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Transnational Self and Community in the Talk of Russophone Cultural Leaders in the UK

Lara Ryazanova-Clarke

Abstract:

Since the end of the Soviet Union, the UK has experienced a dramatic growth of Russian-speaking in-migration. The chapter advances the discursive approach to identity and, focusing on the analysis of discourses produced by three cultural leaders of the Russian-speaking diaspora in London, examines how these leaders talk about their transnational selves and cultural activism, and how this talk shapes the imagination of the Russophone community in the UK. The data used derive from the transcribed semi-structured interviews taken in London in 2017. The intricate bottom-up discursive negotiation by the speakers of their allegiances to the homeland and the host country is compared to the top-down imaginaries of diasporic Russianness elaborated externally by official narratives in the Russian Federation. The chapter demonstrates that rather than producing a coherent Russophone diasporic identity, the speakers display a considerable variety in the meanings and values they ascribe to the different elements of identity and community. While some elements of the speakers' narratives demonstrate loyalty to the Russian official doctrine of global Russianness, the interviews also display internal conflicts and tensions, thus disrupting the possibility of fixing their identities from the outside.

Bio:

Lara Ryazanova-Clarke is Professor of Russian and Sociolinguistics and Director of Princess Dashkova Russian Research Centre at the University of Edinburgh. Her main publications include *The Russian Language Today* (with T. Wade) (Routledge, 2011), *The Russian Language Outside the Nation* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), *The Vernaculars of Communism: Language, Ideology and Power in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* (with P. Petrov) (Routledge, 2015), the two-volume publication *French and Russian in Imperial Russian* (with D. Offord, V. Rjéoutski and G. Argent) (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), and a Special Issue of *International Journal of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education* on the 'Commodification of Russian' (with S. Muth) (2017). She is Series Editor of the 'Russian Language and Society' book series at Edinburgh University Press.

Keywords:

Russian-speaking, diaspora, discourse, identity, imaginary

Transnational Self and Community in the Talk of Russophone Cultural Leaders in the UK

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening up of the borders of Russia and other former Soviet states, the world saw an unprecedented scale of emigration of Russian speakers,¹ propelling Russia to the position of the third largest world sender of migrants by 2015 (Trends in International Migration 2015). This migration of Russophones across the world was concurrent with the era of intensified globalization characterized by a radical intensification of the movement of goods, services, information and culture, leading to fundamental transformations in the relations of people to space on the global scale. In addition to the traditional unidirectional emigration, tens of thousands headed out on ‘new types of journey’ (Rosello 2001: vii), including labour and business travel, study abroad, international tourism, and ‘new nomadism’ (Hoffman 1998; Richards 2015), not to mention the ‘virtual mobility’, that is, crossing borders symbolically with the help of communication technology. The UK has, along with other Western countries, experienced a dramatic growth of Russian-speaking migrants and has seen a rapid development of Russophone communities and border-spanning cultural activities.

Contemporary scholarship has developed the concept of transnationalism to conceptualize the modern stage of migration and the associated expansion of diasporic networks. Steven Vertovec explains that transnationalism refers to ‘sustained cross-border relationships, patterns of exchange’ and ‘a range of practices and institutions linking migrants, people and organizations in their homelands or elsewhere in a diaspora’ (2009: 13). The increased connectivity emerging in the context of transnational relations creates new forms of networks and linkages (Acharya 2016), including new forms of imagining the diasporic community, identity construction and communication (De Fina and Perrino 2013: 510; Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 9).

The view of diaspora as a bounded physical group of people cut off from their homelands has been challenged by the postmodern social constructivist perspective which understands the diaspora rather as a network of practice including engagement in various cultural, social and political projects (Baubok and Faist 2010). From this perspective, diaspora is a dynamic triad of

¹ Due to Russia’s imperial history, the conflation of notions of Russians and Russian-speakers has been pervasive among groups of those who discuss and even conceptualize Russophone migration: Russian elites and lawmakers, communities of migrants from the post-Soviet states and host communities in the UK. The terms accepted here are Russian-speaking migrants or Russophones, which relates to a wider conglomerate group of various ethnic origins and who were born in the Russian Federation, the post-Soviet states and in other countries (e.g. Israel, Germany, US, Sweden).

relationships between the diasporic community, the homeland and the host society, and may be construed as ‘an idiom, a stance, a claim’ (Brubaker 2005: 12; 2017). This means that being a type of imagined community (Anderson 1991), diaspora is, in effect, a discursive construct compounded by ‘different ways of constructing, managing, and imagining relationships between homelands and their dispersed people’ (Waldinger 2003: xvi).

According to the above perspective, identity in mobility – that is, an image of an individual migrant or migrant community – is not a fixed essence or a pre-determined, or pre-linguistic characteristic, but is something that is multiple and incomplete; moreover, something that is constructed, conveyed, and negotiated by various social agents. As in the case of diaspora, language and discourse are the means through which transnational identity is constructed, performed and negotiated (Hall and Du Gay 1996; Benwell and Stokoe 2006; De Fina 2011, 2016; De Fina et al. 2006; Wodak 2012; Wodak et al. 2009; Wodak and Boukala 2015). The notion of hybridity has been developed to describe the complexity of diasporic identities, a sense of double belonging and a hyphenated fusion of national, cultural and linguistic features in the content of identity production (Bhabha 1994; Dervin and Risager 2015; Zhu Hua 2017).

