Post-Russian Eurasia and the Proto-Eurasian Usage of the Runet in Kazakhstan: A Plea for a Cyberlinguistic Turn in Area Studies

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“Nowhere in the world has the management of multi-ethnic states, especially those which have a bilingual divide, proved to be a simple matter: […]” (Akiner 1995:81)

Abstract

In which medium have we observed the most significant trans-regional cultural dynamics in the first decade of the 21st century? On the internet. This diagnosis is true not only in global respects but also with regard to contemporary Eurasia. That is why it seems appropriate to address the question of cultural dynamics in contemporary Russia and Eurasia by focusing on the internet.

The breakdown of the Soviet Union demolished the plausibility of the tacit identification of everything Soviet with Russian, which had been practised for decades. New constructions of common features such as post-socialism, post-communism and post-colonialism came into usage. As the spatial turn reached Slavonic studies it seemed that the hitherto dubious geopolitical construction of a distinctive Eurasian entity as promulgated by Eurasianists and Neo-Eurasianists could be rehabilitated for heuristic purposes in cultural studies and political science.

1 The author thanks Madlene Bruder, Michael Gorham and Victoria Hepting for helpful advice concerning the following article and the editors of the Journal of Eurasian Studies for encouraging this research.
Drawing on the theoretical discussion of common features of cultures in the post-Soviet space, this paper proposes to refocus on the linguistic dimension and to investigate post-Russian Eurasia. Is not the role of the Russian language coming under serious challenge in the post-Soviet context, where independent states are downgrading the status of Russian in administration and education and where ethnic Russians are ‘remigrating’ from former Soviet republics to the Russian Federation? There is, however, one medium in which Russian is gaining new significance as a language of inter-regional communication: the internet. Albeit to a lesser degree than English and Chinese, Russian serves as a means of communication between Russian-speaking communities all over the world. What is more, the Russian internet (Runet) offers access to elaborated resources of contemporary culture (video and music downloads etc.).

In the paper I am proposing, I aim to discuss the role the Russian-based Runet plays for Eurasian web-communities outside the Russian Federation, mostly relying on Kazakh material, and ask whether post-colonial anxieties about Russian cultural imperialism through the Runet are justified or not.

1. Introduction

1.1. In which medium have we observed the most significant trans-regional cultural dynamics in the first decade of the 21st century? On the internet. This diagnosis is true not only in global respects but also with regard to contemporary countries which are nowadays regarded as a part of the imagined entity of Eurasia. That is why it seems appropriate to address the question of cultural dynamics in contemporary Russia and Eurasia by focusing on the internet. In this paper I aim to discuss the role the Russian-based Runet plays for Eurasian

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2 I deliberately refrain from providing any geographic definition of Eurasia in the beginning of my paper because I will later propose a tentative cyberlinguistic understanding of the imagined entity of Eurasia.
web-communities outside the Russian Federation, mostly relying on Kazakh material. With the focus on new electronic media, I intend to reformulate the common research agenda of Kazakhstan’s “Russian problem” (see Kadyrshanow 1996:7; Eschment 1998) or the Kazakh-Russian “dilemma” (Kuzhabekova 2008:167) by narrowing the perspective to the question of whether Kazakhstan has a problem with the Russian internet. To answer this question I turn both to statistical data about Runet usage in Kazakhstan and to the webpage of the Kazakhstani president Nursultan Nazarbaev.

Based on the findings, I will ask whether post-colonial anxieties about Russian cultural imperialism through the Runet are justified or not and what the Kazakh, possibly post-colonial strategies of coping with this situation are. Essential to my essay is the notion of cyberimperialism (Rusciano 2001) which combines aspects of media studies with post-colonial studies. The interdisciplinary approach to internet studies as postulated by Pavlenko (2008a:305-306) will be completed by a linguistic focus on the performativity of language usage online for creating situational language identities. Instead of a conclusion I will round off by offering an analysis of Nazarbaev’s ambiguous inclusive-exclusive logic of argumentation and confront it with Russian (Neo-)Eurasianism as represented by Petr N. Savitskii, Sergei N. Trubetskoi, Lev N. Gumilev and Aleksandr G. Dugin.

2. New paradigms for Eurasian studies?

2.1. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the cultural Sovietisation of Central Asia, which was most evident in Kazakhstan, the “most thoroughly Sovietized” Central Asian culture in the Soviet period (Akiner 1995:51), was no longer accepted common

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3 My focus is exclusively on language performance, whereas other relevant aspects of Kazakhstani identity and politics such as religion, citizenship, authoritarianism, Pan-Turkism or the transfer of the capital from Almaty to Astana cannot be taken into account.
4 As defined in Uffelmann 1999 and applied to (Neo-)Eurasianism in Höllwerth 2007.
ground. While Olzhas Suleimenov, the leading Russian-language author of Kazakh origin, became an important figure in the Kazakhstani ecological protest movement, the ideological construction of a Russian Soviet literature of/in Kazakhstan\(^5\) could not be transferred into the conditions of Kazakh independence. Thus the breakdown of the Soviet Union demolished the plausibility of the tacit identification of everything Soviet with Russian, which had been practised for decades. Since neither Russian studies nor Sovietology could provide convincing models to describe the new reality in the Central-Asian post-Soviet countries anymore, a debate about alternative concepts began.

2.2. In the wake of this debate, concurring constructions of common features of the former Soviet countries and cultures such as post-socialism, post-communism and post-colonialism were proposed, all of them in one way or the other using the communist past as their starting-point.

Without doubt the countries of the Socialist Second World share a political legacy of totalitarian experiences, but does “Post-Totalitarian Eurasia” (Saunders 2009:1) still constitute a coherent “Second World”, a world living in the mode “After” (Kujundžić 2000)? Does the feature of post-communism as advocated by Boris Groys (2005) really predetermine the future of the former communist countries by redirecting them back from the communist utopia to the past?\(^6\) The exclusive focus on the past – on historical trauma and memory

\(^5\) In her bibliography, published – according to the bibliographical information – in Alma-Ata in 1986, Akasheva still speaks of “Russian Soviet literature of Kazakhstan”, whereas in the continuation of 2002, published already in Almaty, she refers only to “Russian literature in Kazakhstan” and stresses that “[п]усская литература союзных республик, являясь «потоком» русской литературы, одновременно принадлежала инонациональному литературному процессу, ориентируясь на его традиции.” [The Russian literature of the federal republics (of the Soviet Union), while being one of the ‘streams’ of Russian literature, at the same time belonged to a hetero-national literary process and oriented itself towards the traditions of that process.] (Akasheva 2002:3).

