

LARISA FIALKOVA

Dept. of Hebrew and Comparative Literature, The University of Haifa, Haifa

MARIA N. YELENEVSKAYA

Dept. of Humanities and Arts, Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa

## **INCIPIENT SOVIET DIASPORA: ENCOUNTERS IN CYBERSPACE**

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become a vital part of everyday life. The emphasis in CMC investigation is on the globalizing nature of the Internet, while its localizing role as the meeting place of dispersed communities has not been sufficiently researched. Defining diasporas, scholars indicate the importance of their symbolic dimensions and the ethnic group consciousness. In the case of former Soviets, however, the latter is less important than common language and culture. We discuss institutional and grassroots sites that function as a cyber extension of the real-life diaspora of former Soviets.

Keywords: virtual diaspora, former Soviets, memories, imagined community

The purpose of this essay is to analyze Internet sites created for Russian-speakers residing in and outside the Russian Federation. We monitored web pages that have emerged in Russia at the initiative of various government institutions and non-governmental organizations, as well as sites created by emigrants from the countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU) who settled in various countries on various continents. We were interested in the agenda of the sites created by the Russian state organizations to promote ties with former Soviets dispersed throughout the world. We also wanted to compare them with the grassroots initiatives – web pages created by former Soviet emigrants – and to determine what is common and what is different in them. In addition, we analyze how activities of virtual émigré communities overlap with those in the physical world. Detailed analysis of the contents of web discussions is outside the purview of this paper. Case studies of the activities of emigrants' sites will be the subject of our other essay. For this study we chose four web sites for systematic review (April-November 2004). In addition, from time to time

we accessed over 30 other Russian-language sites created by and/or for former Soviet emigrants to check the intensity of digital diasporic activity.

The term "diaspora" is in vogue today. It is used in the singular and in the plural; it forms derivatives *diasporans* and *diasporic*; it is modified by a variety of adjectives, such as *incipient*, *mature*, *returning*, *stateless and state-linked*, *labor*, *trading* diasporas, and so on. Such an explosion of terminology shows that the concept, once limited to Jewry dispersed outside the Land of Israel, has expanded dramatically and lost its former rigor. (Note that in English, in texts unrelated to immigration studies, it is still standard to use this noun with the definite article and spell it with the capital D, *the Diaspora*). Today the term *diaspora* is applied not only to émigré communities that have their own institutions and organizations and maintain ties with home countries, but also to computer-mediated communication (CMC). In this domain we also come across a multiplicity of terms, such as virtual (see, e.g. Laguerre 2004; Sökefeld 2002), digital (Baxandall 2004), and visual diasporas – all of which refer to various Internet activities of dispersed communities. The last term is broader than the first two, which are synonymous. Visual diaspora presupposes the use of films and personal accounts (Nassar 2004). All the three terms have germinated from the more familiar, albeit still contested, term "virtual community". In our analyses we rely on Laguerre's definition of virtual diaspora:

(T)he use of cyberspace by immigrants or descendents of an immigrant group for the purpose of participating or engaging in online interactional transactions. Such virtual interaction can be with members of the diasporic group living in the same foreign country or in other countries, with individuals or entities in the homeland, or with non-members of the group in the hostland and elsewhere. By extension, virtual diaspora is the cyberexpansion of real diaspora. No virtual diaspora can be sustained without real life diasporas and in this sense it is not a separate entity, but rather a pole of continuum (ibid.).

Since the break-up of the USSR many researchers in the former Soviet Union (FSU) and in the West have analyzed the incipient Russian diaspora on the territory of the FSU (see, e.g., Laitin 1999; Savoskul 2001; Sheffer 2003:137-139; Shlapentokh et al. 1994). Large groups of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers found themselves living in the "near abroad" – the term coined in the post-Soviet Russian language for the countries of the FSU to distinguish them from the rest of the world, or in the "far-abroad". Those residing in the near-abroad (Tadjikistan, Lithuania, Byelorussia, etc.) have become minorities without migration as a result of the dissolution of the USSR, while those in the far-abroad are immigrants, who for various reasons chose to leave their country of origin.

In the near-abroad, the new independent states, make titular ethnicity and proficiency in its language a factor determining a person's social status, and in some countries even his or her citizenship. Among the members of the non-titular population many families have lived in these coun-

tries for several generations and are to varying degrees integrated into local life. Even though the dissolution of the USSR has marginalized them, hampered their upward mobility, and in many cases aggravated their economic situation, it would be a simplification to say that they do not consider the country of their domicile their own. Yet in some countries, for example in Uzbekistan, Latvia and Estonia, their right to citizenship was questioned. Thus Sergey Issakov points out that the legal status of non-titular population in Estonia differs: out of 404,000 Russian-speakers (28% of the total population of the country) only 120,000 are Estonian citizens. Citizens of Russia make up approximately 90,000. Two other categories are foreigners, (200,000) and illegal dwellers who have no documents at all. Members of the second and third groups are limited in civil rights while the last group is deprived of any and is virtually non-existent for the authorities (Issakov 2002:67). Elena Znobishcheva provides information about young Russian adults in Latvia and Estonia: although over two thirds of this group was born in the republics and the rest have lived there since early childhood or adolescence, only half of them have a full specter of civil rights (Znobishcheva 2002:85). The legal status of migrants in Russia is also unresolved. Many ex-Soviets who escaped to Russia in the periods of military conflicts or moved there in search of jobs do not have legal status and live without valid documents.

