

ARTICLE

Online media in the languages of Russian ethnic groups: Current state and key trends¹

Anna Gladkova²

Taras Cherevko

Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia

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Abstract

The paper examines 75 online media outlets, registered in the biggest cities of eight republics of the Russian Federation: Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Chuvashia, Chechnya, Mordovia, Dagestan, Udmurtia, and Crimea. The choice of the republics among 22 republics of Russia was determined by the size of non-Russian ethnic groups residing in those areas (i.e. the number of people, who consider their native language a language other than Russian, according to the state census of 2010³). We supposed that ethno-cultural heterogeneity of these eight republics should be somehow connected with the number of ethnic media registered and issued there: in other words, the bigger the number of ethnic groups in the republics, the bigger the number of ethnic media there. When analyzing online media, we paid attention to the following criteria: the official status of a web-site as media outlet; the choice of languages – Russian language or/and the language of an ethnic group; the owners of media outlets, etc. The research revealed a number of qualitative and quantitative characteristics of online ethnic media registered in the republics under analysis, the challenges they face today, some trends of their development, the role of the state in creating and supporting such media, and much more.

Keywords

Online media, ethnic media, ethnic groups, web-sites, Russian Federation.

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² **Corresponding author:**

Anna Gladkova, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Faculty of Journalism, 9, Mokhovaya st, Moscow, Russia.

Email: gladkova_a@list.ru

³ Available from: http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm

Introduction

According to the Russian census of 2010, there are over 190 ethnic groups at the territory of the Russian Federation speaking more than 170 languages. Among the biggest ethnic groups, except for ethnic Russians, according to the data of 2010, are the Tatar (3,87%), the Bashkir (1,15%), the Chuvash (1,05%) and the Chechen (1,04%). Out of 142,9 million people living at the territory of Russia, 138 million speak Russian. Other widespread languages are English, Tatar, German, Chechen, Bashkir, Ukrainian, and Chuvash. Oftentimes people speaking these languages, and other ones, which are less frequently used, speak Russian too, thus being bi- or even trilingual (Sociolingvističeskaja situacija v Rossijskoj Federaciji (informacionno-analitičeskij doklad Instituta jazykoznanija Rossijskoj akademii nauk) [Sociolinguistic situation in the Russian Federation (informational and analytical report of the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences)]), 2015).

Such immense ethno-cultural heterogeneity points to the multicultural and multilingual nature of the Russian society. Ethnic groups residing at the territory of the Russian Federation have their own cultures, traditions, values and beliefs, which need to be protected to ensure the society keeps its multicultural character in modern globalized world. In our view, this issue is particularly important for smaller ethnic groups, which risk losing their unique cultural and language heritage if nothing is done to protect and support them.

It should be noted, though, that the Russian government has undertaken a number of successful steps so far to secure pluralism in multiethnic and multicultural Russian society. These steps include, but are not limited to ratification of Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in 1998, signing European Charter for Regional or Minorities Languages in 2001, starting a Joint Program of the Council of Europe, the Ministry for Regional Development of the Russian Federation and the European Commission 'Minorities in Russia: Developing Languages, Culture, Media and Civil Society' in 2009, opening various institutions, such as Moscow House of Nationalities, Guild of Interethnic Journalism, Presidential Council for Interethnic Relations in Russia and others (Gladkova, 2013). For sure, such fundamental documents as the Constitution of the Russian Federation, federal laws 'On Languages of the Peoples of the Russian Federation' and 'On Securing Rights of Small Indigenous Peoples of the Russian Federation' and others constitute an important part of the state policy aimed at supporting Russian ethnic groups today. Last but definitely not least is the decree signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin

in July 2015⁴, outlining several strategic initiatives, which should be taken by the Russian government to ensure ethnic languages and cultures are fully protected. One of those initiatives focuses on supporting online and print media in indigenous languages of Russian ethnic groups, which proves that Russian officials understand an important role of ethnic media in safeguarding pluralistic media landscape and keeping indigenous languages and cultures alive.