The same orientation towards the past affects the theory of post-socialist or post-Cold War studies (Hann et al. 2002:17). Here the main problem concerns differences in regional economics: the effects of the colonial exploitation of Central Asia for agriculture differ enormously from the problems the industrialised Central and East European countries faced during transition:

“The implication is that the central insights gained from analyses of state socialism and postsocialist transformations in Central and Eastern Europe have little or nothing to offer for the study of Central Asian societies.” (Kandiyoti 2002:240)

Although Hann et al. regard post-Cold War studies as a concept broader than post-colonialism (Hann et al. 2002:18), the varying forms of hegemony, colonialism and imperialism which the Soviet Union applied to Central Asian regions in comparison to East Central European regions demand a differentiated post-colonial approach. In the case of East European post-colonial studies, the temptation is less the juxtaposition of post-colonial features in Eurasia with the “classical” post-colonial countries of Africa or Latin America (Moore 2001) but rather the ascription of global features to all post-socialist regions.7

A proponent of East European and Eurasian postcolonial studies, David Chioni Moore acknowledges that the various post-socialist and post-Soviet regions display huge differences, most palpably between the East Central European new member states of the EU and NATO on the one hand and Belarus and Turkmenistan on the other. This chasm becomes even more obvious if one looks at media technology:

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7 “[Z]ones, by their rarity at least, stand not outside but in relation to a global (post)coloniality” (Moore 2001:123, emphasis in the original).
“[...] it is clear that there is no simple explanation for the current state of new media penetration in the Second World. One must look deeper to understand why Shanghai, St. Petersburg, and Split bristle with cyber-cafés, mobile phone users, and hipster digerati, while Tirana, Tyumen’, and Tashkent languish in virtual cul-de-sacs far from the information superhighway.” (Saunders 2009:2, cf. also Hann et al. 2002:12)

From this one might deduce the necessity of a regional turn in the various models of post-totalitarian, post-Second World, post-communist, post-socialist, post-Cold War and post-colonial studies.

2.3. Possessing some common features with the other “post-countries”, the Central Asian republics share other characteristics with South Asia, with the Muslim world etc. which makes it attractive to describe them in terms of in-betweenness. This notion occurs as an implicit diagnosis in many research texts, not only in those that are informed by post-colonial studies:

“Kazakhstan is a country at the periphery of three major civilizations, the Arab-Iranian Muslim, the European Christian and the South-Asian Buddhist world. A whole range of oppositions define its present status. Kazakhstan is not Europe, but not Asia either; it is a post-Soviet, but at the same time a postcolonial country; [...] Kazakh is by law the official state language, but Russian remains in usage.”

Could a similar in-betweenness serve as a distinctive feature of a more strictly confined region, including Russia and the former southern republics of the Soviet Union but excluding the Baltic and East Central Europe? Might the notion of in-betweenness, which is

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so prominent in post-colonial studies, provide a new definition for the Russian (Neo)Eurasianists’ suspicious hegemonic concept of Eurasia?

2.4. As the spatial turn reached Slavic studies it seemed that the hitherto dubious geopolitical construction of a distinctive Eurasian entity as promulgated by Eurasianists and Neo-Eurasianists could be rehabilitated for heuristic purposes in cultural studies and political science. The first signs are appearing that the disregard of Central Asia, practised in cultural and social sciences over decades, is now being countered. The most recent step in this direction was the decision taken by the members of AAASS (American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies) to change the organisation’s name to ASEEES (Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies) – a change which becomes effective in 2010. The new global label, however, is not accompanied by a new all-embracing conceptualisation of the cultural peculiarities of post-Soviet Central Asia. It rather provides the general framework for specialised, regionally differentiated area studies. One of the research fields which has not gained much attention yet is Central Asian internet studies.

The Russian concept of (Neo) Eurasianism is viewed in different ways in the Central Asian republics. It is either identified as an ideological mask for Russian hegemonic aspirations or as a promising synthesis (cf. Hann et al. 2002:14). Kazakhstan’s official state ideology is built around the notion of Eurasia but remains vague. This means that research in Central Asian internet studies must be conducted in a way which differentiates both according to different regions and to divergent understandings of the notion Eurasia. One has to ask in each case: are we dealing with a phenomenon of a ‘Eurasianet’ which includes or excludes Russia, the Russian language and/or the Russian understanding of Eurasianism?

3. Kazakhstan beyond Russian?
But is not the answer to this question obvious because Eurasian countries tend more and more towards a post-Russian political and linguistic situation? Is not the role of the Russian language coming under serious challenge in the post-Soviet context, where independent states are downgrading the status of Russian in administration and education and where ethnic Russians are ‘remigrating’ from former Soviet republics to the Russian Federation?

3.1. After the breakdown of the Soviet Union millions of Russian native speakers found themselves in a “beached diaspora” (Laitin 1998:29). The new Kazakhstan consisted of over 100 ethnic groups, among which Kazakhs and Russians are by far the biggest, which gives one the right to speak of an almost bi-national Kazakh-Russian populace in Kazakhstan. Ethnic Russians are concentrated in the North and the East of Kazakhstan (Kadyrshanow 1996:15.26), the only area in Central Asia where there is a common border with Russia. The new interstate border cut the ties of the Northern territories of the Kazakh Soviet Republic with the Russian Federation. The North’s economy is directly dependent on the neighbouring Russian industry (Olcott 1997:113), and roads connect Kazakhstan’s North with Russia rather than with the rest of Kazakhstan (cf. Olcott 2002:195). Thus on the cognitive map of the North-Kazakhstan Russian population the old orientation towards Russia remained immanent (Braun 2000:92).

