

NEW PLACES OF INTELLECTUAL AND CULTURAL LIFE IN RUSSIA

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Editorial board: Dr. Isabelle de Keghel, Hartmute Trepper M.A.

Technical editor: Matthias Neumann

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Forschungsstelle Osteuropa | Publikationsreferat | Klagenfurter Str. 3 | 28359 Bremen

tel. +49 421 218-3302 or -3257 | fax +49 421 218-3269

mailto: fsopr@uni-bremen.de | Internet: www.forschungsstelle-osteuropa.de

THE *kultura* PROJECT

editorials

PROF WOLFGANG EICHWEDE (PUBLISHER)

Russia's culture has seldom been so little known as today, the country has rarely been so little associated with the names of writers and artists. In Soviet times, culture was often enough perceived as a counterbalance to politics, as a fascinating Other. Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn were present in our media; *Doctor Zhivago* was a best-seller. Today, our image of Russia is marked by political stagings, pipelines and oligarchs. Russia is no longer free-falling, but its stabilization has authoritarian features.

Politics and economics define the country's public perception abroad. *kultura* aims to correct this. On the one hand, it looks at everyday cultural life to show how Russia's self-image is produced. On the other hand, it seeks to reveal alternatives and turn the reader's gaze towards the unexpected. *kultura*'s strives to make culture as important in our image of Russia as it used to be. Our Eastern neighbour is a great continent, which constantly needs to be rediscovered in all its self-will and winding paths.

ISABELLE DE KEGHEL, HARTMUTE TREPPER
(EDITORS)

kultura reports on cultural trends and public discourse in Russia, the development of individual cultural *genres* and media, and a cultural scene finding its way between state control and autonomy. 'Culture' is understood widely: the area covered ranges from the high-brow to the everyday.

The choice of topics corresponds to a series of crucial issues which will run through the individual issues of *kultura*: new spaces of intellectual and cultural life, new institutions and forms of publicity, changing norms, values and symbols, models of living.

What are the most vibrating spaces of intellectual life in Russia today? Where do ideas and opinions clash? Where can like-minded people meet? This first issue of *kultura* offers two replies. Our authors interpret Moscow's intellectual clubs as something like a public version of Moscow's legendary Soviet-era kitchens, which acted as spaces of uncensored debate on topics banned from public space. A club atmosphere was also characteristic of the early Russian Internet. Today this medium has the potential to restore the cultural links between distant corners of Russia that had nearly been severed by the breakdown of the centralized system of cultural organizations and media. The current far-reaching freedom from state control makes the Internet a popular medium for political and ideological debate.

FREQUENCY OF PUBLICATION AND DISTRIBUTION

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Every issue will typically feature two analytical articles and two shorter pieces on related topics.

Translated from German by *Mischa Gabowitsch*

HEIRS TO THE UNDERGROUND, OR WHAT KEEPS RUSSIAN CULTURE GOING
EYE-WITNESS NOTES

Irina Prokhorova

analysis

Cultural life in Russia has traditionally been shaped by individuals and informal structures. The specific cultural landscape of the 1990s was rooted in the late Soviet cultural underground. Newly founded institutions ranged from NGOs to publishing houses, bookshops and web sites. Since 1998, restorationist tendencies have resulted in setbacks in cultural life. Multi-media cultural institutions, lifestyle magazines and clubs are pointing the way to the future.

Back in the early 1990s, a German colleague from the Goethe Institute who was trying to establish cultural contacts in Moscow once exclaimed in a fit of anger: 'It's impossible to work in Russia – so many brilliant personalities, but no institutions at all!' Unsuspectingly he got very close to understanding what's special about social life in Russia. What is peculiar about Russia is not, however, the absence of institutions as such, but rather a fatal discrepancy between those institutions and the functions they were created to fulfil. Russian bureaucratic structures' would-be similarity to their West European counterparts is misleading not only to foreigners but also to Russians.

THE TRADITION OF INFORMAL STRUCTURES IN
RUSSIAN CULTURAL LIFE

The most important result of this social deformation, however, has been a spontaneous evolution of informal, parallel infrastructures of social life in Russia, which usually remain in the shadow of public attention and are therefore difficult to access for outsiders.

One of the best-known examples of this strange cultural duality is Russian literature as a social institution. For a long time it took on an extended range of political and social functions, often to the detriment of its aesthetic tasks properly speaking. Another example is the emergence and 30 years' existence (from the late 1950s to the late 1980s) of the Russian underground, or post-war Russian avant-garde. This unique phenomenon is usually approached from the point of view of ideological opposition to Soviet totalitarianism, above all dissidence and *samizdat*. Unfortunately the

underground is barely ever studied as an alternative social universe with its own creative associations and circles, its own authorities and aesthetic criteria, its own press, an efficient distribution system for its political and artistic production, its own literary prize, a social life with its own peculiar rituals, its own foreign contacts. This is all the more regrettable since many characteristic features of intellectual and artistic life in contemporary Russia are rooted in the traditions of the underground.

HEIRS TO THE UNDERGROUND

Interestingly, the spheres of cultural life that emerged and progressed most quickly in the late 1980s were those that had been developed by the underground and had therefore attracted the main intellectual and human resources. Above all these were human rights and other social organizations, which blossomed in the early 1990s, the best-known among them being *Memorial*, which devotes itself to the study of political repression in the Soviet Union.