The Russian researcher Natalya Kosmarskaya studied Russian-speaking minorities in the FSU and summarized results of quantitative and qualitative investigations carried out in various regions. She estimated that approximately 20% of the Russian-speaking population say that their fatherland is Russia, while the number of people considering the country of domicile as such is double. In the countries of Central Asia affinity with the country of domicile is as high as 60%. According to the surveys of 1992-1994, about 50% of the respondents in Kyrgyz towns and villages, 68-85% in Moldavia, 47% in the towns of Lithuania, and 40% in the towns of Estonia considered the non-existent Soviet Union their fatherland. By the end of the 1990s, however, these numbers had fallen dramatically (Kosmarskaya 2002:124-125, 134-135). Despite the dilution of the Soviet identity, emotional attachment to the disintegrated state has not vanished completely. People feel attached to the memories of the past and are nostalgic for social security and equality even if they were not always real but only proclaimed.

Now let us consider former Soviet citizens in the far-abroad. According to standard taxonomies accepted in immigration studies, migrants can be divided into immigrants and repatriates. The latter group is also called a *returning diaspora*. Among the former Soviets, examples of the returning diaspora are Jews emigrating to Israel, ethnic Germans to Germany, Pontiac and Mariupol Greeks to Greece, and so on. Most of these people were born in the USSR; moreover several generations of their ancestors lived in the Russian empire and later in the USSR. The policy of Russification pursued by the tsarist and later Soviet governments led to the loss of

culture and language by these groups. Predominantly they are Russian speakers who share a cultural background with other former Soviets in the countries of the FSU and elsewhere. This commonality is manifested in similar patterns of integration in different receiving societies (Dietz 2000; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. 2003; Kaurinkoski 2003; Keramida 1999; Khrustaleva 2001; Shuval 2000). Notably, while in the Soviet Union these groups were perceived as ethnic *others*, in the receiving countries they are mostly referred to as the Russians. Again they find themselves *others*, this time not on the basis of ethnicity but of language and affinity with Russian culture. In the Soviet period potential emigrants were the most severe critics of the system. Disillusioned with the Soviet system, this group had over-optimistic expectations of life away from the USSR. Confronted with the sobering reality of their new abode, immigrants often re-evaluate their past experiences. Consequently former Soviets often resort to two conflicting strategies: demonization of their country of origin or its idealization. Quite often the two merge in the discourse of one and the same person (Yelenevskaya and Fialkova 2004).

The question "Who is whose diaspora?" is sometimes difficult to answer, in particular when we discuss returning diasporas and diasporas of the states that no longer exist, for example, Yugoslavia and the USSR. Jews, whose dispersion was the source of the notion, "diaspora", are considered by Zionists to be Israel's diaspora regardless of where they live, whether they cherish the dream of moving to Israel, or whether they are attached to their countries of birth. Gabriel Sheffer, for example, devised a nomenclature of diasporas and placed all the Jews in the group of "historical diasporas", which were created as long ago as in the Middle Ages (Sheffer 2003a). Sheffer's approach was severely criticized by Valery Tishkov, who claimed that the author's nomenclature did not reflect diasporan dynamics and changing group strategies. Tishkov perceives all former Soviet citizens, irrespective of their ethnicity and the current country of domicile, to be members of the Russian (Soviet) diaspora, and maintains that this concept is accepted by the immigrants themselves (Tishkov 2003:166).

### **Russian governmental websites aimed at diaspora**

Since the dissolution of the USSR Russia has changed its attitude to former Soviets living outside its borders. The change of policy is reflected in the emergence of two laws: The Federal Law on the State Policy of the Russian Federation towards Compatriots Abroad adopted in 1999 (<http://www.navi.kz/oldnavi/articles/pdnewimp021100b.shtml>) and the Federal Law on Citizenship of the Russian Federation adopted in 2003 (<http://roszakon.by.ru/zakon/zgrf1.htm>).<sup>1</sup> Émigrés are no longer perceived as traitors, but are

---

<sup>1</sup> We refer to the online publication of the laws but not to the conventional book publication because the Internet is the main or only medium enabling emigrants to access these documents.

deemed a valuable asset and a potential lobby for Russia's interests in their new countries of residence. The establishment of solid ties with the diaspora has been proclaimed a high priority issue of Russian politics. Several institutions reflecting this change in policy have been founded and provide information about their activities on the web. The first to be mentioned is the *Institute of the CIS countries*, or the *Institute of Diaspora and Integration* (<http://www.zatulin.ru/index.php?section=institute>, 31 March 2004).<sup>2</sup> Its site contains publications, a discussion forum, reports from congresses that it organizes, and links to organizations in the near- and far-abroad involved in diasporic activities. In 2003 two more institutions were founded under the auspices of the Moscow government: the *Center for Cultural and Business Collaboration with the Compatriots Abroad*, the *House of the Compatriots* (<http://www.zatulin.ru/index.php?section=mds>, 31 March 2004), and the *Moscow House of Nationalities* (<http://www.mdn.ru/#>, 15 April 2004). Though launched on the Net at approximately the same time, the two are quite different.