This cognitive map was challenged by what appeared at first glance to be typical post-colonial attempts of Kazakh officials towards “a deliberate ‘removal’ of the ‘colonial’ language from the public sphere” in the Central Asian republics in the early 1990s (Pavlenko 2008a:282). Russian toponyms were Kazakhised (for example Tselinograd – Akmola –

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9 One of the official strategies for providing a cultural memory which unites all inhabitants of Kazakhstan – and of other parts of the former Soviet Union – is the argument that they were all victims of Soviet colonial repression: “The entire history of the Soviet Union, beginning with the revolution in 1917, is a history of violation of human rights and even of genocide […]” (Nazarbaev 1998:110).
Astana; Akiner 1995:61) and traces of Russian in Central Asian languages erased (Pavlenko 2008a:283), while calques from Kazakh in the Kazakhstanis’ spoken Russian language increased (Shaibakova 2004). Simultaneously the role of Russian in administration and education was downgraded (Pavlenko 2008a:282-283). Nevertheless it would be too simple to approach the Kazakh case with the topos of minority rights (in this case for the big Russian minority) which must be defended alone. The generalisation of all Central Asian states as “nationalising regimes” (Smith et al. 1998:139-164, still defended in Dave 2007:140) which prevailed in studies of nationalism in the 1990s is evidently inconsistent with regard to bi-national Kazakhstan, because the “ethnic redress” (Schatz 2000:493) is only one side of the coin in Kazakhstani internal policy. Justified fears of a “logic of titular nationalism”\(^{10}\) and Kazakhisation arose in the mid-1990s (Akiner 1995:71-72), but in the long run Kazakhstan witnessed fewer linguistically motivated conflicts than the neighbouring republics (Halbach 2007:89). Thus the impression that the Russian milieu in Kazakhstan is “narrowing” is deceiving (Ilieuova 2008).

3.2. Despite government support for the Kazakh language in official contexts the media situation remains plural. The media law of 1999 prescribing that 50 % of all media programmes must be in Kazakh and only 20 % may consist of rebroadcast material from abroad could not be fulfilled by the media (Adams et al. 2007:85). A majority of the mass media still publishes or broadcasts in Russian (Shaibakova 2004:180; Kaftan 2004; Bensmann 2007:536-537). The blocking of Russian TV from Kazakhstan’s broadcasting network in the mid-1990s was neutralised by satellite receivers (Bensmann 2007:533). The banning of publications like the journal *Lad* in 1995 or *Komsomol’skaia Pravda* in 1996 (Eschment 1998:61–62) occurred occasionally, before in the early 2000s the state made more systematic efforts to subordinate the free media to state control (Ibareva 2005:434.452).

\(^{10}\) „Logik des Titularnationalismus“ (Kadyrshanow 1996:6).
3.3. The demographic situation changed in the 1990s due to the emigration of members of the “beached diaspora” of Russians who after 1991 found themselves as minorities in post-Soviet states other than the Russian Federation (cf. Eschment 1998:80-89), due to the immigration of Kazakhs from other countries and to higher birthrates among Kazakhs than Russians.11

Nevertheless there is and will be a high percentage of ethnic and – what is even more important – cultural Russians.12 If one argues in terms of language skills and not ethnic self-description, the numbers of members of the titular nation and of the Russian-speaking minorities (Russians, Ukrainians, Germans and others) are roughly equal. Even more impressive are the numbers cited by research literature on the secondary Russian skills of non-Russian Kazakhstani: Braun estimates that 2/3 of ethnic Kazakhs in urban areas use Russian as their daily language (Braun 2000:110), while Altynbekova guesses that the figures concerning linguistic self-information given in official contexts are too low and that probably more than 3/4 of Kazakhstani know Russian (Altynbekova 2004:83). Laitin adds that in their private lives many representatives of the titular nation subvert the official imperatives of Kazakhisation and deploy “slyness” to avoid becoming more familiar with the state language and use Russian instead (Laitin 2002:137–138). Even according to official data the level of members of the titular nation fluent in the Russian language increased from 64,2 % in 1989 to 75,0 % in 1999/2004 (Pavlenko 2008a:289).

There is no need to check the reliability of such statistics, suggestions and estimations in detail to understand that the sheer size of the minority and the widespread

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11 Since this article is devoted to tropes of argumentation and performative situational identities there is no room for discussing the sometimes outdated, sometimes unreliable and divergent numbers provided in empirically oriented research literature on the Kazakh-Russian language question.

12 Olcott estimates that despite all demographic factors the future will still see 20-25% Russians and other Slavs in Kazakhstan (Olcott 2002:222).
command of Russian in the titular nation is a factor which cannot be ignored in Kazakhstani language policy. The reality of a bilingual populace demands a smoother, nuanced language policy toward the Russian language than in other post-Soviet countries (Pavlenko 2008a:297). This is echoed in Nazarbaev’s rhetorical question “How could there be a separate problem of the Russian-speaking population, when all Kazakhs are Russian speakers?” (q. in Dave 2007:104–105).

3.4. The early period of independent Kazakhstan’s language policy continues late Soviet traditions. As early as September 1989, Kazakh was elevated to the rank of official state language of the Kazakh Soviet Republic. This move was reinforced in the 1993 constitution, which mentioned only Kazakh as a state language. In response to Russian protests and the peak of the remigration wave of ethnic Russians, this was corrected in § 7 (2) of the constitution of 1995: “In state organisations and organs of local self-administrative bodies the Russian language shall be officially used on equal grounds along with the Kazakh language.” ¹³ The same status was conferred in the 1997 Law on Languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan, which constitutes the basis for all subsequent legal acts concerning mass media etc. (Kuzhabekova 2008:170). In all these documents the interrelation of Kazakh and Russian remains more or less vague and indistinctive. ¹⁴


President Nazarbaev, who, from the very beginning, favoured a double solution with Kazakh and Russian as official languages, was forced into compromises but again and again promoted a double solution (Eschment 1998:36-38). He has tirelessly repeated the compromise formulas in his publications and speeches since the mid-1990s. His rhetoric of equality does not, however, exclude ongoing support for the Kazakh language in administration and education. A specialized plan of Kazakhisation for the years 2001–2010 seems to have been “relatively successful” in fostering the Kazakh language (Kuzhabekova 2008:172), but the question of the parallel function of Russian remains.

