

## 'HOLY COW' AND 'ETERNAL FLAME'. RUSSIAN ONLINE LIBRARIES.

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## analysis

*The old myth of Russian culture's literary rootedness lives on in the Internet. Although in the offline world there are complaints of sluggish sales and poor quality, the Web libraries are abundantly filled. These not only act as enormous repositories of texts, but also as meeting places for a readership spread throughout the world. This fact explains their symbolic status and their importance as a point of identification. However, the pressure on the Russian Internet libraries is growing: commercialisation and integration into the offline legal norms are changing the conditions in which they exist. Two tendencies are evident: the development of libraries that charge for their services alongside the retreat into copyright piracy.*

## ONLINE LIBRARIES AS A NATIONAL CULTURAL ASSET?

I am proud that the collections of books in the Russian internet are considerably larger than comparable online libraries in other countries. I am pleased by a further piece of evidence that, even in this electronic age, Russia remains a literary country, a country of the book. I like to think that the traditions of Soviet samizdat are alive and well today. Sergei Kuznetsov

Is the writer and publicist Sergei Kuznetsov's pride concerning the unique status of Russian electronic libraries justified? Or is the recourse to the myth of Russia as a country of readers simply a repetitive rhetorical gesture that falls back on uniqueness in response to the threat of cultural globalisation? In this light, the reference to the historical tradition of samizdat comes across as an attempt to ennoble digital self-publishing as a continuation of the struggle for intellectual freedom under the new conditions of capitalism.

It is indeed true that the Russian internet possesses an impressive number of websites offering literary texts and academic literature for free download. Most are private projects initiated by amateurs. The collections of texts reflect the individual tastes of their creators. In fact, the philologists Eugene Gorny and Konstantin Vigursky, themselves e-librarians, deny that many of the collections are actually libraries because they were not put together in a logical and consistent manner and

do not possess the minimal requirements of bibliographical documentation. However, in the self-perception of RuNet, as the Russian segment of the internet is often called by its users, these projects perform the role of libraries.

## THE PEOPLE'S LIBRARIAN AND HIS HOLY COW

One of the nuclei of Russian literature in the internet is the library run by programmer Maxim Moshkov (<http://www.lib.ru>). Roman Leibov, the 'inventor' of Russian literary hypertext and an early cult figure among Russian bloggers himself, calls the site the 'holy cow of RuNet'. The library's description of itself gives an insight into the thematic hotchpotch that is an elementary dynamic of this collection, which attracts about 500,000 readers per month:

The best-known www-library in RuNet opened in 1994. Writers and readers fill it every day. Belles lettres, fantastical writing and politics, technical literature and humour, history and poetry, singer-songwriters and Russian rock, travel and parachuting, philosophy and esotericism, etc., etc.

The focus on fantasy and science fiction is one of the last remaining traces of the *tekhinari* – the Russian programmers who created the first literary resources in the early 1990s for their own amusement, but have since been largely expelled from the internet.

The *Maxim Moshkov Library* is a classic case of a 'people's library' or library 'from below', which

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is created in a similar manner to the English-language *Project Gutenberg* (<http://www.gutenberg.org>). In contrast, however, Moshkov not only has texts whose copyrights lapsed seventy years after the death of their authors, but also many works by contemporary writers.

Use of the library is free of charge. The books are chosen by the readers themselves, scanned and sent, ready for publication, to the library. In this way, it reflects the tastes of its readers: 'The readers determine the range and quality of the texts in this library; I simply stand here "at the reception"' says Moshkov. On the question of copyright, he holds a position that is more pragmatic than programmatic. A number of authors have given their express permission to publish their work in the *www-library*, including prominent writers such as Sergei Lukyanenko and Victor Pelevin. In all other cases, a policy of publication by recall is practised, whereby texts are promptly removed from the site if the author requests it; this accords with Moshkov's basic principle that 'the author's word is law'.

