



The Digital City in Post-Soviet Identity Formation: The Case of *OurBaku.com*

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Abstract: This essay uses the case study of the online project *OurBaku* to discuss the wider phenomenon of how non-national identities are being revived and promoted through new media for post-socialist audiences. This site enables past and current *Bakintsy* to commemorate their native city's past, while at the same time creating an alternative digital version of Baku to counter the enormous physical, cultural and demographic shifts that have happened in the city since the end of the Soviet Union. However, while the site promises to allow *Bakintsy* to remember the city as they see fit, the tight curation and editing on *OurBaku* ensures that specific visions of a cosmopolitan Baku and *Bakinets* from the Soviet-era are at the center of memories forged through the site. This effect points to a large trend of how certain hierarchies and controls over historical memory of the city are replicated in the digital world.

Keywords: Nostalgia, historical memory, cosmopolitanism, local history, diaspora, city-identity, online curation, Azerbaijan

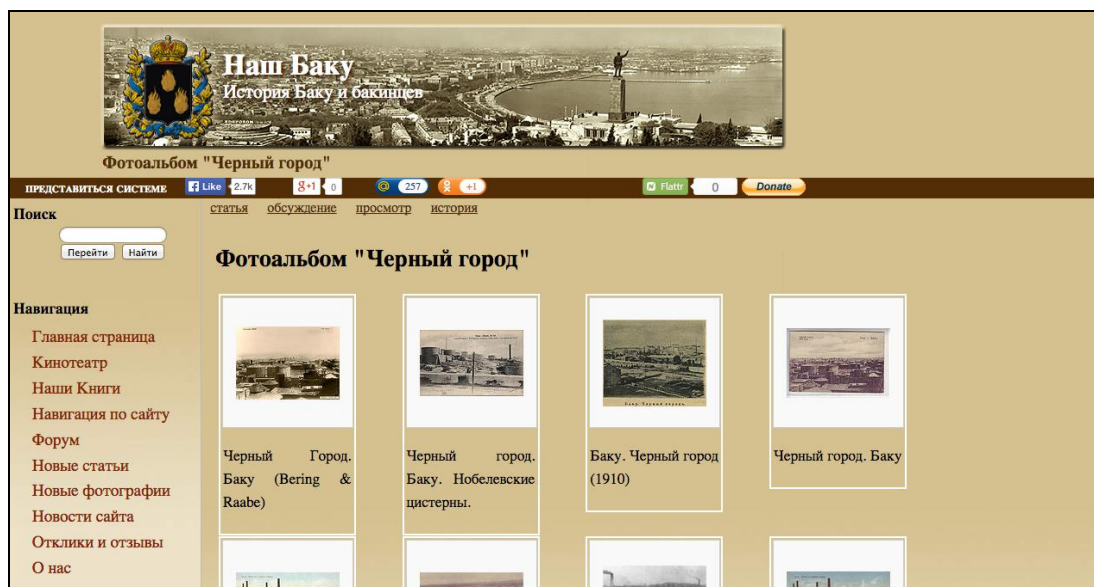
Some years ago, two women, Irina R. and Tat'iana S., met in an online forum about their home city of Baku. Both had left Baku years earlier settling in the West, one in Germany, the other in Israel and then Canada. They took to the forum to connect with others who had grown up and lived in one of the Soviet Union's most diverse and culturally vibrant cities. Their bond strengthened after exchanging messages and discovering that they once worked at the same city medical library, albeit years apart. As their connection developed, it spurred them to think of a way they could memorialize the people, places and atmosphere that made Baku so emblematic and unique. How could they preserve the diverse and vibrant cultural life in the city that so many *Bakintsy* [Bakuvians; singular *Bakinets*] from the Soviet period remember?