The site of the *House of the Compatriots* (HC) functions as a link to the official site of its director, the deputy of the State Duma Konstantin Zatulin, who is also the director of the Institute of Diaspora and Integration (see above). The main page of the site begins with a solemn passage:

Fate and the history of the 20th century have dispersed Rossians throughout the world. In 1991, nearly 25 million people found themselves outside the borders of shrinking Russia and joined the Russian diaspora. But the time has come for gathering the stones.

Note that instead of the adjective "Russian" the text uses "Rossian", *Rossiiskii* in Russian. This adjective, as well as the noun *Rossiane*, are increasingly used in political discourse. They refer to ethnic Russians, but also to anybody related to Russia by citizenship, current or former, by language, and by cultural affinity. Besides the biblical allusion ("A time for throwing stones, and a time for gathering stones" Ecclesiastes 3:5), the quoted passage refers to fate – one of the basic notions of Russian folk culture, often used to explain the most dramatic turns in human life and the history of the nation. The elevated language used at the beginning of the text is in sharp contrast with the rest of the document, which contains dry facts about the *House of the Compatriots* and the list of its goals. In conclusion, the administration of the *House of the Compatriots* calls on public figures, scientists and artists, journalists and teachers concerned for the consolidation of the diaspora and residing outside Russia to participate in the activities of the new institution. The site leaves the impression of a one-man show; it is dormant, and despite appeals for cooperation no suggestions or discussions can be found there.

The site of the *Moscow House of Nationalities* (MHN), which defines itself as the Center for Culture, Peace and Tolerance, is much better

---

<sup>2</sup> We give the addresses of all the web sites we analyze with the date we first accessed them.

developed. Its main page also starts with a quotation, this time from the long-term mayor of Moscow, Yurii Luzhkov. It reads: "The multitude of nations does not create problems but makes us rich and beautiful". This site has an updated calendar of the events run by the MHN and their description. The repertoire of activities is varied and includes concerts, exhibitions, meetings organized by fellow-countrypeople communities, evenings of traditional culture (e.g., a Russian-style tea party), and seminars on cross-cultural issues for young managers. The site advertises services available to the public in the MHN, gives the names of the directors, and lists public committees involved in its activities. In addition, it has links to the web pages of 18 ethnic communities of Moscow, such as Armenians, Georgians, Jews, Lithuanians, and so on. Not just Russia, but Moscow itself is presented as the home and the place where all former Soviet citizens meet, as if it were still the capital of the USSR. The MHN discussion forum is not active, having only three themes and few messages: events in the MHN (5 messages), mixed marriages (37 question-answer threads, most of which deal with legal issues), and general questions about the MHN (45 threads). More than half of the links appearing on the main page are as yet inactive (e.g., statistics, international relations, ethnic mass media in Moscow, etc.).

Three features are prominent about the HC and MHN sites:

- To-date their main function has been to provide information about off-line events.
- There is no person-to-person interaction, only person-to-institution communication.
- The two institutions capitalize on the word *Dom* in their name, which means both "house" and "home". Two examples will illustrate this: MHN refers to the Moscow ethnic communities as *domochadtsy*, "members of our household", and the HC expresses the hope that "all those who live abroad but do not want to lose ties with Russia, those who preserve the Russian language and culture, those who own businesses and would like to participate in the Russian economy will feel that We are their own home in the center of the Russian capital".

These are examples of institutional sites that seek to support diasporas and that are distinct responses to the new trend in the country's policy. The goal of the sites is to promote the transnational identity of former Soviets. Investigating transnationalism among Russian Jews in Israel, the sociologist Larissa Remennick observed that it mainly grew from 'below', unsupported by an institutional basis. But she predicted that the latter "may develop in the future when and if Russia, the Ukraine, and other sending countries achieve economic and political stability" (Remennick 2002:528). We believe Remennick's conclusions are valid not only for former Soviets in Israel but for those in other enclaves as well. Institutional websites supporting the transnationalism of former Soviet citizens have also sprung up in the Ukraine, Estonia, and other countries of the FSU, but contrary to

