

Virtual post-soviet space: Russian language and transnational communities

Maria Yelenevskaya ^{a,1}, Ekaterina Protassova ^{b,2*}

^a Israel Institute of Technology; Israel

^b University of Helsinki, Finland

¹ymaria@technion.ac.il; ²ekaterina.protassova@helsinki.fi

*Correspondent Author

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ABSTRACT

This article explores linguistic and cultural ties in the informal Russian-speaking communities outside the Former Soviet Union (FSU). We employ qualitative methods, such as internet discourse monitoring, ethnographic observations, content and thematic analysis, and language assessments to examine a complex interplay between language, migration, and identity. We explore the role of a common language and cultural background in shaping the relationships and activities within the communicative sphere of Russian-speaking immigrants. The findings reveal that since the Soviet times, the FSU citizens have developed distrust of official channels and learned to rely on informal social networks. Sometimes immigrants activate their old friendships from study times, sometimes diasporans meet at language courses where they learn the local language, sometimes they get to know each other through children on the playground or during parents' meetings at school. The virtual fora and mutual interests, aspirations for their children's future, and attitudes toward political problems may unite or divide people who have left their home country. Overcoming difficulties of the first period of acculturation, acquiring proficiency in the local language/s, becoming familiar with the culture, and expanding social networks beyond the co-ethnics—all of these make permanent resettlement more realistic and desirable. Most often in each individual case there is a whole constellation of push factors that motivated people to migrate, and it is this constellation that distinguishes migrants from Russia and CIS countries from other groups. Although the very notion of diaspora has undergone major changes, migrants still tend to keep together with co-ethnics, at least in the first stages of life away from home. The transnational relations may be motivated by economic interests and are viewed as social capital. In many cases they are vehicles of solidarity and warmth, yet in the periods of political conflict they may also reflect distress, animosities and even mutual hate.

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Introduction

The Russian language brings together the Russian-speaking communities that can be found in the countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU), the so called “Near Abroad”, and in the “Far Abroad”. These two terms, which came into use in the studies of the Russian diaspora after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, remain useful when we have to distinguish between the life of Russian speakers in the countries that were once part of the Soviet Union, and therefore, have closer, although often problematic relations with Russia, and the rest of the countries where there are communities of Russian speakers. Research conducted since the mid-1990s reveals that social and cultural dynamics in these communities differ from those in the communities in the Far Abroad (see works by Barrington et al. 2003; Kosmarskaya 2011, Kulyk 2017, Maximova et al. 2018, Protassova et al. 2021, Protassova, Yelenevskaya 2021, Yelenevskaya, Protassova 2015, 2021).

The Baltic countries, on the other hand, demonstrate some features making them part of the FSU and others bringing them close to Europe (cf. Alijeva 2017). Language policies in the Community of the Independent States (CIS) did little to support Russian officially but did not hamper its everyday usage for pragmatic reasons (Tyson 2009, Hogan-Brun, Melnyk 2012, Kosmarskaya, Savin 2020). Yet it is these policies that triggered a considerable flow of migration (cf. Sadowski-Smith 2018, Denisenko et al. 2020). Malleability and longevity of imperial sentiments, sometimes happily accepted by the population, sometimes enforced on the newly integrated ethnic groups and sometimes covertly denied by them, led to the joint forging of empire and country (Goff, Siegelbaum 2019). In pursuit of a sense of national identity new states created as a result of the Soviet Union’s collapse started on a path of new growth by rediscovering their historical legacies and forming new alliances (Eliæson et al. 2016).

We view the situation in the post-Soviet countries through the lens of communication outside the FSU (Mustajoki et al. 2020, 2021). Migrants from the FSU are multilingual (Khilkhavova 2020). When people migrate, the symbolic power of the language increases because it serves as a connection to family and friends left in the home country and to those who migrated to other countries. It is also a powerful means of transferring culture to the next generations.

We explore two research questions: (1) In what domains do Russian-speaking immigrants maintain transnational connections? (2) How do digital technologies contribute to the transnationalism of Russian-speaking diasporas?

Method

Our research methods include critical discourse analysis, content analysis, and thematic analysis, all of them qualitative by nature. They enable researchers to explore the role of language in social life and the influence of political and socio-economic life on language. These problems have gained significance because of growing migrations, the spread of multilingualism even in the countries which used to pursue monolingual policies, and the resulting superdiversity of societies. Material for this article was drawn from the survey of scholarly literature, interviews we conducted with Russian speakers in Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Israel, Portugal, Switzerland, the U.S.A, and others, systematic monitoring of electronic media, as well as participant observation. Since both of us are immigrants, we keep ethnographic diaries recording various episodes of immigrants' life in which we participate or which we witness, and shoot pictures that reflect various aspects of Russian speakers' life away from their home countries. It is our goal to show how common language and background influence the type of relationships and activities that Russian-speaking immigrants have in their communicative sphere.