The result of this chance online encounter was the creation of *OurBaku.com* (*OurBaku*), a meticulously curated and edited online encyclopedia which aims to catalog and commemo-

rate Baku's past, populated with material contributed by registered site users. The collection of all these materials is, in a sense, a form of digital hoarding. The digital possession allows the site creators to claim a form of ownership over the materials and their historical legacy. While this aspect of online preservation on the website may not be conscious, it must be considered in order to understand how historical memory is controlled and presented on *OurBaku*. This essay will explore how Soviet-era tropes about the cosmopolitan Baku and *Bakinets* are reinvigorated for use in digital space, offering both a means of commemorating the city's past and offering an alternative vision of the city to compete with the transformed physical, contemporary Baku. While the project offers the promise of freedom for the site user to commemorate the city as he or she pleases, the fact remains that the vision of the 'digital city' presented on the site is one that reproduces some of the same hierarchical tendencies that control how individuals commemorate historical memory offline.

Tat'iana and Irina, known as TBS and Jonka on the site, are the organizers and final arbiters of all of its activities and additions as well as some of its most prolific writers, aided by a small cohort of dedicated *Bakinty*. *OurBaku* hosts a multitude of different artifacts in various formats, from written documents to film clips and picture galleries (Image 1).

Image 1. Photo album of pre-revolutionary Baku titled 'Chernyi gorod' / 'Black City'.



Source: http://www.OurBaku/index.php5/Фотоальбом_Черный_город (accessed 2 January 2015).

The site's sections cover everything from the oil industry to jazz musicians to postcards of the city from the nineteenth century (Image 2; Image 3). Such breadth allows site users some ability to customize their own *Bakinets* identity and memories depending on what they click. However, control over what appears on the site remains the purview of TBS, Jonka and a cadre of devoted users. Their personal decisions and preferences determine the shape and content of this reconstituted *Bakinets* community for all users. The cataloging and accumula-

tion of information may seem to be mostly for educational purposes, but this is not the only effect of such activities on the site.

Image 2. Menu of different sections on the home page.



Source: http://www.OurBaku/index.php5/Заглавная_страница (accessed 2 January 2015).

Image 3. Close-up of postcard titled 'Baku. Chernyi Gorod (1910)'.



Source: <http://www.OurBaku/index.php5/Файл:Баку-cherny-gorod.jpg> (accessed 2 January 2015).

According to TBS and Jonka, their main motivation to start the site stemmed from seeing ‘false’ information about Baku spread across the internet. What false information exactly? The reader is unsure, as TBS and Jonka never expand upon this point. But, it is such an important factor that in their account of the history of the site they make sure to note that, ‘even the smallest mistake on the internet multiplies uncontrollably and with lightning speed, distorting the true history of the city’ (Jonka and TBS 31.05.2012).

The website’s hoarding tendencies can thus be seen as directly related to the creators’ desire to ‘protect’ the historical record. Jonka and TBS appear to have a fear that if they do not control Baku’s history online, including the various ephemera that are used to convey connections to the past, then it will be distorted and misrepresented by others in ways that they would not approve. It seems that only with the most expansive collection of material relating to Baku that the website can claim to have the most complete and ‘true’ vision of Baku’s history and past. In turn, this wealth of material is used to form the basis of a distinct cosmopolitan, *Bakinets* identity which is promoted heavily throughout the website.

City identity and cosmopolitan Baku

A great deal of scholarly debate concerning identity in the post-Soviet region focuses, not undeservedly, on national identity.¹ There have been some gestures to recognize other means of identification. Serguei Oushakine’s *The Patriotism of Despair* (2009), for instance, presents examples of non-national identification in contemporary Russia. However, Oushakine readily admits that the specter of the nation and national identity are looming in all of his chapters and prove to be centering forces in his discussion of any aspect of identity in the post-Soviet world. The internet, due to its global interconnectivity, may appear to transcend the constraints of the national as users can employ the anonymity and openness it provides to define new identities online. But, the fact remains that users still have lives offline and the power of national identity remains highly influential. *OurBaku* presents an example of how these two impulses are negotiated as post-Soviet individuals attempt to define their identities using new media. The case study that the website provides will help in moving the discussion concerning identity beyond the national.