The fluidity of contemporary Russophone migration makes it difficult to ascertain the exact number of Russophone migrants in the UK. The figures existing to date vary dramatically, ranging from 67,400 according to the Office of National Statistics 2011 Census (ONS 2013) to 427,000 cited in the 2007 International Organization for Migration data (IOM 2007), to 766,000 provided by a Moscow-based sociological company for the British Russian-speaking magazine *Zima* (Zima 2017).² All sources agree though that London has by far the UK’s most numerous Russian-speaking population and is the major hub of Russophone cultural activity. In the superdiverse megapolis that London has now become (Blommaert 2010; 2013), the Russophone community stands out with its high visibility and its assertive display of cultural activity, which include the Maslenitsa (Shrovetide) celebrations in Trafalgar Square, Russian balls, theatres, cultural centres and a variety of community schools focusing on language, culture, maths, ballet and other ‘Russian skills’.

Given that culture is the major point of diasporic identification (Hall 1999), this chapter explores the patterns of construction and negotiation of transnational selves and community as have emerged from the discourse of interviews given by Russophone cultural leaders and

² Darya Malyutina explains why the statistical data concerning Russian speaking migration to the UK varies and is not fully reliable: ‘The data may be incomplete and imprecise for a number of reasons: the small size of the groups studies, gaps in methodology..., lack or difficulty of access to particular groups (for example, irregular migrants)’ (2015: 33).

entrepreneurs – those who organize cultural events or lead institutions of the kind listed above. While having Russian as their first language, the migrants in the focus of this research are limited neither to ethnic Russians nor to migrants from the Russian Federation. Rather, this is a loose group of people of various countries of origin (not restricted to the former Soviet states) who associate themselves with the Russian language and Russian or Russophone cultures. Cultural leaders are fundamental in fostering the community-forming projects and in articulating the community's identity narratives.

In the analysis that follows, I will address the following questions: how do the Russophone diasporic cultural leaders talk about their own transnational selves and their cultural activism and how does this talk shape the imagination of the Russophone diasporic communities in the UK? What are the discursive articulations of the respondents' transnational identities – in Brubaker's words, the 'idioms', the 'claims' and the 'stances'³ that are used by the respondents and that indicate their perceived value of and allegiance to the various sides of the diasporic triad? And finally, to what extent does their performance of identity display complexity, hybridity and variation? In order to address these questions, the second part of the chapter will discuss examples from interviews of three cultural leaders taken in London in 2017.

With the arrival onto the British shores of many representatives of the educated, creative and affluent social groups of Russophones, the questions of what the Russian-speaking diaspora is and who can make claims to it, have become a matter of intense coverage in both the Russian media and cultural productions. Among the latter was the 28-episode television series entitled *Londograd*, which was screened in 2015 on Russia's STS television channel. The series worked as a sensational exposition of the UK-based Russophone community for the 'homeland' audience, in which the daily life and adventures of British Russophones became a subject of elaborate fictional scrutiny. Scripted by Michael Idov, the Russian-speaking Latvian-American writer and journalist, the show itself offered a transnational perspective on this community. While Idov's vision of his characters celebrated the cosmopolitan London-dwelling Russians who manifestly have no longing for their homeland (Ryazanova-Clarke, forthcoming),⁴ the TV channel's top brass put its own spin on the interpretation by adding to the title the slogan *znai*

³ The stance is a 'display of evaluative, affective and epistemic orientations in discourse' (Bucholtz and Hall 2010: 22)

⁴ Stephen Hutchings has argued, however, that with Idov's influence receding towards the end of the series, the show's ideological messages were reoriented towards 'unambiguously traditional values, tinged with the tones of official patriotism' (2017: 153).

nashikh (lit. ‘know our own’⁵) (Idov 2016). This phrase containing the pronoun *nashi* (‘our’, pl., meaning here ‘of our kin’, ‘kindred people’) served to re-qualify the Russian-speaking migrants not so much as new Londoners, or hybrid ‘Londongradians’, but rather as compatriots who belong to and are claimed by the country they left. Moreover, the added phrase is commonly used as a boastful and supporting cry, which implies a division between the *nashi* in-group and the non-*nashi* out-group while indicating a sense of the speaker’s gleeful superiority over the out-group. The altered wording allowed the STS channel to redefine the identity of the British Russian speakers and linguistically re-appropriate them. In Idov’s admission, in the post-Crimean context marked by the acceleration of confrontation between Russia and the West, the purpose of the intervention in the title of the series was ‘[t]o make it seem as if the show was about the Russians triumphing over the West, as opposed to integrating into it’ (Idov 2016: 35).