PHILOLOGICAL TREASURE TROVES. AVANT-GARDE  
AND THE CLASSICAL CANON

In contrast, the *Russian Virtual Library RVB* (<http://rvb.ru/>) created by Eugene Gorny, amongst others, in 1999 earns the label 'academic online library' by virtue of its decided interest in philology. It is also a private project. However, it is not only aimed at the broader reading public, but also at experts. Alongside classics such as those by Alexander Pushkin, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Konstantin Batyushkov and Alexei Remisov, the repertoire is avant-garde and modernist. It publishes texts no longer subject to copyright. An exception is the 'Mystic of Moscow', Yuri Mamleyev, who expressly welcomes the publication of his work in the online library. The RVB, which has to make do with limited resources, has been funded by pub-

lic institutions such as the *Open Society Institute*<sup>1</sup> (1999–2001) and the *Russian Foundation for the Humanities* (2004–2009).

The *Fundamental Digital Library of Russian Literature and Folklore FEB* (<http://feb-web.ru/>) has set itself, as the name clearly suggests, a much larger task: Since going online in 2002, it has aimed to present the central texts from ten centuries of Russian literature and folklore. The collection is organised into Digital Scholarly Editions DSE, which can be devoted to a writer, a genre or a single work of significance to the history of literature. The choice of works recreates the canon, i.e. the texts handed down from generation to generation that form the country's cultural identity, for example the *Primary Chronicle*, the first account of Russian history from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Although they are not yet complete, electronic editions of, amongst others, Pushkin, Alexander Griboyedov, Nikolai Lermontov and Sergei Yesenin are available.

The library project was founded by a non-profit foundation in which the *Institute for World Literature* of the *Russian Academy of Sciences* is involved. The supervisory board counts such prominent public figures as Mikhail Gorbachev among its members. Sponsors include, to name but a few, the *Russian Foundation for Basic Research*. The *Open Society Institute* provided sponsorship during the start-up period, as indeed it did for almost every internet project dealing with the humanities in Russia. Nevertheless, the library's director, Konstantin Vigursky, bemoaned in 2005 a general lack of funding: the money given as part of the *Electronic Russia* programme was insufficient and was not used effectively.

Vigursky and the editor in chief, Igor Pilshchikov, answer to the *FEB*'s readers via the guestbook. The forum provides, for example, a means of correcting typographical and factual errors. Here, too, the

<sup>1</sup> The foundation for the promotion of democracy and civil society founded by George Soros.

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readers are involved in shaping the resource. As a result, they identify with the site strongly. The user Olga Frolova writes enthusiastically:

FIRST ACQUAINTANCES Thank goodness! I dropped in (by chance) and my life immediately became easier. This library is exactly what I have always dreamed about. Thanks!

MEDIA APOSTLES VS. MOSHKOV. THE TRIAL AGAINST *LIB.RU*

'A lawsuit against the Moshkov library for the systematic infringement of copyright laws'; this quote from Alexei Andreyev's 1998 dystopian science fiction novel *The Spider's Web* turned out to be an eerily prophetic description of a dramatic turn of events in the real world. In 2004, right on time for the tenth anniversary of the .ru domain and Moshkov's internet library, the owners of the pay-to-use web portal *KM.ru* sued a number of 'free' Russian e-libraries for breach of copyright. They claimed to be acting on behalf of well-known literary greats such as the crime author Alexandra Marinina and the science fiction writer Eduard Gevorkyan. The

plaintiffs demanded the fantastic figure of 500,000 US dollars in damages.

The company's acronym *KM* stands for Kirill and Methodius, the so-called Slavic apostles who laid the foundations for the creation of the Cyrillic alphabet, and thus today's written Russian language, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The defendant Moshkov ironically expressed his thanks on his website to the 'alphabet for being so kind as to lend out its letters'.