Using a city as the organizing force for an identity is not a novel concept. In the former Soviet Union, denizens of many cities have long felt a great affinity towards the unique cultural atmosphere that their hometowns fostered. The reinvigoration of this narrative on *OurBaku* falls in line with a phenomenon that Svetlana Boym observed in St. Petersburg that she terms ‘provincial cosmopolitanism’, which ‘forge[s] a tradition on the basis of a local antinationalist tradition, one that was determined not by ethnicity but by urban culture’ (Boym 2001: 123).² The notion of ‘provincial cosmopolitanism’ is essential to understand *OurBa-*

¹ For more on this topic see Mark Bassin and Catriona Kelly ed., *Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities* (2012) and Douglas Blum, *National Identity and Globalization: Youth State and Society in Post-Soviet Eurasia* (2007).

² Rebecca Stanton’s *Isaac Babel and the Self-Invention of Odessa Modernism* (2012) explores this tendency in literature, looking at the vision of the city and the Odessan that Babel and other early Soviet writers from Odessa created. Her work demonstrates how these writers forged a distinct understanding of the city and its inhabitants that distinguished them from the rest of the population of the Soviet Union. *OurBaku* attempts something

ku's narrative about the city and the Soviet-era ideas of both the 'friendship of nations' and Baku's cosmopolitanism which it borrows from heavily. The desire to commemorate and differentiate the former, cosmopolitan Baku that stood as the cultural capital of the Caspian from the current Baku as capital of a newly independent, Azerbaijani nationalist state, underpins much of the work on *OurBaku*. Boym's concept of 'provincial cosmopolitanism' operates remotely on the pages of *OurBaku*; promoting a tradition around urban culture does not have to happen physically in the city itself, but can be forged through diasporic ties with the help of digital technology.

What about Baku makes identifying with the city, as a special entity and concept distinct from the nation, so appealing? Baku, was one of the most cosmopolitan, ethnically and religiously diverse cities in the Soviet Union. It was home to substantial populations of Russians, Armenians, Jews and Azerbaijanis. Baku, it could be argued, was where Soviet rhetoric about the 'friendship of peoples' [*druzhba narodov*], where it was claimed that people did not seem to ask or care much about ethnic background, actually came to fruition. This understanding of the political and cultural situation in Soviet Baku is a gross oversimplification of the reality, but one that remains prominent in the consciousness of many *Bakintsy* (Grant 2010: 123).

This desire to reassert an identity (re)focused on a past Baku appears to be a response to the Azerbaijani government's promotion of ethnic Azerbaijani culture as the 'official' national culture. This change is most palpable in the shift to the Azerbaijani language instead of Russian throughout the country.³ In addition, the city's demographics are becoming increasingly ethnic Azerbaijani, eroding the diversity that made Baku a model of the 'friendship of peoples' (Garibova and Asgarova 2009: 193-5). All of these details help clarify the pull on former and current *Bakintsy*, who remember the Soviet period, towards a nostalgia project centered on Baku's past.

If the site attempts to rebuild a narrative of the city as cosmopolitan melting pot, what then, is prominently featured to accomplish this goal? Unsurprisingly, some of the most detailed pages hosted on *OurBaku* focus on Baku's internationally renowned contributions to jazz music. The city boasted a rich tradition in the jazz world with its unique brand of music called *jazz mugam*, combining jazz with traditional Azerbaijani folk instruments and arrangements. This style of music brought a good deal of international attention to Baku. Soviet authorities often spoke out against jazz as 'Western' or 'decadent', marginalizing it (Starr 1985). These denigrations helped to increase its popularity among the population, especially the educated classes. The prominent positioning of jazz on the site is an attempt to depict a sophisticated *Bakintse* population that appreciates complex, urbane music. The pages show

similar in the digital sphere, basing its vision of Baku on the commemoration of historical events, places and figures and their contributions.

³ This change can be seen in a number of governmental actions including a 2002 law making Azerbaijani the sole official language of state administration ('*O gosudarstvennom iazyke v Azerbaidzhanskoi Respublike*', 2002). In 2008 broadcasting films in languages other than Azerbaijani was banned ('*S pervogo ianvaria*', 2007). Eventually this was extended to all programs on the air, although those of an educational nature may continue to be broadcast in other languages as long as they are accompanied by subtitles in Azerbaijani ('*Na televizionnom prostranstve*', 2009).