4. Trans-regional Russian communication online

So far my overview of the bilingual situation in Kazakhstan has ignored one major factor – mediated language usage, especially in the new interactive media which transcend the one-to-many communication scheme of the traditional mass media. What is the role of Russian in Kazakhstanis’ internet usage?

Albeit to a lesser degree than English and Chinese, Russian serves as a means of communication between Russian-speaking communities all over the world (cf. Saunders 2004:186). Speaking about Kazakhstan, one cannot confine the definition of the Russian Internet or Runet to communication inside the Russian Federation or on sites with the domain name .ru (or still .su and recently also .рф; see Gorham 2010). Referring to the broadest possible Runet definition as proposed by Schmidt, Teubener and Zurawski – “all Russian language communication flows (including e-mail etc.)” (Schmidt et al. 2006:125) – I

функціонування.” [(…) the Russian language, as the language that, objectively speaking, was the most widespread, ceased to be defined by the legally non-binding term ‘language of interethnic communication’ and received the constitutional guarantee of equal functioning with the state language.] (Nazarbaev 2006:80).
understand the Russian Internet as consisting of all Russian-language-based internet activities taking place anywhere in the world.

4.1. The Kazakhstani internet or Kaznet shared the developmental lag with the Russian internet; the domain name .kz was registered on 19 September 1994, half a year after the registration of the neighbour’s .ru (17 March 1994). The first webpage in Kazakh (www.sci.kz) was designed three to four years later. For 2009, the website for international internet usage www.interworldstats.com counted 2,300,000 users in Kazakhstan, which corresponds to a penetration of 14.9%.

Access to the Kaznet is controlled by an oligopoly of providers, the state-owned Kazakhtelekom and the private companies Ducat and Beeline, with Kazakhtelekom in an almost monopoly position (Kurgannikov 2009). The main instruments for organising and filtering information are half-state, half-private media holdings such as Alma Media which was controlled by Nazarbaev’s daughter Dariga and his former son-in-law Rakhat Aliev then (Bensmann 2007:538). During the 2000s the state established centralised control over the Kaznet, recently by transferring responsibility for the domain .kz to the state Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan for Informatisation and Communications in 2004 and by merging this agency with the Ministry of Culture and Information into the Ministry of Communications and Informatisation in 2010. Since 2009 private blogs have been subject to the same juridical liability as mass media.

16 Agentstvo RK po informatizatsii i sviazi.
17 Ministerstvo kul’tury i informatsii.
18 Ministerstvo sviazi i informatsii.
4.2. How far does this control by the Kazakh state concern the Russian internet as defined above? It cannot but affect internet use in Kazakhstan due to the popularity of webpages from the Russian Federation in the Central Asian republic. Spylog data from 2005 reveals that 1.1% of worldwide Russian site visitors access them from Kazakhstan (Schmidt et al. 2006:126), and the Alexa ranking lists 15 .ru-addresses among the 40 most popular websites in Kazakhstan, but only 8 .kz-addresses.\textsuperscript{20} The Runet offers access to elaborated resources of contemporary culture (video and music downloads etc.), whereas the Kazakh section has – apart from poor access speed (Kurgannikov 2009) – a serious quality problem which expels about 80% of the Kaznet-users to non-Kazakhstani sites (Berikova 2010). The most popular website in Kazakhstan is www.mail.ru, while www.vkontakte.ru takes fourth place (30 May 2010). Even if at first glance there is a Kazakh domain name this does not automatically mean that the site has an administrator inside Kazakhstan. For example, www.odnoklassniki.kz leads directly to www.odnoklassniki.ru (30 May 2010, Alexa-rank 11), a site on which Kazakhstan appears only in the bottom-right-hand corner, beneath all the regions of the Russian Federation.

4.3. As far as internet control is concerned, Kazakhstan adopted the Russian model of special registration software obligatory for all internet providers (Deibert et al. 2008:181). Kazakhstan’s centralised internet control became discernible in 2005 when Kazakhtelekom blocked the webpage www.borat.kz (Saunders 2006b:236). This censoring strategy was subsequently questioned by (younger) Kazakhstani officials (Saunders 2006b:242), but the practice was revived when Kazakhtelekom banned ZhZh (Russian LiveJournal) in 2009 because of Nazarbaev’s former son-in-law Rakhat Aliyev’s blog rakhataliev.livejournal.com/ containing kompromat [compromising material] against the Kazakhstani president

\textsuperscript{20} The rest goes to the domain names .org and .com (www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/KZ, accessed 21 May 2010).
(Taratuta/Zygar’ 2010). This strategy of “‘event-based’ information control, which temporally ‘shapes’ internet access” is viewed by Deibert et al. as characteristic of many countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States (2008:183).

4.4. But is access to Russian websites which are critical of President Nazarbaev that dangerous for the Kazakhstani government? Or to broaden this out: how does Runet use affect the political, cultural and linguistic self-positioning of its users?

Robert Saunders argued in 2006 that the prevailing understanding of the internet usage of minorities as “a cause of resurgent nationalism” (Saunders 2006a:49) is misleading – at least for the majority of the users. Saunders refers to an advanced group of globalised digesters (digitally literate users; Saunders 2006a:63 note 6) whose internet use does not imprison them in “virtual ghettos” (Saunders 2006a:45) but makes them more open for the globalised world. Saunders’ optimism is based on a positive version of media determinism in the sense of MacLuhan (Saunders 2006a:51, 56): if one is to believe him, the “emancipatory medium” internet has “inclusionary rather than exclusionary” (Saunders 2006a:46.51) effects. According to the researcher, “cyberspace promotes Gesellschaft”, not ethnically defined Gemeinschaft (Saunders 2006a:62). It serves as an antidote to nationalism and Soviet nostalgia:

“[…] internet acts as a dampening agent for both emergent Russian nationalism and backward-looking Soviet nostalgia, and instead tends to promote notions of difference rather than sameness across the Russian ethnic space.” (Saunders 2006a:45)

The Russian aspect of the users’ identity is not emphasised by being integrated in a transnational and deterritorialized network:

“Rather than being ‘Russified’ by their cyberspatial experiences, ethnic Russians roaming the electronic corridors of the virtual near abroad are instead being ‘globalized’, that
is, undergoing identity shifts which promote the inclusion in the deterritorialized community of transnational elites […]” (Saunders 2006a:50)

4.5. It would demand extensive and representative empirical research to prove whether Saunders’ statements about Russian internet usage in general apply for the suggested transnational identity of ethnic Russian internet users in Kazakhstan as well. What is certain is the fact that for the near abroad and for the digital diaspora (cf. Schmidt et al. 2006:122-123) in general the ethnic criterion is insufficient because Russian webpages are not only visited by ethnic Russian minorities in the near abroad:

“In addition to ethnic Russians, a generation of elapsed cultural Russians, i.e., homo post-Sovietici [sic], are also drawn to the RuNet. Russian is the dominant language of Internet use in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and a number of other CARs [Central Asian Republics]. Due to the robustness of Russian-language cyberspace, Russophones from all over the FSU [Former Soviet Union] choose to spend their cyber-time in the RuNet rather than their indigenous cyberspaces.” (Saunders 2009:18)

4.6. As far as a more advanced understanding of identity than the one adopted by Saunders in this quote is concerned, one needs to say farewell to the outdated idealistic notion of cultural subjects who – determined by their identity – must perform certain cultural actions. It is much more promising to approach cultural identity as a performative category. Russian as a medium of communication (online and offline) is relevant not only for cultural Russians (cf. Pavlenko 2008a:298) or the actively “Russian speaking-population” (Laitin 2002:263-264, Pavlenko 2008b:60), but for all people who at least occasionally communicate in Russian or consume Russian cultural and commercial offers. I suggest calling them virtual Russians, giving preference to this term over Saunders’ “kiberruskie” [cyber-Russians] (Saunders 2004:189) because the notion of virtual habits is less technical and better reflects the potential of coexistence with other situational identities.
5. Normative Trilinguality

To what extent can such a performative and situational linguistic cyberhabit pose a threat to the country’s official language policy? On the one hand, Nazarbaev, who originally voted against the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has since 1991 made big efforts to stay on good terms with his Russian neighbour. On the other hand, the internet is actively used by Kazakhstani officials for the creation of a Kazakhstani state brand (Saunders 2006b:226), promoting a particular understanding of Kazakhshilik (Kazakhness). The internet is one of the arenas of Nazarbaev’s hi-tech feudalism (cf. Ibraeva 2005:429), with its ambitious Norwegian-style investment program.

5.1. In order to achieve the ambitious goals of this hi-tech programme, skills in languages other than Kazakh are essential, and Nazarbaev acknowledged this very clearly in Novyi Kazakhstan v novom mire. Poslanie prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan Nursultana Nazarbaevo narodu Kazakhstana [A New Kazakhstan in a New World: Address by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev to the People of Kazakhstan] in 2007: “Kazakh as the state language, Russian as the language of interethnic communication, and English as the language of successful integration into the global economy.”

21 “[…] kazakhский язык – государственный язык, русский язык как язык межнационального общения и английский язык – язык успешной интеграции в глобальную экономику” (http://www.nomad.su/?a=3-200703010020, accessed 31 May 2010). The reappearance of the adjective “interethnic” which Nazarbaev himself criticised a year before shows the exchangeability of rhetoric formulae and the inclusiveness of his rhetoric.
One may find this trilingual strategy utopian (especially when it comes to English competence, but also to Kazakh proficiency among non-Kazakh citizens),¹² but it is definitely not exclusivist. What is more, languages are not regarded essentially as a goal in themselves but functionally as means for other – rather economic – purposes, something that becomes clear from the addition of a fourth postulate: of advanced computer competence (cf. Khruslov 2006:146). In 2006 Nazarbaev emphatically linked the Kazakhs’ nomadic tradition with the mobility and multilocality of internet communication (2006:366). Therefore one cannot but agree with Edward Schatz, who assumes that “the imperatives of globalisation and the concomitant need to create a technocratic elite” have tempered the concomitant ethnicisation process in Kazakhstan (Schatz 2000:495).

5.2. There is another level where the trilingual programme is clearly not a utopian postulate but a consistent practice – official state webpages, with their embracing trilingual strategy such as Официальный сайт Президента Республики Казахстан [Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan] [Official Site of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan] [www.akorda.kz].²³ What is more, it transpires that the staff behind this webpage (employees of the company RealSoft) are working in Russian first with English translations appearing later and even the Kazakh version being less complete than the Russian one.²⁴ The page title in the top line of the browser remains Russian in all language versions.²⁵

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¹² As the strategy targets the youngest generations (children’s books are published in three languages: www.almatykitap.kz, accessed 31 May 2010) this utopian character may at some point be overcome.


6. Towards a cyberlinguistic definition of Eurasia

6.1. Nazarbaev links his trilingual strategy to an alleged Eurasian quality in the multiethnic Kazakhstan. In his 2005 book *V serdite Evrazii [In the Heart of Eurasia]* he ascribes an information mission for the “Eurasian supercontinent” to the new capital Astana: “Kazakhstan is a Eurasian country, its new capital one of the geographical centres of the huge Eurasian continent. […] In the new century the economic, technological and information streams of the emerging Eurasian space will flow through our capital.”

The geographic European dimension of Kazakhstan is comparably counterfactual as the postulated English proficiency, as Robert Saunders pointed out in 2006:

“Kazakhstan – a country which sees itself as categorically different from its troubled fellow ‘Stans’ to the south – has worked hard to build a credible brand as a resource-rich, multi-cultural, and stable outpost in an otherwise troubled portion of the globe. In fact, the descriptor ‘central Asia’ is eschewed by some elites, who instead opt for a ‘Eurasian’ distinction. Such ‘branding’ relies on the fact that roughly five percent of Kazakhstani territory lies west of the Ural River, thus allowing a claim to Europe-Asian transcontinentality alongside Turkey and the Russian Federation.” (Saunders 2006b:241)

What helps to maintain the vision of the imagined Eurasian space is less the indisputably European language English than the linguistic reality of the European and Asian language...
Russian. Thus one might deduce that Nazarbaev’s notion of “Eurasia” is co-constituted by the Russian language and that the connection of Russian with internet usage justifies referring to a proto-Eurasian function of the Russian internet. To provide a – slightly provocative – definition: Eurasia is the post-Russian space where a virtual community occasionally returns to the Russian language in online communication. The Russian-language section of the Kaznet can thus be regarded as a sine qua non component of a Eurasianet (which, however, is not embracing all of the Eurasian real space).