What we consider to be particularly important is the emphasis on the support of communication in ethnic languages (including communication through media channels), oftentimes stressed in aforementioned documents. Federal law ‘On Securing Rights of Small Indigenous Peoples of the Russian Federation’ signed in 1999, for example, states that ethnic groups have a right to create their own media outlets (article 10). State National Policy of the Russian Federation accepted in 1996 underlines that all Russian citizens regardless their region of living have a right to create federal, regional or local media in a set order (part 5), as well as to receive and distribute information in their native languages. Last but not least, state program ‘Strengthening of the Unity of the Russian Nation and the Ethno-cultural Development of the Peoples of Russia (2014–2020)’ emphasizes an important role of mass media in building intercultural dialogue and communication across nations. The program states that creating new media outlets (print, audiovisual, online) in languages of Russian ethnic groups, and in several languages would allow for better understanding of people sharing different views, traditions and beliefs but living in the same country.

In addition to creating a legal framework for the protection of languages and cultures of Russian ethnic groups through communication in those languages, the government supports ethnic media⁵ in both direct and indirect ways, e.g. allocating direct state subsidies for media in languages other than Russian, and educating journalists working for ethnic media to ensure they are able to discuss intercultural issues in an unbiased and objective way. The latter appears to be exceedingly important for Russian multicultural society, where the number of conflicts on ethnic grounds (including but not being limited to mass protests on Manezh Square in Moscow in December 2010, clashes of ethnic groups in Pugachevo in July 2013, disturbances in Western Birulevo in Moscow in October

⁴ Available from: <http://kremlin.ru/acts/assignments/orders/49877>

⁵ By ‘ethnic media’ we understand, following Blokhin (2008), those print, audiovisual and online media, which serve the interests of particular ethnic groups by airing their views, beliefs and ideas in public, as well as making their cultural heritage known to a broader audience.

2013, etc.) is currently growing⁶. One of the reasons for these conflicts, as researchers (Contini, 2013; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2014; Gladkova, 2013b, 2015; Ivanic et al., 2014; Loennqvist et al., 2014; Min'jar-Belorucheve & Pokrovskaya, 2012; Mishlanova & Sirotkina, 2013; Petrova et al., 2014; Ufkes et al., 2012; Verevkin, 2009) put it, can be non-objective and stereotypical representation of ethnic groups in the media, which in its turn can lead to misunderstanding and even direct confrontation between representatives of different ethnicities.

A quick look at the Russian state policy aimed at supporting ethnic media shows that the state understands an important role mass media can play in interethnic relations today and puts a lot of efforts into making such media available to a broad readership (Tikhonova & Gladkova, 2017; Vartanova, 2018). At the same time, the number of studies analyzing ethnic media in Russia from a so-called practical point of view, i.e. their real numbers, circulations, periodicity, target audience, genres, themes, authors, etc. is quite limited. On the contrary, the majority of studies looking at Russian ethnic media do it from a theoretical point of view, discussing the role of stereotypes in interethnic conflicts and miscommunication across nations (Malkova, 2007; Min'jar-Belorucheve & Pokrovskaya, 2012; Mishlanova & Sirotkina, 2013; Verevkin, 2009), focusing on issues of in-group and out-group trust and the impact of trust and other psychological phenomena upon interethnic relations (Bahry et al., 2005), identifying social prerequisites for interethnic confrontation, such as the degree of diversity in the society (Gladkova, 2013a; Vartanova, 2005, 2012), discussing issues of migration and the lack of sense of belonging among migrants as a potential risk factor in a multiethnic society (Bazhenova et al., 2015; Osin & Konstantinov, 2014); or analyzing the role of language and linguistic means, including hate speech, in affecting attitudes toward ethnic groups (Malkova, 2007; Shulumba, 2013). Let us add that in most cases researchers have focused so far on either print or audiovisual media of ethnic groups, while online media were oftentimes excluded from their analysis⁷.

