



Possessive and Superlative: On the Simulation of Democracy and Nationhood in Russia

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A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future. It presupposes a past; it is summarized, however, in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life. A nation's existence is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite, just as an individual's existence is a perpetual affirmation of life.

~ Ernest Renan, 1882

After the implosion of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Russia was left with an enormous challenge to (re-)build its national identity. With nation being a historically determined concept, it is not surprising that Russian history has been rigorously re-examined and re-conceptualised on all levels, from school history textbooks to popular television shows. New digital technologies, especially the Internet, allow revisionist projects to be staged at a grand scale, involving an almost infinite number of participants. In this contribution, I analyse Russia's contemporary web-based project called *The Name of Russia* in order to explore how new media help moderate public opinions and how history and nationhood are imagined in the digital environment. My contribution is a work in progress, since at the time when this piece was written, the web project was in its mid-phase, and therefore my contribution is an example of web/media anthropology; hence, when *The Name of Russia* is completed, I will be able to re-visit and expand my argument.

The terms used in the title of this contribution are common grammatical denominators. The first refers to possessive pronouns such as 'my,' 'his,' 'our;' the other refers to the superlative degree of adjectives, for example 'the toughest' or 'the most amusing.' These forms may frequently appear in conversations by the citizens of any country speaking proudly—or disparagingly—of their native land. "With America being the most generous and greatest country in the world, do you believe God looks over us?" was the starting question in Yahoo's August 2008 society and culture forum (Yahoo! 2008). While both the forum's moderators and discussants apparently struggled when trying to use the adequate forms of the adjectives—"the most <...> greatest' sounds somewhat redundant—they definitely excelled in applying the

pronouns ‘we’ and ‘they,’ and thus maintaining a modernist view of the world as that of a set of oppositions separating the Self and the Other. While God (of course!) stands vigil over America, Russians—hungry for some kind of God or gods nearly two decades after the communist deity abandoned them—have recently attempted to compile a repository of national saints and heroes. To do so, they turned to resources of new media by launching a primarily web-based project known as *Imia Rossiia: Istoricheskii vybor goda* (‘The Name of Russia’) at <http://www.nameofrussia.ru/> (hereafter *The Name of Russia*).

Image 1. Screen grab of *The Name of Russia* project’s web site.



Source: <http://www.nameofrussia.ru> (accessed on 1 October 2008).

The exercise involves collecting votes from the public with the aim of determining the most popular and/or significant personage in Russian history. The project is supported by *Telekanal Rossiia* (‘Russia TV Channel’). Founded in 1991, the station commands an estimated audience of 117 million people in Russia alone. The project was initiated by Aleksandr Liubimov (b. 1962), the deputy director of the network, and the president of *Mediasoiuz* (‘Media Unity’), Russia’s association of journalists.¹ *The Name of Russia* project was launched on 8 May 2008—a day before the national holiday celebrating the Soviet victory over fascism—with the listing of 500 personalities provided by the Institute of Russian History of the Academy of Science. The purpose of the first round of voting was to nominate 50 candidates, who were then announced on 12 June (Russia’s Independence Day). In the next

¹ As head of *Mediasoiuz*, Liubimov, who originally became known as the anchor of the extremely popular pro-democratic, perestroika era TV programme *Vzgliad* (‘The View’), aims to promote professional interests in the media market.

stage which concluded at the end of the summer, the group was cut down to 12; in its final stage, the project will include a series of talk shows and debates on Russia TV Channel, resulting in the selection of the most prominent historical figure. The project is monitored by *Fond obschestvennoie mnenie* ('Public Opinion Foundation'), an organization that has conducted a number of its own surveys examining Russians' opinions on the matters of history and nationhood.