The story of the two perspectives on the *Londongrad* characters illustrates the mechanism of the migrants’ identity construction and negotiation. Diasporic identity-making proves to be a dialectic process produced from both the homeland and the diasporic spaces. It includes the top-down mobilization of diasporic activism, which may involve governments and official institutions engaged in operations known as ‘soft power’, ‘cultural diplomacy’ and ‘outreach’ (Byford 2012: 717), as well as bottom-up grassroots community activism (Vertovec 2001; Barabantseva and Sutherland 2011; De Fina and Perrino 2013). The narrative presenting the global Russophone world outside Russia as ‘*nashi*’ taps into Russia’s prominent official discourse of *Russkii Mir* (The Russian World), which intends to define the increasingly overlapping notions of Russian-speaking, Russianness, and ‘compatriotism’. In recent years, the *Russkii Mir* discourse has shown signs of evolving into Russia’s official albeit loosely defined ideology predicated on the idea that the Russophone world is a separate and unified civilization (Voitiskova et al. 2015; Suslov 2018). The idea of who the Russian compatriots⁶ are has fluctuated over time from the 1990s de-centred image of the ‘Russian archipelago’ to the 2000s assertion of Russian ‘spheres of interests’, to the current conservative irredentist and isolationist project advancing a Russo-centric, anti-Western and neo-imperialist vision of global Russianness controlled by the Russian state (Byford 2012; Laruelle 2015a, 2015b; Grigas 2016; Nikolko and Carment 2017; Ryazanova-Clarke 2017; Suslov 2017, 2018).

⁵ A more fluent, non-literal translation of this Russian phrase would be ‘this is how we do it!’, however this does not fully render the sense of kinship, group belonging and an emotional bond reflected in the Russian notion of *nashi*.

⁶ The Russian term *sootchestvennik* (compatriot) is derived from the noun ‘otechestvo’ (fatherland) and the shifts in the post-Soviet use of the term reflects the dynamics and trajectory of the top-down ‘diasporic nation-building’ undertaken by the Russian Federation.

The transnational vehicles to propagate the official Russkii Mir doctrine and to mobilize the compatriots across the world around its preferred version of Russophone identity were the Kremlin-controlled organizations – The Russkii Mir Foundation aiming at the promotion of the Russian language abroad and the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo), set up in 2007 and 2008 respectively.⁷ The same purpose is served, by the 1999 Law on State Policy of the Russian Federation with regard to Compatriots Abroad, which has since then undergone five amendments, showing just how painstakingly the officially prescribed compatriot identity has been negotiated and redefined over the years. This Law has cast the diasporic net widely and, in addition to those with Russian and dual citizenships, embraces as compatriots those who merely descended from the territories of the Russian Federation and those who might only have in the past held Soviet citizenship. In fact, belonging to compatriots is ultimately determined through self-identification and is non-obligatory. However, the more recent amendments from 2010 and 2013 add stipulations for membership, which aim at cultivating in the diaspora loyalty to the Russian Federation and political support for the current regime. Thus, Article 3.2 states that a compatriot is expected to confirm his or her status by manifestly engaging in Russian cultural activism, namely, in ‘public or professional activity aiming at the maintenance of the Russian language and other indigenous languages of the Russian Federation, the promotion of the Russian culture abroad’, and ‘to engage in public diplomacy in support of Russia in the country of their residence’⁸ (Federal’nyi zakon 2013; Ryazanova-Clarke 2017: 5). In return, the rights and privileges of the compatriots, provided by the Law, include, for example, a simplified procedure of obtaining Russian citizenship (Art. 11.1) and assistance in voluntary resettlement to the Russian Federation (Art. 13.1).

The next section of this chapter deals, however, with the analysis of the diasporic voices which relate to a different level of identity construction – the grassroots, bottom-up dynamics. How do the UK Russophone cultural leaders negotiate the image of themselves and of the community that they assume to be part of, represent and lead in the face of the above constructions of global Russianness prescribed by such a powerful external agent as the Russian state?⁹ The discussion

⁷ The Foundation operates the annual budget of €5.12m and Rossotrudnichestvo has €40m annually, which is expected to increase to €110m by 2020 (Vojtiskova et al. 2016:29).

⁸ In this chapter, all translations from Russian are by its author.

⁹ There are many different constructions of the global Russophone world by a variety of agents, from the Russian state to individuals who see themselves as part of this world. The term ‘global Russians’ was reputedly first used to refer to members of *Snob* – an exclusive virtual ‘club’ (which included a printed magazine and a subscription-only online social media platform) of self-proclaimed globally dispersed cosmopolitan Russian ‘elites’. This project’s site defined ‘global Russians’ as ‘people who live in various countries and speak various languages but think in Russian’

focuses on three examples of Russophone cultural leaders residing in London. Their recorded interview transcripts are analysed for their deployment of linguistic resources to talk about the elements of the diasporic triad – the homeland, the host land, and the Russophone community built around their activity, including, of course, themselves as agents of this activity. These three conversations represent a small sample of the data from 95 semi-structured interviews which I conducted in 2017-2018 across the UK. The analysis sets no objective to arrive at an overall typology of Russophone identities and community imaginaries. Rather, it aims to demonstrate how discourse, set against the context of its emergence (the speaker's biographical data, behavioural repertoire,¹⁰ etc.), reveals the mechanisms of cultural identity production in 'a constantly shifting description of ourselves' (Barker and Galasinski 2001: 30), and to illustrate the level of uniformity or variability of such identities. The three narrative examples have nevertheless been selected for the purpose of illustrating patterns of complexity and salient trends in identity and community construction, replicated in the larger data.

