



## Russians in the City – 'patriots' with a touch of spleen

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**Abstract:** The article dwells on post-Soviet migrants' internet communications in the UK and places them within the context of contemporary Russian Diaspora debates. It argues that digital developments, community building and social capital accumulation were tightly connected to technological developments and changes in migration flows. The changes were indirectly related to shifts within political leadership in both countries and shall be discussed in connection to a specific historical context. The author argues that internet and digital communications played a key role in the coining of a 'Russian in Britain' self-identification, but had a little if any impact on the construction of off-line community organisations.

**Keywords:** post-Soviet, migration, cultural capital, community, sootchestvenniki project

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In this article I am attempting to trace the development of Russian migrants' internet communications in the UK, and analyse online participation and networking using the theory of social capital. Firstly, I will explain the methodological aspects of the study and describe my corpus, collected during a number of field studies in 2002-2012. I will mainly focus on two distinctively different nodes: the legendary forum *Bratok* that almost monopolised migrants' on-line communication at some point in the early 2000s, and a private on-line based club, *Russians in the City*. Furthermore, I will examine the impact of changing migration tendencies on internet networking and argue that although the virtual and the real are closely connected, they are not fully interdependent in terms of social organisation.

I have to begin with a seemingly distant issue and refer to the connotations evoked by the word 'spleen' in both English and Russian cultures. Spleen, a small but vital organ in the human body, has been linked since Ancient Greece to a variety of emotions from malice to melancholy. In the seventeenth century, Shakespeare provided the tag 'spleeny Lutheran', and in the eighteenth Addison described a pleasant fellow as having 'so much Wit and Mirth and Spleen'. In Russia of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *splin* was used to describe a sombre and stagnant feeling or situation, and such poets as Pushkin and Nekrasov used it in passing without addi-

tional explanations.<sup>1</sup> Although the word is not widely used today, it is still well known to Russians (including the Web-2.0 generation). A famous rock-group from St. Petersburg chose the name Spleen (Splín, Spleán) and returned the word into the Russian youth vocabulary by writing a song called ‘Anglo-Russian dictionary’.<sup>2</sup> Musical fan clubs have discussed the name of the group several times online during the last decade, and as well as citing the aforementioned quotations from Pushkin, added further definitions of spleen as ‘a Europeanised’ version of the Russian (ancient Rus) word for desperate thoughts, and noted the fatalism and pre-determinism associated with it.<sup>3</sup> Another popular song by *Spleen* – also quoted by the musical forum participants – is based on Sasha Chernyi’s poem *Pod Surdinku*, where the word spleen is used thus, ‘I am moth-eaten by my spleen (...) Sprinkle me with naphthalene (...)’. Therefore, the word *splín* is, probably, less connected to the emotional sphere and such feelings as melancholy, but reflects social loneliness and detachment of an individual.

I will argue that in the same vein *splín* – as a sense of apathy, inability to make change – is spreading in the Russian language nodes and in the off-line discourses of contemporary British-based Russian-speaking professionals, where it signifies the failure of the ‘brave new’ internet world to break through real-life social and political inequalities. Methodologically this argument is rooted in Lotman’s ideas of appropriation of the New. When Lotman discusses from a semiotic perspective the process of the appropriation of ‘external’ (foreign or new) cultural symbols/events by a stable cultural system, he distinguishes between a stable core and a dynamic periphery of semantic objects, where new meanings are created. Lotman wrote that the periphery is the semiotic ‘hot spot’ (Lotman 1990 [2001]: 136) and slowly influences the core. *Splín* in this system would represent the situation when the interaction between the periphery and the centre is broken and change does not happen.

This article adopts Bourdieuvian theory of social capital as a theoretical framework for the study of migration and identity dynamics. This framework is not often used in mainstream migration research, where displacements tend to be interpreted either through the lens of ‘external’ to migrants political circumstances, economic conditions and legal provisions or only through migrants’ subjective perceptions and personal motivations. Bourdieuvian ideas are more employed by business management research and human resource studies of migrants as employees and co-workers. For example, in their recent work, A. Ariss and J. Syed apply the social capital theory to analyse how different forms of capital are mobilised by migrants – in this case highly skilled Lebanese migrants in France – to achieve success in career construction (Ariss and Syed 2011). But such studies do not cover human capital transformations in connection to the growing role of the internet – something that this article attempts to do.

The Bourdieuvian framework is currently increasingly used by advanced historical-sociological and historical-comparative research in migration studies, and was employed by E. Morawska, who noted back in 2007 that ‘the existence of social networks of information and

<sup>1</sup> Pushkin famously wrote in *Evgeniy Onegin* ‘A disease (...) similar to English spleen, in short the Russian boredom’. Depicting a gloomy picture of the Russian capital Nekrasov in his poem *O pogode* (<http://ilibrary.ru/text/1532/p.5/index.html>) describes a city wall that ‘evokes depression and spleen’.

<sup>2</sup> ‘When you are at ease with everybody – this is joy, When you are alone everywhere – this is spleen’, <http://www.pereday.ru=1994631&q> accessed 21 April 2013.