The Name of Russia appears to be a carefully constructed and rigorously manipulated social project that aims to reify and reinforce Russian national sentiment by offering civic platforms of discussion and presentation.² The dates of the project launch and announcement of intermediary results coincide with moments of national glory and celebration. While it is unlikely the organizers will choose 7 January 2009 (Russian Orthodox Christmas) to make the final nomination as it may spark resistance among non-Christians and atheists, it is more probable that another important symbolic date, such as 1 January, which marks the start of a new year and a celebration of civil unity, will be chosen. The occasion has repeatedly been used as a propitious time for unexpected political declarations—most notably for the nomination of Vladimir Putin as Boris Yeltsin's successor in 2000—as much of the country is preoccupied by their search for hangover cures and less engaged in politics. While the average hangover incorporates pain, regret, and undulating waves of nausea, *The Name of Russia* has received a huge amount of both criticisms and positive acclaim in media and online communities, paradoxically serving as both a political detractor and catalysis for social debates. Finally, the project celebrates not only Russian history but also a new wave of modernization associated with the spread of digital technologies.

In fact, *The Name of Russia* is arguably Russia's first new media event spanning the Internet, mobile phones, and a panoply of other digital technologies. It signals the advent of omnipresent media convergence: the project benefits from aggressive promotion by *Russia TV Channel* which airs numerous advertisements dedicated to the various nominees, while the actual voting takes place on the project's web site, with the prospect of incorporating votes via other platforms, including mobile phones (SMS), ATM terminals, landline phones, and e-mail. This technological heterogeneity is meant to symbolize the multiplicity of opinions and all-inclusive approaches; however, the project has struggled to establish its democratic credentials. First of all, *The Name of Russia* has revealed some concerns regarding moderation of public opinion in the digital environment; secondly, it has re-ignited some retrograde tendencies in society, including a longing for the totalitarian Soviet regime, manifested in the inclusion of Lenin and Stalin as Russia's most important historical figures (with Stalin temporarily taking the top position on the list in the summer of 2008). Finally, the project has demonstrated that Russia's television producers and cultural elites believe that general public is in need of an authoritative cultural voice. Therefore, in order to compose the original list of nominees, the organizers turned for help to the cultural historians from the Institute of Russian History of the Academy of Science. Thus *The Name of Russia* has unwittingly conflated the authoritative voice of academia with the popular voice of common Internet users, and the voice of the television (policy) producers with that of their audiences.

² Note, for example, the project's diverse forums at <http://forum-nameofrussia.ru/>.

I believe that when the project is completed, it will evince the shifts in power relations in the cultural as well as political sectors which have occurred in Russia since 2000. One such shift has been a tendency towards the mediation of political and cultural discourses, with the television remaining the most powerful tool in the process of reconfiguring the perceptions of reality. In its structure and presentation, *The Name of Russia* replicates the rules and modes of reality television. The project is serialized, with each new season accumulating the procedures of the previous one and ensuring advancement to the next stage in the programme development. As a result, novelty never fully supplants continuity. Similar to reality-competition (also called reality game shows), the purpose of such advancement is to eliminate the contestants one by one until the only remaining person / historical figure is declared the winner. I suspect that the televised debates planned for autumn 2008 will be organized as so-called “balloon debates,” in which a speaker will attempt to win the approval of the audience by inviting its members to imagine that they are flying in a hot-air balloon. As the air cools down and the imaginary balloon begins to sink, one participant should be thrown out to make sure everyone is not to die. At this stage, the voting will shift from positive selection (support for the candidate of one’s choice) to negative voting (casting a ballot against the candidate one most disapproves of). (In this respect, the project will culminate in a series of votes that will achieve a negative rather than a positive definition of nationhood and national hero.) The contestants (that is, the historical figures), despite the fact that they are all either deceased or semi-fictional characters, are conceptualised as real, functioning participants. They have acquired their own voices through carefully scripted biographical statements displayed on the Internet, as well as through video clips that are first aired on Russia TV Channel and later circulated freely via YouTube. In a truly ventriloquist manner, Peter the Great, Aleksandr Pushkin, Fiodor Dostoevskii, and other iconic figures are brought back to life thanks to Russia’s contemporary authors and artists. In spite of generous re-animating strategies, the contestants continue to inhabit the claustrophobic space of what is branded as national history, but in practice is a realm of people’s imaginary. On the symbolical level, these contestants interact with each other and the viewers/judges in a fashion similar to the inhabitants of *Big Brother’s* kitchen,³ *The Name of Russia*, therefore, produces a type of knowledge that circumvents real drama, conflict and transformation, and shifts the debates from the real to the virtual realm. Conceived as detractors in social media, both reality television programmes and *The Name of Russia* disable engagement with social policy and produce a mockumentary effect on the daily lives of Russian citizens. The connection between the content of the programme and the viewers is maintained through the possibility of direct voting, which creates an illusion of political representation and deliberative democracy.

