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ОНЛАЙН ОБЩЕНИЕ РУССКОГОВОРЯЩИХ: В КОНТЕКСТЕ МИГРАЦИИ ONLINE RUSSIAN SPEAKING COMMUNITIES: IN CONTEXT OF MIGRATION

Аннотация: распространение Интернета, социальных медиа и коммуникационных технологий играет важную роль в жизни мигрантов. Интернет может стать платформой для конструкции идентичности и сообщества, “местом, где люди разделяют чувство принадлежности, формы выражения, смысл и эмоции, языки, воспоминания и правила поведения” [Tsaliki 2003]. В этой статье я бы хотела сосредоточиться на русскоговорящих Интернет-сообществах в контексте миграции в Чехию и распознать, какая связь существует между виртуальными и физическими сообществами, как происходит процесс формирования и согласования индивидуальной и коллективной идентичности офлайн. Я буду опираться на результаты включенного наблюдения в Интернет-сообществах и на качественные интервью с русскоговорящими мигрантами в Чешской Республике.

Abstract: the spread of the internet, the social media and the communication technologies play a significant role in migrant’s life. The Web can be a platform for the construction of identity and community, “place where people share sense of belonging, forms of expression, meanings and emotions, languages, memories and rules of conduct” [Tsaliki 2003]. In this paper I would like to focus on Russian speaking online communities in context of migration to the Czech Republic, to discover its power relations, the nexus between virtual and physical communities and the ways that individual and collective identities are negotiated on- and offline. I’ll draw on the findings from participant observation in online communities and on qualitative interviews with Russian speaking migrants in the Czech Republic.

Ключевые слова: онлайн, общение, русскоговорящие мигранты, Чешская Республика.
Keywords: online, communication, Russian speaking migrants, the Czech Republic.

Introduction. As the spread of the internet, social media and communication technologies have influenced the world population; it also has significant impacts in context of migration. As Lee Komito [2011] claims, debates about the social effect of new social media technologies have special relevance for migrants since, as dislocated individuals who have grown up in one society and now live or work elsewhere, changes in communication technologies are likely to have a significant effect on their lives. According to Lee Komito, “evidence from numerous studies indicates that new social media enhance migrants’ capacities to maintain family and kinship contacts across long distances, to create extensive personal networks, and to participate in the national debates of their home societies through transnational associations” [Komito 2011]. The Web can be a platform for the construction of identity and community and “despite the absence of physical space and face to face “handshakes”, cyberspace is perceived and experienced as a place where people share sense of belonging, forms of expression, meanings and emotions, languages, memories and rules of conduct” [Tsaliki 2003].

In this paper I would like to focus on Russian speaking online communities in context of migration to the Czech Republic, to discover its dynamics of power, the nexus between virtual and physical communities and the ways that individual and collective identities are negotiated on- and offline. In the first part of paper, I’ll shed a light on theoretical aspects and challenges for anthropological research on online communities’ topic. In the second part, I’ll devote to practical part of this paper. This work is based on the findings from participant observation in

online communities and on qualitative interviews with Russian speaking migrants in the Czech Republic.

Identity and challenges for research online. The identity has been much of attention for social scientists. Recent studies have warned that it's important to be aware of fractured and flexible character of identities. As Van Meijl claimed identities are multiply constructed across different discourses, practices and positions and especially "in increasingly multicultural contexts identity obtains it's meaning primarily from the identity of the other with whom self is contrasted". The construction of identity is never ending and incomplete process [Van Meijl 2008].

The spread of the internet and emerged of virtual communities created new platform for research on identities. As claimed by Wilson and Peterson [2002], the idea that virtual spaces allow for fundamentally new constructions of identity has got much attention in many disciplines. Authors declared that online groups are very often centered around offline ethnic and national identities. Moreover "identities are negotiated, reproduced, and indexed in a variety of ways in online interactions, and these often can not be understood without considering the offline context" [Wilson, Peterson 2002]. Depend on that, in this paper I'll often refer to the offline world and to the context of Russian speaking migrants in the Czech Republic. But before the practical part, it's also important to mention the challenges for anthropological research on online communities' topic.