Another case in point is the flowering of new intellectual periodicals and cultural book publishing. The market for intellectual literature developed literally out of thin air, in a situation of total economic breakdown and state weakness. Several dozen new independent publishing houses specializing in the humanities and quality fiction created powerful intellectual brands and radically restructured Russia's cultural landscape. Thus, for example, the New Literary Review publishing house became a rallying point for the leading experts in Slavic studies; the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*

analysis

(Independent Newspaper) publishing house has won a good name for itself in the field of essays on cultural issues; *Tekst* specializes in foreign fiction; *Aletheia* has monopolized the market for Classics; *Slovo* (The Word) publishes art books; *Ad Marginem* has flooded the country with French post-modernist philosophers, etc.

At the same time as this flourishing of publishing houses, so-called intellectual bookshops have appeared, where one can browse through and buy all the best journals and books published in the new Russia. This trend was started by the poet and translator Mark Freydkin, who, in the autumn of 1992, founded a small bookshop called *19 oktyabrya* in a little wooden building in central Moscow¹. Interestingly, this metaphor for a narrow circle of friends, so characteristic of the ethics of the underground, also defined the intellectual community's style of behaviour and professional activity in the 1990s and in many ways remains valid to this day.

The new informal professional fraternity was soon enriched by numerous private art galleries, followed by poetry clubs, then by an Internet boom, which spawned a plethora of virtual projects. In the early 1990s the most significant among these were undoubtedly Maxim Moshkov's library and the *Vavilon* poetry site created by the young poet Dmitry Kuzmin.

CULTURE IN THE 1990S: NEW IMPULSES

Of course, these institutionally fragile initiatives could hardly have withstood the economic cataclysms that regularly shook Russian society throughout the 1990s if not for more powerful social institutions which constantly emerged around them, providing them with support and ensuring their survival.

Firstly, in the early 1990s an independent mass media, in which many intellectuals from the underground milieu found employment, rapidly

evolved. Private initiatives, which up to that point had been kept going by their creators' sheer enthusiasm, obtained a high social status and renown. Secondly, foreign foundations established branches in Russia and supported the development of a new cultural establishment. Most important among them was the Soros Foundation, a benefactor to the entire intellectual community.

The 1990s saw a silent revolution in secondary education: numerous lyceums, high schools and specialized schools appeared in the big cities, offering a high level of education, a wider range of curricula, experimental teaching methods etc. There were salutary changes in higher education: non-state universities emerged, as well as unique private institutions such as the Moscow School of Political Studies founded by the philosopher Elena Nemirovskaya, the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences created by the British sociologist Teodor Shanin, and the European University of Saint-Petersburg.

There was some progress in the state university system, illustrated by the appearance of the Higher School of Economics and the Russian State University for the Humanities (RGGU). A revolutionary wave of change swept reformers and modernizers into state bureaucratic structures, and by the end of the 1990s there was hope that these different streams of creativity would merge into a new and effective system of culture and cultural reproduction.

SETBACKS

However, these hopes were doomed to failure. The economic crisis of 1998, which provoked a change of political priorities and power elites, set off mechanisms of partial re-Sovietization. The process of ideological restoration manifested itself above all in a consistent offensive against the socio-cultural institutions that had emerged in the previous period and in an attempt once more

¹ 19 October was the traditional meeting-day for alumni of the Lyceum of Tsarskoe Selo, among them Alexander Pushkin, who dedicated a number of poems to the fellowship of the Lyceum.

analysis

to concentrate all means of influencing public opinion in the hands of the state.

A number of deplorable processes have put free-thinking intellectuals in dire straits. NTV, a TV channel that had been critical of the government, was smashed, and television virtually re-nationalized; pressure has mounted upon the political press, and as a result public debate has faded away and leading journalists have left the major papers and magazines; the Soros Foundation was closed, and Khodorkovsky's empire devastated; control over school textbooks is increasing; the state of libraries and archives has severely deteriorated; access to information has been restricted; the well-known sociologist Yury Levada was driven out of the All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion which he founded in the late 1980s; publishers are facing an ever-increasing tax burden; and the modernization of state educational institutions has failed. A revealing case in point is the fate of the RGGU, where the victory of the old Soviet academic establishment has put an end to attempts at incorporating new faculties and teaching principles into the old system.

THE EMERGENCE OF A PARALLEL CULTURAL UNIVERSE

In order to survive it was necessary to restructure the whole system of cultural initiatives. The intellectual community has succeeded in doing so in a rather intriguing way.

Above all, the late 1990s saw a second blossoming of the Internet. The touching self-made web sites of the heroic pioneering age of electronic mass media gave way to serious web-based social and cultural magazines (*Polit.ru*, *Rusky zhurnal*, *Grani.ru*, *Gazeta.ru* etc) which have since become the main forum for heated political debate and full-fledged literary disputes.

At the same time existing cultural institutions have transformed into self-sufficient multi-media

intellectual corporations. For example, the independent trade fair company *Ekspo-park*, which began as an organizer of antiques fairs (the Russian Antiquarian Salon), currently conducts 14 specialized annual fairs, including an architecture and design fair (*Arkh-Moskva*), an exhibition of contemporary art (*Art-Moskva*), a product design and advertising fair etc. In 1998, *Ekspo-park* initiated an annual book fair called *Non/Fiction* as an alternative to the Moscow International Book Fair, attracting all publishing houses specializing in high-quality fiction and non-fiction. The drama festival *Zolotaya maska* (Golden Mask), which emerged in 1994, has turned into a powerful institution which organizes tours across Russia, master classes, workshops, drama exhibitions and press conferences, has instituted a drama prize with a range of categories, and has launched a publishing programme of its own.

