
“Our RuNet”?

Cultural Identity and Media Usage

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“Our RuNet” (nash RuNet) is a popular expression applied to the Russian – or Russian language – segment of the Internet. It suggests the existence of a distinct object or space and a collective ‘we’. The criteria determining its specifics, though, are not self-evident and vary with regard to the interests articulated by different ‘players’ on the RuNet, such as the net community, commercial corporations or State institutions. The → **boundaries** that confine this assumed ‘RuNet’ may be accordingly language, technology, territory, cultural norms, traditions or values and political power.

The term has almost no analogue in Western languages – a request for “our US Net” or “unser DeNet / unser deutsches Internet” at major search engines (Google, Yahoo) garners very few results, which may lead to the assumption that the Russian Internet offers an especially high identification potential. Indeed, researchers like Jürgen Bruchhaus [2001] or Natalja Konradova [2005] refer to a strong tendency towards self-reflection in the RuNet community, which manifests itself among others as a growing tendency towards historicization, as reflected in projects similar to Nethistory.ru. As reasons for such a high significance of the RuNet for its users – or at least the most active ones among them – several factors that are closely linked to the specific contemporary context of Internet implementation in the 1990s in Russia may be highlighted:

1. The autobiographical factor: The Internet in Russia developed within a period of overall social, political and economic transformation. For many of its early protagonists it has

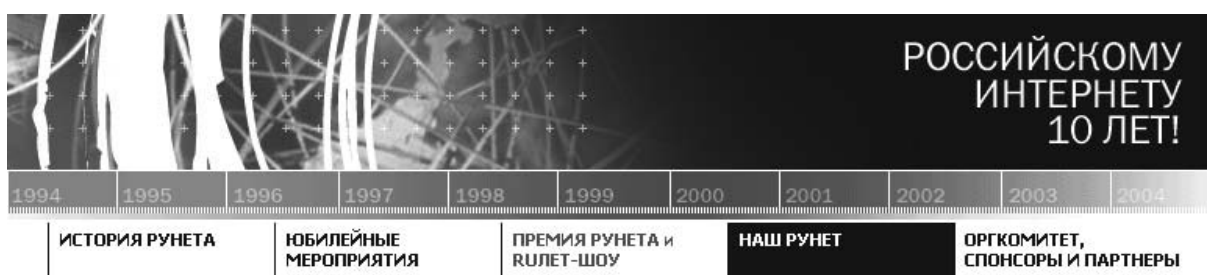
been representative of professional and personal freedom and self-realization.

2. The *Tusovka* (Russian = party, meeting) or clubbing factor: the development of a communication infrastructure in Russia was slow, due to the hardships of economic and political transition. Only from 2000 to 2005 has a significant growth in the numbers of Internet users in the Russian Federation been witnessed. In consequence the core of active participants of Russian net culture in the first, decisive years of its implementation has not been very large. The legacy of these times is a highly personalized sector of Internet culture and mass media.

3. The ‘grassroots effect’: The development of the Internet in Russia from 1991 to 1998 was the result of mostly private economic and cultural initiatives, as State influence in these years was almost non-existent, due to the rough-and-tumble of the transition period. Serious State activities, whether they concerned funding or regulative initiatives can be observed only since the second half of the 1990s.

Last but not least the specifics of Russian ‘offline-culture’ have to be taken into account. Two factors deserve special mentioning:

4. The highly normative cultural background: Official Russian culture – sometimes referred to as ‘mainstream’ – as presented on television and radio, in the productions of the large publishing houses and print media is, to a large extent, determined by normative guidelines.



“Our RuNet”: Fragment of the RuNet award website, launched to mark the Russian Internet’s 10th birthday.

‘Pornography’, ‘slang’, or obscene language are less evident than – by comparison – in German media and popular culture. To illustrate, one may cite the political initiatives to ban the American TV comic serial, *The Simpsons* from Russian screens or the trial of the popular writer, Vladimir Sorokin, accused of pornography. Thus, in a restrictive milieu, the Internet offered a space for free articulation of non-normative cultural activities.