First of all when we talk about online as a field for ethnographic require, we have to be aware of that online field is "the field which is moving very fast"- challenge of "contesting culture". Post, comments and stories are changing very fast on internet. Also people are allowed to delete or make invisible any comment, they made before. That can put some obstacles to research in online field.

Dealing with the category "online" in this paper, I also consider its nexus with "offline". How are these categories connected and how online communities are influenced by local communities as well they can influence them? From my point of view, they are often some kind of mirrors of local communities, at least at their narratives. There is definitely interplay between local and online communities; because even we consider them as virtual they are still very rooted. And it can be just alternative space for communication.

No doubt that online has its own special characteristics. And according to Katz , Rice [2002], in offline communities people usually connected on a base of social and physical boundaries, but online communities attempt to break through some boundaries regarding race, gender, ethnicity, and geographic location established in offline communities [Katz, Rice 2002].

Online communities usually estimated on a basis of common interest and characterized by specialized relationships. What is also important to mention is that it can be money and business interests in online communities, and they can be produced with a special intend.

Moreover if we talk about studying online communities, it's important to keep in mind that communities are very fluid and in every community there is plurality of different communities and cultures. And I acknowledge that "individuals belong to many communities, bounded to different extents in varying ways" [Wilson, Peterson 2002]. On top of that there is no particular agreement on definition of "community" or similar terms are overlapping. In this particular paper when I talk about online Russian speaking communities I mean internet-based groups and collectives, which were established by or for Russian speaking migrants in the Czech Republic.

Practical part. It's hard to establish the precise number of Russian speaking migrants in the Czech Republic, but it's possible to claim, that Russian speaking community is pretty extended. According to data from the Czech Statistic Office in year 2010 there were living 31 807 Russian citizens in the Czech Republic with long-term stay or permanent residence. And according to data from year 2001, there are 12 369 people considered as a representatives of the Russian minority. But Russian speaking people are coming to the Czech Republic from different countries besides Russia, such as Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus and other CIS countries. There are 132 015 people from Ukraine, 4000 from Kazakhstan and 4550 from Belarus on different types of visa in the Czech Republic.

For Russian speaking community in the Czech Republic is much easier to find any information through number of sites, forums, blogs and groups on social media web sites. One of the

examples is created groups in vkontakte.ru, which offer different services for Russian speaking community in the Czech Republic. Usually they have been established for commercial purposes, but some of them serve as a meet-up platforms or platforms for discussions.

Vk.com (before Vkontakte.ru) is the most popular social network in Russian federation, which was based on Facebook.com. In the beginning (2006) the social network Vkontakte.ru was the social network for pupils and students in St. Petersburg, but later became popular amongst broad public in the whole Russia, but also in Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan and etc. I've chosen the vkontakte.ru not only because of its popularity, but also because of its relatively free social media network. In most cases, people can really express what they want without any censorship. In vkontakte.ru is possible to find different groups and communities: commercial – individuals and firms offer their services to Russian-speaking people in the Czech Republic. Services are vary, most popular are: real estates, documents and legal advices for visas and long term-residence, insurance, travel services, language courses, organization of weddings and celebrations. Usually celebrations in Russian style are offered with Russian Santa Klaus (Ded Moroz, Snegurochka) or concert organization of any Russian music group, financial services, technical computer support, cosmetic and hair dresser services, photo and video services. Also there are very popular noncommercial communities: clubs and associations according to interests. For example: Russian literature club, Game clubs, Czech movies for Russian speaking and etc.

There are online communities, which were established for particularly Russian-speaking migrants in the Czech Republic. These communities were my main interests in a frame of this paper. They serve as platforms for getting know new people, for discussions of migrant experience and for sharing some knowledge. The main discussions were on topic related to Russian speaking community and migrant status, new immigration laws, language barrier, Czech-Russian relations. But it also a space for discussion of contemporary events related to the Czech Republic and Czech society in general. For example discussions about candidates for presidential elections, taxes, recent alcohol scandal, sport and cultural events, Czech culture, for example cartoons and movies. Through these discussions people express the way they perceive the Czech Republic and Czech people in general. Some online groups are duplicates of physical/offline communities/organizations which were established for and by Russian speaking migrants (for example “Prague Inspiration”, “Pragmatics”, “Amiga” and etc.). Some individual migrants establish their personal group, which they use in a way of diary and where they share their migrant experience, thoughts about the life in the Czech Republic (for example, “Che in Prague” and “Notes of Nicoletta”).

