Virtual Rusophonia: Language Policy as 'Soft Power' in the New Media Age

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Abstract: Debates on Russian language policy in the internet age have typically focused either on the formal degradation of language by a variety of internal and external forces of corruption or on the functional democratization of speech afforded by the internet's decentralized and relatively uncensored mode of operation. Yet more recent trends complicate this dichotomy and reflect official efforts to use language and the internet as tools for 'soft power' – educational and cultural means of promoting Russian national interests both at home and abroad. In 'Virtual Rusophonia' I examine two specific manifestations of this effort – the 'Russian World Foundation' (Fond 'Russkii Mir') and the '.rf' Cyrillic internet domain project. While both represent a state-sponsored attempt to use language and new technology as tools for creating new spaces of 'Russianness', they present quite different, if not mutually exclusive visions, each fraught with tensions between the de-centered nature of web-based communication and the top-down, paternalistic penchants of the Putin-era political elite.

Keywords: language policy, Runet, rusophonia, *russkii mir* [Russian world], Russian World Foundation, Russian diaspora, virtual communities, sovereign internet

A quick survey of the discourse on Russian internet language over the past decade or so reveals two dominant trends, one primarily formal in nature, and the other – functional.[1] Comments on form tend to be purist or preservationist in tone, bemoaning the 'spoiling' of the 'great and mighty' Russian language by a host of negative influences. Some, such as the proliferation and infiltration of Latin alphabet and foreign loans have external, alien sources. Others such as *mat* [vulgarity]*,* slang, argot, and *iazyk padonkaff*[2] less easily fall into the category of *chuzhoe* [alien]*,* but are nevertheless viewed as a threat to the integrity of the

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[2] [scumbag's language] – an internet-born argot playing off vulgar language and illiteracy common to web-based communication.

national tongue and, therefore, to Russian national identity itself (Shakhova 2002; Get'manenko 2008; Borzenko 2009). Discourse more oriented toward the function of internet language tends, in contrast, to strike a more positive chord, accentuating new technology's role as a haven for free and democratic expression in an increasingly restricted public sphere: in part, due to the de-centred nature of web-based communication, and in part due, at least up until recently, to the relative lack of regulation or control (Asmolov 2009; Podshibiakin 2010). One need look no further than the Putin-Medvedev tandem for personifications of the two trends: while Putin dismisses the internet as consisting of fifty percent pornography, his protégé encourages government officials to become more accessible to the 'masses' by following his blogger-in-chief lead (Lastochkin 2010; Kanygin 2010) and promoting what he calls 'direct internet democracy' (Medvedev 2010b).

Overlooked in this 'old-school form' versus 'new-school function' dichotomy, however, is a newer trend that represents an odd sort of amalgam of the two in which language and the internet are being viewed and used as tools for 'soft power' in promoting Russian national interests both at home and abroad.[3] In the following discussion I examine two specific manifestations of this hybridizing approach. One comes in the form of the 'Russian World Foundation' [Fond 'Russkii Mir']*,* with new technology as one of the many tools at its disposal. The Foundation seeks to dissolve physical national borders to create more porous, virtual boundaries of national identity, in what might be called a 'virtual *rusophonia*'. The other manifestation is the recently launched '.rf' Cyrillic internet domain project, which proposes to create a more secure and 'russified' space in what some have referred to as a Russian 'sovereign internet' (Asmolov 2010b). While both represent a state-sponsored effort to use language and new technology as tools for creating new spaces of 'Russianness', they present quite different, if not mutually exclusive, visions, each fraught with tension between the de-centered nature of web-based communication and the top-down, paternalistic penchants of the very same political elite that has, in recent years, promoted notions of 'sovereign democracy' and the so-called 'near-abroad' [the countries of the former Soviet Union].

'Rusophonia': A Brief Conceptual History

These newer trends mark a shift in the trajectory of the Russian language culture of the post-communist era from an essentially defensive posture, focused on ridding the national tongue of a host of unwanted influences, to an offensive one – recruiting the 'great and mighty' as one of the hallmarks of Russian cultural strength and superiority. For a country keen on projecting a more positive image for international consumption, on protecting its perceived interests particularly in the 'near abroad', and even coaxing that special class of *sootechestvenniki* [compatriots] to give Russia a second look and consider moving back, language presents itself as a useful public-relations tool – not only because it functions as a 'common tongue' with one of the largest diasporas in the world, but also because it serves as a means of defining national identity beyond the more restrictive parameters of bloodline or ethnic ties.[4]

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[3] By 'soft power', I mean a state's use of cultural and educational institutions and initiatives as a means of 'get[ting] what [it] wants through attraction rather than coercion or payments' (Nye 2004: x).

[4] Iatsenko et al. calculate the Russian population living in the former Soviet Union (but outside of Russia) at 25.3 million (2008: 134).

The post-1991 history of the term *rusofoniia* [rusophonia] serves as an interesting testimony to the shift. Built on the lexical model of 'francophonie' or 'francophone' ('-phone' coming from the Greek for voice, to mean 'a person who speaks French'), 'rusophonia' has had a relatively short life span, but one in which the pragmatic meaning of the term has varied widely, no doubt due to the fact that, more than 'one who speaks Russian' – *rusophone* – inevitably carries national, historical, ethnic, political and spatial presumptions that can, in any combination, become a source of disagreement and debate.[5] This is all the more the case when dealing with the more abstract 'rusophonia', which literally means that imaginary group, nation, or space that is constituted by speakers of Russian. In any case, it implies a community that extends beyond the physical or political borders of the Russian Federation and, given the etymological link to 'francophonie', has post-colonial implications as well (Ager 1996). Be that as it may, a survey of Russian-language periodicals from the 1990s suggests that, at least up until the first years of Vladimir Putin's presidency, Russia-friendly sources actually treated the term as a pejorative, used against Russian minorities in newly independent states and contested it stylistically by including it in quotation marks or modifying it with 'so-called' (Tiurkin 1993). One lament from 1993, for example, lists it last in a string of egregious examples of post-Soviet 'newspeak', emblematic of brazen intolerance toward Russians on the part of their neighbours: '"native" and "non-native", "titular" and "non-titular", "Russian-language speakers" and even "rusophones" – all this newspeak [novoiaz] from nationalist secret files have somehow and all at once filled the political everyday life of the former union republics' (Tiurkin 1993). The term frequently arose as the focal point of complaints about Moldovan language policy, which strengthened requirements for the use of Moldovan in the official public sphere to the detriment of the large number of ethnic Russians calling Moldova home. As if denying them their rightful ethnic identity, policies referred to Russians not as *russkie* but as *rusofony* (Feliksova 1993). A 1994 report in *Pravda* decried a recent law requiring knowledge of the state language, describing how it promptly 'sent the so-called "rusophones" packing their bags' (Pasechnik 1994).[6] A 2000 sketch by a Russian priest travelling in Moldova gives more direct evidence of the insulting nature of the label: 'Not once did Aleksei hear, either to his face or behind his back, that insulting little word "rusophone", which, he knew, the Kishinev nationalists had bestowed upon the Russians' (Paisii 2000).[7]

Early signs of a shift in symbolic value of the term appeared in the later 1990s when commentators both within and outside Russia began wondering aloud whether, as one Paris-based commentator for *Rossiiskie vesti* [Russian News] put it, 'the time has come for us to think about rusophonia along the lines of the "francophonie". After all, just as with the French cultural space, the Russian one has become inhabited by many peoples and languages. If they are now talking about a "ruble zone" in economics, then could it be true that

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[5] As the *francophonie* precedent suggests, this is a tension not necessarily unique to Russian and the Russian Federation.