The first independent philological journal, the *New Literary Review* (NLO), created in 1992, has grown into a publishing house specializing in the humanities and instituted two international scholarly conferences. In 1998, NLO began publishing another journal, called *Neprikosnovenny Zapas: Debaty o politike i kulture* (NZ: Debates on Politics and Culture), which, for the past three years, has also come out in a TV version called *NZ na TV* (NZ on TV). The numerous cultural, artistic and social actions carried out by NLO practically turn the publishing house into a free university.

The Saint-Petersburg-based *Pro Arte* cultural and artistic institute created in order to study 20th-century art and supported by foreign cultural foundations and the Museum of the History of Saint-Petersburg, organizes an enormous variety of cultural activities: a training programme for journalists writing on culture, courses for young artists, lectures on contemporary architecture, a contest for musicians and composers of contem-

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porary music (the *Pythian Games*), an annual festival called *Contemporary Art in Traditional Museums*, an art book publishing programme etc.

CULTURE AND LIFESTYLE

Simultaneously there has been an unprecedented bloom of 'glamour' journalism as well as a leisure and entertainment industry. Strange as it may seem, these phenomena are closely related to the restructuring of Russia's cultural landscape. Many professional journalists who were forced to leave the dying social and political press have established themselves in glossy magazines, which led to a sharp rise in the quality of these publications. Suffice it to compare the Russian versions of *Vogue*, *Men's Health*, *Madame Figaro*, *Esquire* etc with their Western models: in the Russian editions, the culture pages are much more substantial, in both a qualitative and quantitative sense, and they publish splendid book reviews and remarkable articles on culture.

One gets the impression that faced with the current stagnation of social and political thought and the lack of a clear state ideology, against one's expectations, it is not literature, but rather these glossy magazines which have taken on the additional social function of propagating a modern lifestyle. Curiously enough, a comparison of the topics dealt with in fashion magazines with leading trends in academic research in the humanities reveals that both are covering the same ground, studying as they do fashion, food, drink, everyday objects, sports, urban habitats, and the luxury and entertainment industry as cultural phenomena and crucial levers of civilizing processes.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, events of intellectual life (book presentations, conferences, award ceremonies, round table discussions, artistic actions etc) are increasingly shifting to venues such as stages, cinemas, cafés, and night clubs. Free-thinkers' bent for informal, Bohemian surround-

ings can easily be explained from the point of view of cultural tradition – this is the atmosphere in which the Russian artistic underground lived and created, and what's more, the daily grind of Soviet life was the inspiration and subject-matter of their work.

MOSCOW'S CLUB SCENE

Special mention must be made of the restaurant boom of the 1990s, when a mesh of cafés, snack-bars, bistros, inexpensive restaurants, beer-houses, teahouses, coffee houses and clubs spread across the big cities virtually over night. Significantly, several cafés and clubs were specifically created as new spaces for intellectual activities. Many entertainment establishments therefore have their own elaborate cultural programmes sent out to their *habitués* and other art lovers by e-mail.

The so-called OGI Project (*Proekt OGI*) is a particularly important example and therefore deserves special attention. At the end of the 1990s three young intellectuals – Dmitry Itskovich, Dmitry Borisov and Alexander Kabanov – created a unique cultural space by blending a publishing house, a social and political forum and a round-the-clock café and bookshop. This peculiar synthetic entity turned out to be incredibly successful and popular; it became the main focus of Moscow's young cultural life and spawned numerous imitations and clones. It was essentially a new model of contemporary urban culture, providing for an intersection of different kinds of intellectual creativity and the peaceful co-existence of different aesthetic currents.

The most interesting aspect of this project is that its authors reproduced and publicized classical principles of underground artistic life. In the spirit of Ilya Kabakov they created a total installation of the famous Moscow and Saint-Petersburg kitchens, where circles of friends and a never-

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ending stream of guests would hold night-long debates about political and artistic issues, read poetry and forbidden prose, and proudly demonstrate fresh masterpieces, crying out ‘You’re a genius, old chap!’ Today the OGI clubs draw a motley crowd, including veterans of the post-war avant-garde as well as their grown-up children. In other words, in the 2000s, Russian culture has responded to attempts at restoring a ‘power vertical’ by reviving the institutional tradition of the underground and in fact creating an alternative infrastructural universe. While officially sponsored journalists are frantically looking for a national idea and the bewildered bureaucracy bus-

ies itself with spirituality and visions of a strong state, intellectuals are persevering in their efforts to modernize the Russian mind on the basis of a new culture of everyday life and in a struggle for a new lifestyle.

Translated from Russian by *Mischa Gabowitsch*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Irina Prokhorova is editor-in-chief of the *New Literary Review*, a Moscow-based journal specializing in literary and cultural studies, and directs the publishing house of the same name.

THE NEW ‘MOSCOW KITCHEN’, OR THE OGI SYSTEM

Dmitry Itskovich

sketch

Though the branches of the Moscow-based ‘OGI Project’ of the late 1990s (OGI = United Publishers in the Humanities, *www.ogi.ru*) are referred to as ‘clubs’, they have less to do with elegant British clubs than with a tradition of social and collective action in private forms harking back to the Soviet urban intelligentsia’s famous kitchen gatherings of the 1970s. But how can an establishment which makes 70% of its profits by serving fine food and drink still see itself mainly as a place of active civic involvement and practical tolerance?

The OGI clubs and their offshoots offer different things to different people. Thus, for example, the *Bilingua* in Moscow has a bookshop with a café, a restaurant and bar, a performance room with a stage, and a boutique that stocks trendy outfits, accessories and gifts. The club seats 220, though 400 people can squeeze in for popular events. It is open around the clock and attracts between 400 and 1000 patrons per day.