<sup>3</sup> <http://muz.ru/forum/viewtopic.php?f=38&t=927> and <http://vk.com/club8952604> (accessed 21 April 2013).

assistance, otherwise called social capital, significantly increases the likelihood of continued international migration between places of origin and destination’ (Morawska 2007). In her works on Polish migration she highlights the dynamics of different forms of capital, and notes that migrants develop new strong and weak social links in the process of enhancing socio-cultural capital with host life orientations and values.

In 1986 when Bourdieu published *The Forms of Capital* (Bourdieu 1986) he could not have predicted the emergence and proliferation of the internet. Along with the forms of capital defined by Bourdieu (social, cultural, economic and symbolic) I am using here the notion of information capital (Morawska 2011). Information capital does not simply imply an access to information or the information *per se*, but should be understood as a vehicle of symbolic and social capital production during the process of communication. This new, internet induced, power of manipulating information through both informal and formal digital networks, is a power accessible to anybody without specific economic investments – this kind of merging of symbolic, social and cultural capital could not have been predicted back in the 1980s-90s. In this article I attempt to trace how these developments channel migration and incorporate emerging networks and identity production in migrants’ circles. I also argue that due to the existence of information capital, migrants’ digital communications played a key role in the coining of a ‘Russian in Britain’ self-identification, but had little if any impact on the construction of off-line community organisations.

This article is a by-product of my contribution to collective projects on cultural conflict and reproduction in migrants’ communities (MIGNET EU 2010-2012), global E-diasporas atlas (2011-2012) and stems from my PhD undertaken in the early 2000s. The article is intentionally written in the form of an essay to fill in the gap between two different scales of analyses: I am attempting to put the results of relatively small scale and non-connected case studies into the wider historical perspective of the growing migration flow from post-Soviet territories to Britain, and to assess the role of migrants’ internet communications in community construction. As a result, this is a meso-level study grounded in empirical hands-on data but contextualised on a broader historical scale.

While working on this article I was using and sometimes comparing materials of two migrants’ digital hubs: a web forum, *Bratok*, and a private online based club of young Russian professionals called *Russians in the city*. My aim was to trace the recent history of post-Soviet migrations to Britain, and to connect the development of migrants’ internet communications in the UK with social and political trends in migration flows, and then to contextualise them within contemporary Russian Diaspora debates. I am using the findings of my PhD, for which I collected a corpus of digital texts with the aim of examining migrants’ communication and identity negotiation, and developed and justified sample frames and analysed objects of virtual discourse in Foucauldian and Lotman’s traditions. I am also using both virtual and ‘real’ anthropological data collected from 2002-2012 while working on the aforementioned projects. This data includes online communications, received newsletters, distributed questionnaires (including digital questionnaires), notes from visits to various off-line gatherings of post-Soviet migrants and face-to-face and Skype interview transcripts.

## Migration in the 1990s

Until the end of 1980s the number of Russians (Russian speakers) living in the UK was no higher than a couple of hundred people. Descendants of previous waves of emigration, a handful of dissidents and a small number of spouses of international marriages constituted this population. All other Russian-speaking residents travelled back and forth through official channels of representation (visits of delegations, diplomatic missions, cultural and educational exchanges).

*Perestroika* saw a slight growth in migration between the two countries, but it was only after the liberalization of travel from Russia, that migration became statistically noticeable. However, it is problematic to provide reliable statistics on the number of Soviet and post-Soviet migrants in the UK. The Russian Embassy in London kept records of Soviet citizens, but does not possess information on *nevozvrashchentsy*, that is, those dissidents or former Soviet citizens who applied for American, Israeli or any other citizenship before setting in Britain. Post-Soviet migration to the UK is also poorly mapped due to the temporary character of displacements as well as the multiple citizenships of migrants (dual citizenship acquired in Britain as well as national citizenships of Russian-speakers from the former post-Soviet republics). For example, the 1991 UK census listed citizens of the former USSR. According to the one conducted in 2001, there were 15644 Russian citizens living in Britain, while the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) estimated there were in fact 18900 Russian citizens settled in the UK that same year (Annual Abstract of Statistics 2002). These figures naturally excluded not only people from Soviet territories with or without the citizenship of their new nationalising state, but also Russian migrants that lived in the UK on fixed-term visas and who were not entitled to settlement status. A number of quantitative studies in consecutive years also provided contradictive data. The Mapping Exercise conducted by the International Organisation of Migration in July 2007 was questionnaire-based and concluded that '300,000 Russians or those who consider themselves as such currently call Britain their home, with a very noticeable surge of approximately 100,000 in the past two years. The numbers are however highly approximate and not formally confirmed by any authority, including the Home Office' (Mapping Exercise 2007:6).