Results and Discussion

Business and Communication

This section Ru.net, the Russian segment of the Internet, caters to Russian speakers residing in the territory of the FSU and in more than 100 other countries on all continents. Many Ru.net pioneers were programmers and researchers, émigrés to western countries. They had access to the technologies which were still scarce in Russia and the expertise to operate them (Schmidt et al. 2006: 120). What motivated them to create "Russian" sites was a desire to maintain contacts with co-ethnics who migrated to other countries and find creative expression of nostalgia for the language and culture of their homeland. Some also saw this as an attempt to come to terms with their new environment using their cultural capital. Administrators of some of these sites were aware that the emphasis on Russianness could be intimidating, so they explained that anyone speaking Russian was welcome. Besides information exchange, these sites help diasporans meet their needs for communication with co-ethnics. Although flaming occasionally occurs, the atmosphere of solidarity prevails on diasporic sites.

Even after the difficult period of acculturation is over, online communication in forums, blogs and discussion groups remains an inseparable part of immigrants' life. In fact, many people living in the FSU and interested in the life of their co-ethnics in other countries also

frequent sites launched by immigrants. Some are just curious, but others are considering emigration and collect information that can be useful. As Ross (2010) justly observes, contemporary migration presents a new model of mobility with high levels of information exchange and communication networks, which enables migrants to make more informed decisions than in the past. Russian speakers, in particular those who were brought up still in the Soviet times, have more trust in informal sources of information, so would-be migrants start collecting facts, opinions about the prospective countries of destination from their predecessors even before they apply for immigration. Today this information is easily accessible online. The knowledge and experience accumulated by immigrants who already feel settled is usually willingly shared by forum members. As Marino reflects, the tension between private and public seems to vanish in these forums as the experiences shared are personal and private, but the forum space is public, and everyone in the cyberspace can read the posts and comments to them (2015: 3). Even when groups are declared “private”, administrators usually accept new applicants.

Unprecedented flows of international migration make it difficult for the economies of the host countries to absorb all the newcomers. Immigrants who fail to find jobs in the domestic labor market of the host society have to look for opportunities in launching businesses serving the needs of their co-ethnics, both residing in the same country and visiting. A common feature of many immigrants’ businesses is that they are based on informal connections (Portes 1994). This trend is also strong among migrants from the FSU. Internet forums are widely used to advertise immigrants’ businesses locally and internationally. A case in point is a public Facebook group Русскоязычные в Европе: Инфо (Russian speakers in Europe: Info). Browsing through the posts one can realize how vast the map of Russian language has become and how diverse are business activities of Russian-speaking diasporans: guides invite tourists for excursions, and sports coaches organize outings; speech therapists promise help to bilingual children, and nannies offer their services to parents who wish their children to hear Russian speech throughout the day. While the COVID pandemic made many small immigrant businesses close down, it also gave a push to numerous online services. Teachers of school subjects as well as performing artists give group and one-on-one classes and tutorials in zoom and other video-conference platforms. Nutritionists recommend diets, and business consultants discuss strategies for start-ups, and so on. Notably, some of the services are transatlantic, connecting European clients with businesses in the U.S.A. Some posts are in the category of social advertising, i.e., they do not promote products or brands, but inform the

audience about social projects, or asking to donate money to some charity, NGO or a social cause. Thus, in July 2022 one of the group members wrote:

This is to announce collection of donations for leisure activities for children and adolescents who have arrived from Ukraine! We'll be grateful for reposts!
A group of volunteers have founded a youth society Phoenix Teens—for psychological support of Ukrainians in Finland. We are organizing different events and help the young guys socialize in Finland. They find new friends among their peers, they meet local teenagers, and above all they have an opportunity to speak their mother tongue.

The post detailed the activities planned by the NGO, gave the account number and the code of the permit to collect donations. Note that like many other internet announcements appealing to help refugees from Ukraine, this one counted on response of Russian speakers residing in different countries. The post emphasizes the importance of giving young refugees an opportunity to speak their mother tongue, without specifying whether it is Russian or Ukrainian. In fact, while some Ukrainians who left their country a long time ago refuse to use Russian now, many war refugees are Russian speakers and despite the ongoing tragedy still prefer to communicate in their own language. An interesting category is posts in which immigrants look for business partnerships:

Hello Group,
In search of collaboration and partnership in the sphere of migration, I am looking for colleagues and all those who are interested. I'll be glad to make new acquaintances and exchange information with jurists and lawyers. Myself, I am an immigration lawyer in the EU, and my central office is in Portugal, Lisbon, MF. Write to my private address.