There are 40 or more cultural events per month, and many of them take place on a regular basis. The most popular among them are the public lec-

tures organized by the online newspaper *Polit.ru*, a kind of free ‘show’ with well-known and respected speakers (politicians, experts, representatives of different social groups etc). They publicly expound their position in 40 minute lectures followed by 60-90 minute aggressively moderated debates. The concept behind these debates is that the speakers act not as professionals or experts, but simply as citizens. The lecturers, organizers, listeners and readers of *Polit.ru* jointly look for civil society-based approaches to the problems they discuss, and thus work their way forward towards a more complex understanding of reality. In the intellectual climate that currently reigns in Russia, this is no banal matter, which is why the discussions are an important element of the concept behind the lectures. The public debates take place every Thursday at 7pm, between leisure and business, between work and free time.

At least twice a week there are book presentations, either in the evening in a format that is similar to the public lectures, or during the day as more business-like press conferences. Some-

sketch

times third parties use these events to promote their products, e.g. by offering a certain type of drink, and contribute to the costs.

Occasionally the *Caucasus Forum* organizes round-table discussions about rebuilding Chechnya (www.kavkaz-forum.ru). The audience is invited to take part in the debates, and the same goes for seminars in the humanities or social sciences, which are designed to be both informative and practical.

The club's premises are often used by partner institutions such as the *New Literary Review* which

organizes its yearly conferences at the *Bilingua*. In addition there are up to five fee-paying events per week, usually concerts but also literary evenings or theatre performances. Entrance fees range between 100 and 600 roubles [about 2–12 British pounds / 3.5–21 US-dollars / 3–18 Euro]. Twice a week the audience is treated to free performances by great artists. Once a week there are special morning performances for children.

Translated from German by *Mischa Gabowitsch*

Here is a schedule of events at the *Bilingua* for 1–7 April 2005:

1 April (Friday)

- A concert by the chirpy band *Pakava It* to celebrate April Fools' Day, the feast of laughter.
- Starting in the morning, day 2 of the International *Bath House Readings* organized by the NLO publishing house.
- 8pm: opening of an exhibition of the works of a contemporary artist, organized jointly with the *Zverev Centre for Contemporary Art*.

2 April (Saturday)

- Day 3 of the *Bath House Readings*. The children's matinee (a show with interactive games for children from 3 to 10, featuring modelling and drawing) had to be moved from the stage to the bookshop.
- 9pm: concert by *Jeff i karmany* (*Jeff and the Pockets*), formerly known as *Kradenoe solntse* (*The Stolen Sun*).
- This is followed by a disco, which used to be called *Tantsy v Bilingve* (*Dances at the Bilingua*) and is now described as *Dances with Uncle Fedor* in an Anglicized form: *with dj-dj Fedor* (*dyadya* is Russian for 'uncle').

3 April (Sunday)

- 1pm: Master classes and seminars for the *LearnMusic* project (a programme to develop musical education).
- 4pm: slide show. 4.30pm: cinema for connoisseurs (i.e. patrons of the *Bilingua*) – old but unforgotten films. Entry is free. The public includes married and other couples, singles and large parties. Today's films are Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* and *Anima Mundi*.
- Meanwhile at the bookshop: literature reading by Scandinavian writers, taking place in a noisy and crowded atmosphere quite of its own.
- 10pm: Concert by *Pani Walewska*.

¹ Named after the Banny Pereulok or Bath House Lane, where the journal's editorial office was once situated
– *Translator's note*

sketch

4 April (Monday)

- Brief respite, except for a round table discussion at the bookshop.

5 April (Tuesday)

- 7pm at the bookshop: reading by poet Oleg Chukhontsev
- 10pm: Concert by Viktor Lufarov (free entry). Apart from his guitar, Lufarov uses metal chains and pots as well as construction tools for musical instruments

6 April (Wednesday)

- 10pm: Concert by *Miss is Big* (crazy funk). Once more, entry is free. The singer on stage looks rather picturesque. The crowd nearly pulls down the counter.

7 April (Thursday)

- 7pm: *Polit.ru* public lecture: Mikhail Dmitriev speaks on "Perspectives of Reform in Russia".
- 11pm: The *Cantaloop* art association presents an original programme entitled *The dehumanization of stereotyped thought*. Entry is free.

Translated from Russian by *Mischa Gabowitsch*

FROM CLUB TO MASS MEDIUM? THE RUSSIAN INTERNET AS A PLACE OF
INTELLECTUAL DEBATE AND POLITICAL COMMITMENT

Henrike Schmidt, Georg Butwilowski, Katy Teubener

analysis

Within the space of ten years, the Russian Internet has changed from an informal means of communication used by small circles of intellectuals into a mass medium. Essential stages in its development are linked to the great crises that have shaken Russia. The gap in Internet usage between urban and rural areas, as well as between different educational strata, remains significant. Although the state directly or indirectly sponsors a range of web sites, the Internet remains the least controllable means of communication in Russia, among other factors for technological reasons. The Net is used to express the most radical criticism of the regime's current policies and to discuss taboo topics openly.

MODELS AND METAPHORS

In his *Notes on the History of the Russian Internet*, the journalist Sergey Kuznetsov develops a typology of models to describe the Russian Internet. His list of graphic definitions includes a club, *samizdat*, an archive, a rubbish dump, a market place and a mass medium (for comparison, *Wikipedia* prosaically defines the Internet as a 'worldwide system of independent networks'). This variety of sometimes mutually incompatible interpretive models is typical of the Internet, which, like every 'new' medium in the history of communications technology, has challenged its users' imagination.