The aim of the current study is to look at ethnic media, in particular online media, from a more practical angle, which is sometimes missing when

⁶ Grozd'ya gneva. Reyting mezhetnicheskoy napryazhennosti v regionakh Rossii. Osen' 2013-vesna 2014 g [Grapes of hatred. Rating of interethnic tensions in Russian regions. Autumn 2013-spring 2014]. Available from: <http://club-rf.ru/thegrapesofwrath/01/>; Moskva i Peterburg vyshli v lidery rozni [Moscow and St. Petersburg have become leaders in tensions]. Kommersant, 14th April, 2014. Available from: <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2452040>

⁷ There are exceptions, of course; see, for example, Bal'haeva, 2008; Gladkova, 2015; Kachmazova, 2012; Volodina, 2010; and other studies.

it comes to Russian ethnic studies. The choice of online media for analysis was determined by several factors: namely, the substantial growth of Internet audience in Russia in the last few years⁸, the increase of audience's trust in the Internet as an objective source of information⁹, and the stable decrease of 'digital divide' in Russian regions (Vartanova, 2013). We believe, there might be a correlation between the mentioned factors and the growth of ethnic media in Runet (Russian Internet space): the wider the spread of Internet connection in the country, the bigger the opportunities for ethnicities to participate in online communication, sharing their opinions, views and their cultural heritage with a broader Internet audience.

Therefore the current paper aims first at analyzing online media of Russian ethnic groups as a whole, presenting some basic data, such as the number of such media, their target audience, owners – in other words, some fundamental things, which are paradoxically missing when it comes to a general overview of Russian media landscape – and second at discussing correlation between the number and the diversity of Russian ethnic media with the general development of Internet connection in the country. It should be added that the paper presents some results of a bigger research project, aimed at creating an overview of all types of media in languages of Russian ethnic groups – print, audiovisual and online ones, including both quantitative (numbers, circulations, audience rates, income, etc.) and qualitative (themes, genres, tone, etc.) characteristics of such media. The authors hope that some of their research findings might be used in a broader discussion about specificity of online communication of ethnic communities, and the general level of linguistic and cultural pluralism in Russian cyberspace.

Methods

The current study is based on the analysis of online media officially registered in the republics of the Russian Federation, where there is at least one more official

⁸ According to the Public Opinion Foundation, the number of Internet users in Russia (meaning by Internet users those who go online at least once per day) grew in summer of 2015 by 53% (62 mln.) of the total population of Russia, which is 6% bigger than in 2014. Available from: <http://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/12369>

⁹ The level of audience's trust in the Internet as an objective information source grew by 64% in 2012 (compared to 40% in 2011), while the number of users naming Internet their primary source of information grew by 59%, which in its turn makes Internet the third most popular information source in Russia after television and press. Available from: <http://www.fapmc.ru/rospechat.html>

language besides Russian in public use¹⁰. Taking into account an unprecedented scale of the territory of Russia and its exceptional linguistic and cultural diversity, we decided to focus for a start on media outlets registered and produced in eight republics with the biggest numbers of indigenous population, according to the Russian census of 2010: Tatarstan (Kazan) – Tatar¹¹; Crimea (Simferopol) – Ukrainian; Bashkortostan (Ufa) – Bashkir; Chuvashia (Cheboksary) – Chuvash; Chechnya (Grozny) – Chechen; Mordovia (Saransk) – Mordvin; Dagestan (Makhachkala) – Avar, Azerbaijani, Dargin; Udmurtia (Izhevsk) – Udmurt.

A quick glance at web-sites in aforementioned languages revealed that the number of such web-sites in Runet is quite extensive, even though we did not calculate them in this particular study. However, when we examined these online resources more closely, we found out that in many cases web-sites, which we originally considered media outlets (and which in fact called themselves so in their missions, editorials or general ‘About us’ sections) were not officially registered in Roskomnadzor¹² and therefore did not have a formal status of media outlets. Since our study was focused on the analysis of official online media only, we had to exclude such web-sites from our research scope, which meant that 75 online media outlets were left for further examination.