During the late 1990s the number of Russians living in the UK grew significantly. This growth was achieved mainly through the granting of work permit visas and thus from the very beginning it was limited to intellectual (professional, artistic, academic) and partly business migration. Intellectual migration from Russia in 1990s was pre-determined by both an interest in Russia in Britain and the destruction of the traditional system of human capital growth in Russia. Little is written on the emigration of highly skilled Russian professionals during the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> The migrations were not only geographical, but included 'emigration' from the professions without displacements: Russian scientists were leaving their academic institutions for newly created business ventures e.g. exchanging their cultural capital for economic, which was not only guaranteed but also risky. Thus, in Russia, the 'troubled' 90s, as they are now called, were marked by a sharp devaluation of cultural capital in all the forms

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<sup>4</sup> Some statically reliable data can be found in *International mobility of the Highly Skilled*, published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in 2001.

noted by Bourdieu, namely embodied (e.g. in the form of time spent on cultural incorporation), objectified (e.g. in form of material objects) and institutionalized (e.g. legally bounded certification) (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Migration to Britain allowed highly skilled Russian newcomers to capitalize on their knowledge and to further develop their cultural capital.

The emigration of highly skilled migrants from Russia to Britain in the 1990s was mainly an individual or nuclear family venture. In the absence of digital networks and information exchange the majority of prospective migrants did not rely on colleagues' help to initiate or assist migration and settlement. Neither did such movements create a phenomenon of 'chained migration', that is, the invitation of former colleagues/relatives to the new place of work and residence. In order to organize the migration, traditional forms of social capital were engaged: *vis-a-vis* contacts during conferences and business meetings and connections through friends and family. Naturally, the process mainly touched central Russian cities and to some extent well-known academic centres in the provinces.

The number of Russians living in the UK grew steadily during the 1990s, but the legacy of differences in the way people were brought up and socialized in Russia and Britain disturbed the process of capital exchange at that time. Scholarly investigations of whether Russian scientists can ever integrate into new professional circles represent now a peculiar reading (for example, Tsukerman 1999), but these texts demonstrate that the imagined and real differences in the symbolic capital of Russian newcomers and the host population were significant at that time and complicated the process of identity negotiations, or, to use Bourdieuian notions, obstructed migrants' attempts to achieve recognition of their social and cultural capital in the new country of residence.

The above described socio-cultural differences complicated in many cases the construction of social networks with neighbours or co-workers. In terms of social networks the migrants were involved in two separate information domains. The first network was still geographically based in the homeland - social networks at the place of origin kept alive through gift and visit exchanges, phone calls, post and emerging e-mail correspondence. And the other domain was based in the country of residence and represented a circle of new acquaintances from a growing number of post-Soviet migrants. This period is well described in a groundbreaking study by H. Kopnina, a second-generation migrant herself, who studied Russian migrants in the 1990s (Kopnina 2005). She described migrants' networks as a number of non-connected and exclusive individual memberships created on the bases of shared cultural and social capital. Kopnina found migrants' connections locked within specific social niches, noted migrants' self-isolation and distancing from their Russian past and reported no traces of solidarities between them, apart from those private and close connections often developed before their emigration.

Sometimes, especially for those Russians who settled outside London, the second type of social network (with other post-Soviet migrants) developed in the form of indirect, mediated communication via recently emerged Russian language UK based newspapers. One of my respondents migrated to Britain in 1992 and reflected on his early experiences in Britain: 'We came to London as a family when I got a research fellowship. I hardly spoke to any other Russians in London. There were too many things to be preoccupied with. Work, money,

language... Everything was completely different from my Russian life: from cheeses to home repairs. We needed guidance in many aspects, but I would not have trusted any advice of my countrymen back then'.<sup>5</sup> Further into the interview he described at length how Russian-language newspapers published in Britain were for him and his family the only useful source of practical information on living in Britain.

The first Russian language newspaper *London Courier* emerged in May 1994; the second one *London-Info* exactly 5 years later. Both papers provided extensive information on practical sides of life in Britain: schools, public transport, used and new cars, property and immigration issues. Local information was specifically tailored for post-Soviet migrants, serving two major migrants' needs of the period: one was the vector of interest directed to learning more about the country of residence, and the second, the vector of nostalgia. In the interviews people recalled their exploration of local habits and places of interest through newspaper articles, as well as their learning about rules, institutions and authorities through Russian language newspaper publications. The respondents also recollected reading comments about events in Russia, interviews with Russian celebrities and reviews of new movies. Russian language newspapers at that time were an important source of information for migrants given the fact that a significant number of newcomers were not fluent English speakers. It should also be taken into account that financial, consumer and political realities in 1990s in post-Soviet countries and in Britain did not match, and equivalent social support structures often were not in existence.

Despite the popularity of Russian language papers, post-Soviet migrants' social connections in 1990s were still limited by either their professional circle or by their connections 'transported' from home. Kopnina arrived at the conclusion that, at the time the Russian diaspora did not exist in any form. Although close friends sometimes provided informal help and support, there were no immediate or mediated networks of support, assistance, advice or information between migrants.

### **Brave, New and Digital**

Then, something new occurred. Although the character of migration from the post-Soviet states to the UK had not been altered by any legislative measures, digital communications were developing and created a completely new possibility of accumulating human capital (in form of information capital) by migrants. The internet networks that were made possible by technological developments were mediated, non-hierarchical and rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari 1980). The notion of the 'rhizome' was borrowed from the natural sciences and was what allowed the philosophers to create a new model of knowledge and information transfer: the rhizome ignores organisational structures, but allows multiple horizontal (cross) connections between powers, organisations, individuals and contents.