A VIRTUAL CLUB

Among the metaphors Kuznetsov enumerates, that of a 'club' is particularly significant and historically relevant. The kind of club he has in mind has nothing to do with exclusive British gentlemen's clubs and their backroom political intrigues; it should rather be understood as a casual gathering of like-minded people who meet to debate, experiment and 'imagine'. Here too there is an element of exclusiveness, however, since technical access is a pre-condition of membership.

The *.ru* domain was registered in the spring of 1994. This date counts as the birthday of RuNet,

analysis

the Russian Internet, although an .su domain had been introduced as early as 1991. The political and economic upheaval of the first half of the 1990s meant that the medium could not possibly be introduced rapidly or on a massive scale. As a result, in its early stages RuNet became an extraterritorial enclave populated by a handful of tech enthusiasts, natural scientists, émigrés and inquisitive creative artists – incidentally, mostly men.

In her article in this issue of *kultura*, Irina Prokhorova stresses the importance of narrow circles of close friends for the ethics of the underground, which continued to shape the cultural scene in the 1990s. The roots of the ‘RuNet club’ model are similar. The pioneers of RuNet are often referred to as a *tusovka*, the Russian equivalent of a club or clique, as if to highlight the zesty and hedonistic character of Net culture. In his memoirs, Kuznetsov recalls the atmosphere of those times: ‘who drank with whom, what drugs the founding fathers did or did not consume, whether it is true that male striptease was one of the most popular pastimes with the top management of RuNet’ are no trifling matters but indeed questions that reflect the spirit of the early days of RuNet, which could also be described as a virtual domain of “sex, drugs & rock’n’roll”.

THE CREATIVITY RESOURCE

For the pioneers of the Web, the discovery of so-called cyberspace was closely linked to an experience of open-mindedness, personal freedom and creative self-realization. This club’s central membership requirement was the ‘creativity resource’: imagination, curiosity, a spirit of exploration. It is no pure chance that the first popular Net projects were of a literary and cultural character, such as the *burima* collective rhyming game (from French *bout rimé*, rhymed ends), the *Tenyota* (Snare) literary contest or the *Anekdot.ru*

joke site. The foundations of the contemporary Russian Internet developed in a ‘disinterested’ aesthetic space with no apparent practical use, borne by a feeling of euphoria about everything new.

The club life of the RuNet pioneers has a specific geographic origin: a flat in central Moscow, in the now-legendary Kalashny Lane, where the literary scholar and editor Dmitry Itskovich gathered a small group of enthusiasts and visionaries. This is where the first Russian Net magazine with a cultural profile, *Zhurnal.ru*, was founded; this is where the first interactive online interviews were conducted, e.g. with cyberpunk writer Viktor Pelevin. Thanks to the Internet’s trans-border functionality, among the most active club members were Russians living in the United States, Israel or Latvia. However, ‘professional’ or established writers or journalists were few and far between. Up until the second half of the 1990s, this amateur culture (positively understood) remained an essential aspect of RuNet. Perhaps its most successful product is the *Lib.ru* library maintained by programmer Maxim Moshkov, which remains popular to this day.

A CRISIS MEDIUM WITH POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Just like many modern means of communication, the Internet is essentially a crisis medium. Its growing significance in Russia has been the result of a series of catastrophes. The first appreciable surge of popularity was due to the financial crisis of 1998, when only online media were able to follow the rouble’s rapid downswing in real time. The Internet became an important source of up-to-date information, especially for the economic elite. The next catastrophe-related surges had to do with international terrorism: they are linked to the sad events of 9/11, *Nord-Ost* and Beslan.

The growing economic and political significance

analysis

of the Internet for Russia did not escape the authorities. In the second half of the 1990s the state began to develop support programmes, but also to implement measures aimed at controlling and tapping the Internet. As yet these have hardly been put to any practical use, which makes them no less ominous in the eyes of the Net public. At the same time, due to increasing authoritarian tendencies in Russian media policies, especially concerning TV, the Internet has grown more important as an independent source of information.

FACTS AND FIGURES – RuNET IN 2005

According to the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), in the spring of 2005 17% of the Russian population had Internet access (for comparison: in Germany, Internet usage is estimated at 55% in Germany). The gap between Moscow – the metropolis – and the other regions is reproduced in virtual space. While 44% of Moscow residents regularly go online, elsewhere the percentage varies between 13% and 23%.

As expected, Russia's online community includes a high proportion of academics and highly educated people. Likewise, Internet users' income is higher than average. The group's age structure is not fundamentally different from that of Western users. 18–24 year olds are the biggest group, followed by 30–40 year olds. Old people are nearly absent from this group. However, there is a high proportion of female users, even compared to West European networks. Hit rates of big search engines such as *Yandex.ru* or *Rambler.ru* provide information about the proportion of Russians outside the country using émigrés among RuNet. According to these statistics, 30–40% live in the near or far abroad; their geographical distribution roughly corresponds to the structure of the Russian-speaking diaspora (USA, Canada, Israel, Germany, the Baltic states).

RuNET AS A MASS MEDIUM?