Russia they target only those who lived on their territory. Russia, on the other hand acts as the heir of the USSR, and tries to re-integrate its former citizens irrespective of whether their former domicile was the Russian Federation or elsewhere in the Soviet Union. But the idyll of mutual understanding and cooperation, as well as the image of Mother Russia welcoming back her prodigal sons that these sites strive to create, is still limited to rhetoric. Many researchers point to the ambivalence of Russian life today: claims of ethnic tolerance but actual xenophobic practices. The Russian ethnologist Oleg Patchenkov interviewed immigrants from the Caucasus in St. Petersburg and found that they were still nostalgic for the quasi-national imagined community<sup>3</sup> called the "Soviet people" and the "brotherhood of nations" that the Soviet Union boasted. They speak Russian, and Soviet holidays remain more important and meaningful for them than the ethnic and religious holidays that have replaced them. Patchenkov emphasizes that these people are deeply hurt by the refusal of the former members of the same imagined community (the Russians) to recognize them as brothers (Patchenkov 2004:72). Similar observations were made by Kiseleva and Damberg, who studied attitudes of the population in Russia proper to Russians from the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Ukraine. The latter were treated as second-rate citizens and were perceived as distinct *others*, which triggered a bitter feeling that Russia did not need them at all (Kiseleva and Damberg 2003:205-209). Another researcher, Kosmarskaya, conducted research for several years in Kyrgyzstan and interviewed Russian-speakers, many of whom were ethnic Russians, including those who had left for Russia and returned because there was no adequate state support in obtaining accommodation and finding jobs. Moreover, the returnees complained of the lack of social solidarity on the part of their co-ethnics (Kosmarskaya 2002:142-143, Kosmarskaya 2004). Similar data are cited by Grigorichev on the situation in Kazakhstan. According to his findings, as many as 200,000 Russian and Russian speaking migrants who had fled from Kazakhstan to Russia re-emigrated, having failed to integrate (Grigorichev 2003:132).

The institutional sites we have discussed do not agitate for the reconstruction of the USSR, neither do they use Soviet symbols. But the virtual Soviet Union does exist. In 1989, having signed an agreement with the semi-private Soviet company "Demos", the University of Helsinki made disk space available for Soviet web pages of a new Internet domain ".su". In 1994, following the dissolution of the USSR, the domain, now ".ru", was officially registered in the international organizations. The old addresses with ".su" continued functioning as before but new ones were registered at ".ru". In 2001 Russian organizations registering domain names officially

---

<sup>3</sup> The term "imagined communities" was introduced by Benedict Anderson as the title of his seminal book about the origin and spread of nationalism. He views a nation as an imagined community since its members "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991:6).

announced the renewal of address registration with ".su". This event sparked an adverse reaction among Russian Internet providers since it was perceived as a commercial gimmick utilized to take unfair advantage in the competition for business clients. Moreover, providers argued that it could be interpreted as an attempt to restore the USSR and compromise Russia in the international arena. The main argument of the supporters of ".su" is that it enables the creation of a Russian-language Internet unrelated to Russia. In the article entitled *SUverenitet* (a graphically enhanced pun: *suverenitet*, means "sovereignty"), the authors compare the struggle between ".ru" and ".su" to the attempts to use the domain of former Yugoslavia (<http://review.e-nikolaev.ru/index.php/articles/view/7013/?PrintVersion=1>, 15 Oct. 2004).

### Non-governmental websites

Contrary to the institutional sites, most of the other sites we monitored gave no clue as to the identity of their creators or sponsors. A case in point is the site Virtual USSR that went online in 2002, in commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the foundation of the Soviet Union (<http://www.ussr-online.net/phpn/>, 15 Oct. 2004).

In the top left-hand corner of the main page a red flag with the hammer and sickle flutters, and users accessing this page for the first time are welcomed by the strains of the Soviet anthem. The introductory text lists the project's multiple goals, the most ambitious being the development of the concept of the virtual USSR, including virtual citizenship, state organizations, and so on, simulation of the country's present and future development, and collaboration with similar virtual organizations in the countries of the former Warsaw Pact. The introductory text is written in the style of Soviet editorials abounding with the old ideological clichés. Visitors are addressed as comrades, and the motto of the site is an allusion to a popular song of the 1970s by D. Tukhmanov and V. Kharitonov, "My address is not a house or a street, my address is the Soviet Union", where "My" is replaced by the inclusive "Our". Publications linked to the site range from Communist Manifesto by Marx and Engels to the ideological poetry of Vladimir Maiakovskii. The creators' attempts to inspire nostalgia for the Soviet past are manifested even in the use of the word *propiska*, registration of domicile, for those who want to browse through the site. The use of this term is paradoxical, because *propiska* was one of the most hated phenomena of Soviet life impeding people's mobility.<sup>4</sup> Despite these

---

<sup>4</sup> Big cities attracted upward mobile young people from villages by better opportunities. But they were literally "closed" for newcomers. To obtain *propiska* people had to agree to the most non-prestigious jobs that gave them only temporary domicile rights. They had to work for the same employer for many years living in dormitories before they were entitled to permanent domicile. The second option to receive *propiska* was to get married to a dweller of that particular city. Life conditions of people without *propiska* resembled the lot of guest workers.



efforts, the site failed to attract a large number of users: only 218 have registered in two years. Most of them are from Russia, others live in various countries of the FSU and in the West. We believe that though the site has not really succeeded, it survives thanks to its international spirit. It takes an anti-nationalist stand and wants to unite "**compatriots** in the literal, figurative and virtual senses".

Another attempt to appeal to the Soviet past was undertaken by the communists of Altai, who announced the creation of the virtual consulate of the USSR on the official site of the region (<http://www.altaregion.ru/data/2001/04/28/news/8193.shtml>, 15 Oct. 2004). The authors of this project promised to issue virtual Soviet passports to anyone who applied. They also popularized sports and the so-called "military-patriotic" activities sponsored by the local communists. Since dissemination of information about this project was to be authorized by the owners of the site, we asked for a permission to use it for a publication, but our e-mail bounced back. Apparently the recent defeat of the Russian communists in real life affected their virtual activities too.