[6] Cf. 'The language wagon is slowly rolling along, not, in my opinion, because these "rusophones" are so hard-headed and do not want to learn the language....' (Meleka 2000).

[7] It is noteworthy that Boris Yeltsin, in a move of self-imposed political correctness, introduced the notion of *rossiiskii* (literally 'citizen of the Russian Federation') into circulation in the 1990s as a means of marking citizenship without creating ambiguous links to *russkii*, which carries marked assumptions of Russian ethnicity. Of course this, too, served as a means of broadening the associative net of 'Russianness'.

the language of Pushkin and Dostoevskii possesses any less value?' (Privalov 1997). The cultural capital clearly marked by parallels to monetary wealth, the new view of rusophonia became a positive indication of one's own linguistic worth, strengthened by the identity with fellow speakers across physical boundaries and historical epochs. In some cases, advocates of rusophonia insisted upon its apolitical and anti-colonial underpinnings: 'Rusophonia is categorically outside of politics [vnepoliticheskaia]; behind it are social, cultural and informational ties established on contacts with the historical motherland, love and respect for her', declared the well-known intellectual Grigorii Pomerants in a discussion of the term in the weekly *Literary Gazette* (Polubota et al 2010).[8] In others, however, the distinction was more ambiguous. In an interview with a Latvian Russian-language newspaper, for instance, Deputy Director of the state news agency ITAR-TASS, Mikhail Gusman, echoed the Parisian call for rethinking when he declared that 'the time has come, I believe, to talk about rusophones' (Troshkina, 2000). Gusman's reasoning, however, drew out two other pragmatic potentials of the term; first, that 'language is the only thing that is shared by people living in different countries who have become distanced from one another in political terms', and, secondly, that, 'just as before, [Russian] is the thing which links people of different nationalities in different countries of the former USSR. Even in independent Latvia, it is recognized that it is Russian that remains the so-called "language of international communication" [iazyk mezhdunatsional'nogo obshcheniia]' (Troshkina, 2000).

When the symbolic terrain shifted from the cultural-driven, old Russian émigré venue of Paris to the newly independent 'near-abroad', where political distance was often precisely the desired state and phrases such as 'language of international communication' immediately invoked Soviet internationalist discourse, the meaning and implications on both ends of discourse of rusophonia took on a different tone, often marked by profound suspicion on the one side and patronizing imperial nostalgia on the other (e.g. Iatsenko et al. 2008). And despite official efforts to underscore the apolitical nature of the concept, fewer diplomatic voices made no bones about the political significance of the rusophonia project. Those with political axes to grind used it as a means of marking the final demise of the pro-Western liberal branches of Russian politics ('After the resounding defeat in the Duma elections of 2003 of Russian pseudo-Westernizers, this issue has once again earned a place on the agenda') ({Sirotkin et al. 2004}). Those concerned more with the uppity nationalistic behavior of neighbours in the 'near-abroad' used it as a means of re-staking claim to a Russian sphere of interest (Iavorskii 2006). In fact, by 2007, official state representatives, when they did invoke rusophonia in the context of language policy in the 'near-abroad', did so as a 'national security' issue (Vorotnikov 2007: 8-10).[9]

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[8] Some have even proposed it as an alternative to the Commonwealth of Independent States, a body whose main purpose is to see the countries through a 'civilized divorce' (Alekseev 2005).
[9] In his opening remarks to this conference, Iurii Vorotnikov, the Chair of the Russian Humanities Scholarship Foundation, drew a direct parallel to current language policy in Russia and the 'near abroad' and the *francophonie* movement of the 1960s – 1980s, although he also notes that the French efforts have thus far been more successful than the Russian (2007: 3-7).

Language Policy as Soft Power in the 'Russian World' ('Russkii Mir')

Whether or not the discourse on rusophonia carried blatant or only latent neo-imperial aspirations or nostalgia, its symbolic shift from negative to positive marked a broader trend toward more proactive efforts to promote proper and widespread use of the Russian language. As is suggested by the earlier attempts to revive the term as a sign of symbolic strength, the trend dates back to the latter part of the 1990s. The government did not really begin seriously investing in such projects until shortly after Vladimir Putin became president. On the legislative front, in 2002 Putin signed a law making Cyrillic the official alphabet of the Russian Federation. In 2005, the parliament passed a law 'On the State Language' [O gosudarstvennom iazyke], which sought to restrict foreign loans, vulgarity and other non-standard verbal practices in all government business, as well as establish Russian as the official language of state. Though berated for its glaring loopholes and the lack of teeth in the way of enforcement, the law still stood out symbolically as a declaration of the bounds of purity and the rightful place of Russian (as the first among equals) in a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual nation. According to Article 1, paragraph 5 of the law, 'The defense and support of Russian as the state language of the Russian Federation enables the increase and mutual enrichment of the spiritual culture of the peoples of the Russian Federation'.

In addition to these legislative acts, the past ten years have seen a steady flow of non-legislative efforts as well, a couple of which have marked the first significant officially supported efforts to harness web-based technologies to promote the Russian language. To name just a few: Putin's revival of the defunct 'Russian Language Council' that Yeltsin created in 1997; the increased funding of the so-called 'Comprehensive Programme for Russian Language' [Tselevaia programma russkogo iazyka], a kind of five-year plan dedicated to critical language needs; the funding of the popular web portal 'Russkii iazyk', known to most people by its URL 'gramota.ru'; and the organization in 2003 of the 'National Corpus of the Russian Language', an ambitious attempt to catalogue the entire living language in a searchable on-line database (http://ruscorpora.ru/) similar to COBUILD.

The consolidation process took a markedly international turn with Putin's declaration of 2007 as the 'Year of the Russian Language'. He chose the 4th of November, National Unity Day [Den' narodnogo edinstva], to announce the decision, underscoring not just national unity, but also an effort to extend the nation's symbolic borders beyond the geographic, declaring that 'Russia is open to all who identify themselves with its fate' (Putin 2006). Most of the sponsored activities took place outside of Russia to promote the language and culture in the so-called 'near-' and 'far-abroad', in part to bring about, what in one document was called, 'a strengthening of the positive image of Russia' [ukreplenie pozitivnogo imidzha Rossii].