6.2. This thesis encompasses a re-linguistification of the spatial turn. When it comes to the internet, the connection of space and language cannot be described in terms of geolinguistics, but of virtual linguistics. And since Russian-language usage of the internet in Nazarbaev’s “Eurasia” is a communicative reality, it possesses a higher degree of performative practicality than the imagined spaces of geopoetics (Marszałek/Sasse 2010). Due to the decentralised nature of the web, this communicative, cyberlinguistic space can only vaguely be circumscribed because its concrete localities are extremely difficult to grasp. For the proto-Eurasian Russian webspace national boundaries are relevant only in the case of filtering (Deibert et al. 2008).

6.3. When developing similar cyberlingual criteria for the Eurasian virtual space, one must not fall back into the assumption of stable identities or continuous linguistic habits. As in the case of the multiple identities which the multinational citizens of Kazakhstan combine in themselves (cf. Schatz 2000), there are multiple cyberlingual habits as well. The linguistic habits of the Russian-using web community vary depending on the communicative, interactive or consumerist purpose of their internet usage. The Russophone identity of the Eurasian web community provides no more than a situational linguistic habit.
7. Cybercolonisation of Eurasia via the Runet?

7.1. Have we thus, thanks to virtual communication, arrived at a harmonious coexistence of situational language habits without any hegemonic implications? In 1998 Pål Kolstø observed that supra-ethnic linguistic identities as “Russophones” were seen as “politically incorrect” in Kazakhstan (1998:63). Thus naive diffusion models of technological development (Ellis 1999, Rose 2006) cannot grasp the power implications of cyberglobalization (Ebo 2001). If Marx is right that quantity transforms into quality, the impact of big linguistic cybercommunities like English, Chinese or Russian on other national communities does imply possible hegemonic tendencies.

7.2. In all the cases mentioned associations with the colonial past come as a reflex. The colonialist use of Russian mass media in Soviet propaganda (cf. Saunders 2009:3) is vividly remembered in Kazakhstan, which justifies asking whether there is any continuity of Soviet strategies in the present media policy of the Russian Federation. Is there a Russian cyberimperialism following the American model (Saunders 2009:5)? The theoretician of cyberimperialism Frank L. Rusciano gives a critical answer because of the decentralized structure of the Internet (2001:15) and of its potential to be used by grassroots organisations. One might add the widely practised anti-disciplinary use (in the sense of Certeau) of the internet, for example in jokes about Russian politicians available on the Runet.27 What then about jokes about Nazarbaev, stored in the Runet?28

And might the linguistic dimension of the sort of cyberimperialism which Rusciano calls “metrocentric cyberimperialism” not be relevant to the Russian-Kazakh case as well?

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27 See search.anekdot.ru/?query=%EF%F3%F2%E8%ED&rubrika=j, accessed 1 June 2010.
28 For example http://search.anekdot.ru/?query=%ED%E0%E7%E0%F0%E1%E0%E5%E2&rubrika=j (accessed 30 May 2010). For a possible confirmation of this suspicion see www.gorychiy.narod.ru/2001/K/0033.htm, accessed 1 June 2010. For more on www.anekdot.ru see Gorny 2006.
Do Russians from the Russian Federation like representatives of other “[…] core nations consciously or unconsciously define and disseminate language and linguistic constructs for understanding the world through the media of cyberspace” (Rusciano 2001:11) and perform acts of linguistic imperialism in so doing?

7.3. Historically, Soviet (Russian language) TV included the Soviet Republics as a culturally Russian territory. Such inclusive TV entertainment can be understood as a non-dividing, as a strategy of cultural hegemony. In contrast to the hegemonic strategy of divide et impera, in this case cultural hegemony is established by non-exteriorisation. It goes hand in hand with the non-acceptance of the external colonizing character of this imagined “internal” cultural diffusion as described by Stefan Rohdewald (2010). In this sense, Russian politicians from all parts of the political spectrum have demanded support for the external-internal Russian diaspora in the near abroad ever since 1991 (cf. Saunders 2005:174).

7.4. After Russia’s withdrawal from the Central Asian scene in the 1990s due to internal political and economic priorities, one could observe Russia’s return to Central Asia in the 2000s (see Matveeva 2007). Russian TV entertainment is once more used for promoting Russian cultural hegemony (Rantanen 2002), and political strategists [polittekhnologi] look at the near abroad again.

As some of the present political strategists are trained computer specialists, use of the Runet can be understood as a tool of soft power as well: “Language and the internet are being viewed and used as tools for ‘soft power’ in promoting Russian national interests both at home and abroad” (Gorham 2010:<1>). Thus what Michael Gorham calls “virtual Russophonia” (2010:<2>) is not just a consumers’ and communicators’ decision alone.

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29 Rohdewald draws on the concept of internal colonisation as advocated in the 2000s by Aleksandr Etkind (2001).
Russophonia has been promoted since the Putin administration’s “international turn” with the declaration of the “Year of the Russian Language” in 2007.

A special target is the near abroad. The webpage of the state organisation responsible, Russkii mir [The Russian World], founded in 2007, explicitly says of its target group:

“‘Russkii mir’ is not just Russians, not just citizens of the Russian Federation, not just compatriots in the countries of the near and far abroad, emigrants, natives of Russian and their descendants. It is also foreign citizens who speak Russian, who study or teach it, all those who are sincerely interested in Russian and who are concerned about its future.”

This broad and inclusive notion obviously comes very close to my earlier definition of virtual Russians, but in the case of Russkii mir the broad definition is envisaged as a means of metrocentric cyberimperialism in the sense of Rusciano (2001). The Diasporas are a special goal of the foundation, mentioned directly after the promotion of positive public opinion about Russia around the world.