5. The strongly controlled media sector: after a short period of relaxation in the 1990s, the media sector, understood in a more narrow sense as television, radio and print journals, has been, since the presidency of Vladimir Putin, largely → **controlled** by the State or (in part) by the open purses of the so-called oligarchs. As a response, the Internet in Russia offers possibilities for the publication of socially or politically questionable contents; it serves only to a lesser extent as a platform for media experiments.

I agree with you concerning the Russian Internet as a rather ‘meaty’ (oriented to content) than a ‘formal’ (media) dimension. At the same time it is necessary to underline a function of re-structuring: the Internet doesn’t refuse the idea of normative structure itself, but does attempt to build a new structure (though, in practice this attempt often turns into a reproduction of the original). [Natalja Konradova]

Patterns of appropriation

In terms of technology the Internet in Russia is a Western import. Whereas its early popularity was ensured by its ‘foreign’, almost exotic character, the RuNet later was gradually customized to meet national needs and interests.

Some memoirs of a ‘veteran’ – according to my first impressions of the Internet in 1996, it seemed like a ‘magic window to America’, as the only well-known resource of general importance at that time was Altavista.com. [Natalja Konradova]

This process started with technological adoption. Whereas, in the early years, Russian texts had to be written in Latin transcription, in the mid-1990s Cyrillic encoding was introduced, Russian search engines developed, and Russian domain names registered. The provision of full Cyrillic web addresses will complete this development in the near future. A fundamental knowledge of English is no longer necessary in order to benefit from the (Russian) Internet. With regard to the users, this tendency will lead to a new stage of democratization, as foreign language skills are no longer a barrier to participation; with regard to the contents, though, it results in a growing separation of the RuNet as a kind of “ethnonet” [Goralik 1999], a tendency especially significant for those segments of the World Wide Web that do not use the Latin alphabet.

RUcenter Domains IP-addresses About the company

Domain name registration & additional services

Domain name transfer from RIPN to RU-CENTER

Domain name registration

Domain: .ru

Zone	Registration fee*
RU	20 USD / 1 year
SU	100 USD / 1 year
NET, COM, ORG	25 USD / 1 year
BIZ, INFO	50 USD / 2 year

* - taxes are not included

Additional services

You may order additional service for any domain domain.com, domain.msk.ru):

Domain:

Service

- [Primary-Standard](#)
- [Primary-Auto](#)
- [Secondary](#)
- [Web-forwarding](#)
- [Mail-forwarding](#)

RUcenter: “The domain .su is also a part of our history.”

The technological adoption of the Western Internet into the national context is paralleled by a similar inscription on a cultural – semantic and semiotic – level. Different patterns of appropriation can be distinguished, which vary largely with regard to the agents of these discourses, the different interest groups, such as the net ‘intelligentsia’, business or political institutions. These processes of media adoption and usage are to a large extent determined by historic experience and cultural identity.

Excursus: Cultural identity and the semantics of the Internet

The term ‘cultural identity’ is often criticized for its absence of scientific substance. In our understanding it signifies mental constructions that do not exist in ‘reality’ but, nevertheless, have a ‘real’ impact on the individual’s as well as the collective’s world views. Thus, cultural identity is assumed, rather than

given and the effect is identity politics, implemented top down as well as bottom up. In correlation with the economic, social, and political conditions they determine the limits and the potential of social activity, which the individual and the society as a whole assign themselves. In consequence → **cultural identity** influences media usage as well as understanding of the public sphere(s).

The German scholar, Peter Wagner, in a critical review of the term ‘cultural identity’ suggests further operationalizing its usage by the introduction of three antinomies which, by their very nature, as contradictions, cannot be solved, but have to be analyzed in their constant shifting [Wagner 1997, 58]:

- ▶ “choice“ – “fate”,
- ▶ “autonomy” – “domination”,
- ▶ “construction“ – “reality”.