Putin had made efforts to reach out to Russians living abroad early on in his presidency. In 2000, on a trip to Paris he made a special point to visit the graves of well-known Russian émigrés at Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois (Bogomolov 2000). In October of 2001, Putin sent members of the Russian Language Council to meet with members of the French 'International Organization of Francophonie' to discuss that group's experience and ways in which it might be adopted to promote rusophonia (Vorotnikov 2002). That same year Putin addressed the Congress of Compatriots [Kongress Sootechestvennikov], declaring that 'the concept of

"Russian world" has for time immemorial extended far beyond the geographical borders of Russia and even far beyond the borders of the Russian ethnos' (Putin 2001) Curiously, Putin also suggested here that the strength of the Russian diaspora depended on the strength of the Russian state itself ('A truly strong diaspora can only exist – I have no doubt about this what-soever – in connection to a strong state' ['Po-nastoiashchemu sil'naia diaspora mozhet byt'…. tol'ko u sil'nogo gosudarstva'] {Putin 2001}). It is also noteworthy that a year earlier than Putin's speech, the Russian First Lady, Liudmila Putina, made a far more direct link be-tween transnational language ties and Russia's national interests. At a conference on 'The Russian Language on the Boundary of Millennia' in October 2000, she said that 'the confir-mation of the borders of the Russian world is also the assertion and strengthening of Russia's national interests. The Russian language unifies the people of the Russian world – the aggre-gate of those who speak and think in that language. The borders of the Russian world extend along the borders of Russian-language usage' (Kantor 2000). It was also in that 2001 meeting he first mentioned the use of internet technology as a means of enhancing communication between the Russian state and the diaspora ('Within the framework of the adopted state pro-gram "Electronic Russia", it would be useful, it appears, to dedicate a section to the devel-opment of communications with compatriots, including internet technology' {Putin 2001}).[10]

Rather than the relatively recent 'rusophonia', Putin has opted throughout his presidency for the notion of *russkii mir*, or 'Russian world', to refer to the Russian-speaking population residing beyond the borders of the Russian Federation, although arguably the two terms car-ried the same ambiguities that instilled them with both flexibility (for advocates) and danger (for skeptics). In the case of *russkii mir,* one finds clear symbolic links to the positive aspects of Russian spiritual and cultural heritage, however vaguely defined (e.g. Enikeeva 1996). Even in cases where the *russkii mir* is perceived as somehow vulnerable, it is, at its core, something spiritual (e.g. 'It is not just the social system that is changing, but the entire spiri-tual composition of the Russian world. Material interest, the real, reality, are being made the ideal' {Zolotusskii 1998}).

At least by the 1990s the term *russkii mir* had become a mantel for the 'patriotic' red-brown opposition, a convenient marker of that which had been demolished by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rise of Western-oriented reform policies, or some other moral or spiri-tual calamity (Kozhemiako 1995; Ioann 1995). One author writing in response to Boris Yel-tsin's call for a Russian 'national idea', for example, debunked the liberal, post-ideological stance, arguing that ideology was immanent and proposing the placement of 'the traditional Values of the Russian world' at 'the foundation of the state ideology' as a means of helping Russia 'return the lost meaning of its public and state existence' (Stepanov 1997). Common also was the link to Eurasianism: 'By virtue of its own past, which determines the movement of any civilization, Russia cannot help but move toward Orthodoxy, toward Slavic, Eurasian unity. All of these three beginnings were and still are present in the Russian world' (Davydov 1998). After equating *russkii mir* with 'Eurasia' and the 'former territory of the USSR', a 1996 Communist Party campaign document singled out the Russian language in particular as 'the ideal field for developing the theme of "spirituality" in the campaign', 'the only thing

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[10] 'Electronic Russia' is a federally funded program designed to bring an array of government services online ('Programma "Elektronnaia Rossiia"' {2011})

that truly unites citizens of the Russian Federation (rossiiane) regardless of their social status, their economic well-being, their faith, their gender, their age and even their political passions' ('Iz ust reformatora' 1996). Less blatant political uses of the term in nationalist-patriotic news outlets still assumed an exceptionalist stance with regard to Russia's spiritual and historical underpinnings (e.g. '[Pushkin] understood equally well the most treasured of secrets of the Russian world and the general features of the life of humanity' {Reshetov 1999}).

Evidence of the term's symbolic authority could be found even within the very reformist, market-oriented wing of the political spectrum demonized by communists and patriots alike. In 2000 the political philosopher Petr Shchedrovitskii published a conceptual piece on *russkii mir* in a number of high-profile venues that triggered a wide debate in the press through the remainder of that year and had a clear impact on, at least, former Prime Minister Sergei Kirienko, who was then serving as Governor of the Privolzhskii Federal Administrative District (Kalashnikova 2000; Pinsker 2000). More economic than spiritual in orientation, Shchedrovitskii's twenty-first century vision of 'Russian world' included a 'networked structure of large and small communities thinking and speaking in Russian', 'trans-regional unions' and 'global diasporas' dedicated to modernization and technological innovation that would enhance Russia's ability to compete within an increasingly globalized political and economic framework (Shchedrovitskii 2000a). 'In our view', he wrote in terms anticipating Medvedev's 2009-2010 mantra of 'modernization', 'the strategy of forming post-national statehood in Russia can be realized with the support of the resources of the Russian World, professional and trans-professional schools and networks, traditions of innovative thinking and action shaped in the engineering and social-humanities spheres – by and large competitive and on occasion the leading educational technologies' (Shchedrovitskii 2000b).[11]

As it turns out, then, *russkii mir* was a protean concept with little baggage from the past, but a store of symbolic potential that could be used to justify cultural patriotic visions of 'Russianness', more exclusionary, nationalistic notions, and even more liberal, economic and transnational sentiments. While the potential of all three meanings may well have proven useful to Vladimir Putin in 2001, who by then had already demonstrated a knack for appropriating and employing in less threatening tones the discourse of his opponents, what one can see in his use of the term at that time is the centrality of the notion of 'consolidation' ('all this work will… become a real investment in the consolidation of the diaspora, in the strengthening of its ties with Russia') and of the primacy of spiritual markers of identity over political or geographical: 'In the world today it is not one's geographical point of residence that is important; what is important is the state of one's soul [dushevnoe sostoianie], one's aspiration, and, as I have already mentioned, one's self-determination. Where one is going to spend the majority of time in a year – Moscow, Petersburg, London, Paris, Tel-Aviv – is no longer of fundamental significance. What's important is the result of collaborative efforts' (Putin 2001). Underlying this outreach effort, of course, was an essential paradox less readily acknowledged, namely the promotion of an idea that was, on the surface, transnational for the nationalist aims of the state.

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[11] While clearly a minority use of the concept, Shchedrovitskii's *russkii mir,* particularly with its emphasis on modernization and recognition of the economic and political potential of the international Russian-speaking community, bares a striking resemblance to the rhetoric coming out of the Medvedev's Kremlin in 2009-2011.