Self and Community in the Russophone Diasporic Imagination

Anna

Anna¹¹ works at a supplementary school dealing with the Russian language and culture. She is in her fifties, grew up and went to university in parts of the Soviet Union that are now independent states (Moldavia, Ukraine) , and has been living in the UK since the early 1990s, so for a substantial part of her life. While she has never lived in Russia, she speaks passionately about her role as a promoter of Russian language and culture. In her story, Anna highlights that she was a founder of several international Russophone communities' cross-European activities and organizations, set up under the aegis of the Russian Federation and that she was an active participant in major initiatives and events organized by the Russian government targeting

(*O proekte* n.d.), although, over time, this label has disappeared from the club's members' self-description (Roesen 2011: 87). A very different meaning has been attached to 'global Russians' by transnational business, which uses it for top managers and executives from the Russian Federation (Podtserob 2016). The present chapter understands 'global Russianness' as a construct that translates someone's participation in the global Russophone world into a particular way of being 'Russian' in the contemporary globalized world, bearing in mind that different agents construct this 'global Russianness' differently.

¹⁰ Behavioural repertoire is 'the actual range of forms of behaviour that people display, and that makes them identifiable as members of a culture' (Blommaert and Jie 2010).

¹¹ All participant names are changed.

compatriots, such as the annual International Compatriots Forums in Russia¹² hosted by the Russkiy Mir Foundation and the EU Russian Speakers' Alliance.¹³

Anna's discourse about her involvement with many initiatives supported by the Russian government displays a strong orientation¹⁴ towards the official Russian compatriot doctrine. For her, Russia is a 'homeland' and a 'cultural civilization' she belongs to, she marks her allegiance by her deployment of key words from the Russkii Mir discourse, such as 'compatriots' [sootchestvenniki], 'cultural code' [kul'turnyi kod], and Russian 'civilization',¹⁵ and marks her stance to the host state by using the word 'Russophobia' [rusofobiia], also from the vocabulary of Russian officialdom, not least when alleging anti-Russian attitudes in the UK.¹⁶ She assumes a position of someone with roots in the Soviet Union ('I am reasoning from the point of view of a person who has lived here for 26 years and who came from the Soviet Union' ['ia rassuzhdaiu s tochki zreniia cheloveka, kotoryi zhivet zdes' 26 let i vyekhal iz Sovetskogo Soiuza']) and re-enacts Soviet knowledge frames, practices and rituals as elements of cultural community-building in her school. This is indicated, for example, in the personalities she attributes cultural value to. Her description of the children's song competitions she organizes reveals her pride in having Sergei Zakharov, a 1970s' Soviet pop icon, as the competition's judge and patron (she uses the Russian officialese word *kurator*). Anna also describes how she engages the children at her school in the activities evoking Soviet practices. Seeking to preserve tradition, she introduced a rule into her school that children must address their teachers by name and patronymic. She also assumes a romantic nostalgic tone for Soviet rituals as she justifies the adoption of the celebration of the Soviet and Russian Army Day on 23 February in her school, when boys get congratulations, cards and gifts placed on their desks. In passages (1) and (2), we see how Anna's happy memories of her own Soviet school day practices inform their re-enactment as a diasporic ritual in London:

¹² To demonstrate the indoctrination work with compatriots, the 2018 Forum was held under the slogan 'Together with Russia', and declared its objectives to 'actively involve members of Russophone diaspora in the political life in Russia and in the forthcoming Russian Presidential elections'. The programme of events included the demonstration of a Ministry of Defence developed project which counters the 'falsification' of the Second World War history. <https://www.ruskiymir.ru/the-forum-together-with-russia/> [accessed 15 April 2018].

¹³ An organisation of Russian-speakers living in the EU and founded and led by the Latvian pro-Russian MEP Tat'iana Zhdanok.

¹⁴ As Jan Blommaert explains, 'Identity discourses and practices can be described as discursive orientations towards sets of features that are seen (or can be seen) as emblematic of particular identities. These features can be manifold and include artifacts, styles, forms of language, places, times, forms of art or aesthetics, ideas, and so forth' (2013: 616).

¹⁵ According to the nationalist and statist writer and philosopher Alexander Prokhanov, it was Vladimir Putin who plucked the term 'Russian civilization' from the narrow usage of the small circle of conservative patriotic thinkers and introduced it into the vernacular (Prokhanov 2014).

¹⁶ Russian official organizations tend to respond to criticisms of Russia's international behaviour, levelled by Western states, by claiming that its cause is the anti-Russian sentiment of those states, dubbed 'Russophobia'.