The majority of the sites related to diasporan activities of former Soviets, however, have been created by emigrants. Among them we find institutional sites, such as the web pages of Russian-language newspapers (e.g., the newspaper "Russian London", <http://www.russianlondon.com/>, 30 Oct. 2004), research organizations created by immigrant scientists (e.g., Institute for Social and Political Research in Israel, <http://www.ispr.org/authors/index.html>, 30 Oct. 2004), sports clubs (e.g., a Russian football team in New Zealand <http://homepages.ihug.co.nz/~kulashko/main.htm>, 30 Oct. 2004), and sites of other immigrant organizations. In addition, many sites have been created by private individuals.

We will now briefly discuss two community sites: *Benelux*<sup>5</sup> – the site of the Russian language community of the Netherlands (<http://www.ruscom.info/ru/default.asp>, 13 April 2004) and the Israeli portal *Souz*, "Union", the ellipsis commonly used in speech to denote the Soviet Union (<http://www.souz.co.il/>,<sup>6</sup> 1 April 2004). Both of them partly overlap with physical communities; that is, they contain information about events in the real world; at the same time they have discussion forums, chat rooms, and projects that function only online. According to Sökefeld's classification, these sites manifest activities of social virtual communities based on interaction and reciprocal relationships of communication via the Internet (e.g., in discussion forums and chat rooms) and cultural virtual communities that disseminate and consume imaginations and representations via the Net (Sökefeld 2002:108). *Benelux* has links to current news, outlines the goals of the community, explains how to become its member, posts telephone numbers that can be useful to immigrants, and has pages

---

<sup>5</sup> *Benelux* is the acronym that stands for Belgium-the Netherlands-Luxemburg.

<sup>6</sup> Some of the immigrants' sites use local providers (e.g., .co.il is an Israeli domain); others use services of the Russian domain .ru

devoted to various community services and projects. *Souz* has a much more complex structure. It provides information on the state of Israel, the history of the Jewish people, religion, social issues, education, repatriation, tourism, entertainment, etc. It gives links to other Russian Israeli sites, contains an online bulletin board, posts the names of the best Russian businesses and Russian clubs, and has numerous pages with jokes, online games, and so on. Like other immigrant sites, the two we analyze here have become important sources of sharing and exchanging useful information about the new country of residence among the newcomers: law, immigration services, job hunting, language courses, and other services. Sharing this type of information in the mother tongue and with people of similar background is extremely important for immigrants. As Wellman and Gulia remark, the Net challenges experts' claims to monopolies on advice (Wellman and Gulia 1999:340).

Unlike the Moscow institutional sites, all the Benelux and Souz pages exist and function. Information pages found on "Benelux" and on "Souz" are devoted to the themes mentioned above. In fact, we have chosen them for analysis because they have a standard selection of topics found on Russian language immigrant sites all over the world. Naturally, there are deviations, and some web pages are more comprehensive than others but the tendencies remain the same.

The most active part of the *Benelux* and *Souz* web pages is communication among users. *Benelux* has 796 registered participants, and *Souz* has 5,153. Not all of them give information about their residence, but besides Holland and Belgium on the *Benelux* site, and Israel on the *Souz* site, we see participants from various countries of the FSU, Canada, Germany, the USA, etc. Many mention not only the place of residence, but the town of origin, e.g., Minsk-Köln, Moscow-Amsterdam, St. Petersburg-Jerusalem-Amsterdam, Moscow-Texas and even Gomel-Technion.<sup>7</sup> Not all the registered members are audible: some have sent only 2 or 3 messages, some none at all. But there are also those who are very vocal, and their record exceeds 100 messages on the *Benelux* site and 1,000 messages on *Souz*. Similarly, there is a great difference in the number of users sending messages to the discussion forums and those who merely read them.

---

<sup>7</sup>The Technion is the Israel Institute of Technology.

## *Benegluki*<sup>8</sup>

### Discussion forum *State and Society*

Topic	Messages	Viewings
Europe, Beware!	3	227
The country of great boorishness	10	507
Citizenship	2	471
Is it possible to conduct business honestly in Russia?	3	253

(April 2004)

The difference in numbers shows that a lot of net surfers remain in the reception mode and prefer to be lurkers. In April 2004 *Benegluki* was offering users 15 forums, four conferences, and discussions. Of these, nine discussion threads give advice and consultations to new immigrants and four threads discuss the community's "special projects".

In the discussion forum "**State and Society**", three themes proved to be most popular:

The Dutch are bad lovers.	50 utterances	1,560 readers
Back to Russia...	16 utterances	1,012 readers
Goodness! If there is someone who likes it here, where did you come from?	74 utterances	3524 readers

The last two threads contain many emotional statements that show the writers' ambivalent attitudes to their country of origin and to the host country.