It is at once logical and ironic that language should serve as one of the primary means of strengthening Russia's image, especially regionally. Logical, because as a vehicle for cultural expression and affiliation, language enjoyed more cultural capital than most things 'Russian' at the time, as well as an important symbolic bridge for the millions of 'accidental émigrés' who, after the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, found themselves detached from their original homeland and a member of an ethnic and linguistic minority.[12] Ironic, at least at first glance, since the Russian language – billed throughout the Soviet era as the language of international and interethnic communication – had also served as one of the very first and most vulnerable symbolic targets by means of which newly independent states declared their independence from Soviet (and Russian-language) dominance in the late- and post-perestroika era. As the historian of nationalities M. N. Guboglo put it, 'Language reform became the first test case [pervyi probnyi kamen'] for the true liberation of the periphery from the force [zasilie] of the Center' (Guboglo 1998: 165). By 1993, all fourteen of the non-Russian Republics or newly independent states had approved state language policies (with only two – Belarus' and Kyrgyzstan – giving Russian the status of either 'state language' or 'official language'), and by 2006 the official number of people in these countries who did not know Russian has risen from 'zero' to 38 million over a fifteen-year period (and was projected to rise to 80 million by 2016) ('Russkii kak inostrannyi' 2006).[13] Be that as it may, from a post-Soviet Russian perspective group identification through linguistic and cultural ties avoided more problematic national and ethnic forms of self-identification – the very forms that were deeply ingrained over years of Soviet nationalities policy and thus more likely to give rise to resistance among Russia's neighbours and accusations of neo-imperial aspirations. And while concrete evidence exists that this association of Russian with the language of colonial oppression persists at least among those of older generations (Iatsenko et al. 2008: 7-11), Russian authorities now find themselves with greater economic leverage and a significant population of ethnic Russians living in the 'near-abroad' who, they argue, are in need of defending, due to their own post-Soviet status of oppressed language minority.

Fond Russkii Mir (The Russian World Foundation)

One of the more lasting institutional products of the aforementioned 'Year of the Russian Language' was the creation, by presidential decree in June of 2007, of 'The Russian World Foundation' [Fond Russkii mir, henceforth 'RWF'] perhaps the most concerted effort to date at conceptualizing a notion of 'Russianness' [russkost'] that transcended ethnic bloodlines and geographical boundaries. A couple of things made this event more noteworthy than the formation of yet another presidential commission for the protection of Russian. First, it was a plan hatched very closely with, if not within, the Kremlin itself. The Foundation's Executive Director is the political technologist Viacheslav Nikonov, who has served as advisor to every

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[12] According to one source, around 12 million Russians were living in the non-Russian member states of the CIS as of 2000 (Zakhvatov 2000). For a discussion of the term 'accidental diaspora', see Laruelle (2006: 196-97).

[13] The specific language policies of each of the former Soviet republics vary widely, from exclusionary language in the Baltic States to recognition of Russian as an official state language in the two mentioned here. For an overview of the current status of Russian in the former Soviet republics, see Iatsenko et al. (2008) and Gavrilov et al. (2008).

sitting president since the onset of perestroika, from Gorbachev to Medvedev.[14] Secondly, the organization's trustees include Ministers of Education and Foreign Affairs Fursenko and Lavrov, heads of major media organizations VGTRK and ITAR-TASS, representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, university presidents, business leaders and charitable organizations.

Language and national identity lay at the foundation of the project, but clearly within the context of building Russia's image abroad and protecting and expanding its sphere of influence. According to the organization's stated 'ideology',

> *Russkii mir* is not just Russians [russkie], not just citizens of the Russian Federation [rossiiane], not just compatriots [sootechestvenniki] in the countries of the near and far abroad, emigrants, natives of Russia and their descendants. It is also foreign citizens who speak Russian, who study or teach it, all those who are sincerely interested in Russia and who are concerned about her future.
>
> All strata of the Russian world – poly-ethnic, multi-denominational, socially and ideologically heterogeneous, multicultural, geographically segmented – are unified through the recognition of a sense of belonging to Russia.
>
> By forming *Russkii mir* as a global project, Russia is discovering a new identity, new opportunities for effective collaboration with the rest of the world and additional impulses for its own development ('O Fonde' 2011).

In his 2007 annual address to the Duma, where Putin first formally introduced the concept, he echoed Soviet language policy when he declared that 'Russian is the language of an historic brotherhood of peoples, a language truly of international communication. It is not only the preserver of an entire stratum of truly global accomplishments, but also the living space [zhivoe prostranstvo] for the many-millioned Russian world, which, of course, is significantly broader than Russia herself' (Putin 2007). Compared to Soviet language policy, however, which treated Russian as a 'second native language' or 'secondary native language' for non-Russians, as a source of enrichment for their own native tongues (Bruchis 1984: 110; Filin 1968), the Putin model reflected a less paternalistic attitude toward the non-Russian speaking of the former Soviet Union, viewing them more as potential kindred spirits sympathetic to the idea of a virtual Russian language space.

This being said, the political function of the language question did emerge, most visibly so in cases where Russian-speaking populations were seen as victims of prejudicial language policies. Such was the case in Russian-dominant Crimea (Ukraine) in 2007, for example, when the international conference 'The Russian Language in a Multicultural World' took place in the regional capital of Simferopol'. Opening remarks by Anatolii Gritsenko, then Speaker of the Crimean parliament, framed the meeting around the anti-Russian policies of the Yushchenko-Timoshenko government – which not only failed to recognize Russian as an

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[14] Nikonov also happens to be the grandson of Stalin-era politician Viacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov. In his youth he rose to a leadership position in the Komsomol and later served as Head of the Central Committee's Ideological Department in the USSR. In 1993 he co-founded the political public relations firm, 'Politika', where he is still president. He is president of the 'Unity in the Name of Russia' Foundation [Fond 'Edinstvo vo imia Rossii'] and a member (and former governing board member) of the Russian Federation Civic Chamber [Obshchestvennaia palata].

official language of a minority population but also required Ukrainian as the language of legal proceedings, classroom instruction and college entrance exams. Gritsenko described the term 'Russian-language citizens' as one that referred to a 'united community [obshchnost'] of people' that extended beyond political and geographical boundaries (Gritsenko 2007). A Crimea-based professor followed by proposing that that 'community' be referred to as either 'rusophonia' or a more russified variant of this, *Rusorechie*, and defined the concept as 'a supra-state, supranational, supra-ethnic, supra-cultural, supra-confessional phenomenon, the geographic borders of which are defined by one factor alone – within those borders, the Russian language can be heard' (Rudniakov 2007).

One can find the same sort of mix of metaphors of protection, consolidation, expansion and repatriation – with language as the lynchpin for all – in a widely broadcasted list of Russian foreign policy principles published shortly after Dmitrii Medvedev became president in the spring of 2008:

> …to defend rights and legal interests of Russian citizens and compatriots living overseas on the basis of international law and actual bilateral agreements, viewing the multimillion Russian diaspora – the Russian world – in terms of a partner, including in the matter of expanding and strengthening the space of Russian language and culture;

> to facilitate the consolidation of organizations of compatriots with the goal of more effectively guaranteeing them their rights in their countries of residence, the protection of the ethno-cultural identity [samobytnost'] of the Russian diaspora and its ties to its historical Motherland, consequently creating the conditions for promoting the voluntary relocation to the Russian Federation of those compatriots who would make such a choice; to facilitate the study and dissemination of the Russian language as an indispensible part of world culture and instrument of international communication ('Kontseptsiia vneshnei politiki' 2008).[15]

More recent (spring 2010) legislative amendments to the law 'On the Russian Federation State Policy with Regard to Compatriots Abroad' have actually sought to narrow the definition of 'compatriots'. Signed into law on 27 July 2010, the changes raise the bar on 'compatriot' status beyond ethnic origin, native tongue, or former citizenship to the USSR, by requiring documented proof of 'either social or professional activity in the preservation of Russian language, the native languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation and the development of the culture of Russia', the strengthening of friendly relations with countries in which compatriots reside, or the support of civic organizations of compatriots and the defence of the rights of compatriots' ('Federal'nyi zakon Rossiiskoi Federatsii' 2010). The end goal amounts to the cultivation of a more engaged, virtual rusophonia: 'to build partnerships with fellow compatriots, while assisting them in "using the Russian language for the development of their spiritual and intellectual potential", in the "creation of national cultural