When analyzing mentioned web-sites, we paid attention to the following criteria:

- *official registration of a web-site as a media outlet.* When selecting web-sites for analysis, we browsed an open database of Russian media outlets¹³ searching for online media resources registered in one of the eight republics under examination. Additionally, we double-checked all selected web-sites using an official open database provided by

¹⁰ Just to clarify it in a few words: Russian Federation includes 85 federal subjects (i.e. constituent units) with different degree of autonomy. 22 out of the 85 federal subjects are national republics within Russia, having besides Russian another official language in public use – the language of the biggest indigenous ethnic groups residing in those republics.

¹¹ Hereinafter the data is listed in the following order: the name of the republic, the name of the biggest city in the republic, the official language of the republic, used alongside with Russian in different spheres of public life, including communication in cyberspace.

¹² Roskomnadzor stands for The Federal Service for Supervision in the Sphere of Telecom, Information Technologies and Mass Communications. It is Russian federal executive body responsible for overseeing the media, including the electronic media, and mass communications, information technology and telecommunications.

¹³ The one we used in our study is one of the biggest Russian databases of such kind. Available from: <http://public.ru>

Roskomnadzor. This turned out to be the right way to choose web-sites for analysis, since several web-sites we came across looked like online media outlets (i.e. provided a description of their editorial policy, a list of journalists, etc.) and were included into Public.ru database¹⁴, but were missing in the database of Roskomnadzor¹⁵. Interestingly, the majority of such ‘fake’ media (i.e. web-sites, which declared themselves as media outlets but which were missing in Roskomnadzor’s list of media) came from Crimea: out of 18 web-sites, which stated their official status as media, only 8 were recognized as such by Roskomnadzor. Let us add that the factual number of web-sites providing information in ethnic languages in Runet is for sure much bigger than 75; however, as the current study showed the majority of them cannot be considered media outlets due to the lack of official registration as such;

- *availability of content in several languages* (language of an ethnic group plus Russian, English or any other languages). Since we did not carry out a content analysis at this stage (which is planned to be conducted later on), we did not go into details analyzing all publications available on web-sites and focused on home pages only. All web-sites were examined with the help of native speakers or by the authors themselves;
- *media owners*. This criterion was selected in order to find out whether online ethnic media in Russia are created and issued primarily by the state, taking into account straightforward governmental politics aimed at supporting such media, which was mentioned earlier, or by some private companies/individuals.

Results

To start with, we compared the number of all available web-sites in ethnic languages under analysis and the number of officially registered online media in those languages (*Table 1*). One can easily notice that these numbers differ significantly depending on the region: Tatarstan has the biggest number of both web-sites in Tatar language and online media in Tatar registered by Roskomnadzor (22 and 20 correspondingly), while Dagestan has the lowest number in both terms (1 and 1). We believe, there might be two reasons for this phenomenon: first, unequal penetration of Internet connection in Russian

¹⁴ Available from: <http://public.ru>

¹⁵ Let us add that all Russian media outlets (print, audiovisual, electronic) irrespective of the region they are published in, or their language, must be listed in the database of Roskomnadzor to have the official status of media.

regions¹⁶, which makes Tatarstan one of the leaders among the republics under discussion in terms of Internet penetration and availability of digital technologies to a broad audience; and second, the size of indigenous ethnic groups residing in those areas, which again makes Tatarstan one of the leaders compared to other Russian republics¹⁷. An exception in this regard is Mordovia, where there are 4 officially registered online media while the population is relatively small, and Dagestan, where one can notice an opposite situation: there is only one ethnic medium while the population is bigger than in Mordovia.

Table 1

Online media in the republics: Total number

| | Tatarstan | Crimea | Bashkortostan | Chuvashia | Udmurtia | Chechnya | Dagestan | Mordovia |
|---|-----------|--------|---------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| The number of online media in Russian and other languages (Source: www.public.ru) | 22 | 18 | 13 | 4 | 8 | 5 | 1 | 4 |
| The number of online media in Russian and other languages (Source: Roskomnadzor) | 20 | 8 | 11 | 4 | 8 | 5 | 1 | 4 |
| Population (thousand people) ¹⁸ | 3779,8 | 2327,4 | 4102,9 | 1313,9 | 1570,5 | 1100,3 | 2584,2 | 888,7 |

The study showed that the number of officially registered online media in ethnic languages is noticeably smaller than the one in the Russian language. Let us add that all online media in languages other than Russian, which we came across represent bi – or multilingual resources, being available in several languages (in most cases Russian plus the language of an ethnic group).