On 8 April 2004, the first hearing before the Moscow district court took place. The case cut to the very root of the convictions of the Russian internet community, which in general is highly antipathetic towards the enshrinement of copyright in a law that can be tested in the courts. The Russian blogosphere became the centre of the resistance to the trial. Before long, a supporter weblog appeared in which the Russian readers could express their ties to 'their' library. This is how Nataliya Belenkaya from Jerusalem put it:

Eduard [Gevorkyan], please, let us have the library. It is perhaps naïve to ask you to take

ROMAN. THE UNHAPPY LOVE FOR RUSSIAN HYPERTEXT (*HENRIKE SCHMIDT*)

The first and most famous Russian literary hypertext was *Roman* [Novel] (1995). It was initiated by the literary scholar Roman Leibov, who is based in Estonia. The three-fold meaning of the title, which identifies the genre, the topic (in Russian, *roman* also means a love affair) and the author, underlines that this text is a complicated conceptual work. The narrative starting point, however, is an intentionally banal love story. The hero of the novel throws a love letter to the object of his affections into the letterbox, but immediately regrets his impulsive act when she appears in the hallway of the block of flats with a rival. The classical intrigue derives from the questions of whether and how the "postal secret" can be kept and how the love triangle will resolve itself. *Roman* was formally organised as a collective writing project in which different authors would write the different plot lines concurrently. Leibov conceived it in order to prove that it was impossible to create a story in a collaborative, non-hierarchical way. Indeed, the result was a confusing multitude of potential plot lines. This flaw is not seen as a failure, but rather as a successful experiment. Nevertheless, this inauspicious success did not suggest that a further development of the hypertext genre would be productive. Thus, in Russia, the hypertext, which had been celebrated as a liberation from the despotism of linear text, died an early death.

[http://www.cs.ut.ee/~roman\\_l/hyperfiction/htroman.html](http://www.cs.ut.ee/~roman_l/hyperfiction/htroman.html)

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back your statement to the court, but believe me, for us, the Russian-speaking readers abroad, it is vital that the library continues to exist in its present form. [...] Please understand, it is not just a website or a collection of texts – it is a symbol, a kind of eternal flame, or, in other words: our *home*.

Despite the campaign of support, Maxim Moshkov lost the case brought by *KM.ru* in 2005. At 30,000 roubles (about 1,000 €), the fine was much lower than the damages claimed. Incidentally, the latter were not brought as compensation for a loss of income by the author, Gevorkyan, but rather for the ‘moral damage’ he had suffered.

Even before the judges pronounced their verdict, the library received an unexpected confirmation of its value from elsewhere, namely from the state. The *Federal Agency for the Press and Mass Media* approved funding worth 1,000,000 roubles (about 30,000 €). Its chairman, Mikhail Seslavinsky, remarked:

Following the lively discussion on how copyright could be protected in electronic libraries, we have decided not to wait for a final decision and to support the central library of RuNet – Maxim Moshkov’s site.

This was a pragmatic policy pursued beyond the legislative framework. Indeed, on 21 April 2004, the revised law ‘On Copyright and Related Rights’ passed its second reading in the Russian parliament. In accordance with international law and as a condition of the country’s entry into the World Trade Organisation, copyright was extended from fifty to seventy years after an author’s death.

Influenced by the trial, Moshkov himself drew a number of far-reaching conclusions regarding his library’s policies. He invested the subsidy in the extension of the classical literature section in order to sidestep copyright problems. Moreover, the former people’s librarian no longer accepts books sent by readers into his collection. Instead,

Moshkov only cooperates with authors who submit their own texts because they wish to see an electronic version of their works.

## BUSINESS LIBRARIANS AND THE COPYRIGHT PIRATES

The years 2005–2006 indeed witnessed a decisive reorientation among Russian electronic libraries. While Moshkov unobtrusively reformed the procedure, a group of the once ‘free’ (meaning free-of-charge) e-libraries came together to develop a new business model. The online libraries *Aldebaran*, *Fictionbook*, *Litportal*, *Bookz.ru* and *Fanzin* created a new portal for the distribution of electronic books under the label *LitRes* (<http://www.litres.ru>): the texts can be read free of charge on the computer screen or downloaded at a cost. In both cases, the authors receive a fee, either from the price of the book or the site’s advertising income. One of the most prominent authors to have signed a contract with *LitRes* on the distribution of his work over the internet is the science fiction writer Sergei Lukyanenko, whose books were also once available on Moshkov’s site.