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[15] Interestingly, the language appears under the subheading 'International Humanitarian Collaboration and Human Rights'.

autonomies, non-governmental organizations, media sources" and in "voluntary resettlement" to Russia' (Khamraev 2010).[16]

Elsewhere in RWF formulations one finds the language of communion or communality, which evokes pre-Soviet notions of national unity and reunification:

> '*Mir*' is a community. No matter how much terms like 'communality' [obshchnost'], 'conciliarity' [sobornost'], 'collectivism', are criticized, their historical presence was based on a certain social practice. The practice of the past ten years, in contrast, shows that one of the problems with Russia today is the disunity of society [razobshchennost' obshchestva], individualism, the breakdown of social networks. The task of building a civil society is unrealizable without their restoration, strengthening, without the creation of community, unification [edinenie] in space and time. All of these processes make up, in essence, the concept of 'Russian World'.[17]

Noteworthy in nearly all official invocations of *russkii mir* is the manner in which they downplay new political boundaries that have come to be since 1991 to focus instead on more virtual national boundaries marked by an amalgam of linguistic and affective allegiances. Linked to this new, virtual rusophonia is a notion of healing and reconciliation after decades of turmoil and disintegration. As one of the RWF promotional videos puts it, '*Russkii mir* is creating a new global informational and cultural space, because Russian world is not just a unified people. It is a people living in the world with itself and with the rest of the world. The key word here is "peace", as in the absence of confrontation. Russian world is Russian reconciliation, concord, Russian harmony, unity, the surmounted schisms of the twentieth century' ('Prezentatsionnyi rolik' [n.d.]).[18]

Virtualization of the Russian World

While much of the language of the RWF speaks of the cultivation of a 'virtual rusophonia' in the trans-national, trans-geographical sense, the discourse of communality and unity in these statements resembles Pierre Lévy's more technologically grounded definition of a web-based 'virtual community' as being 'constructed from related interests and knowledge, shared projects, a process of cooperation and exchange, independent of geographic proximity or institutional affiliations' (Lévy 2001: 108). Examining the impact of the internet on a more national level, Henrike Schmidt, Katy Teubener and Eugene Gorny, among others, have pointed out the natural affinities of the internet to what Schmidt and Teubener called the 'innate compe-

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[16] This new, more emotional or affective, criterion for measuring 'compatriotism' has a clear pragmatic function as well: in the current budgetary climate, the Russian Federation fears promising more than it can possibly deliver with the language of the existing law. But the language also reflects Putin's earlier conceptualizations ('What's important is the state of one's soul'), themselves rooted in the long spiritual, moral, and religious history of the concept 'Russian world'. For an excellent overview of the literature on the post-Soviet Russian diaspora, see Kosmarskaya 2005.

[17] It is noteworthy that the term *obshchnost'* found its way into Soviet discourse as well (Azimov et al. 1972).

[18] 'Russkii Mir sozdaet novoe global'noe informatsionnoe i kul'turnoe prostranstvo, potomu chto Russkii mir – eto ne tol'ko edinyi narod. Eto narod, zhivushchii v mire s soboi i s ostal'nym mirom. Kliuchevoe slovo zdes' – "mir", kak otsutstvie vrazhdy. Russkii mir – eto russkoe primirenie, soglasie, russkii lad, edinstvo, raskoly 20-ogo veka.' 'Mir' in Russian can mean both 'world' and 'peace'.

tencies and characteristics of Russian culture and mentality'.[19] Add to this the fact that the Runet from its very inception has served as a natural gathering place first and foremost for the Russian diaspora and it would seem that a project such as the RWF would have great potential for creating such a digital linguo-cultural space for Russian self-identification.[20] In her book on the language of the Russian internet, the linguist Galina Trofimova echoes Putin's 2001 remarks to the Congress of Compatriots when suggesting the Russian internet can and should become 'and active instrument for the establishment of a common Russian-language cultural space', a 'powerful strategic instrument', 'capable of supporting the dissipating [rassypaiushcheesia] common cultural space of the countries of the CIS':

> The Russian language has mastered a new sphere of its existence – the Russian-language virtual world. This world cannot exist outside of the Russian language […] Its real inhabitants, without whom the world would be impossible, are getting accustomed to a new blend of their physical and metaphysical – virtual – essence. This enables the unification of all speakers of the Russian language and Russian culture in a single [edinoe] virtual, linguo-culturological space, (and thereby) expanding the borders of Russia (Trofimova 2004: 245, 246-47, 256).

Of the many practices that the RWF has engaged in, efforts at cultivating a virtual rusophonia with digital, as well as trans-physical, presence have been modest, but persistent, with recent signs of increased interest. At an RWF-sponsored roundtable dedicated to 'The Russian World in the Internet: Social Networks and the Particularities of Interactive Communication', the science fiction writer and blogger Sergei Luk'ianenko likened the blogosphere to quite a smaller space, but one which in Soviet times served a similarly virtualizing function: 'for the time being blogs fulfil the function that kitchens did in the USSR–a place for informal interaction, where people speak on meaningful (social, political) issues [and] actively argue'. It is for this reason, he asserted, that it is necessary to create a 'narrowly directed [uzkonapravlennyi] social network that would unite the Russian language diaspora of the whole world' ('Russkii mir v internete' 2009).[21]

The question is, of course, if a state-funded agency designs and manages the operations of even the most sophisticated virtual kitchen, will any Russians – diasporic or otherwise – sit at the table? [22] 'Soft power', as Nye (2004: 5) puts it, 'rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others'. If the internet component of the RWF is any indication, the chances are unlikely: as a site of congregation for global russophonia it comes up short.[23] In its early

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[19] 'The Internet is no longer a Western import but is seen as something genuinely Russian. Its features of interactivity, connectivity, de-hierarchization, informal networking and free information delivery are positively interpreted and seen as innate competencies and characteristics of Russian culture and mentality' (Schmidt et al. 2006). Gorny (2004) points out affinities between *LiveJournal* and Russian national character.

[20] For a history of Runet as initially a gathering place for Russian diaspora, see Schmidt et al. (2006) and Saunders (2009: 18).

[21] Eugene Gorny offers a more detailed analysis of new media resources as a combination of kitchen-table culture and *samizdat* [self-publishing] (2009: 159-70).

[22] As Lévy points out, 'The social and cultural movement that underlies cyberspace – a powerful and increasingly broad movement – is converging not toward any particular content but toward a form of communication that is unmediated, interactive, community based, nonhierarchical and rhizomatic' (2001: 112).