In the early 2000s chat-rooms were giving way to forums that, technologically, opened up new possibilities for asynchronous responses, were convenient for people with office jobs and facilitated more stable online identities. But more importantly, they allowed for the es-

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<sup>5</sup> Interview 12 for the MIGNET EU project, September 2011, Edinburgh.

tablishing of new mediated connections (rather than occasional contacts in chat rooms) across social and geographical divides. Although technological advances have altered the way digitally literate people communicated all over the globe, migrants became the first group that made extensive use of this medium. As the project e-Diasporas proved, the internet produced a phenomenon of ‘connected migrants’ – highly digitally engaged subjects, constantly using electronic communication tools despite possible differentiation in cultural and economic capital.<sup>6</sup> Internet engagement of post-Soviet migrants, the majority of whom belonged to the group of highly skilled migrants, was further facilitated by the availability of computers at their workplace and helped establish long-distance connections with colleagues all over the world. The following table demonstrates the importance of the internet to post-Soviet migrants in Europe. According to my archived data, the number of websites associated with migrants from the former USSR was significantly higher than the number of web places created by migrants of other origin also widely represented in Europe (e.g. Polish, Pakistani, French-speaking Canadians).

**Table 1:** The number of ethnic websites created by migrants and their organisations in Europe (letters P-R)

▶ <a href="#">Pakistani</a> (3)
▶ <a href="#">Quebecois</a> (1)
▶ <a href="#">Palestinian</a> (1)
▶ <a href="#">Persian</a> (1)
▶ <a href="#">Romanian</a> (12)
▶ <a href="#">Peruvian</a> (1)
▶ <a href="#">Romansch</a> (4)
▶ <a href="#">Piemontese</a> (0)
▶ Russian-language (647)
▶ <a href="#">Polish</a> (30)
▶ <a href="#">Portugese</a> (10)
▶ <a href="#">Punjabi</a> (2)

Source: <https://searcheurope.com> (accessed 8 May 2005)

Migrants’ web forums became places where one’s cultural capital, brought by migrants from the previous place of residence, could be fully validated through the use of native language, extensive literary quotations, historic allusions and professional remarks. On account of the new social capital related to their new place of residence, claims of belonging were accumulated. Mediated communications reached the stage of articulating a new form of self-identification, ‘Russians in Britain’. I would like to argue that the year 2002 became a turning point in the self-reflection of Russian-speaking migrants and in some ways marked the emergence of the Russian community in the UK. This new self-identification was ‘digitally

<sup>6</sup> The concept developed by D Diminescou – for more details see <http://www.e-diasporas.fr>.

driven': when the forum platform *Bratok* was created, communication through the forum initiated the new identity discourse of being Russian in Britain. It happened in one of the first online threads – a new identity – that of being 'nash', a Russian-speaker in Britain – was articulated.

**Fig. 1:** First Entries in *Bratok*

**Bratok**

26.04.2002, 19:44

Снова форум пришлось менять и покупать за &pound;50 новый :( Сейчас все должно работать!!! всем извинения за неудобства....

**Malyshka**

26.04.2002, 19:59

Ладно, не переживай, главное то, что ты его восстановил!:D

**Bratok**

26.04.2002, 20:46

Да. сейчас снова толпа наших подвалит :)

**Bratok**

26.04.2002, 19:44

I had to change the forum and buy a new one for &pound;50:( Now everything should work!!! Sorry for the inconvenience everybody ....

**Malyshka**

26.04.2002, 19:59

Alright, don't worry, the important thing is that you restored it!:D

**Bratok**

26.04.2002, 20:46

Yes, [our] guys [the crowd] will drop by soon again :)

*Source:* <http://www.rutalk.co.uk/archive/index.php/t-1.html> (accessed 12 December 2012)

The correspondence in *Bratok* was in Russian only; however nothing in the interface alluded to the common past of migrants and their countries of origin. There were two logos: a red double-decker and an outline of buildings in Central London. The motto 'Community with mind' (in English) referred to the self-inscribed intellectual character of migration and was widely quoted by the participants in their messages.



**Fig. 2:** A later version of BRATOK’s logo with a mixture of Cyrillic and Latin scripts specifically stated that the website serves as a communication platforms for Russian people in Great Britain.



Source: <http://www.bratok.co.uk> (accessed 1 November 2004).

There was nothing special about *Bratok* as a node: it used a standard interface; communication included a range of topics from everyday life to politics and was divided into sub-forums; messages were post-moderated (this was not yet a common practice in those early days of web-communications when pre-moderation was the standard); registration gave access to additional features but unregistered readers were also able to follow discussions, search the site and use its archive. But within a year there were more than 10 000 registered users of the platform. The only explanation for *Bratok* becoming a media phenomenon of the early 2000s was that it engaged an already existing communication need.