Thus virtual club life has shed its exclusiveness, even though a broad spread of Internet access across population strata and Russian regions remains a distant perspective. The RuNet is on its way to becoming a mass medium. This change of paradigm can be dated, albeit roughly. In 1999, the 'messenger of Net culture' co-founded by Dmitry Itskovich, *Zhurnal.ru*, ceased working. Among other reasons, this was a result of the Russian Net's professionalization and of its protagonists' personal success. *Zhurnal.ru*, which can still be visited on the WWW as a monument to early Net culture, was reincarnated in a series of extremely successful virtual offshoots. The *Setevaya slovesnost'* (Net Literature) Laboratory for Net Language Art publishes contemporary literature and devotes special attention to media experiments. The 'political information channel' *Polit.ru*, formerly a section of *Zhurnal.ru*, is now an officially registered mass medium and declares that it offers an 'authentic' and 'real informational product' which differs significantly from the 'secondary' and often 'false' state information resources. The site has an interesting overall philosophy: politics are analyzed through the prism of culture, which thereby becomes the measure of things. With an average readership of 30,000, this site is one of the most popular online media. Its board of directors is chaired by the above-mentioned Dmitry Itskovich. However, the site is no longer managed from his private kitchen, the editorial office having moved next door to the *Bilingua* club. Thus the Internet is only part – albeit an important part – of an alternative communicative space.

THE FRYING PAN AND THE FIRE – OLIGARCHS AND THE STATE ON THE INTERNET

New professional Net media that emerged in 1999–2000 continue to set the standards today:

analysis

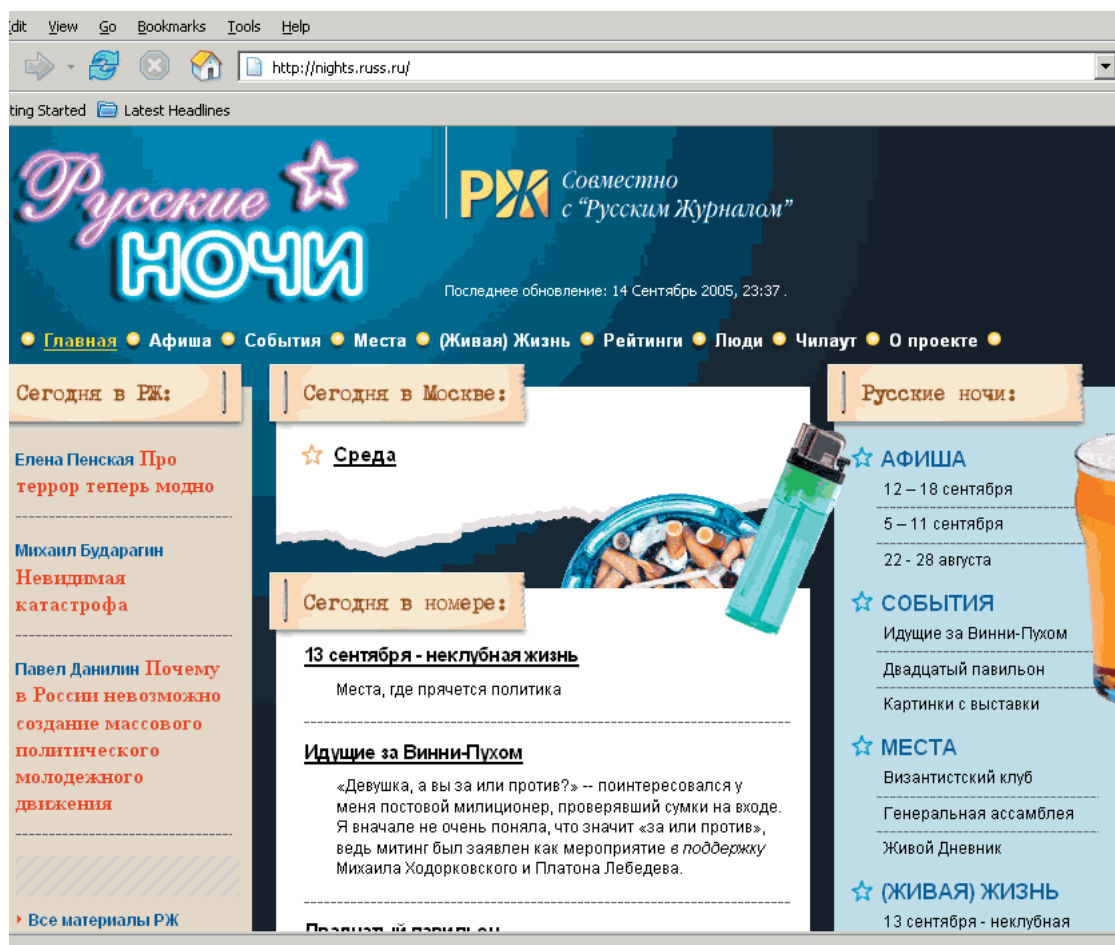
Lenta.ru, Gazeta.ru, Utro.ru, SMI.ru. The pioneers of RuNet played a significant part in their success stories. But this success came at a price: personal, professional and political interests diverged, resulting in conflicts.

This may be illustrated by the Effective Politics Foundation (FEP) directed by the controversial political technologist Gleb Pavlovsky. The Foundation set up many of the above-mentioned online media, using money provided by the so-called oligarchs, as well as significant state funds. Since 2003, most of the media created by FEP have officially been sold to the state. The one significant exception is *Russky zhurnal* (*russ.ru*), the Russian Journal, which is especially popular in cultural circles and is still edited by Pavlovsky. Apart from political commentary and personal columns, this resource is marked by an interest

in ‘exotic’ cultural phenomena, such as Russian provincial culture. But it also features a journal reading room which provides electronic versions of literary and cultural journals – a project that might well serve as an example for ‘Western’ (literary) scholarship, which still finds it hard to accept the Internet as a serious publishing medium.

Although the site (which was founded as early as 1997) is registered as a mass medium, its recent relaunch plays with the charm of the homely and family-like: its wallpaper shows an actual old-fashioned wallpaper. *Russ.ru*’s recent offshoot programmatically entitled ‘Russian Nights’ (*Russkie nochi*) is entirely designed in the style of the cultural and political ‘night’ clubs it reports upon.