As is the case with successful Soviet and Russian television programmes, *The Name of Russia* relies not only on the mechanisms of entertainment, but also on the power of the didactic approach. During the Soviet era, *Chto? Gde? Kogda* (‘What? Where? When?’), a programme in which a group of six contestants would attempt to answer complex questions coming from the audience, was arguably the most popular TV show.⁴ Correspondingly, *The Name*

³ *Big Brother* is a reality television series broadcast in the United Kingdom and Ireland on Channel 4 and E4, and on S4C in Wales.

⁴ The programme was launched by Vladimir Voroshilov in 1975, and its peak of popularity was in the 1980s and 1990s.

of Russia exploits the know-how of the Soviet programme by appealing to Russian history and culture, and producing the effect of an intellectual debate. Furthermore, it derives its energy from creating an illusion of superiority amongst the members of the audience as they suddenly appear to be able to decipher some of the most problematic cultural texts and phenomena. Such attitude are maintained on the project's website, which offers sundry quizzes and tests, challenging the members of the audience.

In their interpretations of historical figures and events, the project organizers entice abridgment and stereotyping. The strategy reveals itself in the choice of the form—from a multiple choice task posted on the Internet to a video clip aired on television—as well as in the choice of contexts and performers. For example, the clip devoted to Sergei Esenin features Sergei Bezrukov reciting a poem by the Russian lyrical poet. Bezrukov, primarily known for his star performance in the 2002 gangster television series *Brigada* ('The Brigade') inadvertently advances the popular perception of Esenin as a master of debauchery, promiscuity, and decadence. In their interpretation of the character of Catherine the Great, the project organizers highlight the monarch's popularity among Russian peasants, achieved through her miraculous personal talents. In spite of the project's creative thrust, the notion of miracles hardly conceals its insistent simplification of the past and the impossibility to convey history's complex narratives in a short video sequence. Furthermore, as with Esenin, it is a film star who represents Catherine the Great in *The Name of Russia*: Svetlana Kriuchkova performed the monarch in Vitalii Mel'nikov's 1990 film *Tsarskaia Okhota* ('Tsar's Shooting Party'). By choosing film stars to represent real historical figures, the project organizers conceive and mediate historical figures as celebrities.

Image 2. Screen grab of YouTube video featuring Svetlana Kriuchkova in *Tsar's Hunting Party*.

The screenshot shows a YouTube video player interface. At the top, the YouTube logo is visible along with navigation links for Home, Videos, Channels, and Community. The video title is "Екатерина II - Имя России?". The video player shows a scene with a woman in historical attire. Below the video, there is a rating section with 5 stars and 1 rating, and a "Views: 475" counter. There are also links for "Share", "Favorite", "Playlists", and "Flag". At the bottom, there are social media sharing options for MySpace, Facebook, and Digg. To the right of the video player, there is a channel profile for "AndrGor13" with a "Subscribe" button and a list of "Related Videos" including "Менделеев - Имя России?", "Пировов - Имя России?", and "Кучев о Екатерине II".

Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbVEpqbPzE&feature=related> (accessed on 27 December 2008)

The ulterior motive of *The Name of Russia* is to advance societal consolidation and promote a mass-mediated form of national integrity. For example, the producers utilize a video devoted to Vladimir Vysotskii (1938-1980) in order to convey the notion of rebellion, confrontation, and heroism as mundane attributes of the process of a person's maturation. The short film begins with a still image of Vysotskii, followed by a series of abstract tableaux showing different stages in a person's life presented in the chronological order: childhood, adolescence, maturity, and so forth. The clip comprises imagery recorded in present-day Moscow, as well as historical footage from the late Soviet period—for example, heroes of the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989) and the winners of the Moscow Olympic Games (1980)—when Vysotskii's popularity was at its apex. The film finishes with a slow motion portrayal of elderly Muscovites and a view of Vysotskii's hands playing the guitar. On the one hand, in its rendition of historical facts, the film highlights the idea of perceived discontinuity brought about by the collapse of the Soviet regime and radical changes in the cultural climate symbolized by Vysotskii's premature death, which had sparked societal changes. On the other hand, through the presentation of the cycles of human life, the film puts forward the notion of connection and progression. Finally, the film advocates Vysotskii's self-determination and defiance as characteristic features of the human spirit rather than products of a specific historical era.

In its obvious appeal to younger audiences—manifested both in the recurrent imagery of young people socializing in the centre of Moscow and in the project's reliance on new digital technologies available in Russia largely to users aged between 15 and 35—the project is reminiscent of the so-called “social advertising” of the 1990s. In the mid-1990s, all major Russian television channels broadcast a series of advertisements aimed to help people reconnect emotionally in the aftermath of the social cataclysms of the previous years. Two commercials became particularly popular: 1) a reel showing disadvantaged and lonely elderly people included an appeal to younger audiences “Don't forget to ring your parents;” and 2) an advertisement featuring people going about their daily business and interacting with each other in a friendly manner capped with a proud exclamation “This is my town!”⁵ Generally this type of state- or NGO-sponsored advertising applies marketing and advertising principles to promote health and social issues and bring about positive behaviour change. (For example, in October 2008, the National Health Service in the UK launched a series of commercials that inform teen-agers of dangers of unprotected sex, particularly the danger of contracting such sexually transmitted diseases as chlamydia.) While the post-Soviet project of the mid-1990s endeavoured specifically to bridge the generational gap and improve everyday social practices, *The Name of Russia* aspires to re-establish the public's awareness of their country's past and to stress the role of national imagery in the formation of a new cultural identity. Sponsored by the Russia TV Channel, a state-owned institution, the project injects a portion of politically dubious claims into the mostly de-politicised body of Russian public. Does the need to choose between Aleksandr Nevskii and Andrei Rubliov translate as what is more im-

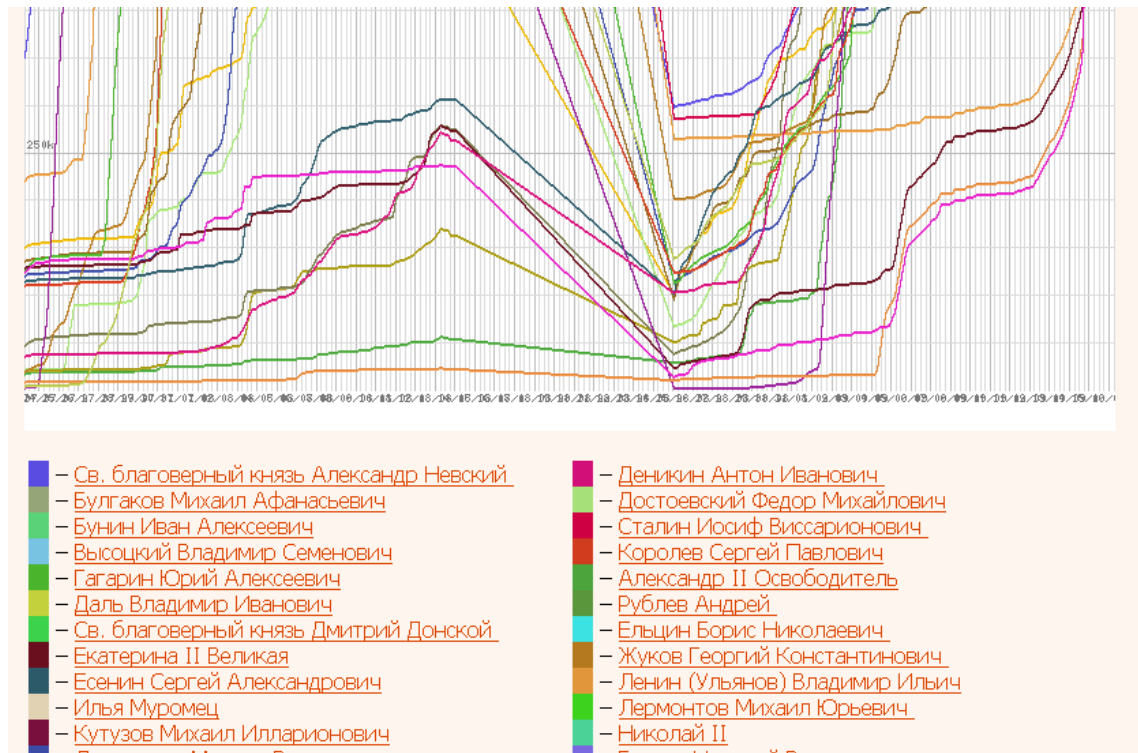
⁵ The advertising project was masterminded by Igor' Burenkov, head of ORT TV's public relations department (http://www.socreklama.ru/sr_article.php?arti_id=69). The clips may be viewed on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wvL38k7vkY>).