The audience of the Forum was divided into two main groups – registered users (that were able to send messages and comments) and unregistered readers. But the impact of discussions was somewhat wider: Russian-speaking migrants occupied a particular occupational and social niche in the UK, and co-workers (non-users) discussed with Forum participants what the latter read or wrote online. Every one getting in touch with everyone else created the impression of a real-life community. The forum quickly became a public information channel and was used by traditional media as a tool to monitor public interest. The editor-in-chief (2003-2008) of *London-Info* confirmed in his interview (2012) that he used to browse the site to monitor and find the most acute topics and occasionally quoted comments and threads from *Bratok*.<sup>7</sup> Such use of the web-materials by the traditional media in the UK further widened the audience.

And... there was no place to spleen or *splin*. Passion transcended discussions. ‘Lengthy discussions were mesmerizing. I remember I pushed myself not to check new entries too often while at work, but I also had to watch my time at night when I followed discussions (I found interesting) or simply browsed new talks’ – recollected one of the respondents.<sup>8</sup> The most recurrent and ‘populated’ threads and topics of discussions were the local population, migrants of other origins, Russian history as well as the nationalizing tendencies of former Soviet States.

More importantly, this new web forum fostered a network of informal communication that was wider than a circle of close friends among Russian-speaking migrants. This community was symbolic in a sense that the members were not often in personal touch with each

<sup>7</sup> Skype interview November 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Interview for the MIGNET EU project, December 2011, Edinburgh.

other, but felt associated with the community at large through mediated communications. People went online to talk about local news and discuss political developments, or when they wanted to meet with other post-Soviet migrants locally (in the same city and neighbourhood), or when they sought to establish links with people from a specific city in the country of origin. There were threads inquiring about *rodnye* [kin], *nashi* [ours] in the city/area of residence in the UK.<sup>9</sup> The threads also reflected an existing need to discuss their settlement experiences with people sharing the same cultural and historical background, regardless of their social standing in the new country.

One can see how migrants' new *We, Us* was articulated in these discussions.<sup>10</sup> This understanding of *Us* was constructed through the Othering. The archive of *Bratok* contains a number of discussions reflecting migrants' preoccupation with how the local population is different from the newcomers, and with how Russian migrants are different from 'other' migrants. The Soviet past was also an important discursive category. The Soviet past and Soviet legacy was subjected to fierce debates. For example, in the discussion 'Sovok', ironic messaging with high numbers of smileys and *off-tops* typical for the website was substituted by categorical statements such as 'I do not want to communicate with this Sovok', 'the main feature of Sovok – is impassable vulgarity' etc. The participants blamed the Soviet Union for limiting freedom and enslaving citizens. At the same time, the participants praised the high achievements of art and science in the USSR.<sup>11</sup> By rejecting the Soviet (totalitarian) past and at the same time praising the high level of education and culture in their (Soviet) upbringing, migrants agreed upon some universal, 'European' character of their native culture and upbringing, one that allowed them to justify their belonging to the new place of residence.

The complex system of Self-Other categorization crystallized the understanding of *Us* as Russian Britons or British Russians, bordering on an idea of a new cultural minority: Russian speakers of any age, ethnicity, professional and social standing migrated to the UK from the Soviet Union. This claim therefore sought to transcend the differences among migrants.

Both online and offline meetings, announced through the forum, were intentionally egalitarian. There were no threads describing financial difficulties of community members, but there were appeals to help various charities both in Britain and Russia. At the same time in 'the online domain' participants and moderators could ridicule any discussions related to financial prosperity. Participants with privileged social standings reduced the standing of their online personalities by choosing non-glamorous mottos, avatars, or nicknames ('village boy', 'rabotai v pole', 'letaiu kak vorona'). This egalitarianism was also stipulated by calling each other friends, or *bratishka* [bro].

During my fieldwork in 2002–2004 I often visited off-line gatherings where similar codes were used. In 2004 I joined a winter hiking tour in the Lomond area of Scotland. The hike was advertised online. A participant from a deprived area of Glasgow asked on-line for a lift and fellow hikers, who did not know him personally, came to pick him up in their smart car. Among the hikers, there were many who knew each other through other events while

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.rutalk.co.uk/archive/index.php/t-1.html> (accessed 12 December 2012).

<sup>10</sup> For more details about the content of *Bratok* in 2002–2005 and diversified system of 'Othering' see Morgunova 2010.

<sup>11</sup> For ex., the discussion *Sovok* <http://www.rutalk.co.uk/archive/index.php/t-7115.html> (accessed 12 November 2012). For its analyses – see Morgunova 2006.

others were new – there was a former PhD student working as a builder, a consultant from a City firm, a political refugee, a lawyer, a business advisor and an unemployed wife of a Glaswegian. People used first names or on-line inks to address each other. The group was also ethnically diverse.

Once I received a message from somebody I read and debated with on-line. This person – a courier who missed his train back to London – asked if he could stay with us overnight, since my place of residence was mentioned in the forum as Edinburgh. He sent such messages to a number of people who resided in Scotland and, I learned later, he was invited to stay by all.