But even RuNet’s cosy outward appearance can-



analysis

not hide the fact that the Web has become a media battleground for various interest groups; it looks almost as if the aesthetic appeal to old times is supposed to make readers forget the Internet's mass anonymity. Although RuNet is greatly politicized, only few sites registered as mass media clearly acknowledge their ideological objectives and play with an open deck as much as *Grani.ru*, the web site financed by Boris Berezovsky, which is presented in greater detail in the interview below. The tycoons who oppose Vladimir Putin and their impact on the Russian Web draw widely diverging reactions. Some see their commitment as providing biased but nevertheless valuable alternatives to state-controlled information, while others see this as jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. Thus, unexpectedly and to the regret of many of its early protagonists, Russian online

media are turning from a *place* of political debate to its *topic*. Precariously, however, the talented 'culture-bearers' of RuNet club are precisely those who contribute most to this process, turning the creativity resource into a political tool.

The political involvement of the big sites and opinion makers may be one of the reasons why weblogs are especially popular on the Russian Internet, creating as they do a semi-private, semi-public media space. Being less dependent on political funds, they have established themselves as a decentralized social and political debating forum.

GRANI.RU

The Russian word *gran* means 'border', 'verge' or 'edge'; metaphorically it can denote a multiplicity of aspects or viewing angles. A first glance



Грани.Ру - Mozilla Firefox
File Edit View Go Bookmarks Tools Help
http://www.grani.ru/
Getting Started Latest Headlines
→ Карта сайта → О проекте

ГРАНИ .ru

с скончался **СЕМЕН ЛЕВИН**
LENTA.RU
ПОСЛЕДНИЕ НОВОСТИ
Что ответила Тимошенко

Касьянов напращивается на срок
Михаил Касьянов намерен бороться за пост президента на ближайших выборах, которые, по его мнению, могут оказаться досрочными. "Ответ сегодняшнего дня - да", - сказал Касьянов в прямом эфире "Эха Москвы". Экс-премьер против политики Кремля, однако отвергает революционный путь развития.

Александр Осовцов
На мародере шапка горит
Российская власть как гибрид черного ворона и черного воронка

Валерия Новодворская
Зрелище хлеба
Подарок кесаря народу Третьего Рима

Дмитрий Шущарин
Московские старости
Эпоха Лужкова подошла к концу

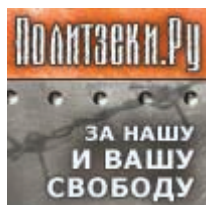
Полцарства за адвоката
Мосгорсуд срочно ищет замену адвокату Ходорковского Генриху Падве, накануне рассмотрения кассации попавшему в больницу. Помощнику адвоката Елене Левиной пришлось доказывать в суде, что больше защищать бывшего главу "ЮКОСа" некому. Процесс продолжится 19 сентября.

Смена правил в ходе игры
Виктор Ющенко не желает делиться полномочиями с будущим премьером и Верховной Радой. Ради этого он даже готов пересмотреть принятый в прошлом году закон о политреформе.

Пересуды
Демократическая комедия
Обширная территория Мосгорсуда, где проходит

Главная
Мнения
Политика
Война
Общество
Акции протеста
Происшествия
Наука
Экономика
Культура
Автомобили
Технологии
Фотогалереи
Спецпроекты:
Политэски.ру
Партнёры:

analysis



at the thematic focuses of this e-zine reveals how the metaphor is to be understood in this case. *Grani.ru*'s journalism is pushing the edge of the liberties that the press is currently allowed in Russia. Its logo, a square globe, symbolizes the rough edges of the global world, the manifold borders and conflicts of interests which the Internet is unable to overcome and which it may even help to accentuate.

Grani.ru is strongly geared towards political topics. Among the site's sections are Opinion, Politics, War, Society, Protest Actions, Events, Science, Economics and Culture. The texts published are characterized by unsparing portrayals of reality that verge on sarcasm and presuppose a lot of background knowledge. *Grani.ru*'s comments consciously abandon the official style of writing, often using jargon, puns and foreign loan words.

The privately-financed news project came into being in December 2000 and its current format dates back to July 2005. *Grani.ru* is a mass medium registered with the relevant ministry and only exists as an online publication based in Moscow. Apart from the director, Yuliya Berezovskaya (no relation of Boris Berezovsky's) and the editor-in-chief, Vladimir Korsunsky, who used to be *Deutsche Welle*'s Moscow correspondent, *Grani.ru* has ten staff writers, each of them with his or her own column in the Opinions section.

It is no secret that the project is financed by the exiled Russian 'oligarch' Boris Berezovsky, although the site's masthead does not officially acknowledge this. In early May 2005, an unconfirmed report by the Russian web-based magazine *Weplaneta.ru* gave rise to rumours that *Grani.ru* had been bought by Leonid Nevzlin, another oligarch who has fallen from favour and lives in Israel. According to the report, Nevzlin, Mikhail Khodorkovsky's comrade-in-arms, was also planning to buy the online newspaper

Lenta.ru in order to build an information front against Vladimir Putin for the presidential elections of 2008. Both sides have denied the much-discussed sale.

Grani.ru indeed has a penchant for delicate domestic subjects, which makes its oppositional line even more evident. In the Yukos affair *Grani.ru* has taken a clear pro-Khodorkovsky stance. Its project *Politzei.ru* calls for an acquittal for him and other political prisoners. *Grani.ru* has also created separate thematic sites on topics related to human rights and terrorism in Russia.