¹⁶ Available from: <http://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/12275>

¹⁷ Available from: http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm

¹⁸ Available from: http://www.gks.ru/perepis/tab1_1.htm

An interesting thing is that we did not find any online media in ethnic languages only, which might be explained by an attempt of media owners/creators to reach out to a broad Russian-speaking audience along with a smaller audience of ethnic communities.

If we look at the number of online media in official languages of the republics under analysis (which, as we noted earlier are the languages of the biggest indigenous ethnic groups represented there) (Table 2), we will notice an obvious trend, namely the prevail of Tatar-language media (11 resources) upon media in other languages, for example Bashkortostan (3 resources) and Chuvashia (1). Several republics (Crimea, Udmurtia, Dagestan, and Mordovia) do not have online media in their official ethnic languages at all, while some of them provide information both in English and in Russian (Crimea, Chuvashia, Chechnya, and Dagestan). Another interesting trend is the ownership of ethnic media: as the current study showed, 100% of online media outlets in ethnic languages belong to the state – for instance, *Tatmedia*, the biggest state media company in Tatarstan, which is the owner of all online media under analysis, as well as 99 print newspapers, 15 magazines, 21 TV channels and 13 radio stations¹⁹.

Table 2

Online media in ethnic/non-Russian languages in the republics

| | Tatarstan | Crimea | Bashkortostan | Chuvashia | Udmurtia | Chechnya | Dagestan | Mordovia |
|---|-----------|---------------------|---------------|-----------|----------|----------------|----------------|----------|
| The number of online media in Russian and other languages (Source: Roskomnadzor) | 20 | 8 | 11 | 4 | 8 | 5 | 1 | 4 |
| The number of online media in ethnic/non-Russian languages | 11 | 0 1-English only | 3 | 1 | 0 | 2-English only | 1-English only | 0 |
| The number of web-sites with home pages in ethnic/non-Russian languages | 6 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

As we noted earlier, all officially registered online media under analysis represent bi- or multilingual resources, with language versions being almost identical in design and structure, but providing different content depending on

¹⁹ Available from: <http://tatmedia.ru/aotatmedia/>

the language version. We failed to identify any online media publishing content in languages of ethnic groups in addition to Russian or English within one language version, except for 'About us' section, which is oftentimes available in several languages simultaneously. Therefore online media under discussion represent two or more separate web-sites, which look very much alike but differ in language and in content they provide. The user thus needs to switch between two language versions by pressing a 'Language' button at the top of the screen to get access to publications in different languages. An interesting thing to note here is that in most cases home pages of ethnic media are available in Russian, while the number of media with home pages in other languages is considerably lower (see *Table 2*). Again, we believe this trend can be explained by the media owners/creators' intention to attract first of all Russian-speaking audience, which clearly dominates in Runet.

All in all, we have identified only 15 online media in ethnic languages, which are officially registered in the republics under analysis and recognized by Roskomnadzor as media outlets²⁰. It should be noted that among these 15 media only seven can be considered ethnic media in its full sense²¹, since the remaining eight, although providing content in ethnic languages alongside with Russian, are primarily used by the Russian-speaking audience²². An important thing is that those seven web-sites have their home pages in ethnic languages, which makes corresponding ethnic groups their primary target audience, while Russian- and/or English-language versions are used as additional ones, and not visa a versa as in other online media under discussion. The importance of having a home page in an ethnic language is stressed by statistical data: in a situation when a home page is available in Russian, only 2-4% of visitors switch to a version in an ethnic language, as our study of web-site visitor data showed. On the contrary, if home page provides content in an ethnic language, 74% of visitors keep browsing through web-site version in that language. Putting it into simple terms, a home page is often used to determine the main target audience of online media, which – as the current research showed – is mostly Russian-speaking one, even when it comes to ethnic media outlets.