Joint ventures, collaborative research and art projects conducted across continents have more than 30 years of history. Based on common language and background they also profit from differences. Diasporic communities today are not what they used to be shortly after the demise of the Soviet Union. Influenced by contacts with the host societies and new experiences immigrants have evolved new customs, behavioral patterns and worldview. And it is this combination of similarities and differences which makes them interesting to each other and helps produce material and symbolic products. For example, online publications promoting Indonesia focus on a large selection of fresh vegetables and exotic fruits, surfing opportunities, international and friendly atmosphere, the unique religious and cultural profile with rich rituals, a variety of architecture, the culture of yoga. Low prices for gasoline and vehicle rental are deemed important, and so is a convenient visa policy that allows Russians to stay on the island from a month to six months without any problems. Some risks concern road accidents, sunburns, absence of public transport, expensive seafood, robbery and fraud attacks, corruption, the quality of internet connections. Other drawbacks often mentioned are intense

rains and winds, snakes and scorpions, and a danger of earthquakes (vc.ru/migrate/621151-kak-pereehat-zhit-na-bali-v-2023-godu?ysclid=lk42273bf6798642285). Still, the Russian-speaking community on Bali comprises between 40,000 and 60,000 people who have developed startups and enjoy life there (sobesednik.ru/obshchestvo/20230208-kak-zivut-i-cem-zarabatyvayut-v-indonezii?ysclid=lk41vb2a8i94674844). There are good prospects for the development of Russia-Indonesia cooperation (Sibarani 2019, Valindyputri 2021).

According to Ryazantsev (2018), today it is more appropriate to speak about Russian-speaking communities or diasporas rather than “the diaspora”. Diasporic communities are ethnically diverse, but have many qualities in common, including their lingua franca—Russian. They aspire to integrate into the host society already in the first generation, although they prefer to maintain their home language and remain true to their customs and everyday habits, enriching them by adding local ones. In most cases Russian speakers have a high level of formal education, and in their business activities they rely on informal networks with co-ethnics not only in the host country and in their homeland but also in other countries where Russian speakers reside.

In many immigrant receiving countries (e.g., Finland, Germany, Israel, Norway) newcomers are entitled to free language courses. However, these programs seldom take into account the needs of highly educated adults. They are designed to enable students to communicate in everyday situations greeting people, shopping, talking about the weather, etc. Some language programs include talk about work situations but mostly in low-skilled jobs. So, immigrants aspiring to work as doctors, teachers, academics and engineers, that is, in professions requiring sophisticated language have to become autodidacts or take private lessons. Insufficient knowledge of the local language and English is one of the most serious brakes in professional reintegration of Russian-speaking migrants.

The period of COVID-19 pandemic added to the difficulties experienced by immigrants and their families, including Russian-speakers. Those who had unqualified jobs that could not be performed from home were fired during lockdowns or sent for unpaid leaves. At the same time, since borders were closed, some labor migrants turned into hostages left without jobs but unable to return to their home countries (Armania-Kepuladze 2021). Financial difficulties experienced by the socio-economically weak immigrants were exacerbated by their poor understanding of how social security systems of their host countries work, and reluctance to turn to state organizations for help. In turn, this triggered psychological problems that had adverse effect on family relations.

Across Europe, drastic decline in working hours and employment were in the hospitality sector, in tourism, in cultural events and activities (Eichorst et al. 2020, Borjas, Cassidy 2020), those very domains in which many Russian speakers worked as employees or freelancers. Many people employed in service industries and those who were engaged in exporting and importing goods from and to CIS countries had to suspend or close down their businesses. On the other hand, despite restrictions imposed during the pandemic, some highly qualified professionals were just starting their careers in new countries and although their jobs were secure, they also suffered from uncertainties and a lack of supporting networks. It was in the period of the pandemic that the importance of family and friends was experienced more acutely than under normal circumstances. Here is what we read on vc.ru, the site regularly posting stories of émigrés about their life away from home. VK, who was not a novice in moving from one country to another and appreciated help of the officials and new acquaintances in Riga, Latvia, admits that the lockdown was a trying period for her:

VK: I cannot say I ran into trouble in a new country. My difficulties were primarily psychological. I was lucky it was Latvia: after all, you feel more comfortable when everyone around you speaks Russian. Culturally and linguistically this place is very close to Russia, and you don't have a feeling you are on another planet. And nature is very similar. But it was an ordeal: everything is closed, only food stores and pharmacies are open, and there are no friends or family nearby.

Even those who relocated together with the family reported feeling uneasy and isolated. IS, relocated to Singapore after working in the U.S.A.: Time after work is easy to fill by being with the family and friends living in this country: there is a big Russian-speaking community here. But during the Covid it was really, really sad here (vc.ru/migrate/257390-gorod-gosudarstvo-singapur-kak-mesto-dlya-zhizni-i-vedeniya-biznesa, retrieved 15 July 2022). IS does not say explicitly why the period was “sad”, but we may infer that during the lockdown he suffered from a lack of face-to-face interactions with people in his network. Various studies show that a state of anxiety fosters a natural desire for affiliation, especially amongst those who are living through the same anxiety-inducing experience (Sarnoff, Zimbardo 1961; Gump, Kulik 1997; Caligiuri et al. 2020). Research conducted so far suggests that the slowing-down of administrative procedures legalizing newcomers' status, the general uncertainty of the situation and an increase in the acts of xenophobia against migrants, even if these are not directed against them personally, may affect mental health of migrants (Guadagno 2020). We can add that in the periods of crises cultural differences in coping with difficulties become more acute, which may aggravate the feeling of loneliness and exclusion and increase the desire to be in touch with friends speaking your own language.