The individual as well as the collective – the latter as an abstract assumption – position themselves within this framework of parameters. With regard to the antinomy of “choice – fate” the attributes of the personal and national character are interpreted as either “achieved” or “ascribed”, e.g. as flexible or as fixed. In the first case, responsibility and freedom are emphasized, whereas, in the second case, it is the ability to adapt to the per se unchangeable circumstances that is stressed. Exactly how interpersonal relationships and social communications are practised is dependent upon the ‘answer’ given with regard to the first antinomy. If “choice” is stressed, there is a tendency towards “autonomy”; if “fate” is experienced as a guiding principle, “domination” is the more relevant factor of social organization. The individual’s and collective’s positioning with regard to the first two antinomies also determines the interpretation of the last one: “life” will be understood accordingly as a “construction” or as “reality”.

The latter approach is, in academic theories, often labelled as an → **“essentialist world view”**: “the notion that what we are is innate and unique”,

	Positive semantics	Technical feature	Negative semantics	
Choice	Low hierarchies	Decentralized structure	Loss of authority	Fate
Autonomy	Flexibility	Connectivity	Disorientation	Domination
Construction	Cooperation; collaborative ethics and aesthetics	Interactivity	Loss of control and quality; danger of abuse	Reality

Table 1: *The Internet as a cultural model.*

as formulate Simon Franklin and Emma Widdis in their anthology, *National Identity in Russian Culture: An Introduction* [2004, 7]. According to their findings, Russian culture – always understood to a certain extent as an abstraction – is still largely dominated by an essentialist world view, which is deeply rooted in such different historical traditions as Russian religious philosophy on the one hand and Soviet ideology on the other. In contemporary, Post-Perestrojka Russia this view has been challenged by the sudden exposure to system transformation and globalization. Or to put in the words of the German literary scholar, Georg Witte [2005]: Russian society in the 1990s experienced a “trauma of contextualization”. The confrontation with a networked world, paralleled by the loss of a (artificially) homogenized identity and a lack of international status was experienced by large parts of the population as a shock. Mental patterns inherited from Soviet times made it especially difficult to adapt to the changing circumstances [Gudkov 2004, 797].

The Internet, in contrast, may be seen as the predestined medium of contextualization, as it offers information never isolated but embedded into a large variety of contexts. As a cultural model it stands, with regard to the above mentioned antinomies, for “choice”, “autonomy”, and “construction”. And indeed, the technological features of the Internet are often endowed specific → **semantics** – with positive or negative connotations – and accordingly inscribed into one’s world view. Of course, in practice, there may be realized a mul-

tiplicity of positions within this theoretical framework (see table 1).

Patterns of appropriation within the Russian net community

With regard to the Russian net community itself two lines of media appropriation can be roughly distinguished. When speaking about the “net community” we refer to those ‘institutions’ and forums on the Russian Internet that articulate the above mentioned “high self-reflexivity”, that analyze and interpret its history, functions, and structures. Such institutions and publications are, for example, the International Internet Association, Ezhe.ru, online periodicals, such as the Russian Journal or research projects, such as Nethistory.ru.

‘Russification’ / ‘Nationalization’: the specifics of the Russian Internet (or, more appropriately stated: of a specific Internet culture) are interpreted in terms of cultural tradition and mentality [see Konradova 2005]. The Internet is no longer a Western import but is seen as something genuinely Russian. Its features of interactivity, connectivity, de-hierarchization, informal networking, and free information delivery are positively interpreted and seen as innate competencies and characteristics of Russian culture and mentality.