Bakintsy not just as jazz consumers, but active participants, adding their own spin to the genre, enriching world culture.

The main article on this topic, 'Jazz in Baku', informs the reader of the history of jazz music and the key players in the jazz scene in the city. The reader learns of Tofik Kuliev, a *Bakinets* who played with famous jazz impresario Aleksandr Tsfasman and had a 'dream for the creation of a national jazz orchestra' (Jonka 04.08.2013). To reach this goal, the article states that Kuliev teamed up with other Azerbaijani musicians. The result of these collaborations led to a fusing of traditional, folk sound with an exciting, imported and at times illicit musical style. This culminated in a situation where the popularity of jazz musicians 'competed with the popularity of movie stars' (Jonka 04.08.2013).

This is the sort of triumphant story that *OurBaku* promotes throughout the website regarding the unique contributions and innovations of *Bakintsy*. According to *OurBaku*, it only took the will and ingenuity of a few dedicated individuals to start a groundswell that brought these artists from performing in movie theater lobbies to winning praise at festivals and being invited on tour throughout the Soviet Union. The dedication and genius of the *Bakinets*, as presented on these pages, is never to be underestimated. This figure is able to seamlessly combine Baku's native traditions with an international artistic form, granting him fame at home and abroad. This is the identity available for all *Bakintsy*. According to the website, they have an innate ability to strike a balance between being rooted in their own heritage and partaking in the most exciting and innovative aspects of global culture. While praising the achievements of past *Bakintsy* does a great deal in fostering a positive emotional response towards the image of the *Bakinets* constructed on the site, it is not the only method the site employs to (re)create a specific *Bakinets* identity and community.

Differing nostalgic lenses

OurBaku is a nostalgic project, reclaiming life in a version of the city that can only exist textually, or in memory. The website can be understood as partially engaging in 'ruinophilia', to borrow another of Svetlana Boym's terms, which 'dreams of the potential futures rather than imaginary pasts' (Boym 2011). Her notion of 'ruinophilia' is particularly interesting for an analysis of digital media. According to Boym, our fascination with ruins is "not merely intellectual, but also sensual. Ruins give us a shock of vanishing materiality" (Boym 2011). The ephemeral and conspicuously non-physical nature of the website can generate the longing and distance that are key aspects of reflective nostalgia. This is reinforced with the largely diasporic character of the user community who use the site to attempt to create a sort of alternative city, more in keeping with their previous ideals and memories about Baku rather than what exists there now.

Boym's understanding of 'ruinophilia' cannot be applied to *OurBaku* wholesale. Any visitor to the website can plainly see that the creation of an 'alternative' future only partially captures what is at play. The site's pages spend a great deal of time dwelling on the past and remembering what once existed in the city as a means of (re)constructing *certain* imaginary pasts for the city. A page covering the *Passazh Tagieva* (Tagiev Passage) is one of the

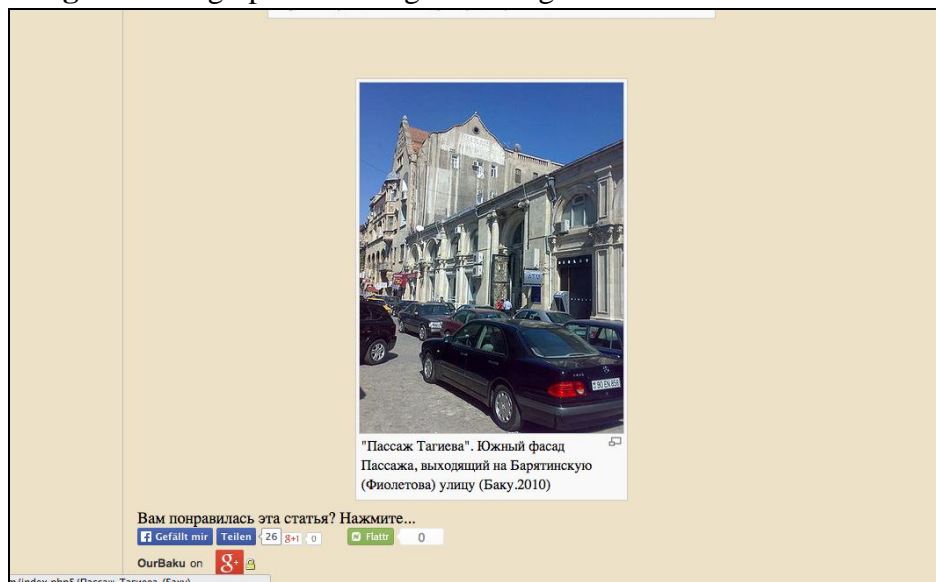
strongest examples of how the site both displays Boym's notion of 'ruinophilia', while at the same time still partakes in creations and restorations of the past. The page grandiosely describes the history of one of Baku's best-known structures.⁴ The site proclaims how the passage was built during the '[t]ransformation of Baku, as a result of the oil boom, giving one of the richest cities in the Russian Empire a European style' ('Passazh Tagieva' 05.04.2012).