The advocates of a Russian world have detected the implicit, subcutaneous “propaganda” effect of the Runet:

“The Runet is an ‘impersonal’ but highly effective carrier of the language, the very .ru-zone which gives all users the possibility to get information and communicate

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independently from citizenship and at the same time to broaden the Russian-speaking space."\(^{32}\)

On 9 April 2010 Russkii mir held a conference devoted exclusively to Russkojazychnye v Tsentral’noi Azii [Russian Speakers in Central Asia].\(^{33}\) So far the actual effects of Russkii mir’s internet-based linguistic imperialism in the near abroad seem insignificant.\(^{34}\) But the possibility that the Russian minority in Kazakhstan could be targeted by Russkii mir as a “fifth column” and that the foundation’s traditional linguistic imperialism may advance to more modern means of linguistic cyberimperialism cannot be denied.

8. Resistance by emulation

What are the Kazakhstanis’ strategies of resistance to the potential new Russian linguistic-cyberimperialistic threat?

8.1. It would be misleading to return to the outdated research stereotype of “nationalising regimes” (Smith et al. 1998:139-164) all over Central Asia, which suggests an antagonistic postcolonial attitude towards the colonialist in the sense of Frantz Fanon. Adams et al. try to describe the Kazakhstani strategy with a deductive pattern of postcolonial resistance directed simultaneously against international consumerism and the previous colonizer, but admit a specifically defensive gesture instead of antagonism:

“[...] we can explore the dimensions of cultural conflict in post-Soviet Kazakhstan as an example of a post-colonial resistance to cultural globalization: the target is both internal (the colonized mentality and the remaining settler population), and external (the continuing

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\(^{32}\) “Рунет – это «неодушевленный», но весьма эффективный носитель языка, та самая зона .ru, которая дает возможность воспринимать информацию и общаться всем пользователям независимо от гражданства и тем самым расширять русскоязычное пространство.” (Iatsenko 2007).


colonial domination of the culture markets); the actions tend to be proactive, intended to reaffirm and bolster local culture rather than being concerned with ‘pollution’ [...] the tone of the response tends to be defensive, in part because of continued dependence on the colonizer and, again, in part of the colonized mentality.” (Adams et al. 2007:84)

As shown above, the presidential administration of Kazakhstan addresses the “Russian problem” with a non-antagonistic and rather inclusive strategy. It tries to avoid a direct opposition between Kazakh (nation) and Russian (language). After a short period of concessions to Kazakh ethnic nationalism around 1993, Nazarbaev returned to his inclusive strategy for constructing Kazakhstani identity from the early 1990s (Akiner 1995:69) and has since then been preserving his rhetoric of trilinguality. But is not the Russian component of this trilingual constellation a paradoxical or even counterproductive means of “resistance” against Russia?

8.2. No, because Kazakh identity has over centuries developed by departing from a Russian or Soviet starting point. Kazakh national identity was invented in early Soviet times – during the so-called korenizatsiia - by Russians in Russian (Saunders 2006b:244) and in distinction from the Russian identity. The Sovietisation of Kazakhstan followed a “dual course, enacting russification policies at the same time that it maintained and strengthened national institutions” (Pavlenko 2008a:281). Nazarbaev, former secretary general of the Communist Party of the Kazakh Soviet Republic, based his early politics on the Soviet model, from which he made small steps toward Kazakhisation. Kazakh identity has thus always developed by starting from a Russian or Soviet model, by first emulating this model and by slowly introducing non-Russian aspects such as nomad identity or clan lineage. In contrast to what Homi K. Bhabha describes as the hegemonic imposition or else subversive appropriation of a “not quite” identity of the colonized in comparison to the colonizers (Bhabha 1994:87), the Kazakhstani way of resisting and gaining agency starts from the
“almost exactly” and then introduces small steps of differentiation. This defensive, slow tactic renounces of the more widespread overtly antagonistic post-colonial attitude (cf. Schatz 2000:489). It is more post-colonial in the temporal than anti-colonial in the antagonistic sense.

8.3. One expression of this emulative-defensive strategy can be found in the inclusive and embracing logic of argumentation of the “both … and…” type. On the object level this was already observed in the existing research literature, for example concerning Nazarbaev’s “balancing act between russification and nativization” (Pavlenko 2008a:302) or his deliberate avoidance of “making a choice between an ethnic and a civic nation concept” (Kolstø 1998:56). Nazarbaev tried to give the impression that he was “both forward- and backward-looking” (Saunders 2006b:244) and pursued “both a multinational society and a homeland for the ethnic Kazakhs at the same time” (Kolstø 1998:56).

The vagueness and apparent contradiction of Nazarbaev’s inclusive arguments as diagnosed in research literature is not a problem for understanding this strategy but the solution for a better understanding itself. Differing from antagonistic postcolonial attitudes, this “both… and…” strategy tries to overcome the being “in the gap” as it is known from Petr Chaadaev’s famous first Filosoficheskoe pis’mo [Philosophical Letter], according to which Russia belonged “neither to the Occident nor to the Orient”.35

9. Towards a Eurasian post-colonial logic of argumentation?

In contrast to the geocultural gap envisaged by the Russian Westerniser Chaadaev in 1829, the Russian traditional Eurasianism of the 1920s implemented an argumentative strategy which is predominantly inclusive.

9.1. This becomes obvious at a first glance from the manifesto of Russian Eurasianism of the 1920s, *Iskhod k Vostoku [Exodus to the East]*. The argumentation starts with a self-exclusion from Europe comparable to Chaadaev’s:

“Russians and those who belong to the peoples of ‘the Russian world’ are neither Europeans nor Asians. Merging with the native element of culture and life which surrounds us, we are not ashamed to declare ourselves Eurasians.” (Savitskii et al. 1996:4)

But then the authors Savitskii, Suvchinskii, Trubetskoi and Florovskii advocate a new figure of “inclusion of a whole circle of East European and Asian peoples into the mental sphere of the culture of the Russian world” (Savitskii et al. 1996:4). The functional relationship between the argumentative tropes of exclusion and inclusion becomes clear from the following quote: “[…] Russia is not merely ‘the West’ but also ‘the East,’ not only ‘Europe’ but also ‘Asia,’ and even not Europe at all, but ‘Eurasia’” (Savitskii 1996:6). Internal inclusion (Eurasia) serves as a means for external exclusion (of Europe).