(1)

Anna: In my childhood, I used to give presents to the boys I fancied on the 23 February, and I had the most pleasant memory, and on the 8 March [International Women's Day], they would give me presents in return... and we danced so well then.

(2)

Anna: I will show you a card we made for our men here for the 23 February, very amusing. One of them, F., was born here so he does not quite understand what 23 February means (laughs).

Moderator (laughs).

A: But in any case, he was amused, they got poems from the women and attention

M: umm

A: and a nice little card [otkrytochku], why not? Who said that's bad?

M: Sure, but you might do that on 14 February instead

A: Well no, 14 February [is very personal],

M: [Valentine]¹⁷

A: it is very personal, it is different¹⁸ [drugoe], it is. Yes, it is different [...] This is what each of them will give to themselves, within a couple,

M: mm

A: and here they put it around on the desks for everyone [...] and here one could... one could go a bit wild [razguliat'sia].

Showing allegiance to Soviet practices as they are transplanted to and naturalized in her school ('and a nice little card – why not?'), Anna discursively produces firm national boundaries and categorizes the British as an out-group, indexing this in a number of ways: qualifying British Valentine's Day practices as 'drugoe' (different, or other), emphasizing this word with her tone and through its repetition. In contrast, she describes the Soviet/Russian Army Day celebration using the verb 'razguliat'sia' which is given positive, folksy and poetic connotations.

¹⁷ In the transcription of the conversation, the square brackets indicate simultaneous utterances.

¹⁸ The underlined words are spoken with an additional emphasis.

The negative stance towards the host society may be detected in other parts of Anna's narrative where she uses the generalizing negative depictions of the British, saying they are hostile to Russian speakers, and associates the public mood in the UK with 'Russophobic sentiments' [rusofobskie nastroyeniia].

In addition, Anna assumes a negative stance towards bilingualism and biculturalism as she explains the motivations for Russophone children to join her school community. She discusses the imperfect Russian language skills of Russophone children from the Baltic states in terms of trauma and psychological suffering. Anna explains that integration into a different society threatens children with a loss of their language and cultural identity, something that, in her evaluation, leads ultimately to a mental health condition, which only speaking Russian can heal. In (3) she talks about her school as a 'psychological centre' [psikhologicheskii tsentr] safeguarding children from a mental institution and in (4), of a summer camp she organizes as 'psychologically important' therapy. She self-identifies as a saviour of such children by providing them with an experience of a community united by what she construes as an innate, instinctively felt Russophone temperament and 'cultural code':

(3)

Anna: So we prevent so many children from... ahh... will say crudely, from the lunatic asylum probably.

(4)

Anna: Being in such a camp... is very therapeutic for them... important, very psychologically important... because suddenly they can socialize at the level of their temperament, their cultural code regardless of being from different countries, they understand with their guts what unites them.

Anna's narrative identifies her own self and imagines a version of a Russophone community which she links to the Russian cultural practices of celebrations, popular song festivals, schooling and camping that she fosters. As she speaks and selects her repertoire of meanings she constructs a diasporic imaginary which valorizes the Soviet past and transmits many contemporary meanings that dominate the official Russian discourse. The activities she endorses (the Army Day celebrations, the activities of the compatriot network) and her discursive performance display a high level of allegiance to the Russia-promoted Russkii Mir doctrine. At the same time, she complained on several occasions, that despite embracing the

sootechnestvenniki movement and values, she felt abandoned by the Russian authorities and that the little funding she used to receive in support of her cultural enterprise had, with time, dwindled. In terms of her stance towards the host land, she depicts a chasm between ‘Russianness’ and ‘British life’ as she imagines these, seeing a flaw in cultural hybridization and integration.

However, Anna further demonstrates more complexity, admitting to her own hybrid identity. When asked whether she has any British side to her, she changes her discursive strategy and repositions herself as a Brit – a fluent English speaker, an admirer of English culture and a provider of jobs in London. She marks this side of her identity by unexpectedly switching from Russian to English for the chunky length of 300 words.

(5)

M: Well, you have lived here so long... don't you feel at least a little bit English or British? [a vot vse-taki, vy tak dolgo zdes' zhivete, vy ne chuvstvuete sebia niskol'ko anglichankoi, ili britankoi?]

Anna: (in Russian) Well, you know, I very much... [a vy znaete, ia ochen'] (in English) I can speak English quite well, this is umm, my favourite country in the world

M: umm

A: and I studied British culture very well and British history umm... I adore this country absolutely... and when I came to this country, well, I did have an illusion that I would be, absolutely English.