Image 4. Photographs of the Tagiev Passage from 1896 and 1933.



Source: [http://www.OurBaku/index.php5/Пассаж_Тагиева_\(Баку\)](http://www.OurBaku/index.php5/Пассаж_Тагиева_(Баку)) (accessed 11 January 2015).

Image 5. Photograph of the Tagiev Passage 2010.



Source: [http://www.OurBaku/index.php5/Пассаж_Тагиева_\(Баку\)](http://www.OurBaku/index.php5/Пассаж_Тагиева_(Баку)) (accessed 11 January 2015).

⁴ The passage, built between 1896 and 1898, contained both residential and commercial buildings. Its design reflects classical elements, but with a rather liberal interpretation.

The page shows a number of photographs and illustrations of the buildings from its construction, highlighting such aspects as the department store (*univermag*) and the theater, which once existed in the Tagiev Passage. However, this history ends abruptly in 1933, with one final picture showing the south façade in 2010 (Image 4; Image 5). No explanation is given to what happened to the buildings during the rest of the twentieth century or what occupies them now. As a result, the temporal distance between the reader and the Tagiev Passage's heyday provides a great deal of fodder for reflection on potential directions, for both citizen and city; a myriad of alternatives seem possible on this page.

At the same time, the fact that all but one of the photographs are from the 1930s or earlier suggests a vision of this site as anchored entirely in Baku's mythic remembered past. This past appears to be lost in the physical Baku as evidenced through the contemporary picture of the Tagiev Passage, which appears rather shabby. The inclusion of pictures from this particular chronological period is meant to restore a distinct vision of Baku as dynamic, both culturally and commercially, while at the same time freezing history in its place, so that such an image of the city is not spoiled. Thus, one sees that through the exact same set of text and photographs, *OurBaku* generates both alternative future versions of the city, while at the same time, allowing for the re-creation of a mythologized past city, largely untouched by the changes of time. It is not only the website's content that allows for the dual effects of envisioning an alternative future of the city and a reconnection to its past state; the site's structure mediates this process as well.

Speaking of the city

One important tool at the disposal of the *OurBaku* authors is how they choose to communicate with their audience. This directly sets the tone for how the site's creators intend to display information and what kind of audience will be drawn to the site. The exclusive use of the Russian language in the articles tells a great deal both about how the site's authors see the history of Baku and the type of reader they are hoping to attract. Permitting only Russian immediately filters all ideas and memories presented on the site through the very language of Baku's cosmopolitan days in the Soviet and even Imperial eras. The decision to only have articles in Russian automatically discounts potential contributions in Azerbaijani or Armenian as having too much of a particular 'national' or 'ethnic' focus. These posts would be too parochial for *Bakinty* as the site defines them. There is also, most likely, a practical reason for this, Irina and Tat'iana are clearly native Russian speakers, raised during the Soviet period, so it is doubtful that they know Azerbaijani.