[23] According to March 2011 data from the Web information company, Alexa.com, approximately 66 percent of RusskiiMir.ru users come from within the Russian Federation, 8 percent from the United States, 4 percent from

redactions, the RWF website consisted primarily of a collection of Web 1.0 resources – official documents and speeches, working papers, news about Russia and Russian from around the world and a monthly electronic journal, *Russkii mir.ru*. More recently it added online learning resources such as an 'audio encyclopaedia of Russian culture', featuring basic language lessons, lectures on old Russian art, folklore, contemporary Russian language (V. V. Kolesov), stylistics and 'Language and Mentality' (V. V. Kolesov) – all worthy endeavors but as yet insufficiently developed to attract the sort of sustained user base one might hope for from such a resource ('Vremia govorit' po-russki', 2009; 'Russkii bez granits', 2009). The internet TV channel '*Russkii Mir* TV' likewise suggests an enhanced level of multimedia interactivity, promising to 'expand the boundaries of informational exchange in the internet space of *Russkii mir* with the help of contemporary interactive technologies' ('Russkii Mir.TV' 2011). The site invites end users to record and submit tape of their own Russia-related events for posting at the RWF site, although as of this reading, shows no sign of a user-generated database. In fact, a closer look at video offerings suggests the resource differs little in content from a poorer online version of the 'Kul'tura' channel with greater emphasis on language and promotional material advertising the work of the Foundation itself. (In this last vein, a promotional video declares, 'There are places in the world where you must remain silent. But in order to live worthily, be happy, and become successful, you must speak. Good Russian helps. Russian World Foundation'). [24] The site does include a discussion forum, launched in the fall 2009, which features themes one might expect to be of interest to a global Russian community – language, literature, art, music, film, theatre, sports, cuisine, politics and Russian traditions ('Forum' 2011). But visitor traffic (and, consequently, the number of posts) is far from substantial.[25] The same is true of a more recently launched 'Social Network' ('Sotsial'naia set'), which features 43 three user groups, with most groups containing from one to five participants. While it has optimized the internet's function as a *tool* for communication, then, the RWF has fallen short of realizing its more ambitious vision of the internet as an alternative space, a *prostranstvo* [space] that would transcend physical boundaries to create an extended, virtual community or 'kitchen' of Russians linguistically and affectively defined.[26]


Serbia, and the remaining 22 percent from an unspecified mix of other countries. While this suggests some geographical diversity, the amount of traffic to the site is uniformly low (Alexa.com). Also according to Alexa.com, the site's rank among Russian internet users is only 15,781.

[24] '[V mire est' mesta, gde ty dolzhen molchat'. No chtoby zhit' dostoino, byt' schastlivym, stat' uspeshnym, ty dolzhen govorit'. Khoroshii russkii iazyk pomogaet. Fond Russkii Mir] ('Reklamnyi rolik "Vremia govorit' po-russki"').

[25] In fact, the forum with the highest number of posts (296 as of 7 March 2011) has to do with Ukrainian-Russian relations, but upon closer examination all stem from virtually the same single user, a 'dondocud'. The Russian language forum has the next highest number of posts at 118, but those are divided across 12 different topics and often involve exchanges between only a small number of users, most of whom are either interested in issues of the status of Russian in the 'near abroad' (especially Ukraine and Moldova) or the concern over the declining literacy among Russian native speakers.

[26] Mark Poster (2004) pointed out over a decade ago that the truly revolutionary effects brought about by the internet have to do with the new types of relationships to which it gives rise. Poster talks in terms of the formation of a new public sphere.

**Figure 1**. Homepage of the Russian World Foundation.
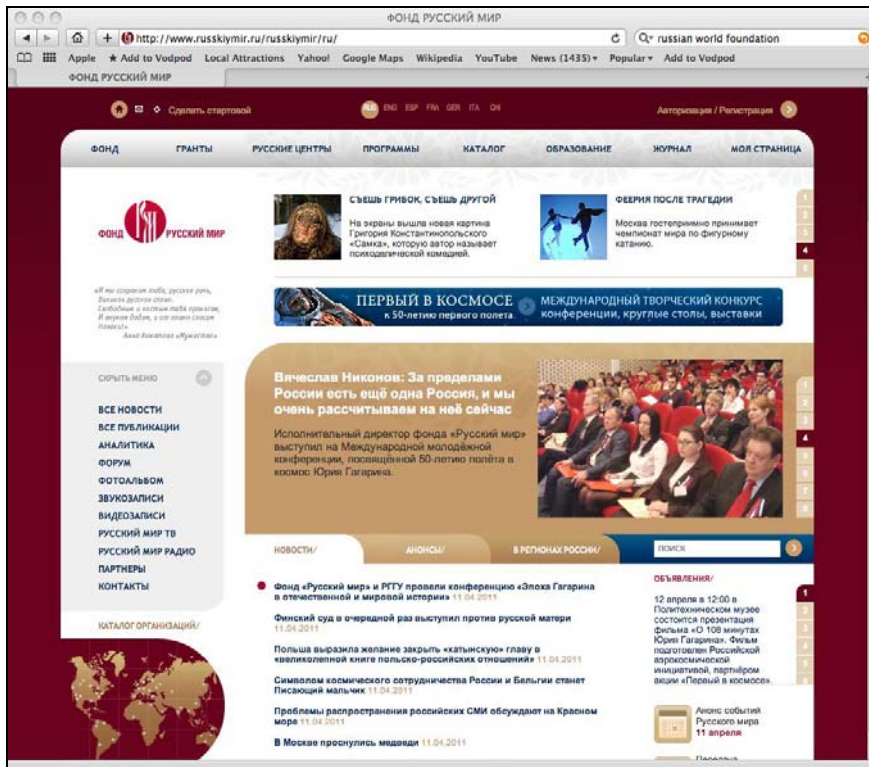
Source: http://www.russkiymir.ru/russkiymir/ (accessed 11 April 2011).

Figure 2. Web access to contents of *Russkii Mir.ru.*
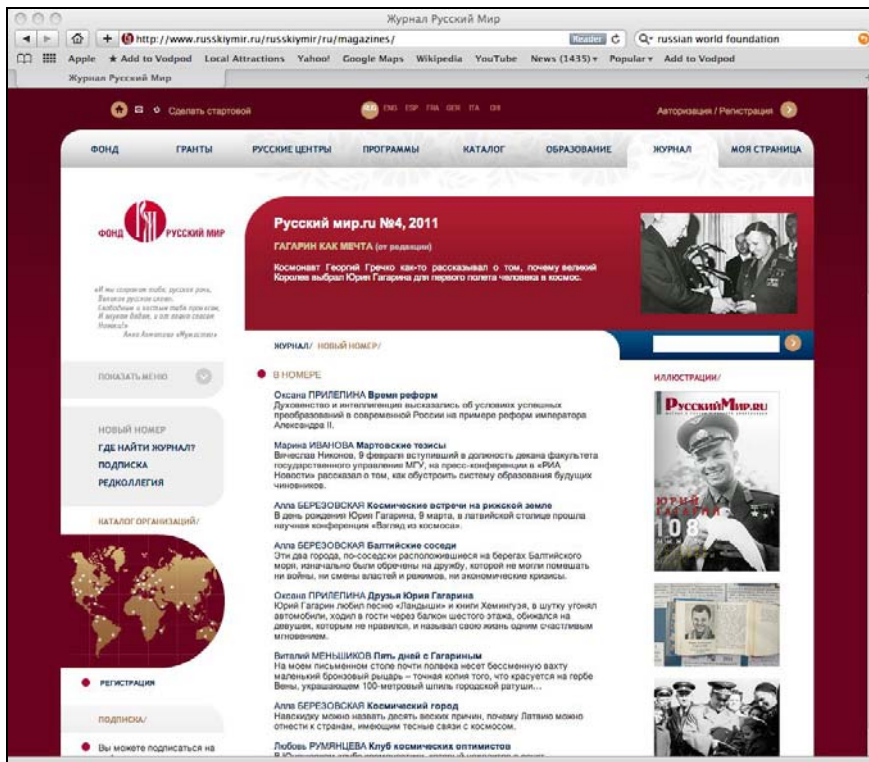
Source: http://www.russkiymir.ru/russkiymir/ru/magazines/ (accessed 11 April 2011).