In other parts of her conversation, Anna does not mix her Russian and English and this code-switching episode indicates that in her linguistic repertoire, English seems to be treated as a rigidly different, insular code suitable specifically to perform her ‘Englishness’. However, even while expressing her adoration for England and its culture, Anna talks about the impossibility of being English when you have a Russian heritage, and frames her love for England as a youthful, romantic illusion. Overall, Anna’s narrative demonstrates that ‘Britishness’ and ‘Russianness’ sit uneasily in her imagination, living a conflictual, fractured coexistence. Like many Russian speakers, she equates Englishness and Britishness, but the idealized image of the country she lives in is probably a reflection of Soviet-era idealizations of a nineteenth-century genteel monocultural England. This image is at odds with today’s complex, multicultural Britain, which she has to reckon with, not only as a lover of quintessential English culture but also as a member

of the migrant minorities. Consequently, she construes superdiverse London communities as a racially compartmentalized, competitive terrain of zero-sum games, characterized by discriminatory attitudes towards Russians.

(6)

Anna: Unfortunately, from the British authorities, apart from our football club, some trifles towards our football club, we could never get any funding, ever. That is to say, hmm, to help the black community, yes, that's fine, then there is a strong Jewish diaspora in ... our area, they receive good financing, but in my experience, Russian-speaking organizations struggle very much.

Boris

My second respondent, Boris (late twenties), is an executive responsible for organizing a high-profile Russian film event in London. Like Anna, Boris never lived in Russia: he was born and spent his early childhood in Sweden and then went to an elite private school and university in the UK. He is fluent in three languages – Swedish, his first language, English, and Russian, his mother tongue, i.e. the language that his parents used with him at home. Although Boris has a day job as a business investor, he explains his commitment to Russian cultural activism drawing on his Russian identity, which he refers to his ethnicity ('I am Russian by blood', he says) and to his parents' cultural heritage, citing, for instance, his father as a collector of Russian art, including film posters. Boris's narrative positions him close to some of Russia's official organizations – he speaks about how he had collaborated with the European Russian Alliance as a member of its Youth wing and how, as a student, he organized the Russian Economic Weeks at his university, which featured among the guests President Medvedev and Foreign Minister Lavrov. He discursively marks his allegiance to the Russian officials by telling a story of his selection to run the programme of Russian film events, focusing on the details of the names, titles and positions of high-powered Russians and using their words for his positive self-categorization as a 'quality person':

(7)

Boris: When last year there was the literature and language cross-cultural year in England... and in Russia, was the year of film. I was approached, to be more precise, the Ambassador of the Russian Federation was approached by Mikhail Shvydkoi who is ah, in culture, the adviser to the president and also works in the Foreign Ministry,

Moderator: Uh-huh

B.: and he approached the Ambassador, said if there are people who can, quality people...so to speak, who could organize a film event,

M.: uh-huh

B: uh-huh. The Ambassador approached me and said would you like... you have organized plenty of things... would you like to take on cinema... And at that moment, I was fully immersed in my business... and I thought this is an interesting challenge.

These discursive tools indicate Boris's positive stance regarding official Russian soft power initiatives and operations, the components of the *Russkii Mir* doctrine. His stance is also manifested in the details he brings in. For example, he mentions that he endorsed the Golden Unicorn as the prize to be awarded at the film event that he was responsible for, and he justifies this with the argument that a unicorn is a symbol connecting Russia and Britain. He explains that while featuring in the British crown arms, a unicorn can also be found in one of Ivan the Terrible's state seals. References to Ivan the Terrible have become popular in currently dominant Russian political discourse, which aims to rehabilitate the tyrant for contemporary political expediency. Boris here seems quite eager to facilitate the transmission of this particular flow of cultural and political semantics.

In his narrative, Boris identifies himself as a globally aware, well connected, urbane and cosmopolitan Russian who, being British educated, is well integrated into British life. At some point, he says that as a product of three cultures, he 'has no identity'. But then his discourse shows that while he feels no allegiance to Sweden, he combines an emotional attachment to his imagined homeland – Russia, the place he has only visited and never lived in – with claiming that, over time, Britain has become his home. In general, Boris's orientations are, in equal measure, to Russia, the UK, and to the wide cosmopolitan world: 'I like London, I like Los Angeles, perhaps New York... or Moscow, I would be glad to [live in] Moscow. In principle, I do not mind where to live as long as there are opportunities and work. Currently, these are in London'. In addition, his complex, or at least, double belonging is indexed by his performance of connectedness at the top level of the British and Russian states, which may be seen in his strategy of name dropping in reference to both Russian and British elites – the Ambassador, Mikhail Shvydkoi, but also Prince Michael and the art auctioneer William MacDougal. Yet another strategy that Boris chooses for his discursive performance of a hybrid self is his smooth use of Russian-English code mixing. In conversations of bi- and multi-linguals, both code-

switching and code mixing strategies are usually indicative of group belonging (Auer 1998). But while in Anna's conversation, the two distinct codes are presented as two different universes tearing the speaker's self apart, throughout Boris's talk, his flawless English phrases slip intrasententially into his sophisticated Russian, arriving at a blended complexity of his linguistic repertoire.¹⁹ For example, 'interesnyi [interesting] challenge', 'u menia bol'shaia industry programma' [I have a large industry programme], 'my ne znaem local publiku' [we do not know the local public], 'nachali [began] with a big bang', and 'my obrashchaemsia [we approach] proactively'. The deployment of these units indexes a choice of a semiotic system affected by a transnational condition and cosmopolitan lifestyle, and enables Boris to play an 'authentic', 'hyphenated', unconflicted identity. Perhaps because of this, in many contexts, Boris departs from the Russkii Mir discursive script – rather than referring to 'compatriots', he is more comfortable with the more neutral term 'diaspora', and, contrary to the Russian traditional premise of the collective, he construes the Russophone community as organized around himself, as in the following exchange.