Online communities exist in the global-local nexus. As Lisa Tsaliki claims it breaks away from traditional, space-bounding understanding of identity and community and is spread across the globe. In broader sense we can say that the internet connects the homeland and the migrants around the globe. The name of groups and communities also reflect their cross borders perspectives: ahojky.ru, privet.cz and etc.

Through discussions and their online expression migrants can rebuild, reconsider their identity. One of the evidences of reworked identities is nicknames. People, who live in the Czech Republic, sometimes use in their nicknames, instead of their real name for example Czech/Ceshka (Чешка) and then the real surname. In that way they can demonstrate the place, where they belong or where they want another people to believe that they belong.

The question of language use is very significant in context of migration and social media. The mixture of using Russian language and the Czech language in the same sentences, demonstrates the language competences of those who live in the Czech Republic and connectedness to their community.

Leonid: *Even the smallest city in the Czech Republic is better than Kiev. But of course if you **makat** (work) through agency it's better to go to Ukraine.*

Sveta: *“**makat** through agency” what does it mean?*

Leonid: ***Makat** means sweat/toil. **Amongst us** it's a slang word – work hard.*

Some people use the Czech language in posting status and comments (by Russian-speaking). Or write Czech words in Russian letters. For example: Пражаки! Through the language migrants

can demonstrate their competence in both languages and conscious of their sub-cultures and group-specific expressions.

They are also general discussions online about the Czech language and language barrier. People give advices each other, share knowledge and experiences, share information about language courses or about possibilities of conversation with native speakers. Discussants are asking each other if somebody has Czech friends or know somebody for language tandem.

Also it's a place for peer review, "safe" space to practice Czech language amongst the same people who also learn it. Here is one of the examples, where participants of discussion had to introduce their self in Czech language and some of them tried to alert if somebody had mistakes.

Svetlana: Emic, you have a small mistake. Correct is to say: Ahoj, Katerino)

Kate you also have a small mistake, the right way to say: Bydlim v Irkutsku)

P.S. don't be angry) I just want to help.

People discuss the Czech language similarities and differences with Russian language and its relation to Slavonic language group. From this topic discussions usually move to the topic of similarities and differences between Russian and Czech people in general.

In some cases in groups and forums related to the Czech Republic, there are also people who would like to migrate there and seek for information and advices from those who are already in the Czech Republic. According to Tsaliki "issues of power, authority, dominance, regulation and rebellion are as relevant and significant in cyberspace as they are in real life" [Tsaliki 2003]. Interactions between those who are inside the Czech Republic and those who would like to get there demonstrate power relations. "Insiders" have knowledge, experience and sometimes Czech language skills; on the other hand "outsiders" seek information, advices and help. This creates tensions between those who are in the Czech Republic and those who are out.

Alina: people, can you say it is real to go there or no? You all dissuade from going there, but you your self live there and work even without knowledge of language. I can't understand, is it because, you're so greedy if somebody else will come to Prague?

Igor: Yes, Prague is not rubber (isn't big enough to take everybody on board)

In discussion we can see not only division between those who are in the Czech Republic and who are outside according to knowledge and experience, but also in a frame of social stratus.

Olga: sometimes you walk in Prague and think "just not to meet Russians" ...I'm not saying that it relates to everybody...

Olesja: Yes... Russia is very deep in devastation, lack of culture and vulgarity for at least 150 years, nothing we can do about it. Elite and intelligence emigrated a long time ago, evidently the working class only maintains))

People who are in the Czech Republic identify their self with high social status. And even as migrants they can find their self in a lower status in a major society, online they can reworked and rebuild their identity in discussion with those who desire to migrate and see the Czech Republic as the paradise. Also posting beautiful pictures about their "perfect" life in the Czech Republic can influence another people's decisions to emigrate. It contributes to formation of imagination about the Czech Republic like a paradise destination.