Other observations relate to my visits to Russian social events, such as parties/meetings/clubbing, organized by *Bratok*. Participants symbolically downplayed their social differences by making fun of their office clothes, using their nicknames instead of real names and surnames and rejecting any ‘glamorous’ references to themselves. An unwritten rule at these gatherings was: underplay one’s real-life privileges and difficulties and highlight their common post-Soviet background. Russian songs were played, mushroom picking outings fixed and Russian literature and art discussed.

The emerging identity of being a *Russian in Britain* facilitated migrants’ digital quest for ‘rightful’ membership in the new country. I would like to argue that this self-identification helped, at least partly, in overcoming the initial difficulties of validating the cultural and symbolic capital brought from the native country into the value system of the host country. The social and cultural capital acquired back home by highly-skilled Russian migrants was not directly exchangeable in the new society due to the relational character of cultural capital value. French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, investigating the relational meaning of human values, places them in a changing system of human organisations and concludes that

which is reputed to be of value in itself – freedom, equality, happiness, existence, art, God, or the diamond – only has value under the condition of being defined by something else (or by its rarity, which amounts to the same thing). Price is thus always an interpretation. To speak of “values” as absolutes thus makes no sense. Values are therefore recognized signs, appreciated and exchangeable in a context or in a given system. (Nancy 2005: 438)

Values could be declared and accepted as absolutes only within a homogenous community. And I would like to argue that at this time and probably under the influence of the web forum debates a number of social barriers blurred to create a new sense of ‘we-ness’ amongst post-Soviet migrants in Britain. And these solidarities were to spread from on-line into off-line relationships.

And at the same time, on-line communication produced new form of capital – an informational one: all voices were heard, new names remembered. Information capital earned on-line seemed to create the ideal conditions for some to become off-line personas.

Those same years saw the first attempts of the diaspora to self-organise off-line, and this process was also reflected (but not initiated) on-line.<sup>12</sup> I found the threads evinced attempts to create traditional off-line community organizations in July 2002. A person with the nickname Anna Morozova referred to some discussions in the ‘women’s corner’ and suggested creating a civic or political organization to lobby the interests of post-Soviet migrants in the UK, but her idea was dismissed by other participants. A participant called Pixie sent a message: ‘Why do we need political organisations? Are you missing the USSR?’<sup>13</sup> A long sequence of ironic comments followed. In November 2002, a new thread was launched to support the first Forum of the Russian Speaking Community and was met by the internet community with the same negativity and rejection.<sup>14</sup> Participants also refused to vote and take part in any elections on-line and off-line. The group identity of *Russians in Britain*, which was under construction in *Bratok*, did not require or promote political representation of post-Soviet migrants in their new country of residence.

The *Russians in the City* club was created that same year (2002) and took the form of a mailing list for Russian language professionals based in the UK. Xenia Bobkova and Julia Zagonek, recent London graduates, had received jobs in the City of London and wanted to stay in touch with others like them (Russian-speaking colleagues and former classmates).<sup>15</sup> Their first mailing list contained 10 names. *Russians in the City* (RIC) also intentionally rejected the forum as the chosen mode of their web-presence. There was not much textual information circulated and the newsletter does not provide enough data to analyse the ‘othering’ in a manner similar to my conducted study using *Bratok* discussions.

Bobkova and Zagonek decided to limit their subscribers to colleagues in the financial and legal industries only and to admit new members only on the basis of personal recommendation. Their restrictive approach had yet another criterion – being a Russian-speaker, which in 2002 necessarily implied having post-Soviet experiences. In my interviews with Bobkova I asked why they decided to consciously limit their potential audience, but have not received an extensive answer beyond wanting ‘to be different’ from the others. The same connection between on-line and off-line activities was noticeable among RIC subscribers: participants arranged house exchanges, asked about teachers for kids, planned holidays and mushrooms picking trips online, or asked for help with delivering parcels to Russia. But the exclusive and restrictive subscription criteria were indeed very different from the egalitarian and inclusive solidarities of *Russians in Britain* so visible in web-places like *Bratok*. The nodes complemented each other rather than competed. Some subscribers of *Russians in the City* were at the same time active participants in *Bratok*.

In essence, the existence of a common identity online – be it *Russians in Britain* or *Russians in the City* – helped add value to the human capital of migrants, and created a place where their ‘native-country-born’ social and cultural capital was absolutely and unquestionably accepted through the common grid of associations and markers.

<sup>12</sup> For ex. <http://www.rutalk.co.uk/archive/index.php/t-3147.html> and <http://www.rutalk.co.uk/archive/index.php/t-3258.html> (accessed 12 October 2012).

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.rutalk.co.uk/archive/index.php/t-836.html> (accessed 12 October 2012).

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.rutalk.co.uk/archive/index.php/t-3147.html> (accessed 12 October 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Interview 9 for the MIGNET EU project, July 2011, London.