portant for Russian nationhood, military aggression, or piteous art? Or does it really matter that only one woman—Catherine the Great—made it to the shortlist?

Predictably, controversy has surrounded the project from its very inception. Complaints and disapproval have concerned not only the process of nomination and the nominated personages, but also the very principle of voting for the pre-eminent “Russian” and the fairness of very voting process upon which the project relies. Initially, the organizers allowed any Internet user to vote for one or more nominees as many times as s/he would like, which at first resulted in people obsessively voting for one historical figure. The openness of the system eventually prompted some users to activate robots that would launch massive attacks on the project’s server in order for one nominee to surpass all others. The controversy surrounding the voting system reached its peak when Stalin became the leader of the popular vote in July 2008 (*Argumenty i fakty* 2008). According to Aleksandr Liubimov, voting in favour of the “father of nations” was staged by various flash mobs and activists of Stalinist movements who utilized special software to increase the number of hits (*The Name of Russia* 2008). When the mistake was realized, the organizers had to disqualify 20 million votes and change the system to allow only registered users to cast their ballot, a decision that was immediately followed by heated disputes in the blogosphere. While Internet users indulged in various conspiracy theories and the scandal spread, some basic issues concerning the project and its merits remained unresolved.

The project’s brief history has demonstrated the volatile nature of social institutions in contemporary Russia, institutions that have proven to be unable to instigate an appropriate sense of national belonging based on shared values and commonality of living. It has also exposed the volatile structure of the Russian Internet, which appears to be prone to activists’ movements, agitation, and some form of “meme-infection,” whereby news—or rather gossip—proliferates at an incredible speed and surpasses users’ ability to apply their offline critical judgement online. The web space has been used as a projection of the national fantasy and resulted, ironically, in the creation of a national phantasmagoria.

Image 3. Visualisation of voting data from *Russia without a Name*.



Source: <http://www.unnamedrussia.ru/?ru=1> (accessed on 1 October 2008)

Consequently, it is not surprising that *The Name of Russia* has sparked controversy and condemnation in the online media. A few competing projects have emerged such as *Bezymian-naia Rossiia* ('Russia without a Name') (<http://www.unnamedrussia.ru/?ru=1>). *Russia without a Name* has attempted to scientifically contest the results of voting in the original project by providing the data that demonstrates how—allegedly—the organizers of *The Name of Russia* manipulate the results of voting. Furthermore, *The Name of Russia* is similar to analogous projects in Germany, the United Kingdom, and—most recently—in Ukraine. While all of them share a number of features—the popular vote, the gradual elimination of the candidates, and so forth—the Russian enterprise has proven to take the most advantage of the new digital technologies. The cross-cultural and cross-media comparison will certainly reveal more exciting aspects of *The Name of Russia*, however, since a suitable name has not been found yet, that is the project is not complete, it is slightly premature to make further analytical extrapolations.

To be continued...

(London, September 2008)

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