(8)

Moderator: Do you feel yourself part of the Russian diaspora?

Boris: Of course, what would I do without it? [Konechno, kak zhe bez nee?]

M: And what makes you part of the diaspora?

B: Well, I have done a lot for it... Well, I don't know, about thirty thousand attended my events.

When speaking outside the context of the events he organized, Boris is critical about the UK Russophone community, applying distancing strategies in his reference to its members. The diaspora emerges from his discourse as a separate entity from himself and is emphatically negatively characterized: 'The Russian diaspora is very disorganized, very chaotic and very passive', he says. He therefore sees his mission in organizing and educating the diaspora. However, unlike Anna, he does not target his activities solely at the Russophones. The Russian film event that he organises has elements of a traditional British red-carpet event, which involves members of the British Cinema establishment and British audiences and in this way is transcultural and hybrid, reaching out to both constituencies.

¹⁹ Jan Blommaert (2013) argues that in the context of mobility, complexity is a more accurate frame for describing language and identity work, in contrast to codes as ontologically intact linguistic units.

Boris's narrative clearly displays a hybrid diasporic identity and presents an example of a 'prosthetic' (Appadurai 1996: 96) homeland allegiance as he shows a high level of orientation to the Russia of his imagination, where he has never lived and whose language is not his first language. Being global and British does not prevent him, though, from internalizing and promoting aspects of the *Russkii Mir* imaginary, as facilitated by the Russian state.

Aleksandr

My third respondent is Aleksandr, a man in his forties, a former Muscovite and an employee of a London-based political organization which actively opposes the current Russian authorities. Aleksandr is involved in organizing hundreds of events as part of this organization's campaign programme: lectures by political and cultural figures, film screenings, and debates which are attended by thousands of Russian-speaking Londoners. While living in Russia Aleksandr used to work for the figure who acts as this organization's principal sponsor and he then emigrated with him to Britain in 2013 in a move that he describes as 'a flight, an evacuation', emphasizing the dramatic emergency of his departure. Aleksandr positions himself in his narrative as an exile, a refugee, and he defines his migration as a 'very non-standard story', thereby separating himself from the wider migrant community. He says he did not choose the UK as his host country and is not going to return to his homeland until radical changes at the top of Russian power have occurred. His association with Britain appears to be distant – while he accepts, with some hesitancy, that his home is now in Britain, he uses the 'they' pronoun when referring to the host society (see 9) and admits that his English is not fluent and that he speaks it infrequently. He positions himself, through the story of his travels, as someone whose identity is global rather than British. His discourse displays a salient orientation to his homeland and is characterized by the semantics of lack and non-existence. His story re-scales Russia – his vision of homeland zooms into the local area of Moscow and the house where he spent his childhood, which is now reconstructed to an unrecognizable state. 'Personally, I have no nostalgia at all. What does it mean? Perhaps, I do have some warm memories of the place where I was born and grew up. It was in the centre of Moscow. It does not exist anymore. Simply. It is no more.', he says, stressing the sense of absence with his shortened incomplete sentences as he proceeds. A stark contrast to Anna's memories lamenting the loss of the Soviet era, Aleksandr's memories of Russia focus on the intimate as he switches register from business-like to poetic and contradicts his earlier statement by displaying a nostalgic stance: 'that house with a quiet courtyard... and a quiet, wonderful garden full of maple leaves'.

Given the sheer volume of practices and activities that Aleksandr's organization engages in in London, it has considerable potential to promote its philosophy of liberal, democratic and ethical values among the diaspora, and try to mobilize and shape the UK Russophone community around them. And yet, Aleksandr's discourse produces little by way of imagining a diasporic community and refuses to see British Russophones as a group he can define and relate to. While both Anna and Boris negotiated the term for the Russophone community they constructed, Anna preferring 'compatriots' and Boris 'diaspora', Aleksandr is uneasy about what label to use. This is evidenced in his hedging in (9), which stand for his torturous hesitancy and, ultimately, his inability to find a term, or a description, to define the people who attend his events. As in his narrative about his homeland, Aleksandr ends up conceding he is attempting to define a void.

(9)

Aleksandr: Well, I have a lot... of contacts and links

Moderator: Mm

A.: well... with Russians... loosely speaking [uslovno], Russians

M.: uh well, Russians, yeah, we always say, loosely speaking,

A.: well, yes, let's say.

M.: it's very difficult with Russian-speakers... compatriots... diaspora too.

A.: None of these describe this category fully enough and... from all angles.

M.: And is there any word that describes them?

A.: Mm. I don't think so...I actually have no single word that in any way fully... would describe those people who could here be provisionally called Russians.

M.: Uh-uh.