## **A Utopia That Was Never Realised?**

The subsequent years saw a dramatic rise in both the immigration rate and in the digital and offline infrastructure of the community. Although in January 2002 a new type of visa – HSMP (Highly Skilled Migrant Programme) – gave almost unrestricted settlement rights to highly-skilled migrants and their families, it was the expansion of the EU in 2004 that added a completely new stream of Russian-speaking migrants from a number of new EU countries, former Soviet territories. These were mainly young people looking to fill job vacancies unwanted by the British. Both informal internet and formal business links between the post-Soviet space and Britain brought to the island a significant number of new settlers through international marriages.

These changes coincided with significant modifications that were then taking place to the social aspects of the internet. Facebook started in 2004, Odnoklassniki in 2005 and LiveJournal (ZheZhe) (which changed the ownership in 2005). These tools created a much more complex system of online social communication. These platforms provided a multiplicity of diversified, goal-orientated channels for a user. Web 2.0 created the possibility of establishing a stable on-line profile in social and blogging platforms, and therefore the possibility of converting information capital into social and economic capital. Such a prospect signified the dawn of a more pragmatic, mundane and tangible use of digital networks.

The year 2005 can be marked as the beginning of the next (ongoing) stage in community development. It is the beginning of formal community building and at the same time the polarization of the diaspora. In 2005 at least three more newspapers and a magazine were launched together with the Russian language radio station and the Londongrad BBC project. A flurry of business and not-for-profit ventures has followed, and the majority of them have taken care to create their network profiles and web representations properly (Morgunova 2012). Community organisations were mushrooming: clubs, Saturday schools and cultural centres. This was followed up by the ‘Sootechestvenniki’ project, which embodied an emerging interest in Russia in Russian passport holders living outside of Russia.<sup>16</sup>

*Bratok*, the hub of egalitarianism, was sold and then revived under the names of *Rupoint* and then *Rutalk*, but it never regained the popularity and fame it held before. The web community became more diversified and dispersed through several international social networks and blogging platforms. But the *Russians in the City* club has survived. Since 2002 the number of subscribers has grown significantly from 10 to over 2000. There are professionals that have kept their membership for ten years, others have dropped off, while some left for countries in the former Soviet region but stayed in touch.

The club continues to be strictly secular, apolitical, multiethnic and describes itself as the only Russian business online club in Britain. The organization positions itself as an invitation-only private club for Russian speaking professionals who work in the UK and share post-Soviet experiences. Bobkova in her interview pointed out that ‘the members may or may not debate the future of Russia or other related issues’, but the club members ‘do not socialise on the basis of who thinks what about political situation, compatriots or anything else’.

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<sup>16</sup> For community building and sootechestvenniki project see Byford 2012.

Communications in *Russians in the City* are streamed through several channels: an online newsletter informing members about cultural events or their enquiries concerning renting flats, sending documents to Moscow or other post-Soviet cities, through offline meetings in clubs and outings into the countryside organised for the members. Both channels offer a means of communication between professionals in similar fields (there are communication subdivisions for those working in hedge funds, legal firms, banks etc.). Zagonek proudly said in her interview to the BBC that there is no institution in the city where they do not have at least one member.<sup>17</sup> Some members describe *Russians in the City* as a network of opportunity – a chance to meet colleagues and launch new business projects together. They insist that they do not feel, behave or ‘sell’ themselves as Russians. Young professionals do not have to care about validating their home-grown cultural and social capital in the country of residence, but still they see their Russianness as a competitive advantage in their careers.

Professional networking, rather than simply the elitist approach of the RIC, can be better assessed in comparison with the *Snob* project, as analysed by Roesen (2011). Although different in scale and financing, both projects claim a selective approach to their membership. Several years ago *Snob* opened the veil of mystery around its membership and allowed those uninvited to become members and get access to the content. This move can be seen to be as much an egalitarian gesture as a smart marketing decision: by opening their profiles and giving access to their blogs the new Russian elites validate their economic capital in the native country in a way similar to the validation which was needed by members of *Bratok* when they wanted to establish themselves in the new country of residence. Members of *Russians in the City* feel comfortable enough in their professional circle in London and keep their online and offline communication closed to strangers. Interestingly, Julia Zagonek still opened a profile on *Snob*.<sup>18</sup> And this alludes to the fact that 10 years ago some members of *Russians in the City* were also active participants of *Bratok*.

Members of the RIC benefit not only from business networking but can get advice in parenting and family matters. The organizations decided to widen these activities and in October 2012 it launched a new online programme to assist Russian-speaking parents in their search and choice of Russian schools and activities, and also initiated the first offline Russian school fair which took place in Pushkin house in London (October 2012). The need to nurture the language, to preserve cultural affiliations and to pass both to the next generation remains, but in *Russians in the City* this need is associated more with individual preferences and family pastimes rather than with collective virtual discussions. Useful educational hubs are in demand, but passionate debates on the future of Russian culture are now in the past. Heritage language and culture tend to become a private matter rather than a collective on-line experience.