An online survey carried out by the MASMI Research Group revealed that 83% of *Grani.ru* readers are male, most visitors to the site have a higher education and earn over 800 US dollars a month. Over a third of readers are from Moscow, while one quarter live abroad. 60% of readers appreciate the editors' political stance. *Grani.ru* cultivates a large network of contacts, making it clear that, beyond strengthening its own market position, it is aiming to build an alternative media space.

Translated from German by *Mischa Gabowitsch*

THE AUTHORS:

Henrike Schmidt directs the *Russian-Cyberspace.org* project at the Lotman Institute of Russian and Soviet Culture (Ruhr University at Bochum) and is especially interested in contemporary Russian culture and literature, particularly modern lyric poetry and Russian Internet culture.

Katy Teubener directs the *Russian-Cyberspace.org* project at the Institute of Sociology at Muenster University. She conducts research into the way in which new media transform public space and explores innovative forms of computer-supported communication and co-operation in national and international research and education.

analysis

Georg Butwilowski works at the *Russian-Cyberspace.org* project at Muenster University's Institute of Sociology. He is studying for a degree

in Eastern and Western Slavic Studies, specializing in literary science and international politics.

READING HINTS AND LINKS

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RUSSIAN-CYBERSPACE.ORG INTERVIEWS GRANI.RU

An interview with Nikolai Rudensky, deputy editor-in-chief of Grani.ru

interview

The interview took place in Moscow in April and September 2005. The questions were asked by Julia Heckmann, Ekaterina Kratasyuk, Katy Teubener and Henrike Schmidt.

A full Russian version of this interview can be found at *Russian-cyberspace.org*, the home page of a research project on the formation of cultural identities on the Russian Internet (sponsored by the Volkswagen Foundation).

Russian-cyberspace.org: Mr Rudensky, could you give us a brief sketch of Grani.ru in the context of the Russian media landscape?

Grani.ru is an online newspaper that has been published for over four years. That's a long time by Net standards. In Russia, the Internet is still not economically viable, but nevertheless it plays a very progressive role in certain areas, such as the independent electronic media.

So far, the Internet in Russia has escaped state interference. Television, however, is effectively placed under direct government control. Print media are also only partially free, here too there is visible governmental influence. Radio regularly offers objective reporting, but as a medium it has lost most of its Soviet-time popularity. If you wanted to find an advertising slogan for the Russian Internet, it would be 'You never find the truth on TV'.

Why are you so optimistic about freedom from censorship on the Internet?

'It's hard to make predictions – especially about the future'. A year ago people thought pressure on the Russian media would increase as part of the general rise of authoritarian tendencies. But since then the growing instability of the undemocratic regimes across the post-Soviet space has become apparent. The Russian president's popularity is definitely less stable than it was a few years ago. This may bode either more coercion or less pressure and advances in democracy and freedom of speech. On the Internet there is no state pressure so far, or almost none. The political leadership is much more concerned with television, which is more effective for mass propaganda. Moreover Internet technology makes online media very hard to control, both legally and technically.

How do you explain the thematic focus of your web site, which, for example, devotes a special section to 'war'?

The war in Chechnya has been and will remain one of *Grani.ru*'s main interests. This section is edited

interview

by a former officer who now works as a journalist covering military issues. But we do not merely focus on the war in Chechnya, we are interested in military topics in general. This includes tricky issues such as conscription, corruption and violence in the army, the international arms trade etc.

Who is your target audience?

More and more people in Russia can afford to go online today, so online media are becoming less elitist and more 'mass-oriented'. We can observe a growing interest in the Internet as a source of information. This upsurge is linked to a specific event – 9/11, when the number of people looking for up-to-date information on the Net increased tenfold. When we started, *Grani.ru* was accessed about 5–6,000 times per day. Now 20,000 hits are considered just OK; 40,000 are excellent.

As a news resource with an outspoken social and political stance, we assume that our audience shares our world view. However, we know that we are also read by our opponents.

You make little use of the Internet as an interactive medium to get in touch with your audience. Why is that?

Our web site once had a forum. But eventually we were obliged to shut it down, since it was increasingly being flooded with extremist, nationalist, anti-Western and anti-Semitic comments. But maybe sometime we will give it another try.

Why does Grani.ru provoke such reactions?

This is partly due to the public image of our sponsor, Boris Berezovsky, whom many see as the embodiment of 'universal evil', especially people who harbour anti-liberal ideas and anti-Semitic prejudice. Unfortunately they are numerous, and our experience shows that they have a special penchant for issuing detailed comments in interactive spaces.

Would you say that the information offered by Grani.ru is independent in the sense of oppositional?

Basically there is no such thing as state or oppositional information. Information is either objective or distorted. The press must do its professional duty and inform society by presenting different points of view. Unfortunately, the media community in Russia is too susceptible to state pressure: it has displayed little steadfastness and independence. In this respect the case of NTV, a very influential TV channel that became the first victim of state persecution immediately after Vladimir Putin came to power, has played a very negative role. NTV was a successful and conspicuous project which many colleagues disliked for a number of reasons, often including envy. When the state came down on NTV with all its might, very few journalists supported the channel. And afterwards the Soviet-period instinctive fear of difficulties re-emerged. This explains the caution that is characteristic of most Russian media today.

Is Grani.ru being put under any pressure?

No. Here one must do justice to Putin – so far he has not persecuted us. The main reason, however, is probably that we're very small compared to NTV or even the smaller Ren-TV. But everything can change.

Translated from German by *Mischa Gabowitsch*