A.: Well, not talking about whom the British call 'Russians'... Look at their 'Meet the Russians' series

M.: Yes, yes, yes (laughs).

A: (laughs) where to be honest if you look... there are no Russians... at all.

This excerpt manifestly demonstrates that Aleksandr deploys the discursive strategies of community dismantling as opposed to the strategies of community construction (Wodak et al.

2009) that may otherwise have been expected from a cultural leader. Furthermore, in another part of his discourse, he linguistically devalues the members of the Russophone community saying that the audience attending his organization's events in London has for it 'the least importance' [imeet piatoe znachenie] and is not something they are interested in.

We can, therefore, observe that the diasporic triad emerging from Aleksandr's talk is missing a community-building core. The political activity of his organization, he claims, is fully directed at the homeland and although it stages events in London, their real aim is to effect change in Russia. And British Russophones, he maintains, have little to do with that. The imaginary that Aleksandr's discourse presents is a form of political transnationalism, or 'homeland politics' (Vertovec 2009: 93). It involves mobilization for consciousness-raising and a long-term preparation for transformation in Russia, but unlike the textbook political mobilization in exile, it is the one that downplays the role of diaspora engagement in such mobilization.

Conclusion

The three narratives of UK-based Russophone cultural leaders and entrepreneurs presented in this chapter show that the patterns of self and community construction among them are varied as all three respondents diverge in the meanings and values they ascribe to their transnational selves and cultural activism, to the host country, homeland and diasporic community they imagine. In other words, these grassroots agents discursively negotiate what transnational Russophone identity and the community is, producing stances, idioms, and claims of belonging. While constructing their images of self and community, the speakers engage in a dialogue not only with other community facilitating actors like themselves but also with the Russian state's *Russkii Mir* doctrine.

Anna's version of Russophone transnational self has a prominent element oriented to her imagined homeland constructed from her Soviet memories, which seems to sit uneasily with the partially integrated 'British' element in her, nevertheless, hybrid identity. Her allegiance to the deceased Soviet Union experienced from its non-Russian peripheries conflicts with her Russia-oriented narrative and further complicates her identity imagination. She embraces the *Russkii Mir* discourse and the practices it promotes, and naturalizes them in the school and camp communities she oversees, but also produces a resentful litany when, despite her expressed loyalty, resources from Russia are not forthcoming for her cultural undertakings. Thus, the transnational identity Anna imagines is complex and fractured, as manifested, among other

things, in her use of discursive strategies of boundary construction, code switching and metaphors of psychological trauma.

Boris displays an identity narrative which may be described as ‘happy hybridity’ (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010). It is aligned with the semantics produced by the Russian elites and at the same time is well integrated into the British middle class, his language indexing his belonging to both. He constructs the Russian side of his identity through loyalty to his imagined, prosthetic homeland and is amenable to the soft power semiotics of the *Russkii Mir* doctrine, which blends effortlessly with his cosmopolitan, global self. The Russophone community he imagines is generally deficient and he sees his role in improving it through cultural education and events organization. However, his cultural work does more than Russophone community-building – the Russian film events he organizes are well integrated into the contemporary British cultural scene and serve as a contact zone in London’s superdiverse urban cosmopolitan environment. Boris’s example thus illustrates how the ‘Russianness’ promoted by Russian-speaking cultural entrepreneurs may not only build a Russophone community of a specific kind but also affect, blend with, and potentially reconfigure segments of wider British society.

Aleksandr portrays himself as a political exile of a new type – well-travelled, non-nostalgic and cosmopolitan – but also reveals a detached stance towards his host country. His cultural and political activism aims to achieve changes in his homeland, yet which, in its current state, he describes in terms of ‘non-existence’. Being in disagreement with the current Russian regime, he, as would be expected, sees no relevance in the narrative of *Russkii Mir* and compatriots. At the same time, he creates no diasporic imagination to counter that: he acknowledges no diasporic community that could be mobilized, struggling to define the attendees of the events he organizes.

On account of the endless time and energy that these three cultural leaders invest in promoting Russian language and culture through their respective projects, they would all, no doubt, qualify for a Russian compatriot status as per Russia’s Compatriots Law. In terms of responding to the mobilizing influence exerted by the Russian official compatriot narratives, the three interviews may be placed on a scale from following those narratives closely, in the case of Anna, to their full rejection, in the case of Aleksandr, with Boris’ discourse standing somewhere in the middle. However, while Anna’s discourse seems to be overdetermined by the *Russkii Mir* doctrine and heavily layered with Russian official semiotics, on closer examination, even her narrative exposes her independent agency in taking stances that appear to counter that doctrine (for example, taking issue with Russian compatriot organizations, or presenting herself as a job provider for Britain). Rather than falling unequivocally into the Russia-determined mould of

compatriots, the three narratives, projected by those who position themselves and act (in different ways) as cultural leaders, demonstrate considerable variety, complexity and unfixedness of Russophone identities in the diaspora, revealing a whole set of internal conflicts, while at the same time opening up spaces for further grassroots identity imagination.

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