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<sup>17</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/avconsole/nb\\_wm\\_fs.shtml?redirect=fs.shtml&lang=ru&nbram=1&nbwm=1&bbwm=1&bbram=1&ws\\_pathstory=http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/avnews/avfile/2007/01/&bbews=1&ws\\_storyid=070122\\_city](http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/avconsole/nb_wm_fs.shtml?redirect=fs.shtml&lang=ru&nbram=1&nbwm=1&bbwm=1&bbram=1&ws_pathstory=http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/avnews/avfile/2007/01/&bbews=1&ws_storyid=070122_city) (accessed 10 March 2012).

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.snob.ru/profile/5355> (accessed 21 April 2013).

## **Public Spheres of the Migrants’ Web and Beyond**

The identification of Russian settlers as Russians in Britain was not sustainable and disappeared, not so much under the pressure of new geopolitical realities (such as the Orange revolution or Ossetia conflict), but as a result of the changing face of migration. Probably, it was buried under the influx of newcomers who did not fit into the elitist idea of the ‘community with mind’ – a purely intellectual migration, whose only problem is the unfair ‘exchange rate’ in translating their allegedly highly developed cultural and symbolic capital into some local system of values. ‘Londograd is now called Londonovka – says Xenia Bobkova. –‘It is not a city, it is a village. If you need a nanny, in a day’s time one can easily find somebody from Ivano-Frankovsk (in Ukraine) living now in London’.<sup>19</sup> So what is left from the egalitarian period? Just a touch of spleen – or *splin*? Social divisions in the community became more important than the sheer fact of speaking the same language. The information capital of online presence became more related to economic capital than to cultural capital. For example, in my digital survey on the role the RIC plays in the lives of its members half of all respondents stated it to be ‘a source of information’, while almost 70 percent regarded it as a, ‘a source of new contacts’ in addition to being an ever important ‘Russian language hub’ (83%).

Unexpectedly, Russia in a way becomes closer than before as my analyses of recent interviews and questionnaires for the MIGNET EU Project shows. A digital questionnaire on political participation was included in a newsletter sent to *Russians in the City* members, but the response rate was low and I distributed the same questionnaire among Russian professionals in Scotland, only to find out that the results were almost identical. There were 26 fully answered questionnaires in total. Although Russian-speaking professionals discussed and referred to British realities as their home country, problems and achievements, none of the respondents had in the last ten years taken an active part in any form of political action or campaign regarding British issues. However, the respondents actively participated in the protests and discussions during recent election campaigns in Russia, either by blogging or by protesting on the streets. Russia retains its newsworthiness and remains in the sphere of online discussions. The following chart from the distributed digital survey among highly skilled Russian migrants in the UK shows that more than 66 percent of them took part in online discussions about the Russian electoral campaign in 2012 and almost 17 percent were prepared to discuss it extensively, explaining their position at length in the survey.

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<sup>19</sup> Skype interview, 2011.

**Table 2:** A screenshot of my survey results at Survey Monkey

5. Демонстрации за честные выборы в Москве:		Response Percent
Это бессмысленно		16.7%
Меня не касаются		0.0%
Участвовал в них в Британии		33.3%
Участвовал в дискуссиях в блогах и Интернете		66.7%
Разговаривал в британскими коллегами		50.0%
Особое мнение, которым я хочу поделиться		16.7%

Source: <https://www.surveymonkey.com> (accessed 20 April 2013).

The attitude to the native country is more fragmented than in the early 2000s. In 2002 in the above-mentioned thread *Sovok*, for example, the participants praised the new epoch of democracy in comparison to the lack of freedom in the Soviet era. Now, after 10 years, Russians in Britain, both online and offline, have a completely different perspective: many nostalgically recollect the Soviet Union, but complain about the current lack of freedom and the endangered future of Russia. These discourses correlate with contemporary Soviet nostalgia (or shall we say ‘spleen’) noted by researchers in media and sociological polls in Russia.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

It has become clear in recent years that virtual and real worlds are connected more closely than online pioneers supposed ten years ago. Yet, contemporary research of internet use in Britain holds that migrants remain a specific population group that is highly digitally engaged but self (excluded) socially disengaged off-line. It allows for the hypothesis that the validation of human capital is shaped and motivated differently in online and offline circles. Russians’ self-identification in Britain as inclusive, ‘everybody embracing’ phenomenon is disappearing on-line, but continues to be present in activities of offline diaspora organizations that are still preoccupied with community building for Russians in Britain.

In this article I have traced the recent history of online communications among post-Soviet migrants in Britain and argued that social, cultural and ethnic divisions among post-



Soviet migrants are becoming more emphasised and visible both online and offline than at the beginning of the digital communication boom. It appears that these divisions now mark the borders of virtual ‘sphericules’. As Parker and Song defined them, new ‘public spheres, or more accurately sphericules, are smaller discursive places where group identities can be asserted, disseminated and rethought’ (Parker and Song 2009:588).

For Russians working in the City or outside it, online egalitarian bonding appears to be dissolving under the realities of everyday life of Russians working in the City or outside it. Does it mean that the internet, the user-generated communication space, cannot resist the pressure of traditional values and hierarchies? And therefore is splin – as a symptom of the inability to produce new forms of human capital and social membership – spreading in virtual space? This question demands further attention.

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