Many circular migrants who go abroad for seasonal work could not return home to Russia, because of the lockdowns, while those who were caught by the pandemic in Russia had trouble returning to their homes abroad. In both cases families were separated for months. In many internet discussion groups we find posts asking for advice as to how to bring family members to the host countries bypassing restrictions. Those who succeeded share their experiences, like a member of an FB group "Girls in Belgium". G: Girls, if your parents are still prohibited to come here, here are laifhaki [lifehacks] for you. What follows is usually a description of complicated travel routes and suggestions as to how to be vaccinated in a third country, even after a Russian vaccine, not validated in Europe, was administered at home.

With a general economic upswing, numerous countries are interested in conquering Russian-speaking markets, while in periods of recession immigrants hope that those who are better in Russian are more likely to stay afloat. On many occasions, diasporans act as intermediaries between businesspeople in Russia and in their host countries. Much of the transnational interaction, be it joint research projects, business ventures or art contests are carried out on the Internet. While Ru.net pioneers targeted members of the host society as receivers of information about Russia, diasporans of today write their content for co-ethnics all over the world, acting as experts of their new home countries. As our material shows, it is these opportunities to advance one's career, maintain contacts with friends and family living in other countries, and find new opportunities for leisure activities that makes transnational connections attractive. At the same time, potential benefits of transnational ties motivate diasporans to maintain their Russian.

The portal GlobberLand (globberland.com) started up in the Chinese market in 2014 and gradually expanded its operations to 52 other countries. The data base of this site includes guides and interpreters who studied in the FSU as foreign students and are offering services in translation not only in Russian, but also in Ukrainian, Kazakh and Uzbek. Recently, GlobberLand started offering services in remote interpreting, using various online platforms to assist in negotiations. In addition, their interpreters and translators act as remote representatives carrying out tasks of the clients who are unable or unwilling to be physically present in the area where the task is to be carried out. The tasks range from collecting information, searching for needed goods and producers, quality control of production, transportation and delivery of products. Russian-speaking translators are widely used by pharmaceutical companies for their international research projects. They need to conduct interviews with potential customers, fine-tune their questionnaires, do back translation and find medical professionals who know the needs of the local markets. For such jobs it is not enough to be a qualified linguist, but it is

necessary to know the regional varieties of the Russian language. Clearly, representational services have become even more in demand now than in the pre-pandemic time.



Fig 1. Russian-speaking shops in Los Angeles

The Common Language of Leisure

The way people spend their free time says volumes about individual, group and societal values. Like in other domains of life, leisure activities of Russian speakers living outside Russia are to a large extent heirs to what was available and popular in the Soviet period. While in the years of Stalin's rule leisure of the populace was seldom discussed, in the post-war Soviet ideology it occupied an important place. Massive industrialization allowed for more attention to consumer needs of the people, and the communist party was elaborating the utopic vision of the future in which everyone was to develop harmoniously. Meaningful leisure activities were viewed both as means to increase labor productivity and to shape a new personality endowed with diverse knowledge and abilities (Hollander 1966). The trouble was that leisure presupposes at least some degree of individual choice, agency, personalization and detachment from public and ritualized activities (Lovell 2005), which did not go together well with collectivist ideals and attempts of the regime to guide and supervise the citizens' lives as closely as possible. Moreover, in the economy of consumer shortages and still poorly developed service industries, considerable time after work had to be spent on solving problems of everyday subsistence.

Official Soviet culture was puritanic. People were brought up to deny themselves meeting material needs and worldly pleasures and work for the "Joy of tomorrow" as formulated by a renowned Soviet educator Anton Makarenko. While before WWII the dates

when this “bright tomorrow” should come remained unspecified, in the 1960s it was given a more or less precise time: twenty years after the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party. Indeed, in the 1960s–1980s Soviet Society became more affluent and less oppressive, which was also reflected in more freedom in the choice of uncontrolled and unorganized leisure activities.

Notably, public and community work, which was theoretically meant to develop altruism and readiness to do good in one’s free time, was in fact acts of coercion. Many students and employees involved in these activities did not participate by choice, but because it was additional assignments given by the institutions they were affiliated with. So, public and community work was viewed as an additional burden imposed by the state. The negative attitudes toward forced collectivism and ritualized, top-down volunteerism is not easy to overcome, and ex-Soviet and post-Soviet immigrants’ participation in voluntary organizations of host societies remains low. In order to adopt a new volunteering ethos immigrants have to overcome mistrust and skepticism, and find a new meaning and purpose making them devote their few and precious hours of leisure to common good (Khvorostianov, Remennick 2017). While still reluctant to join voluntary organizations of their host society, many people are willing to help their co-ethnics who are new in the country or are in trouble. This sort of help is not registered in organizations, because it is done informally, but it can be traced in internet discussions in local forums and is documented in our ethnographic diaries (see, e.g., Fialkova, Yelenevskaya 2011, Yelenevskaya 2016). A case in point is help provided by Russophone immigrants in the European countries and Israel to the refugees from Ukraine escaping the war with Russia. They act as interpreters, donate money, provide refugees with clothes, medications, food, and put them up in their homes.

