its first revision in the MediaWiki API.

To account for the size of the two editions, the total user page views of each edition, English and Russian Wikipedia, were collected for the same 30 days after each accident [4]. Over these periods English Wikipedia received 7.1 to 12.0 times as many views as Russian Wikipedia (median 8.8). Each event's ratio of English to Russian views was divided by this edition ratio. An adjusted ratio of 1 means that the two editions gave the accident the attention their size would predict; below 1, Russian Wikipedia gave it more.

2.3. Clean sample

The comparison of views needs both articles to exist during the peak of attention. An event was kept only if both languages had their own article, both were created within two days of the accident, both had views in the 30 days after it, and the English peak came within three days. Of the 99 events, 43 were removed because one of the articles was written more than two days late, 4 because the English peak came later (Siberian Light Aviation Flight 42, the 2021 Azerbaijani Mil Mi-17 crash, the 2024 Kamchatka Mil Mi-8 crash and Tara Air Flight 197), 1 because no English views could be retrieved for its first 30 days under any of the article's titles (DHL Aero Expreso Flight 7216) and 1 because the English link was a redirect (the 2026 Crimea An-26 crash). The clean sample has 50 events: 15 post-Soviet, 32 other and 3 unknown.

2.4. Measures and tests

For each article, four measures were computed over the 30 days from the date of the accident: total views, the highest daily views (peak), the share of the 30-day total that came in the first seven days, and the number of days after the peak until daily views first fell below 10% of the peak. The gap between languages was measured by the ratio of English to Russian total views for each event, and medians of these per-event ratios are reported because they vary by orders of

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magnitude. The difference between the post-Soviet and other groups was tested with the Mann-Whitney U test, and relations with the number of deaths with Spearman rank correlation; p-values were computed by permutation (10,000 permutations).

3. Results

3.1. Russian Wikipedia is often late for foreign accidents

English Wikipedia wrote about most accidents within two days in both groups (Table 1). Russian Wikipedia did so for 20 of 25 post-Soviet accidents, but for only 34 of 70 other accidents, about half. For 27 of the other accidents, the Russian article appeared more than 30 days after the accident, when the attention had already passed. The median delay of the Russian article was 0 days for post-Soviet accidents and 3 days for other accidents. This extends to Russian the finding of the earlier study [1] that articles about accidents in some regions are written later.

Table 1. Articles written within two days of the accident, all 99 events

Group	Events	English within 2 days	Russian within 2 days	Russian more than 30 days later
Post-Soviet	25	19	20	4
Other	70	64	34	27
Unknown	4	4	3	0

3.2. The gap in views depends on where the accident happens

In the clean sample, English views exceeded Russian views in all 32 accidents outside the former Soviet Union (Table 2, Figure 1). The median of the per-event ratios was 19.0. Recent accidents followed the same pattern: Jeju Air Flight 2216 in December 2024 had 1,312,084 English views and 64,117 Russian views in its first 30 days. For post-Soviet accidents the median ratio was 1.7, and in 5 of 15 cases Russian views were higher. The largest such case was the crash of the Russian Defence Ministry Tu-154 near Sochi in December 2016, with 424,734 Russian views and 228,012 English views. The difference between the two groups was large and clear (Mann-Whitney $U = 467$ of a possible 480, $p < 0.001$).

Table 2. Views in the first 30 days, clean sample of 50 events (medians)

Group	Events	English views	Russian views	English to Russian	Adjusted for edition size	Russian ahead after adjustment
Post-Soviet	15	137,150	31,551	1.7	0.19	15 of 15
Other	32	268,814	11,064	19.0	2.09	9 of 32

The three events with an unknown region (median ratio 22.3) are not shown in Table 2.