The Russian-only policy also prevents languages with a wider presence on the internet, like English, to be used. Articles in English have the potential to reach a wider, global audience. But, having articles in English could also invite contributions from people not part of the *Bakinets* community; this would be anathema to the project, which in its mission statement explicitly states that 'our Baku is created by Bakinty' (Jonka and TBS 31.05.2012). The site's language policy makes sure that those who call *OurBaku* its own are drawn from a specific type of educated *Bakinets*, comfortable using the *lingua franca* of the Soviet period.

Digital pilgrimage

In its most basic sense, *OurBaku*, provides a space for visitors to make a (virtual) pilgrimage and pay their respects to those figures, places and objects that have been deemed important and worthy, a sort of digital shrine. Such a project demonstrates the digital mediation of memory in post-Soviet space that Ellen Rutten and Vera Zvereva discuss as one of the most important arenas for the formation of political and national identity in the post-socialist world at the present moment (Rutten and Zvereva 2013: 1-11). *OurBaku* delves into the relationships between city and national identity, between policies and rhetoric of Soviet and post-Soviet states, and between diaspora and non-emigrating populations. Rutten and Zvereva's choice of the term web wars is highly apt, conveying the passionate feelings, contentious arguments and at times actual attacks (verbal or otherwise) that are launched when events are interpreted and remembered in different ways.

Aside from taking part in the larger context of digital mediation of memory, *OurBaku* also fulfills Pierre Nora's definition of a 'site of memory', presenting a concrete (digital) object 'where memory crystallizes and secretes itself' (Nora 1989: 7). Visitors to the site are flooded with images, stories and memories of Baku, where *Bakintsy* are able to engage with their city's past. However, unlike non-digital pilgrimages, there is none of the sacrifice that usually accompanies the physical journey. In the religious sense, the giving up of time and money in addition to the often physically arduous nature of the task sets pilgrimage apart from other acts. Instead, visiting *OurBaku* allows users to feel that they are taking part in something historically minded through a simulated experience.

On the one hand, this makes the act of commemoration accessible to a much wider group of people who may not have the ability to return to Baku to physically visit these places. On the other hand, however, it makes the act of remembering rather facile. Not much thought or effort needs to be expended to complete the task. The cursory nature of the digital pilgrimage creates an audience that does not have the same sense of immersion and reflective ability that one would receive by breaking the diasporic separation of the physical pilgrimage. As a result, the site visitor is limited to what is present on the site and his own prior knowledge in deciding how to commemorate certain places, people or events that appear on *OurBaku*. The simulated pilgrimage allows the reader to feel a sense of accomplishment, as if he has done a great deal in commemorating the past and the city. At the same time, however, the site controls, through its careful curation, exactly what the user sees, learns and venerates. These digital places of pilgrimage are thus falsely reimagined authentic 'sites of memory' to fit within a new ideological framework. This reimagining of the past to fit the editors' narrative about the *Bakinets* is seen throughout the site. One of the most interesting of these moments involves their treatment of the Imperial past and Baku's oil boom and the way they join it to the largely Soviet-era notion of the cosmopolitan *Bakinets*.

Cosmopolitan oil

As previously mentioned, the website is most obviously intended for *Bakintsy* who remember Baku's experience during the Soviet period. In order to keep the attention of this target demographic, most of the information on the site relates to that era. But, as a project that attempts to retell Baku's entire history, *OurBaku* also includes material from the pre-Revolutionary period. One of the most prominent aspects of pre-Revolutionary Baku on the website is a number of pages about the European and American oil companies which came to the city and the architectural landmarks that were built with the influx of foreign money. These articles show that Baku's oil was demanded around the world and figures from such illustrious families as the Rothschilds and Nobels became heavily invested in the development and export of Baku's mineral riches, demonstrating Baku's global cache among the world's elite.