In the post-war period much was done in the Soviet Union for physical, intellectual and artistic development of the youth and young adults. In palaces and houses of culture (which usually had halls for showing movies and holding concerts and theater performances) there were numerous hobby groups that were either free or very inexpensive. However, there were few opportunities for the middle-aged and the elderly to do sports, pursue creative activities and develop talents. Things have changed after the Soviet Union fell apart, and both in Russia and in the Russian-speaking diasporic communities middle-aged and the elderly have become active in expanding their horizons, learning languages, doing sports and participating in creative activities. In countries with big Russian-speaking communities immigrants are both providers and consumers of recreational activities.

Wherever Russian-speaking people settle, they develop an interest in museums, theater, concerts and exhibitions, because these are widely acknowledged as spiritual pursuits. This is absolutely true about intelligentsia, and even those who grew up in small towns and villages are also convinced that one must go to movies and concerts. For some youngsters refusal to attend cultural events is a manifestation of a revolt against parents and their values. Women are usually more arduous consumers of arts. Immigrants who have permits to work as guides organize tours deepening immigrants' knowledge of their host countries and connecting their history and culture with the homeland (see, e.g., Yelenevskaya 2015). Russophones organize and attend lectures, theater shows, film and song festivals and brain rings. Meetings with film makers, actors and singers touring countries with big diasporic communities are also popular. In Finland, Germany, Israel and the USA there are agencies organizing tours of FSU artists. They are advertised on Russian-language TV channels and on the billboards. Many people in Russian-speaking communities called for boycott of such concerts because of the artists' support of Russia's annexation of the Crimea, but still, they are well-attended. Today, though, among the touring Russian-speaking actors, musicians and artists there are those who left Russia as a protest against the war in Ukraine. They are supported by their colleagues who emigrated earlier and have established themselves in the host countries. They are enthusiastically received by the public and their performances enjoy a box-office success. Since the 1990s many Russian theaters have been launched in the countries with big Russophone communities. Most of them were founded by professional directors but among the actors there are not only professionals but also amateurs. Not all the new theaters could survive because of the financial problems. At least in the first years, there is no money to pay the actors, so they have to make a living finding other jobs and follow their vocation out of pure enthusiasm in their leisure time. The actors also make clothes and stage props. Starting as Russian only, some of these theaters gradually become bilingual, trying to attract bigger audiences, though it requires hard work for the actors to learn to speak without an accent. One notable example is the Israeli theater Geshar (Hebrew for a "bridge"), which started its productions in Russian only, but gradually switched over to Hebrew. Enjoying great popularity among the public, it retained Russian text in the moving lines projected on a display above the stage. Another example is Shaul Tiktiner's "Theater for the Young Spectator" in Israel. Launched as a one-man show in 1991, it has evolved into a professional repertoire theater for children with 10 studios in different towns. Young studio participants do not only learn to act but perform sketches before the shows of the theater, take part in children theater festivals

and participate in film and TV castings (<https://www.artikshow.com> retrieved 21 March 2022).

Russian diasporic theaters maintain close ties with their colleagues in the FSU. They go on tours and participate in theater festivals held there. Moreover, before the COVID-19 pandemic they held two international festivals “The World of the Russian theater” under the auspices of the Russian magazine “Theatergoer” and the NGO of cultural and humanitarian initiatives “The world of the theatergoer”. The first festival was held in 2017 in Italy, and the second one in 2018 in Berlin (Briantseva 2018). One can only hope that the pandemic and the disastrous Russian-Ukrainian war will not put an end to the international contacts of the Russian diasporic theaters with their transnational audiences.

One of the most popular music genres of the late Soviet period was bard songs. They lived off the lyrics in which their authors reflected about eternal human values. Many songs were narratives about dramas and tragedies of Soviet history. Starting as a lyrical genre, bard songs evolved into “tourist”, protest, and rock songs. Performed by their authors, they were recorded on magnetic tape during home concerts or in the clubs of universities and R & D institutes. People copied the recordings and learned the texts by heart. In the 1990s, bard clubs were launched by Russophone émigrés in Canada, Europe, Israel, and the U.S.A. They united professional and amateur musicians and people who enjoyed listening to the songs of their youth. The clubs advertise their events and communicate with their members in the social media. The little money the diasporic bard clubs collect as membership dues and from the sale of tickets have to be paid for renting halls where they arrange concerts. Besides meetings of local clubs, lovers of the bard songs invite Russian-singing musicians from the FSU and other countries and organize national and international bard festivals. Their geography encompasses the “near abroad”: Armenia, Belarus, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Latvia, Lithuania and Uzbekistan, as well as the “far abroad”: Canada, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Israel, Poland, Switzerland and the U.S.A. The old repertoire has been greatly enriched in the years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, reflecting new experiences of the songwriters and their audiences. Some of the bards started writing songs in two languages, e.g., the Israeli Eli Bar-Yalom; others translated their favorites into the language of their host country. Thus, songs by Bulat Okudzhava were translated into Croatian, French, English, German, Hebrew, Italian, Spanish, Turkish and some other languages. There were attempts to involve members of the host societies in the bards’ activities, but they were not successful. Most popular bard festivals bring together hundreds of attendees coming with friends or families, but others admit to having just a few dozens of enthusiasts coming. Many bards’ festivals take place in the open: in