Russian-speaking Israelis are much more active on the Internet: in June 2004 *Souz* had 36 forums, the most popular being

### *Souz*

Israel and Us: Everything about Israeli politics, economy, life, and, naturally us, Olim, <sup>9</sup> the title that deserves special respect and a capital "O".	2723 threads - 67,236 messages
Russian youth in Israel: Everything that concerns the Israeli youth thinking in Russian.	2153 threads - 67,488 messages
Passion and sex: Everything about sex and its role in our life.	1743 threads - 65,127 messages

<sup>8</sup> *Benegluki* is a pun and a jocular name of *Benelux*. The slang word *gluki* means drug-induced hallucinations.

<sup>9</sup> Olim is Russified Hebrew for "repatriates".

Not surprisingly, Russian-speaking Israelis seem to be more involved in the political concerns of the receiving society, and discussion forums often turn into an arena of ideological battles when Intifada, religious issues, and interethnic relations in Israel are discussed. But in other respects special projects launched on both sites reflect the emergence of similar cultural institutions that immigrants create in the new countries.

The overall impression of the discussion forums we studied on *Benelux* and *Souz* is that the themes inspiring the greatest interest are those that pose questions of loyalty and challenge the possibility of seamless integration. *Benelux*, *Souz*, and other immigrants' sites confirm that the Internet is less some kind of a futuristic "cyberspace" and more a discontinuous narrative space (Jones 1997:15), where users try to sort out their various problems, be it identity, relations with society or personal relations.

The names of the web pages maintained by Russian-speaking immigrants in different corners of the world often reveal the mood of the creators and users and show several common tendencies. Former Soviets

- domesticate new space by marking their presence: "Russian Switzerland", "Russian London", "Russian New York", "Rimgrad" – the compound noun combining the Russian name of Rome with the old Slavonic form of the word "town" (cf. Petrograd, Stalingrad), etc.
- try to make themselves comfortable by creating a Russian-speaking environment: "Germany in Russian", "Canada in Russian", etc.
- attempt to reproduce traditional culture: children's centers are named after the characters of favorite fairytales: Kolobok, Cheburashka; discussion forums are called: *Besedka*—alluding to the place for soulful talk (*Benelux*), *Kulichki* (an American site) – an allusion to the idiom *u cherta na kulichkakh*, "in a godforsaken place".
- perpetuate familiar leisure activities and recreate public organizations bearing the same names as in the USSR: the brain trust "What, where, when?", clubs of Bards' Songs,<sup>10</sup> "Houses of Scientists", societies organizing lectures and seminars, "Associations of War Veterans", etc.

All the sites mentioned in this essay are in the Russian language, although some of them give the most essential information in English too. Besides, immigrants from the FSU have created bilingual sites. Thus a personal site DonSlaviK, Ukrainian diaspora in Canada, <http://donslavik.sitecity.ru/index.phtml>, 31 Oct. 2004 is maintained in Russian and in Ukrainian. Some of the pages devoted to specific themes are in Russian, others are in Ukrainian. Visitors to this site leave messages in one of the two languages. With the exception of nationalistic sites explicitly addressed to Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Russian Jews, etc., most of the immigrant sites we accessed cater to former Soviets irrespective of ethnicity. Russian, which

---

<sup>10</sup> These clubs unite amateurs who write and perform songs. Whether romantic or satirical, these songs made a marked contrast with the exaggerated enthusiasm of officially-approved pieces performed on stage or broadcast on TV in the Soviet period.

used to be the lingua franca of the USSR, has also become the lingua franca of emigrants from the FSU.

### **Conclusions**

Only five years ago, analyzing electronic media in emigrant communities, Donald R. Browne claimed that except for chat groups and other Internet-mediated forms of interest groups, immigrant involvement in virtual communication was low. He believed that the situation would change if the costs of using the Net were to decrease (Browne 1999:70). Our observations show that for former Soviets this optimistic forecast has come true. The Soviet virtual diaspora has evolved and functions as a cyber extension of the real diaspora.

This preliminary study showed three tendencies in the virtual diasporic activities of former Soviets. The first is an attempt to recreate on the Net the Soviet Union with its political and ideological symbols and use them as the basis for uniting its former citizens. Low registration and slow activity of the users prove that this project is a failure, probably because nostalgia for the Soviet Union does not include attachment to the state-sponsored symbols, but is based on the feeling of unity, security and common memories.

The second is an effort by official Russia to consolidate the diaspora of all former Soviets manifested in popularizing various programs of scientific and cultural collaboration with compatriots on the Internet, creation of a database of research literature devoted to Russians abroad, providing legal advice to Russian citizens residing abroad, and so on. Despite these efforts the activity of the targeted audiences on governmental sites also remains low. But links to the Russian press, announcements by Russian embassies and consulates, as well as information about various events sponsored by Russia in emigrant enclaves and posted on the sites created by non-governmental organizations indicate emigrants' interest in maintaining ties with the country of origin. Finally, grassroots sites attract many more visitors and active participants than institutional sites. Not all ex-Soviets involved in the activities of these sites consciously belong to the diaspora. Even if they do, this does not presuppose loyalty to the Russian Federation, and the discourse of return to the fatherland has only a marginal role. Other sites seem more oriented to the successful integration in the host country, but they also reflect immigrants' attempts to reproduce familiar institutions, cultural practices, and loyalty to the Russian language. As the web page of the magazine for migrants *PMZh* put it,

It is now a long time since a new planet emerged on Earth – the planet of Russia. Millions of Rossians live throughout the world and communicate with each other by means of hundreds of Russian newspapers and magazines, TV, radio, and the Internet ([www.pmg-online.ru/deerhunt.shtml](http://www.pmg-online.ru/deerhunt.shtml), 13 April 2004).