Figure 3. 'It's Time to Speak Russian!' Online basic language program offered through the
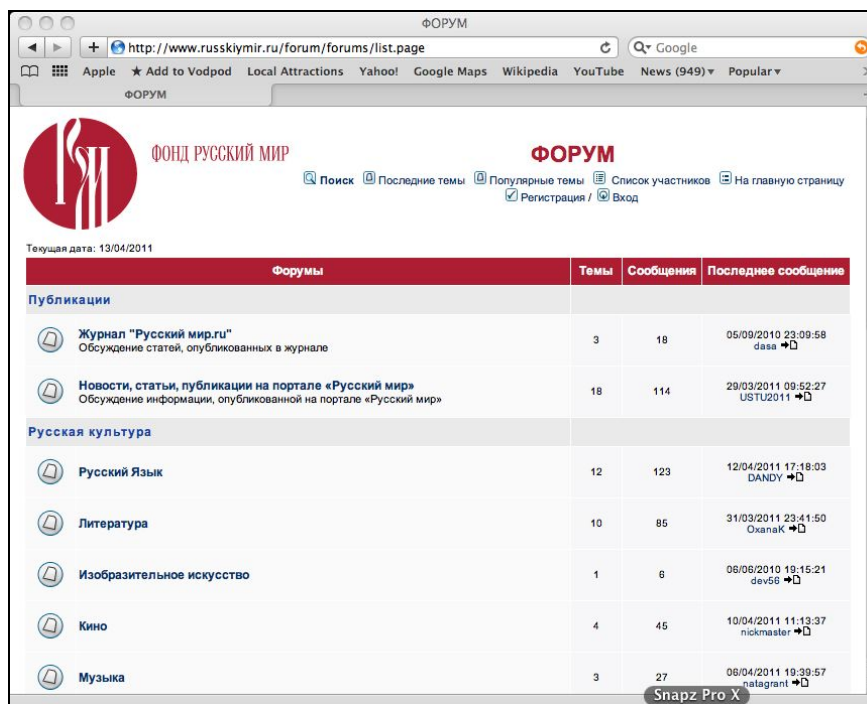Russian World Foundation website.
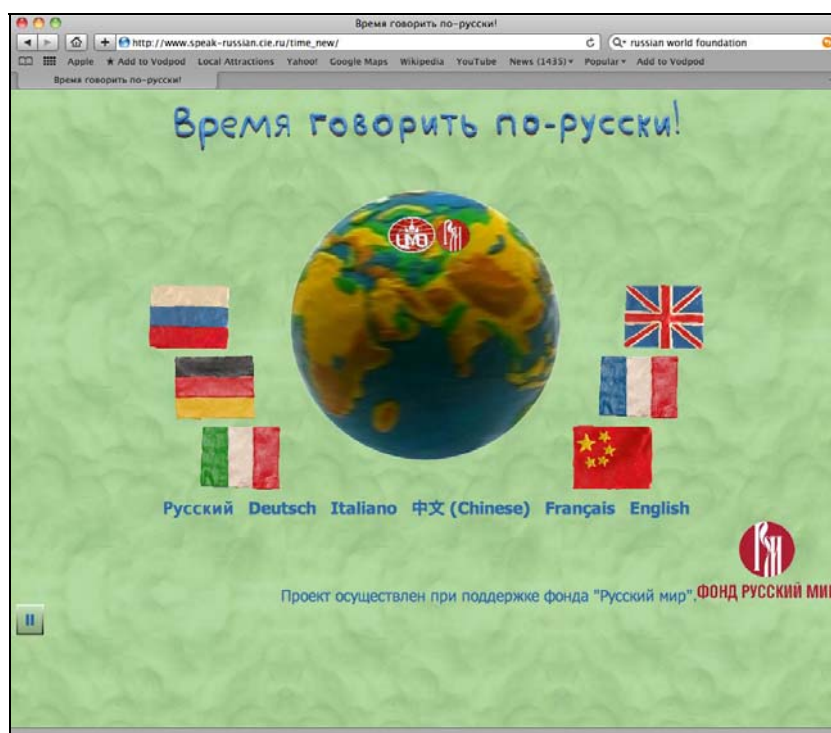
Source: http://www.speak-russian.cie.ru/time_new/ (accessed 11 April 2011).

Figure 4. Internet television station 'Russkii mir.tv'.

Source: http://russkiymir.ether.tv/ (accessed 11 April 2011).

Figure 5. Gateway to Russian World Foundation discussion forum.

Source: http://www.russkiymir.ru/forum/forums/list.page (accessed 12 April 2011).

From Virtual Rusophonia to a Sovereign Internet

When one looks more closely at state-sponsored initiatives aimed more explicitly at the internet in recent years, one finds, in fact, quite a different type of language-based 'consolidation' that is focused more on national sovereignty than transnational community-building. One comes across, to extend the spatial metaphor a bit further, multipronged efforts to maintain not just a Russia-friendly virtual kitchen, but to take on more direct management of the entire apartment, building and neighbourhood themselves. Perhaps the grandest manifestation of this effort is the creation of the Cyrillic-based domain '.rf', a state sponsored effort trumpeted by Dmitrii Medvedev soon after assuming the presidency in 2008. It was formally approved by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) in November 2009, and officially launched in May of 2010 (Popova 2008; 'O domene RF'). Justifications for the move have ranged from guarantees of greater security and accessibility (especially for those users who do not understand English) to the availability of a broader range of attractive URL addresses available to businesses. Underlying much of the discussion, however, is a sense of national pride that Russian internet users would finally be able to use their native tongue to visit and mark the virtual territory of the Russian-language. Also how does the patriotism argument work with ethnic / linguistic minorities, i.e. those choosing between 2 foreign languages, English and Russian?: 'It's a serious thing', declared Dmitrii Medvedev at the Tenth World Congress of the Russian Press in 2008, 'it's really a symbol of the significance of Russian and of Cyrillic' (Medvedev 2008). 'One needs to respect one's fatherland, one's language and one's users', echoed Boris Reznik, Duma Member and Deputy Chair of the Information Policy Committee (Gavshina et al. 2009).