parks, forests and on camping grounds; others are held in concert halls. The names of some of the festivals are quotations from the best known songs of this genre, e.g., *Liudi idut po svetu* (People wander the world) by Yurii Vizbor, *Sinii Trolleybus* (Blue streetcar), *Voz'memsia za ruki druzia* (Let's hold hands, my friends) by Bulat Okudzhava, *Za tumanom* (In search of the fog) by Yurii Kukin, and others. (marshruty.ru/Meetings/Meetings.aspx?activityid=33&year=2022). Clearly, some of the festivals planned for 2022 could not take place due to the war in Ukraine, but one can hope that long friendships and common values linking lovers of the bard songs will serve as a bridge helping Russophones in the long and difficult process of making peace with each other.

Student cabaret "The Club of the Witty and Resourceful" and the brain ring "What? Where? When?", both Soviet TV products, continue to be popular among the intellectuals in Russia and in the Diaspora. Quality entertainments of this sort require high proficiency in Russian, and for some young people their desire to participate creates an additional stimulus to improve their Russian-language skills. The cultural phenomenon of KVN which has become a hobby for several generations of Russophones attracts journalists, anthropologists and culturologists. This is what the Russian-American writer and cultural critic Alexander Genis (2015) said:

I am still convinced that it is the most successful invention in the history of TV. Football had existed earlier, but KVN was born and continues thriving on the blue screen. (...) The co-author of this gem was its epoch. The club of the cheerful and resourceful—a student contest in wit was the fruit of our first thaw (...) KVN is a unique phenomenon. It is almost the only artefact of the Soviet epoch, and in its most specific manifestation which outlived the fall of the regime, the disintegration of the empire and what is most amazing, it managed to integrate and thrive in the Russian diaspora, in Israel, Western Europe and certainly in America.

Note that although there were people of different ethnicities among the creators of KVN, and people representing different countries among the players, the game is merited for adhering to Russian "national principles". These principles are not to be questioned or problematized because they are "axioms". Subordinating the individual to the communal is viewed as the main value. Referring to Moscow and Sochi as to "shop windows" the author unwittingly puts KVN into the paradigm of make-belief, in which less attractive elements of life are hidden behind the glamor of model cities. The spread of KVN in the world started in the early 1990s with the mass emigration from the FSU. Among the émigrés were those who played KVN in their home country. They were the initiators who had experience, knew the rules and had connections with other KVN players residing in the FSU and other countries. It was thanks to their efforts that First KVN World Festival took place in Israel in 1994. The teams

represented Russian-speaking communities of the FSU, Germany, Israel and the USA. This event inspired new generations of players in these countries to form their own teams.

Unlike its Russian counterpart, diasporic KVN is not commercialized. Most of the “actors” write the scripts of their performances, stage sketches and even make clothes for the shows. They are not subsidized, but sometimes are sponsored by Russian-speaking businesspeople. Finding a place to meet may also be difficult. Thus, in a recent game, a team of the Israeli Open League expressed their gratitude to the owner of a kindergarten who made its rooms available for their evening rehearsals. KVN players in the diaspora mobilize their transnational connections, inviting teams from the FSU and other countries for games with local teams. Thus, the team of the fashionable Spanish resort Marbelie invited a popular Ukrainian team of the Dnepropetrovsk State University. In order to attract the spectators the game was called an interactive comedy show “Yours and our history in songs and stories” (espanarusa.com/ru/affiche/article/617206, retrieved 15 March 2022).

In 1999, the West-European KVN League was created. First, its members were only German teams, but later they were joined by other countries. In 2007, the League, registered as an NGO, held the 7th European KVN Festival with 27 teams from five countries, and 20 teams were chosen to participate in the European championship (dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/ruwiki/317001, retrieved 27 March 2022). While the first games are hosted by different German towns, the finals are held in Berlin. Although many of the players of the first diasporic teams have stopped playing, the KVN movement is still thriving. In 2015, the teams from seven countries reached the final games of the European championship (berlin24.ru/ru/news/novosti-germanii-segodnja-v-novostjah/5318-berlin-rozdestvenskij-kubok-kvn.html, retrieved 27 March 2022). The American KVN team grew from four teams in 1995 to 40 in 2008. Some of them were formed at such prestigious universities as Harvard and Berkley. The proof of the popularity of KVN in the U.S.A. is the number of tickets sold for the games: on average about 20,000. The captain of the Philadelphia team Anatoly Polinsky said in an interview conducted by the Voice of America in 2008 that KVN is not just an organization of people who get together to write jokes and then perform them, but a structured network of fun people. He is convinced that KVN’s main contribution to the community life is bringing together young Russian-speaking Americans and promotion of their transnational contacts with co-ethnics (golosameriki.com/a/a-33-2008-06-26-voa20/621116.html, retrieved 15 March 2022).