A comparable functional sequence of inclusion for the sake of exclusion can be found in Russian Neoeurasianism, as Alexander Höllwerth described in his analysis of the obscure logic of Aleksandr Dugin’s argumentation: “The ‘logic of connecting’ is always an instrument of the ‘logic of division’.”

9.2. Although in the case of Dugin the alleged internal inclusion jeopardizes Kazakh independence and masks Russian cultural and political expansionism, the Russian Eurasianism has served as a philosophical model which the Kazakh government propagated actively (Khruslov 2006:148) and that can be institutionally seen in the example of the L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University in Astana, which in its self-description links the

Kazakhstani president with the Russian Eurasianist, the neoracist Lev Gumilev, in embracing rhetoric:

“The president of the Republic of Kazakhstan, N.A. Nazarbaev, gave the Eurasian National University the name of Lev Nikolaevich Gumilev. […] The head of state is a convinced supporter of Kazakhstan’s national revival and of the Eurasian idea. […] The most important point for Kazakhstan is that he [Gumilev] worked […] on the problem of the mutuality of Turks and Slavs in the context of the unity of the peoples of Eurasia.”

Apparently Nazarbaev has learned not only from the content of Russian Eurasianism but also from its argumentative forms: he includes Russian (and English) in his internal trilingual strategy while the Kazakh information space is protected against Russian cable TV and against certain Russia-based webpages, as Khruslov points out:

“At the same time the national mass media have to fulfil the task of gaining information independence from the Russian mass media and to form a homogeneous information space of the Republic [of Kazakhstan].”

Nazarbaev’s “Authoritarianism 2.0” (Kalathil 2003:43) deploys cybertrilinguality for the sake of excluding critical media from abroad. Kazakh webpages are written in Russian to promote the president’s world view (parallel to the dozens of translations of his books into foreign languages), but the domain name .kz is supposed to remain an emblem reserved for the privatized state brand Kazakhstan/Nazarbaev.

37 “Президент Республики Казахстан Н.А. Назарбаев присвоил Евразийскому национальному университету имя Льва Николаевича Гумилева. […] Глава государства – убежденный сторонник национального возрождения Казахстана и евразийской идеи. […] Для Казахстана первостепенное место имеет то, что он [Гумилев] работал […] над проблемой взаимодействия тюрков и славян в контексте единства народов Евразии.” (Selivestrov n.d.).

38 “Одновременно перед республиканскими СМИ поставлена задача обретения информационной независимости от российских СМИ, формирования единого информационного пространства республики [Казахстан], …” (Khruslov 2006:147).
In camouflaging the purpose of division under a cover of multiple connections, Nazarbaev is diplomatically more successful\(^{39}\) than the Russian Eurasianists who – in every generation – have not held back from declaring that among the Eurasian peoples “the Russian people has the central position” (Savitskii et al. 1996:4, sic). Nevertheless the similarity in the connecting-disconnecting or including-excluding strategies is striking. One might risk providing a second, rather abstract, non-spatial (and slightly ironic) definition of Eurasia: “Eurasian” is a rhetoric of inclusion for the sake of pragmatic exclusion.

10. Unsurprising Coincidences

10.1. This Kazakhstani “Eurasian” logic displays rather unsurprising coincidences with various Russian, Soviet, post-Soviet and post-colonial argumentative logics. As seen above, the Kazakhstani and the Russian Eurasianisms share a connection-dividing logic. The Nazarbaev administration’s ambiguous russification and kazakhisation cannot deny its traces in Soviet language policy. As Schatz diagnoses:

“Post-Soviet Kazakhstani internationalism was shaped by many of the discursive and institutional legacies of its Soviet-era predecessor. As in the Soviet era, the Kazakhstani elite propagated ambiguous cultural categories designed for universalistic appeal and broad resonance.” (Schatz 2000:491)

The Kazakhstani preservation of the “colonial” language Russian as a means of interethnic communication is akin to the majority of African post-colonial countries, which retained the former colonial languages for the analogous purpose of transregional, interethnic and international communication (cf. Pavlenko 2008a:300).

\(^{39}\) One needs to distinguish this authoritarian strategy of inclusion from a postmodern paradoxical inclusion of contradictions. Nazarbaev, however, made a postmodern attempt of self-defuting when he changed Kazakhstan’s politics towards Borat, becoming self-ironic and therefore ultimately embracing all contradictions (Saunders 2008:127).
10.2. What is more surprising is that Nazarbaev’s “both… and…” strategy meets with approval from a Western human rights perspective. Eschment echoes Nazarbaev in 1998: “A rational solution would be a ‘both… and…’, a balanced bilinguality.”\(^{40}\) The German scholar even subscribes to the topos of Kazakhstanis as predestined to think in Eurasian inclusive categories (Eschment 1998:117).

10.3. Less surprising is the last – but politically most relevant – coincidence: the structural similarity of the Kazakhstani linguistic internationalism and the recent Russian media expansionism. The new Russian embracement strategy of non-distinction and the Kazakh rhetoric of non-exclusion come – as far as the logic of connection is concerned – close to each other. The two authoritarianisms – the post-Soviet Kazakhstani and the Russian of the Putin era – share a comparable embracing rhetoric designed for exclusive purposes. This makes it possible for Russian Neo-Eurasianists to quote Nazarbaev’s renewed appeal to the Kazakhstani people of 23 May 2010 to learn Russian and English authoritatively on their webpage evrazia.org (evrazia.org/news/13273; accessed 31 May 2010).

Time will show whether the two inclusive strategies – the Russian and the Kazakhstani one – will engage in open conflict with each other or whether eventually the decentralized structure of the internet wins out against both unfriendly inclusion strategies.

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\(^{40}\) „Eine rationale Lösung läge in einem Sowohl-Als-Auch, in einer ausgewogenen Zweisprachigkeit […]“ (Eschment 1998:45).


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