Soviet components of identity are not behavioral since the society and the state no longer exist; rather they form the symbolic and mythical background of a person's worldview and mentality, manifested in language and idiom. Dislocation of time and space, typical of immersion in Internet culture (Wilbur 1997:11) helps immigrants to see their life in two perspectives and mobilize those aspects of their identity that are related to the "old" or "new" country depending on the situation of virtual communication.

## REFERENCES CITED

- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition. London - New York: Verso.
- Baxandall, Phineas. 21 March 2004. "Good Capital, Bad Capital: Dangers and Development in Digital Diasporas". <http://www.nautilus.org/virtualdiasporas/paper/Baxandall.html>
- Browne, Donald R. 1999. "The Snail's Shell: Electronic Media and Emigrant Communities." *The European Journal of Communications Research* 24/1:61-84.
- Dietz, Barbara. 2000. "German and Jewish Migration from the Former Soviet Union to Germany: Background, Trends and Implications." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 26/4:635-652.
- Grigorichev, Konstantin. 2003. "Pereselentsy iz Tsentral'noi Azii na Altae: Novaia i prezhniaia rodina glazami 'otsov' i 'detei'" (Migrants from Central Asia in Altai: The New and Old Motherland through the Eyes of "Fathers" and "Sons", in Russian with English abstract). *Diasporas: Independent Academic Journal* 2:127-141.
- Issakov, Sergey. 2002. "Osnovnye etapy istorii russkoi obschiny v Estonii" (On the History of the Russian Community in Estonia, in Russian with English abstract). *Diasporas: Independent Academic Journal* 3:46-77.
- Jasinskaja-Lahti, Inga, Karmela Liebkind, Gabriel Horenczyk and Paul Schmitz. 2003. "The Interactive Nature of Acculturation: Perceived Discrimination, Acculturation Attitudes and Stress among Young Ethnic Repatriates in Finland, Israel and Germany." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 27/1:79-97.
- Jones, Steven G. 1997. "The Internet and its Social Landscape." In *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*. Steven G. Jones, ed. London: Sage, 7-35.
- Kaurinkoski, Kira. 2003. "Les grecs de Mariupol (Ukraine). Réflexions sur une Identité en Diaspora." *La Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales* 27/1:79-97.
- Keramida, Fani. 1999. "The Way to the Homeland: A 'Repatriated' Migrant's Life Story." *Oral History* Spring:75-89.

- Khrustaleva, N. S. 2001. "Uchastie v kruglom stole o migratsii. (A Participant of a Panel Talk on Migration, in Russian)". In *Sotsializatsia detei rossiiskikh migrantov: materialy Vtorogo mezhdunarodnogo kruglogo stola po problemam kul'turnoi i psihologicheskoj sotsializatsii detei rossiiskikh migrantov i bezhentsjev*. O. I. Makhovskaia et al., eds. Moskva: Institut psihologii RAN, 26-31.
- Kiselieva, Irina and Sergei Damberg. 2003. "Drugie russkie': Rol' v istoricheskom siuzhete" ("Other Russians": Their Role in the History's Plot, in Russian). In *Evrazia. Liudi i mify: Sbornik statei iz zhurnala "Vestnik Evrazii"*. S. A. Panarin, ed. Moskva: Natalis, 192-216.
- Kosmarskaya, Natalya. 2002. "Russkie diaspory': politicheskie mifologii i realii massovogo soznania" ("Russian Diasporas": Political Mythologies and Realities of Mass Consciousness, in Russian with English abstract). *Diasporas: Independent Academic Journal* 2:110-156.
- Kosmarskaya, Natalya. 2004. "Post-Soviet Russian Diaspora." In *Encyclopedia of World Diasporas. Immigrant and Refugee Cultures around the World. 1. Overview and Topics*. Melvin Ember, Carol R. Ember and Ian Skoggard, eds. New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 264-272.
- LAGUERRE, MICHAEL S. 21 MARCH 2004. "VIRTUAL DIASPORAS: A NEW FRONTIER OF NATIONAL SECURITY". <http://www.nautilus.org/virtual-diasporas/paper/Laguerre.html>
- Laitin, David D. 1999. "Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Nationality in the Post-Soviet Diaspora." In *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*. Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, eds. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 321-356.
- NASSAR, HALA. 26 MARCH, 2004. "VISUAL DIASPORA: PALESTINIAN DIASPORA NARRATING THE LOST HOME". <http://www.nautilus.org/virtual-diasporas/paper/Nassar2.html>
- Patchenkov, Oleg. 2004. "The Life of Ethnic Migrants: Primary Groups vs. Imagined Communities (based on case-study research of Caucasian migrants in St. Petersburg, Russia)." In *Times, Places, Passages: Ethnological Approaches in the New Millenium*. Attila Paládi-Kovács, ed. Budapest: Publishing House of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 65-74.
- Remennick, Larissa. 2002. "Transnational Community in the Making: Russian-Jewish Immigrants of the 1990s in Israel." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28/3:515-530.
- Savoskul, Sergei. 2001. *Russkie novogo zarubezhia: vybor sud'by* (Russians of the New Abroad: The Choice of Destiny, in Russian). Moskva: Nauka.
- Sheffer, Gabriel. 2003. *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sheffer, Gabriel. 2003a. "Diaspory v mirovoi politike" (Ethno-National Diasporas in Politics, in Russian with English abstract). *Diasporas: Independent Academic Journal* 1:162-184.
- Shlapentokh, Vladimir, Munir Sendich and Emil Payin. 1994. *The New Russian Diaspora: Russian Minorities in the Former Soviet Republics*. Armonk - New York - London, England: M. E. Sharpe.