However, the resistance to the commercialisation of the internet has rallied together in the form of *Librusek* (<http://lib.rus.ec>). The library’s server and operator Ilya Larin are in Ecuador, and thus far removed from the jurisdiction of the Russian courts. As with *lib.ru* before the trial, the roughly 75,000 readers ‘produce’ the books themselves. However, they no longer do this via the librarian, but rather put the works directly onto the platform, and thus adhere to the spirit of the Web 2.0 philosophy of user-generated content. As of January 2009, there were more than 100,000 works by over 32,000 authors. In comparison, the American *Project Gutenberg* lists ‘only’ 27,000 books that can be downloaded free of charge. Unlike Moshkov, the ‘copyright pirates’ are not interested in cooperating with the authors, as the site’s

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manifesto makes clear:

The authors' views do not interest us. Nor does their personality. We take everyone. And deal with them in the same way. The only form of cooperation with the authors is the improvement in the quality of the books offered. Without restrictions.

The conflicts over copyright in the Russian internet and the literary libraries are acquiring an increasingly globalised character: while Russia conforms to the international laws, the global nature of the internet offers new technological opportunities to evade them.

Therefore, there are a number of practical explanations for the fact that the Russian internet is awash with literary texts. It perhaps has less to do with Sergei Kuznetsov's topos of literary rootedness and more with the gaps in the country's literary infrastructure – which, of course, does not detract from its appeal and importance. As Valeria Stelmakh underlined in the issue of *kultura* dealing with libraries and librarianship,<sup>2</sup> Russia's regions particularly suffer from a lack of well-stocked libraries and bookshops. Electronic resources often represent the only point of access, especially for contemporary literature. They are no less important for the Russian diaspora, which due to the repeated waves of emigration is scattered throughout the world. The internet, at least in theory, virtually reunites this Russia abroad with its country of origin. This communal aspect explains the particularly emotional connection to Russian e-libraries. They are not simply repositories of texts; they also serve as a virtual meeting place for readers by integrating them into the library. The cultural and national potential embodied in this form of identification via the e-libraries, which indeed also has political implications, is probably one of the motiva-

<sup>2</sup> 'Book Saturation and Book Starvation. The Difficult Road to a Modern Library System', *kultura*, 2008, No.4, pp.3–8.

tions behind the support provided to a particular and highly symbolic amateur bibliophile project in RuNet, the Moshkov library, by the state, even though there is no



*The Russian 'copyright pirates' from Ecuador: logo of the e-library Librusek. (<http://lib.rus.ec/>)*

overall strategy for the development of the electronic libraries in Russia.

(With additional research by *Eugene Gorny*; Gorny has been actively involved in the construction of Russian cyberculture from the early 1990ties, has initiated numerous literary projects on the internet and wrote his doctoral thesis on the 'creative history of the Russian internet'.)

*From the German by Christopher Gilley*

## READING SUGGESTIONS:

- International Union of Internet Professionals 'EZHE'. 'In Defense of Maxim Moshkov's Library' <http://ezhe.ru/actions/lib/eng.html>
- Gorny, Eugene, 'The Russian Internet: Between Kitchen-Table Talks and the Public Sphere', in *Art Margins. Contemporary Central & East European Visual Culture*, Thursday, 18 October 2007 [http://www.artmargins.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=145:the-russian-internet-between-kitchen-table-talks-and-the-public-sphere&catid=111:articles&Itemid=68](http://www.artmargins.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=145:the-russian-internet-between-kitchen-table-talks-and-the-public-sphere&catid=111:articles&Itemid=68)