They seem to fit perfectly into its set of mental patterns, as there is a (supposed) strong tendency towards collectivism, a popularity of informal net-

works (*blat*), or the rejection of the idea of copyright in the Western sense promoting instead a broader definition of intellectual property. This approach is in a typical way expressed in the writings of the Russian literary scholar and philosopher Mikhail Epshtejn who returns to the traditions of the → **Slavophiles** and Russian religious philosophy in order to illustrate the “Russianness” of the global networks. “Electronic sobornost” (from the Russian: “sobor” = cathedral; council, synod) is a slogan Epshtejn introduced in the late 1990s; the term alludes to the concept of a spiritual unity, which nevertheless allows for individual creativity and self-realization. Epshtejn’s style is highly metaphorical; it is typical of the period of early Internet euphoria characterized by a fascination for the new digital world, in a philosophical or even metaphysical sense:

We are interested in the metaphysics and culturology of the electronic spider’s web that entangles Russian intellectual life more and more [...]. This technological innovation has something in common with such favourite categories of Russian thought as “sobornost”, “sophism”, “all-unity”, “cosmism”, “polyphony”, “cosmic reason”, [...] “human anthill” [...]. [Epshtejn n.d.]

In his detailed studies of specific genres of Russian net communication, such as the Virtual personalities or the Russian blogger community, the Internet researcher, Eugene Gorny proceeds from similar assumptions. He focuses on two parameters of Russian traditional thought, which, according to his findings, lead to an especially fruitful adaptation of global information technologies in Russia; that is 1) a specific and more flexible understanding of intellectual property rights and 2) a strongly expressed tendency towards collectivist behaviour patterns. Whereas the first property influences mostly the content and promotes, for example, the development of richly furnished web libraries, the second quality is, according to Gorny, typically expressed in a specific usage of weblogs largely oriented towards community building.

Within this tendency of semantic ‘russification’ traditional mental patterns turn out to be stronger than global technological features. “Our RuNet” is accordingly determined by cultural identity, which cannot be reduced to the experience of a shared language. Such a pattern of media appropriation is partly characterized by an essentialist world view as it assumes the existence of a ‘typical Russian mentality’. The technological features of the Internet are endowed with a positive meaning – collaborative ethics and aesthetics, spiritual unity and collectivism, creativity and freedom.

One can intensify this point considering the concept of “electronic sobornost” not just like one of Epshtejn’s ideas but like an innate base of early RuNet. The more I think about it, the more I realize that the “nationalization” of the Internet was, indeed, the only way to submit to the losses on the main ideological field in reality – be it an official or dissident one. [Natalja Konradova]

‘Westernization’ / ‘Internationalization’: a different pattern of appropriation may be distinguished less among philosophers or (literary) scholars, than among journalists and representatives of Internet business and institutions who see the Russian Internet on the road towards a complete integration into the global networks. The idea of such a ‘Westernization’ or ‘Internationalization’ denies the notion of national specifics in global technologies. On the contrary, the Internet offers the possibility to escape narrow, national contexts. It is seen as an instrument for work, and not as a specific milieu or community. Asked whether there are certain specifics of the so-called RuNet, representatives of the Internet media, such as Dmitrij Ivanov [2004] or Natal’ja Loseva [c.f. Busse 2005] refer to material constraints, such as the low implementation rates, the problems of infrastructure and financing and last but not least, the strictly controlled media sector. All these

clearly definable external factors explain the peculiarities of the RuNet, which are nevertheless seen as weaknesses rather than strengths (even if they have some positive side effects, such as the high number of online media).

The successful development of the RuNet will lead to an adaptation and assimilation to Western standards. Mental patterns and traditions are somewhat excluded from this technologically determined point of view. The Internet is seen as an avenue of escape from national traditions and restrictions.