The number of Russophones using the Internet for work and leisure is constantly growing. In Russia, as well as in some countries of the Near Abroad, Yandex is the main search

engine. Its history began in the early 1990s, when all the data it processed could fit on a single server. As a company it appeared in 2000. Today it has offices and representations in ten countries. Besides Russia where it makes 61 per cent of all search traffic, it operates in Belarus, Kazakhstan and Turkey. It is proud of its social projects, e.g., the app that was developed during the COVID-19 pandemic and told the users whether it was safe to leave the house. The company also runs its educational programs in different fields (https://yandex.com/company/general_info/yandex_today, retrieved 22 August 2022). Today most of the users in the “near abroad” use Yandex as their search engine and rely on email providers mail.ru, yandex.ru, and rambler.ru. Among the most popular social networks are VKontakte [InTouch]—the fourth most visited site in Russia, first in Belarus, second in Kazakhstan, 16th in Moldova, 20th in Kyrgyzstan, 34th in Latvia (<https://web.archive.org/web/20090403042044>, <https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries>, retrieved 22 August 2022). Vkontakte enables its users to message each other publicly or privately, create groups, pages, and events; share and tag images, audio, and video; and play browser-based games. Another network popular among the Russian speakers is Odnoklassniki [Classmates]. It positions itself as a platform enabling users to find old friends and stay in touch with them. More than half of the users are people over 30, while in VK, the majority of the users are under 30 (Shiller, Sheludkov 2013). Both social networks were founded in 2006 and in order to remain competitive they keep expanding their technological possibilities. Diasporans choose to use these systems created in Russia because they are good search engines, good postal programs, well-trebled communication networks, especially for those who are more proficient in Russian than in English, and those who prefer to use Cyrillic alphabet.

Many people view their identity through the holidays they celebrate. The New Year was the favourite holiday in the Soviet Union, it was a family holiday devoid of any ideological interference. and it is still much loved in the diaspora, although many people living in Christian countries also celebrate Christmas. Adults often learn about local holidays and rituals connected to them through their children who start learning local traditions still at school. In most cases, attachment to the holidays of the homeland do not cause any conflicts, but there are also exceptions. In Israel, for example, Russian-speakers’ attachment to New Year celebrations alienated the Jewish sector since Israelis identified it with Christianity (St. Sylvester’s Day). It was viewed in the 1990s as unwillingness to integrate into the host country’s culture (Fialkova, Yelenevskaya 2013: 148–182). So, in the 1990s “Russian” celebrations of the New Year were seen as acts of defiance. Gradually, however, the profits

made by restaurants, food stores, and gift shops, as well as realization that it is a secular holiday and time for merrymaking made it more acceptable. Even women married to Muslim Arabs managed to convince their spouses that the New Year cannot be abandoned. Here are excerpts from the interviews with two women married to Palestinian-Israelis conducted by the blogger Tanya Springer ([youtube.com/watch?v=vkz9Y0JeZFU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkz9Y0JeZFU), [youtube.com/watch?v=ZPtGGMT_5ro](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPtGGMT_5ro), retrieved 10 August 2022):

Yu. We are bringing up our child as a Muslim. That is, it says in his ID that he is a Muslim Arab. And this is how we are bringing him up. That is, he knows that he has a Russian mum and an Arab dad. And we celebrate the New Year. We cannot do without the New Year. And we also celebrate two and a half Muslim holidays. As a rule, on these days we visit his [her husband's] family.

T. Tell me, when your children were in the Russian kindergarten, what holidays did they learn about?

L. They learned about all holidays, that is, about all Jewish holidays and of course, the Russian New Year. Incidentally, our first fir tree... when my husband and I moved in together, he immediately bought a fir-tree for me to celebrate the New Year.

T. He brought a fir-tree for you?

L. Yes, yes, that is, it was immediately clear that we would always celebrate the New Year. As far as the Arab holidays are concerned, yes, Yu. was right about these two holidays: as a rule, they are celebrated in the family circle. Members of the family meet, roast shashlik, cook something together. Yes, like this. We don't have any prayers or something.

Our other interviewees having mixed families said that it was important for their husbands that they should wholeheartedly join traditional celebrations of their families as it is a sign of respect. Clearly, preserving festive traditions are much easier in secular than in deeply religious families.

May 1st is an ideological holiday, and in 54 countries, including Australia, Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lichtenstein Lithuania, Luxemburg, Portugal, Slovenia and Sweden it is a day off. In Finland festivities start at 18:00 on the 30th of April, which is the national Student Day. Then the students are joined by those who mark the Walpurgis Night. In the late Soviet period and also today May 1 has been hardly perceived as a day of solidarity, rather it is viewed as the time when spring takes over, and many people go to the country to work in their vegetable gardens.