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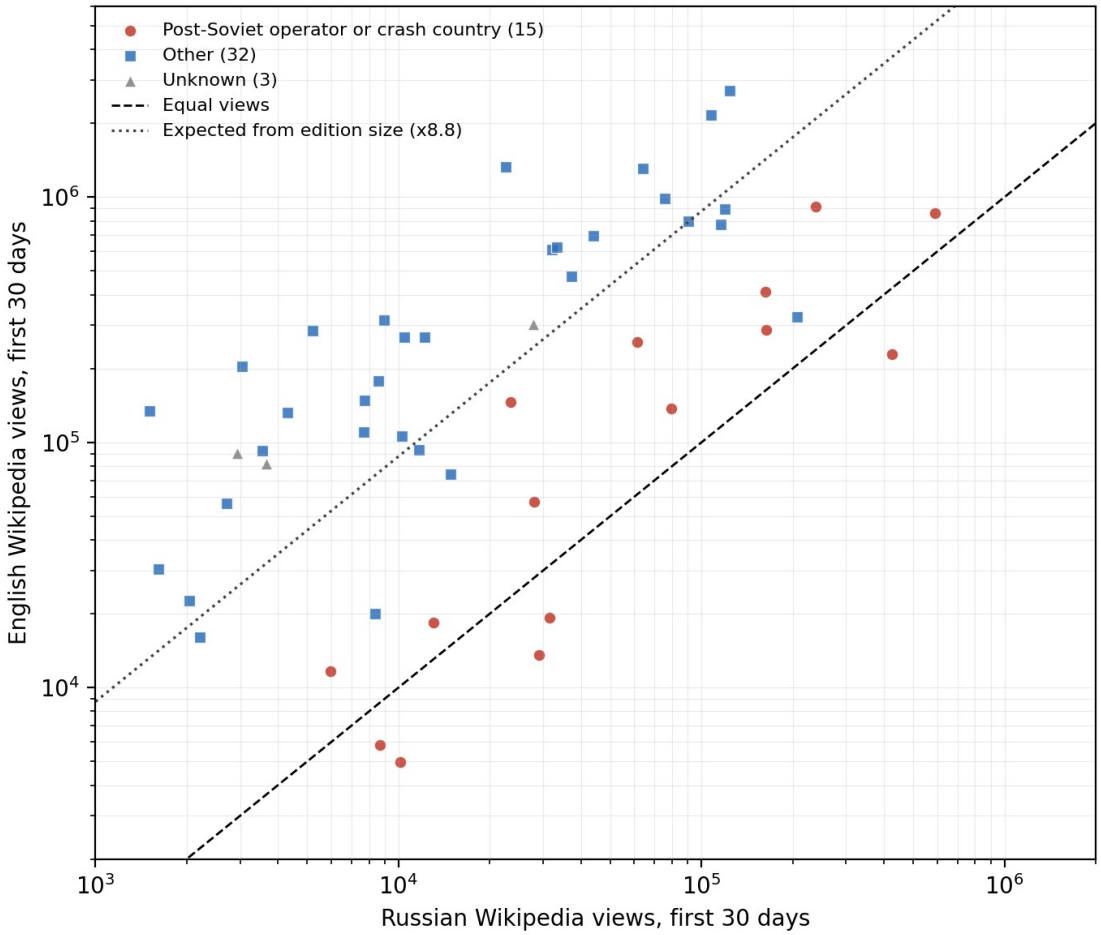


Figure 1. Views in the first 30 days in English and Russian Wikipedia, one point per accident (log scales). The dashed line marks equal views; the dotted line marks the ratio expected from the size of the two editions.

Much of the raw gap comes from the size of the editions. After adjustment, every post-Soviet accident received more attention in Russian than the size of Russian Wikipedia would predict, typically about five times more (median adjusted ratio 0.19). Accidents outside the former Soviet Union received about half the expected Russian attention (median 2.09), although in 9 of 32 cases Russian Wikipedia still gave them more than its share. The group difference remained after adjustment ($U = 470$ of 480, $p < 0.001$).

The number of deaths was related to total views in each language (Spearman rho = 0.35 in English, $p = 0.01$, and 0.39 in Russian, $p = 0.006$; 49 events with a recorded number of deaths), but not to the ratio between the two languages (rho = -0.03, $p = 0.85$).