But as it was already mentioned above, those who live in the Czech Republic for a long time try to break this "perfect" imagination of potential migrants and prevent their coming. And if people who would like to live in the Czech Republic don't take advices from "experienced", "smart" migrants seriously, they are considered as naïve and silly.

Valentina: Ohhhh My Goooooooooooood....you're so naïve...You think you'll come here and everybody will seize you with both hands? Nobody needs foreigners!!! And laws from the first of January have been made tougher. It's complicated to get work visas. And Czechs, especially in regions, are unemployment and complain about it. And you without knowledge of language, where will you go??

Narratives from online discussions also demonstrate the way people think that they are perceived by major community, by Czechs. One of the examples is description of one group, which calls Česko, it says:

The Czech Republic is such a small state, where we Rusaci/Russians (how they call us) live.

*Original: Česko, to je takovej malej stát, kde my Rusaci (tak nám říkají oni) bydlíme...
xD xD*

As was already mentioned above the online and offline communities are often connected, we can see it from a few examples, which were founded in V Kontakte.ru. Sometimes online communities are established for making real changes in offline communities by migrants. For example, Russian speaking users in V Kontakte.ru were organizing the picking of clothes and toys for orphanage in the Czech Republic. Another one was organized for gathering for community work day or, in other words, cleaning day in Prague 13.

If we talk about other Russian speaking forums for migrants in the Czech Republic, I found out that narratives are changing. In social network site as V Kontakte.ru, people usually are not anonymous, so people try to post beautiful pictures on their pages, with happy faces from different touristic parts of the Czech Republic and Europe. But in forums where people can be anonymous, migrants can express their feelings, disillusion and needs for help. Forums give opportunity to express more openly their broken hopes, problems, and challenges during migration. It can provide moral support from countrymen or can be used as the place to express migrants' frustration and loneliness. But of course it also can happen in v kontakte.ru.

Online space is definitely connected with offline and has enormous influence on it. People who are shy or have low-esteem can feel more freely in virtual world than in physical one. And that can help to find new friends and company in new place. For these purposes youth online communities serve very well. Young Russian speaking migrants organize "Prague meetings", "Active recreation in Prague", "Mafia games in Prague".

Another very important part of Russian speaking migrants' life in the Czech Republic is Skype. Through Skype migrants are connected to their relatives and friends, who left behind in country of origin, and create transnational communities. They have online "face-to-face" conversation, where emotions are not hidden as for example through text messages. In this kind of interaction people can see each other (mimics, gestures) and hear each other (voice tone). Some of my informants actually through the Skype can sometimes "participate" in family gatherings and celebrations. The country of origin still stays as very important part of life, one of the social fields in which migrants are situated. It's obvious that country of origin still play a great role in negotiating and construction of identity. And through communication online some parts of social control still remain from their reference group outside the Czech Republic.

Social media, communication technologies allow transnational practices (for example transnational work practises) and transnational identities; all these practices can be easier and faster. Those who live in the Czech Republic are representatives of particular knowledge/ skills. They don't address anymore only to financial recourse in the Czech republic, but can participate for example in Russian labor market (provide services to organizations in Russia online). Translating Russian - Czech texts, give Czech language classes on Skype to those who would like to migrate to the Czech Republic in the future.

Conclusions. Social media platforms and communication technologies offer a possibility to participate in online communities across the borders or create them. It creates new practices of connection between migrants and their country of origin and people who are left behind. But it also helps in adaptation to the new society and in getting necessary contacts and information. Through online platforms people of similar ethnic descent meet each other and share experiences, information, sometimes aspirations and dreams. ICT helps migrants shape identity and meaning through questioning, discussion and virtual "hang outs". People in minority situation can experience "normalcy of identity online", to participate in community of their own choice, where is possibility of being majority. The social media open new possibilities for research on migration topic, for example on power relations within migrant communities.

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