²⁰ Alekseyevsk.ru, Apastovo.ru, Arskmedia.com, Chuprale-online.ru, Kaibicy.ru, Kukmor-rt.ru, Laishevskiyi.ru, Nashcheremshan.ru, Protatarstan.ru, Rsloboda-rt.ru, tatar-inform.ru, Resbash.ru, bashgazet.ru, bashinform.ru, Irekle.org

²¹ Arskmedia.com, Chuprale-online.ru, Kukmor-rt.ru, Laishevskiyi.ru, Nashcheremshan.ru, Rsloboda-rt.ru, bashgazet.ru

²² This is proved by the fact that only 4% of users switch to a web-site version in an ethnic language if there is a Russian-language version available there (Cherevko, 2016: 244-245).

Conclusion

The study showed that despite straightforward governmental politics aimed at supporting media in languages of ethnic and cultural communities in Russia, the number of online media in ethnic languages is relatively low today. Saying this, we refer to officially registered online media only (*Table 2*), keeping in mind that the number of web-sites in languages of Russian ethnic groups, i.e. those resources, which do not have an official status of media (*Table 1*), or web-sites containing some information in those languages but not being fully translated into those languages, is for sure quite extensive.

Among all officially registered online media outlets in eight national republics under analysis, though, roughly 10% only provide content in ethnic languages, while the rest use Russian to reach out to a broader Internet audience. The number of online media using ethnic languages as main languages in electronic communication and having their home pages in languages other than Russian is even lower: we managed to identify only seven web-sites of this kind. This shows that only a few resources are oriented upon ethnic groups as their main target audience, while the rest are focused primarily on Russian-speaking Internet users that dominate in Runet. The reason for that might be unprofitability of such web-sites, including for instance challenges with having web-sites in less widespread languages effectively indexed by search engines compared to Russian-language ones (which in its turn makes ethnic media less attractive for advertisers or investors), or salaries for additional staff members, who are fluent in ethnic languages. As the current research showed, this problem can be solved by increasing financial support from the state: all analyzed media outlets belong to the state, while we failed to come across any ethnic media owned by private companies or individuals, presumably because of low profitability of non-Russian media.

The study revealed that the number of ethnic media differs significantly depending on the republic and possibly the audience's access to digital technologies there, as well as the size of indigenous ethnic population and their digital literacy, which might also affect the number of electronic media in languages other than Russian. Tatarstan is thus a leader in terms of the number of online media in ethnic languages, representing the biggest ethnic group in Russia and the area with rapidly growing Internet penetration in recent years²³.

²³ Internet penetration (12+) in Kazan, the biggest city in Tatarstan, reached 72% in spring 2016, while the average Internet penetration level (12+) in Russia is 68%. Available from: https://yandex.ru/company/researches/2016/ya_internet_regions_2016

At the same time, Dagestan and Chechnya, for example, despite being home for numerous ethnic and cultural communities too, have less developed (and more expensive at the same time) Internet connection compared to Tatarstan²⁴, which is likely to influence the number of ethnic media produced in those republics: the worse Internet connection, the fewer online media in those areas.

Finally, although we did not carry out comparative content analysis on the particular stage of research, we could not but notice that publications in different language versions of web-sites (most often in one of ethnic languages either in Russian or English) are in most cases identical, meaning primarily reportages and interviews. An exception is newsfeeds, which are usually more detailed and thematically diverse in Russian (provided that a Russian-language version is available on a web-site) and much shorter and less diverse in other languages. Again, this can be a sign of media owners/creators' attempt to attract as many users as possible, which can easier be done in case of Russian-language media content.

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²⁴ Average monthly price for unlimited Internet access is 365 rubles in Volga Federal District, where Tatarstan is located, while in North Caucasian Federal District (Dagestan and Chechnya) it reaches 500 rubles (spring 2016). Average Internet connection speed is at the same time around 29 Mbit/s in Volga Federal District and 27 Mbit/s in North Caucasian one (spring 2016). Available from: https://yandex.ru/company/researches/2016/ya_internet_regions_2016

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