Implementation of the new domain has faced some technical impediments. As recently as April 2010, programmers were reportedly still trying to come up with Cyrillic equivalent for the '@'-sign and early mock-ups of the first model websites, '*президент.рф*' [president.rf] and '*правительство.рф*' [pravitel'stvo.rf / government.rf], for months displayed the decidedly un-Cyrillic URL addresses of 'http://xn--d1abbgf6aiiy.xn--p1ai/' and 'http://xn--80aealotwbjpid2k.xn--p1ai/', respectively, when the Cyrillic addresses were typed in (a problem that has since been fixed) ('Russian Internet not yet ready' 2010). More serious is the general skepticism with which the new domain has been met from within the Russian internet community, some dismissing it as unnecessary, irrelevant and technically flawed (Savchuk 2010), others seeing it as a cynical attempt to allow domain registrars such as the giant 'RU-Centre' to make a quick ruble (Tekhnomad 2011).

Glitches aside, the '.rf' project is but one of a number of measures, either already taken or simply envisioned, that point to a general trend of sovereignization of internet democracy on the part of the Russian state. Concurrently one can trace the gradual takeover of major Runet companies by Kremlin-friendly oligarchs (Open Source Centre 2010; Taratuta et al 2010; Ivanitskaia et al. 2008); the cultivation of Kremlin-backed and trained bloggers and Twitter corps encouraged to embed themselves in a variety of social networking sites to promote Kremlin views (Hodge 2009; Krainova 2009);[27] proposals from the Ministry of Justice to register – by name – online users (Kulikov 2009); the Press Ministry's plan to monitor social networking and blogosphere 'to fish out the good ideas of the network' ('E-nationalism' 2009); recent laws cracking down on internet extremism and plans to subject bloggers to the same rules governing the activities of journalists (Freedom House 2009; Taratuta et al. 2010); and the recently announced proposal for 1) a national, state-sponsored search engine – ironically dubbed 'Kremlyandex' (Asmolov 2010a; 'Gospoiskovik' 2010); and 2) a state-subsidized internet plan designed to provide affordable access to a limited number of websites and tools (Asmolov 2010c).[28] Collectively, these trends have led observers to surmise that, as a result of 'the government's fear of the power of the new media', it is taking measures to 'isolate Russian cyberspace from the global network' by creating a 'national cyberzone', a 'sovereign internet' that not only makes the space 'more Russian', but (more importantly) 'more state-affiliated' as well (Sidorenko 2010; Asmolov 2010b).[29]

Whether or not Russian users will opt for such a model of a sovereign internet remains to be seen. Runet analyst Gregory Asmolov outlines a scenario by which the Russian state might use access, speed, security and affordability as a means of enticing the majority of internet users into a nationalized cyberspace. However, this audience would in all likelihood be

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[27] According to Krainova 2009, 'The ministry said it was offering up to 5 million rubles (almost $166,000) to the company that could provide "effective mechanisms of promoting the interests of the federal bodies of the executive branch of power on specialized social networking sites". The winning bidder will also need to research the Russian-language internet for specialized social networking sites, "draft a concept" to promote state interests through the websites, and propose "methods of monitoring" the sites in order to "boost the effectiveness" of the activities of state bodies on the sites, the documents for the tender said'.

[28] 'Kremlyandex' is a playful amalgam of 'Kremlin' and 'Yandex', the name of Russia's biggest search engine.

[29] For an excellent discussion of the evolution of strategies of government control over Runet, see Deibert et al. (2010). Digital media scholar Vlad Strukov (2009) is likewise sanguine about Runet's potential to positively shape the formation of democratic values in Russia due to the lingering and substantial digital divide between those with and without internet access, as well as the Russian government's regulatory control over and deep mistrust of the internet.

domestic, leaving the vast majority of the 'Russian world' living beyond Russia's borders to look elsewhere for their Russian-language interaction (Asmolov 2010b).[30] If this is so, then it would appear that these two language-specific initiatives – the creation of a virtual rusophonia through projects such the RWF and the establishment of a sovereign internet through '.rf' and other initiatives – are working at cross purposes. The first seeks to use language and the internet to break down borders, while the latter threatens to create something akin to, what has been variously called, a 'cyber ghetto', an 'electronic curtain' or 'Cyrillic curtain' (as opposed to an iron one) (Lazutkina 2009; Popova 2008).

Underlying this conundrum lie broader issues pertinent to internet studies everywhere: 1) the degree to which expansion and evolution of new global media technologies are susceptible to national cultural contexts, and 2) the degree to which new media serve as further means of liberating versus controlling populations. The positive spin on new media in politics is that they lead to greater public access and participation; the negative spin – they risk creating 'a form of technological dominion over individuals, capable of controlling and manipulating opinions, decisions and behaviour to an extent never before possible' (Bentivegna 2002: 51). Evgeny Morozov has warned of the latter in countries such as Iran and China, noting that, 'not all social capital created by the internet is bound to produce "social goods"; "social bads" are inevitable as well' (Morozov 2010a, 2010b; Charnay 2010). In their discussion of strategies of government control in Runet, Ronald Deibert and Rafal Rohozinski argue that the approach of the Russian Federation thus far has been more subtle and, in the long term, more successful than China and Iran in controlling internet content, relying on more indirect methods of legislation, surveillance, interaction and competition to counteract perceived threats to state 'security' (Deibert et al. 2010). In all likelihood Leah Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone are correct when they contend that 'new media systems are products of a continuous hybridization of both existing technologies and innovations in interconnected technical and institutional networks' and to this extent 'are both the instrument and the product of social shaping', in which case the development of the internet and new technologies will assume a range of possible configurations (Lievrouw et al. 2002: 8). In the two case studies of Russian language policy in the age of new media taken up here we find an at best ambiguous mix of configurations, striving at once to expand and constrict virtual Russian worlds. As the social shaping process is still unfolding, how exactly this dynamic evolves in the Russian context remains to be seen: indeed, in the midst of all the consolidation efforts outlined above, we hear persistent drumbeats from Russia's current president of 'direct internet democracy' and calls for fellow bureaucrats to make themselves more available to citizens in the linguistically less formal and decentralized blogosphere (Medvedev 2010a; Bilevskaia 2010). Much may depend on Medvedev's ability to secure a second term of the presidency to allow for the further confluence of policies with practice. At the same time, the very lack of clarity on the issue may likely reflect yet another articulation of *russkii mir* – this one by the writer Vladimir Sorokin, who offers a less celebratory, yet in its own way exceptionalist, view of the notion: '[*Russkii mir*] is the world of a certain metaphysical emptiness

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[30] Indeed, the few studies of the affiliations of Russians living abroad that have been done suggest that, while linguistic and cultural allegiances are often still felt, there is little evidence of patriotism toward the Russian state itself, let alone tolerance toward moves restricting content on and use of the Russian-language internet (cf. 'Mezhdunarodnyi fond po rabote' 2006; Iatsenko et al. 2008).

that envelops our space. We walk upon the earth with a special, very unstable, nature. It could be said that the Russian world is a world without foundation [opora]. No person here, not the richest, nor the poorest, can be entirely certain of anything. Hence the emergence of the "philosophy of the final day", and along with it a corresponding lifestyle…' (Shapovalov 1997).[31]

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[31] In a similarly contrarian, but perhaps more optimistic, manner, Viktor Erofeev characterizes *russkii mir* as 'that space in which the carnivalistic is natural, where to make something improper is of the highest propriety [*sdelat' chto-nibud' neprilichnoe – vysshee prilichee*]. Nothing else counts or is taken into account in the system of the Russian world' (Erofeev 1999).

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