3.3. Attention fades at a similar speed in both languages

In both languages, most attention came in the first week. The median share of 30-day views that came in the first seven days was 76% in English and 73% in Russian, and the median number of days from the peak until daily views fell below 10% of it was 7 in both languages; 2 English and 4 Russian series that never fell below 10% of their peak within 30 days were left out of this last measure. The groups differed in English: for other accidents 81% of English views came in the first week, for post-Soviet accidents 72%. In Russian the share was 74% in both groups. Larger accidents concentrated slightly more of their attention in the first week (rho = 0.33 in both languages, $p = 0.02$).

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4. Discussion

The main result is that Russian-language attention to aviation accidents is concentrated on accidents close to the Russian-speaking world. Russian Wikipedia often has no article at all during the days when people look for information about a foreign accident: for about half of them, nothing was written in the first two days. When both articles exist, the raw gap is about 19 to 1 for foreign accidents, but most of it reflects the larger size of English Wikipedia. Relative to the size of each edition, Russian Wikipedia gives post-Soviet accidents about five times its expected share and foreign accidents about half of it. Because the clean sample leaves out late Russian articles, which are mostly about foreign accidents, the full gap in attention to foreign accidents is probably larger than the one measured here.

The author's hypothesis was that English works as a common language for following disasters: people who follow an event abroad may go to the English article even when their own language has one. Page views do not show where readers live or which languages they speak, so this hypothesis is not tested here. The author also suggested a check in a third language. For EgyptAir Flight 804 in 2016, an Egyptian flight, the Arabic article (created on the day of the accident) had 16,761 views in 30 days and the English article 698,159, both counted with redirects, about 42 times more. However, English Wikipedia as a whole received about 54 times as many views as Arabic Wikipedia in the same 30 days, so the Arabic article received close to what the edition sizes would predict. In this single case the result neither supports nor rules out the hypothesis.

The results agree with the earlier study [1] in two ways. The region mattered for attention, as it did for English and Spanish, and attention faded within about a week in both languages, which supports the idea that the fast decay is general. Unlike the earlier study, which found the speed of decay independent of the number of deaths, larger accidents in this sample concentrated slightly more of their attention in the first week; with 49 events this difference is uncertain.

4.1. Limitations

The sample includes only accidents that have a Russian article at all, so accidents that Russian Wikipedia never covered are not counted, and the clean sample of 50 leaves out late articles; both make the gap for foreign accidents look smaller than it is. Events were found through the Wikidata point-in-time date, which may miss some accidents, and the region of each accident was assigned from Wikidata, which may be incomplete or wrong for some operators; where no operator country was recorded, the crash country was used. Day 0 is the date in UTC, which may differ by one day from the local date, and some Wikidata dates may be wrong: for Emirates SkyCargo Flight 9788 the English article was created one day before the recorded date of the accident. Page views were filtered for automated traffic only by the agent type provided by Wikimedia. Page views measure interest, not understanding, and do not show the location or language of readers.

5. Conclusion

Across 99 aviation accidents from 2015 to 2026, Russian Wikipedia was often late for foreign accidents, and in the 50 cases where both articles existed from the start, English views exceeded Russian views by a median of 19 to 1 for foreign accidents and 1.7 to 1 for post-Soviet ones. After taking the size of the two editions into account, Russian Wikipedia gave post-Soviet accidents about five times its expected share of attention and foreign accidents about half. Attention faded within about a week in both languages. Russian-language attention to aviation accidents is strong for events close to the Russian-speaking world and weak for the rest.

Data availability

All data come from public Wikidata and Wikimedia APIs [4, 5]. The event list, daily view series, article creation dates and the analysis code are available from the author or his mentoring team on request.

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Author contributions and use of AI tools

The author wrote the account of his interest in aviation that opens the Introduction (in Russian; translated by his mentor), chose the comparison between English and Russian Wikipedia from a shortlist of directions prepared by his mentor, selected the first accidents to examine (Charkhi Dadri, 1996, and Los Rodeos, 1977), proposed the hypothesis that English serves as a common language for following disasters, and suggested the comparison with Arabic Wikipedia. The data were collected and analysed, including the Arabic check, and the text was drafted by his mentor with the help of a generative AI assistant (Claude, Anthropic). No number, quotation or reference was produced by a language model without being checked: every statistic is computed by the analysis scripts from the public data described above, and each statement about a cited work was checked against its published text or abstract.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest. No funding was received for this study.

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