- Shuval, Judith T. 2000. "Diaspora Migration: Definition Ambiguities and a Theoretical Paradigm." *International Migration* 38/5:41-55.
- Sökefeld, Martin. 2002. "Alevism Online: Re-Imagining a Community in Virtual Space." *Diaspora* 11/1:85-123.
- Tishkov, Valerii. 2003. "Uvlechenie diasporoi: o politicheskikh smyslakh diasporal'nogo diskursa" (A Passion for Diaspora: The Political Connotations of Diasporic Discourse, in Russian with English abstract). *Diasporas: Independent Academic Journal* 2:160-183.
- Wellman, Barry, and Gulia, Milena. 1999. "Net-Surfers Don't Ride Alone: Virtual Communities as Communities." In *Networks in the Global Village: Life in Contemporary Communities*. Barry Wellman, ed. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 331-366.
- Wilbur, Shawn P. 1997. "An Archeology of Cyberspaces: Virtuality, Community, Identity". In *Internet Culture*. David Porter, ed. New York - London: Routledge, 5-22.
- Yelenevskaya, Maria and Larisa Fialkova. 2004. "From Anti-Utopia to Utopia: Immigrants' Memories of the Soviet Union". *Proceedings of the 13th International Oral History Conference (IOHA) "Memory and Globalization"*. Rome (Italy). CD. Atti Del Convegno#.
- Znobishcheva, Elena. 2002. "Pokolenie 'tridsatiletnikh' v stranakh Baltii – sostizatel'naia model' etnicheskikh otnoshenii" (The "Thirty-Something" Generation in the Baltic States – Competitive Model of Ethnic Relations, in Russian). *Diasporas: Independent Academic Journal* 3:78-99.

## SOVJETSKA DIJASPORA U NASTAJANJU: SUSRETI U KIBERPROSTORU

Larisa Fialkova, Dept. of Hebrew and Comparative Literature,  
The University of Haifa, Haifa

Maria N. Yelenevskaya, Dept. of Humanities and Arts,  
Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa

### SAŽETAK

U tekstu se analiziraju internetske stranice stvorene za ruske govornike koji borave izvan Ruske Federacije. Građa je prikupljena s internetskih stranica koje održavaju različite vladine institucije i nevladine organizacije u Rusiji kao i s internetskih stranica koje su pokrenuli bivši sovjetski emigranti nastanjeni u različitim zemljama. U radu se uspoređuje struktura dijasporičkih internetskih stranica i informacija koje oni donose, kao i intenzitet s kojim korisnici sudjeluju u virtualnim diskusijama.

Uočene su tri tendencije u virtualnim dijasporičnim aktivnostima bivših Sovjeta. Kao prvo, riječ je o pokušaju da se na internetu ponovno stvori Sovjetski Savez, koji bi ujedinio svoje bivše građane svojim političkim i ideološkim simbolima. Slabi odaziv posjetitelja upućuje na bezuspješnost tog projekta. Drugo, službena Rusija nastoji konsolidirati dijasporu kojoj bi pripadali svi bivši Sovjeti. To se nastojanje manifestira u popularizaciji različitih programa znanstvene i kulturne suradnje putem interneta, stvaranju baze



podataka o literaturi posvećenoj Rusima u inozemstvu, konzultacijama među ruskim građanima koji borave izvan Rusije o različitim pravnim pitanjima, itd. Unatoč tim naporima aktivnost publike kojoj su te informacije namijenjene ostaje niskom. Konačno, internetske stranice koje nastaju "odozdo" i održavaju se kao osobne ili zajedničke internetske stranice privlače puno više posjetitelja i aktivnih sudionika nego institucionalne internetske stranice. Oni pokazuju da svi bivši Sovjeti koji sudjeluju u aktivnostima na tim internetskim stranicama ne pripadaju dijaspori. Neki od njih žele održati veze sa "starom domovinom", no to ne pretpostavlja lojalnost Ruskoj Federaciji, a diskurs o povratku u domovinu tek je marginalan. Druge internetske stranice su više orijentirane na uspješnu integraciju u zemlji imigracije. No i one odražavaju napore imigranata da reproduciraju poznate institucije, kulturne prakse i lojalnost prema ruskom jeziku.

Ključne riječi: virtualna dijaspora, bivši Sovjeti, sjećanje, zamišljene zajednice