Meredith Clason reports that on March 14, 72 students from four high schools and community-based Russian programs came together on the campus of The University of Chicago to participate in the first autonomous Illinois ACTR Olympiada of Spoken Russian. This event represents one of about 15 annual regional pre-college Russian language competitions across the United States under the auspices of the American Council of Teachers of Russian (ACTR). Each student prepares for individual conversations with three native speakers of Russian who judge their competence and proficiency in the following categories: everyday conversation, recitation of a poem or text, and Russian civilization. In addition to this opportunity to demonstrate their language skills and cultural proficiency, our day-long event allowed students to meet and mingle with students and teachers of Russian from other schools and included Eastern European food, a pedagogical presentation by Dr. Elisabeth Elliott (Northwestern University) on an innovative Russian Intercultural Dictionary project, informal campus tours, and a performance by the University of Chicago Russian choir, Golosa.

This year is the first year of an Olympiada including only schools in the state of Illinois; since 2009, our competition was a regional cooperation including students from both Illinois and Indiana, and organized by Mark Trotter, Associate Director of the Russian and East European Institute at Indiana University. Our inaugural year as a sole Illinois Olympiada was co-sponsored by the University of Chicago Center for East European and Russian/Eurasian Studies (CEERES) and the University of Illinois Russian, East European and Eurasian Center (REEEC) and held at the University of Chicago Language Center. The competition itself was run by the Cori Anderson (Coordinator of the University of Chicago Slavic Language Program), the state chair, and an expert panel of judges, who are all native speakers and experienced instructors of Russian: Irina Avkhimovich (University of Illinois), Nina Weida (Middlebury College), and Maria Iakubovich (University of Chicago). A team of staff and graduate students coordinated the details of the event. Thanks to Katrina Chester, Maureen Marshall, Rachiny Samek, Katie Tucker, and John Doyle Wagner for all your work to make the event run smoothly and make our guests feel well cared for.

The group of students was extremely impressive; they competed bravely, performed brilliantly, and demonstrated very professional and conscientious behavior. The students represented two high schools in the Chicago Public Schools system, Pritzker College Prep (teachers: Phillip Stosberg, Rebecca Kaegi and Lauren Nelson) and Noble Street College Prep (teachers: Paco Picon and Josh Bloom), and two community-based schools, By the Onion Sea (teacher: Julia Denne) and Charodei (teacher: Anna Karasik).

At each regional Olympiada and outstanding contestant in both the regular and heritage categories is chosen for special recognition in the form of a book prize and letter from the ACTR President, Dan Davidson. Joselin Romero from Pritzker College Prep received the honor in the regular student category, and Vera Kotelnikova from By the Onion Sea in the heritage student category.