As concerns the usage of the Internet in this country I think that for lots of people here the Internet is a way into the outside world, rather than a sort of connection with others in Russia; the Web is supposed to be open, → unlimited, not at all closed within its own inner boundaries. [Jaroslava Evseeva, Graduate student]

Against the background of ideological ‘overload’, of growing nationalism within the country, the idea of a specific development of the Russian Internet is rejected. “Our RuNet”, in consequence, either does not exist, or only exists for an intermediate period of time:

I don't think that there is a fundamental difference concerning the question of how the Internet should develop in Russia and on a worldwide scale. The Internet is an instrument, an instrument for different purposes: for communication, information research and orientation within the contemporary information society. [Ivanov 2004]

In any case it is determined almost exclusively by such quantitative factors as the number of Russian speaking users, sites, registered domains, servers – or their absence. The question of whether the Russian Diaspora, spread around the globe and intensively using the Internet, is a part of “our RuNet” is a further complex issue that needs to be discussed separately.

The sketched opposition between a ‘Russification’ and a ‘Westernization’ of the RuNet should

nevertheless not be seen as a simple prolongation of the traditional dispute between *Westernizers* and *Slavophiles*, of those intellectuals who vote for an adoption of Western standards and norms and those who pledge for a specific, national development. Similar discussions concerning the causalities of technological and cultural features are frequent in Internet studies. The dispute is thus part of a more general quarrel about technological determinism versus cultural constructivism, e.g. about the question of what significance is attributed to the ‘hardware’ of technology and the ‘software’ of its cultural adoption. The commonality between both patterns of appropriation within the RuNet community is their conveyance of a rather positive picture of the Internet and its potential significance for Russian society. They accentuate the creative and deliberating force of the web with regard to the individual as well as to the collective. In other words: they agree on “choice” and “autonomy” as the driving forces for its development.

The idea about technological determinism seems to be much more popular among Russian academics, scholars and artists of my generation (“the generation of the 1990s” – a group formed in the years of perestrojka, with its own specific socio-psychological features). There could be an ideological point: to be under technology means to be free of the human (cultural) factor. [Natalja Konradova]

“Our RuNet” – a centralized vision?

The significance of cultural identity for Internet usage may also be illustrated by an example from the official discourse. The logo of the Federal Funding programme, Electronic Russia [Elektronnaja Rossija 2005], visualizes the historical, political and religious centres of Russia – the Vasilij cathedral, the Lenin mausoleum, and the Kremlin

– as indeed, ‘central’ source(s) of information. The ‘rest’ of Russia remains unspecified, and thus reproduces the common image of the vast country as a kind of *tabula rasa* which becomes informed and ‘enlightened’ by the metropolis.



Electronic Russia 2004: *A centralized visualization.*

In 2004 the logo of the Funding programme was changed, to focus less on the visualization of a specific place – Red Square – but on the more abstract signifiers of State power, which are the flag, the escutcheon and the map of the State territory. However, it expresses the same centralized visualization – and vision – of Electronic Russia. The networked structure of the medium, its connectivity and interactivity are not reflected in the logo as the official brand of the funding initiative. “Our RuNet” as conceived by the State authorities is dominated by a centralized notion. Or, to return to the antinomies of cultural identity: it stresses fate over choice, domination over autonomy and the “reality” of national identity.



Electronic Russia 2005: *A centralized vision.*

Cultural identity thus manifests itself not only through the content, but is immediately embodied in the patterns of usage and media appropriation. Accordingly the Internet is appropriated into the user’s world view or rejected as a ‘foreign’ and endangering element. The latter approach, large-

ly prevalent among non-users, is best described by the Internet journalist, Sergej Kuznecov:

[...] the Internet became a space to where the undesirable feelings and emotions of society were transferred: hatred, aggression, sexuality. In this sense the image of the Internet was constructed relying on the same principles as the image of the Other in society – the stranger, the alien, the madman. [Kuznecov 2004, 12]

With regard to the contemporary context of post-Soviet Russia, the Internet – “our RuNet” – may thus be interpreted as symbol for both hopes and fears related to the overall atmosphere of change and transformation. Whether it continues to remain ‘alien’ to large parts of the Russian population or becomes integrated into the lives of the people using it depends, not only on successful technological diffusion but on its being acknowledged a cultural model of social significance.