Migration has significant social and cultural implications, as individuals or groups move from one geographic location to another, often encountering new languages, cultures, and communities. The study of social and cultural aspects of migration involves making sense of the experiences, challenges, and opportunities faced by migrants, as well as examining the social integration processes, cultural adaptation and identity formation. An important aspect of these studies is the interaction between the members of the host society and migrant

communities, and the impact they have on each other. Trust in national institutions, such as the government and police, influences perception of immigrants and the potential threats they might pose. Differences in religion, language, customs and values may create a sense of uncertainty, leading to mistrust or even alienation. Stereotypes, prejudices, and misconceptions about certain religious or cultural groups can contribute to the formation of biased attitudes towards immigrants who belong to those groups (Danaj et al. 2018, Finotelli, Ponzio 2018, Murat, Pistoressi 2009, van Oudenhoven, Ward 2013, Zembylas 2012). Promoting trust-building initiatives, fostering intercultural dialogue, and increasing exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences can help mitigate negative attitudes and foster more inclusive and understanding societies.

Language plays a crucial role in identity formation and maintenance, particularly in the context of migration. Individuals may navigate their sense of self and cultural belonging through language use, code-switching, and language choice. Language can be a means of expressing ethnic, cultural, or national identity, as well as a way to establish connections and create a sense of belonging within a community. Research in this field explores how language use and language ideologies shape identity construction and negotiation. The role of the language is particularly prominent when it is a global language like Russian used for interethnic and international communication (Bassin et al. 2015, Platt 2019, Strukov, Hudspith 2019). The theoretical and methodological frameworks used in research vary, but they often draw from sociolinguistics, anthropology, cultural studies, and identity theory. This multifaceted approach is constantly evolving.

Self-determination on the basis of ethnicity was very strong in the Soviet times. Note that in everyday discourse Russophones do not talk about ethnicity, but about nationality. This was the name of the fifth entry in the internal Soviet passport, the entry which could stigmatize the owner of the document and even determine his or her career opportunities and life trajectories. Although this entry in the internal Russian passport has been abolished, the current Russian propaganda machine addressed to the residents of Russia and to diasporans attempts to boost laypeople's pride in belonging to the Russian world, speaking the Russian language, sharing Russian cultural values and being rooted in the Soviet past. It is done persistently and aims to create the feeling of superiority over other nations. TV stations broadcasting in Russia and in many countries include programs and even commercials that show such landmark events of the Soviet history as victory in World War II, the first manned spaceflight, the voyages of the nuclear-powered icebreakers, and others. Even if a commercial advertises vodka, the last sentence of the clip proclaims: *Nam est' chem gordit'sia* (We have

things to be proud of). In the year 2022 another clip was frequently shown on Russian TV channels. It popularized a medal issued to mark a centenary of the creation of the USSR, aiming to make people nostalgic about the country which is no more but “still alive in the hearts”. Naturally, there are divisions and controversies within the Russian-speaking communities and controversies in the policies and ideologies of different states. The Russian-speaking communities are not coterminous with Russian ones and not necessarily attached to Russia rather people are attached to their countries of origin. Russia’s war against Ukraine again showed divisions in the Russian-speaking communities. In some countries with large Ukrainian communities most Russian-speakers from Ukraine engage with Ukrainian organizations rather than Russian-speaking ones, a preference that was manifested well before 2022 but became more pronounced in time of war (cf. Puleri 2020). The commercial glorifies the “most powerful state of the 20th century” and says that although it can no longer be found on the map it remains in the heart of everyone. In a curious way, the feeling of ethnic superiority sometimes goes hand in hand with the uncontrolled criticism of “our own” and glorification of things foreign.

Conclusion

Russian speakers’ transnational ties help develop immigrant economies, as entrepreneurs, researchers and artists rely on their informal ties, both those that were established prior to emigration and after it. Russian businesses are very successful in the spheres of complementary education and various services, including entertainment industry. Cultural products range from concerts, performances, lectures, and brain rings for the high-brow public to stand-up comedy, cabarets, and shopping and food tours for the less demanding tastes. The COVID-19 pandemic had a heavy toll on small immigrants’ businesses which required physical presence of the providers of services and customers, but it opened numerous online opportunities. Online courses, health, management, and nutritional consultations and even sports training have become widespread and popular.

Life in the Russian-speaking diasporas is not isolated from the events in the home country. Like annexation of the Crimea in 2014, the war Russia waged against Ukraine caused a split in the diasporas dividing their members into those who approve of it and those who condemn it. Many diasporans irrespective of their ethnicity, citizenship or residence permit feel obliged to help Ukrainian refugees and political emigrants from Russia. Some ties have

ceased to exist, but new connections are being built instead. The whole transnational community of the Russian-speakers is undergoing restructuring.

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