The prominent place given to pages about oil companies (they have their own section on the site) is an attempt to further consolidate the image of the cosmopolitan Baku and *Bakinets* that is so dominant throughout the website. These pages help to develop the pedigree of the 'international' *Bakinets* engaged with different cultures and conversant in world affairs beyond the Soviet period. These pages further the notion that such 'cosmopolitanism' has long been in the DNA of the *Bakinets* and is not some sort of recent innovation. These pages assert that international experience, exchange, and dislocation from one's homeland have long been part of the *Bakinets* tradition. Those living abroad can claim to be carrying on this aspect of *Bakinets* identity, showing that *Bakintsy* can engage at the highest levels of business throughout the world and that their hometown is one of the most important hubs of the world economy. *OurBaku*'s editors use the oil industry as a key element to retell the story of *Bakinets* identity before the Revolution, underscoring their vision of Baku's history; this history is engaged in international business and capital in addition to multiculturalism, values that are paramount in the countries that many of the *Bakintsy* emigrated to following the fall of the Soviet Union.

The ability to communicate a certain type of memory about the city is vital to understand *OurBaku* not only as a 'site of memory', but as a 'vehicle of memory'. A 'vehicle of memory' enables some shared cultural knowledge to be transmitted to successive generations (Confino 1997: 1386).⁵ Even if none of the site's users had any direct experiences during the pre-Revolutionary period, they now have access to this era on the website, albeit through a prescribed channel, curated to fit a very particular narrative about the city's past. The articles concerning the pre-Revolutionary oil companies, tycoons and their contributions to the city are designed in a way to show that the notion of the cosmopolitan *Bakinets* does not only need to be defined through the city's ethno-religious diversity from the Soviet period. Rather, this tradition extends to the nineteenth century, when foreign capital transformed the city's look and brought new visitors and residents, leaving a deep impression on the population and local culture that persisted into the twentieth century. While this type of control over how the

⁵ Confino's 'vehicles of memory' include films, books, works of art, monuments etc. which are able to transfer a specific vision of historical memory from generation to generation through easily accessible and consumable means.

past is imparted to the reader may seem benign, it is important to keep in mind that the site's editors are able to control exactly how the image of the *Bakinets* is framed and understood. There should be no mistaking *OurBaku* as a fully egalitarian project where all voices and opinions can be heard.

Control, customization, and conclusions

TBS and Jonka and some of the most active users maintain full control, authoring a majority of the articles and editing pages as they see fit. Just like any other 'site of memory'. *OurBaku* serves as yet another illustration that for all of the talk of the internet's democratizing capabilities to share attitudes and ideas, the fact remains that in many online projects hierarchies still reign. These hierarchies determine what will be seen and how it will be framed. *OurBaku*, while small, is a strong, illustrative example of this phenomenon. Even in such a banal setting, power can still be exercised in control over history, memory and identity.

Recognizing how a certain hierarchy controls site content should not totally discount the role of the individual site reader. The fact remains that the user has the freedom to selectively browse the website, read what he finds interesting and disregard what he does not. The reader's choices allow him a certain degree of freedom to construct his own *Bakinets* identity fostered through the website. One must remember that the level of customization, however, is tied directly to what is allowed on the website in the first place. The relationship between the site's creators and visitors, while asymmetrical, still has openings for average visitors to find creative means of constructing their own identity that may subvert the intentions of the site's editors.

OurBaku is a nexus in which many of the most prominent debates and trends concerning identity formation, the role of the city versus that of the nation, nostalgia and memory of the Soviet past and a diaspora's sense of community all come together. What distinguishes this website, though, is that all of these issues play out in the digital sphere. Such a resource allows researchers to observe how medium affects these questions. The site's project, reviving the once important urban identity and preserving the history of the city, appears as a response to the rapid physical, cultural and demographic changes that have occurred in Baku. For all of the varying subject matter and types of articles, there is a discernible, overarching account of the city and its people, one of immense diversity and cosmopolitan tastes and values. This is a vision of the city lifted from Soviet-era discourses about Baku, which the former Soviet *Bakinty* contributors are keen to protect and promote. In many ways, *OurBaku* is a rather enviable project, one that both preserves urban history and puts forward what seems to be an innocuous and inclusive form of identity. However, the process by which the website crafts such a narrative of the city and its cosmopolitan followers is one that replicates some of the same hierarchies and exclusions that are implemented through coercive power in the non-digital world. The ability to share and preserve a nostalgic view of Baku presupposes existing beliefs and biases, which shape its creation. These must be taken into account in any comprehensive, critical view of the project.

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