Moscow and St. Petersburg compete: Negotiating city identity on ru.net[1]

Maria Yelenevskaya, Technion – Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa

Introduction

In the complex and multifaceted phenomenon known as identity, place, i.e. space endowed with meaning (Relph 1976, pp. 8-26; Tuan 1977, p. 6, 179; Lewicka 2008, p. 211), has an important role. Studies conducted by environmental psychologists, sociologists and cultural geographers show that affiliation of self with place forms a salient part of identity, and even personalities inclined to nomadic life styles identify themselves in terms of location (Cuba & Hummon 1993; Twigger-Ross & Uzell 1996). People may take pride in referring to themselves as Parisians, Bostonians, or Berliners; they establish emotional bonds with their houses and streets, they show off their addresses in affluent and fashionable neighbourhoods, or just the opposite, they fail to maintain a favourable level of self-esteem and self-efficacy if their physical environment is not viewed as congruent with the self (Stedman 2002, pp. 561-563; Twigger-Ross & Uzell 1996, pp. 208-209).

In people's relations with space, cities have a special role, albeit one that changes over time. In the second half of the 20th century, erasing of the borders between urban and rural areas, the growth of migration, and globalisation marked by convergence of consumer tastes and patterns have changed the face of the city. At the turn of the millennium, the spread of information technologies and attempts to create virtual cities that complement or even partially replace real ones made social scientists wonder whether the city would retain its function of a public place in which people can make contacts, interact, and enrich their life through sharing experiences, knowledge, and values. Theorists and journalists alike kept arguing as to how practices of the "information society" would affect our sense of place and whether our social relations increasingly mediated by communications technologies would become uprooted from local contexts (Carter 2005; Graham 2004; Gustafson 2001). Despite continuous advances in digital technologies, the exhilaration and utopianism of dematerialised cyber-cities are on the decline, and people's need for distinctiveness and continuity of the space they inhabit is seldom doubted.

---

[1] Paper delivered on the panel "Shaping virtual lives: identities on the Internet", during the 10th Congress of the Société International d'Ethnologie et de Folklore (SIEF), Lisbon, 18 April 2011.

Moreover, discussions about various aspects of city life conducted on the net by people in various corners of the world give evidence that the key notion of place identity remains relevant in the information society.

Although definitions of place identity differ, it seems that the starting point for all the authors is that a place is not just an abstract location, but a qualitative "total" phenomenon, not reducible to any of its separate properties, such as texture, colour or spatial relationships (Norberg-Schulz 1984, p.7). In informal discourse this totality is often conceptualised as the "character" or "atmosphere" of a place. Most authors also agree that place identity requires human agency and is inseparable from human perception and symbolic meanings attributed to places by individuals and groups. According to Yuri Lotman, the city occupies a special role in the system of symbols developed by the history of culture, and the two main spheres of urban semiotics are city as a space, and city as a name (Lotman 1984, p. 30). People often appropriate the meanings of place to articulate a sense of self, and this self-interpretation may incorporate multiple locales, ranging in scale from dwelling places to regions and even countries (Cuba and Hummon 1993, p. 549).

Place identity does not always presuppose a person's experiential familiarity with the place. People often attach meaning to places they've never been to. Experiments conducted by Gould and White in 1974 and assessed by Ryden show that people consistently rank certain places as highly desirable without ever travelling there. Ryden concludes that in the absence of "hard experiential information about the landscape and culture of a place, people rely on positive and negative stereotypes of the type found in movies, television, newspapers, advertisements, music and books" (Ryden 1993, pp. 54-55). In order for these stereotypes to exist at all, the place has to be important for a large number of people who share symbolic meanings and reproduce clichés associated with it.

Place identities are not frozen constructs but keep evolving under the influence of historical events, human actions, and changes in populations, technologies and life styles. As Stuart Hall remarked, like all signifying practices, the process of identification is subject to the play of *différance* and entails discursive work, the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries, the production of 'frontier-effects' (Hall 1996, pp. 2-3). It is in people's talk about the meanings of different places, attachment to them and their perceived role in the life of individuals that place identities are shaped.

The purpose of this essay is to analyse how the identities of the two biggest Russian cities, Moscow and St. Petersburg, and their residents are negotiated and reshaped in the discourse of Internet users and why the juxtaposition of the two cities has been a pervasive theme in the last decade.

Material and methods

Material for my study was drawn from the Internet with the help of the Russian search engine Yandex. Four phrases were chosen as key words and yielded the following results:

Moscow – *Peter*[2] – 119 million pages

Moscow and St. Petersburg, confrontation – 1 million pages

Moscow and *Peter,* rivalry – 331,000 pages

Facts about Muscovites and residents of *Peter* – 132,000 pages

Browsing through the sites selected by relevance, I chose 25 in each search, altogether 100 sites, giving preference to those which attracted a large number of discussants. Chronologically, the selected material encompasses a period of 12 years, from 1999 to 2011.

Working with the sample, I used content analysis to single out prevailing themes and motifs and text analysis to identify prevailing tropes. Genre analysis revealed a variety of formats: essays, interviews, journalistic reports, transcripts of radio and TV panel talks, poems, comic lists and rhymes, jokes, humorous tests, multi-user chat threads and complex ensembles of verbal and visual elements. Some of these are copy-paste compilations of previously posted materials, but others use texts by other authors to launch a discussion or to reinforce one's own position or challenge another person's views (see Radchenko 2010 on the characteristics of complex multimedia texts on the Internet). My analyses explored three main questions:

How have the identities of Moscow and St. Petersburg and stereotypes associated with them changed?

What categories emerge as salient when the two cities are compared?

How is affiliation with a place used by Internet users to present themselves?

Analysis of the geography of the sample indicates that by no means is the topic of relations between Moscow and St. Petersburg limited to the dialogue between residents of the two cities. Among participants in online discussions there are users from various other towns in Russia, as well Russophones residing in the so-called

---

[2] At the turn of the 19th-20th centuries the diminutive *Peter* came to be popular among the low classes of St. Petersburg (Sindalovskii 1997, pp. 147-148). Sounding less foreign and easier to pronounce and decline, the nickname survived the Soviet era and reached the peak of popularity after the city regained its original name in 1991. Its derivatives *piterets, pitertsy,* for a "resident/residents of St. Petersburg", have become standard in the informal discourse.

"near abroad", i.e., countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU); and in "far abroad": in Europe, North and South America, and in Asia.[3]

The sheer number of pages devoted on Ru.net to the comparison of the two cities, the variety of websites initiating these discussions, and the decade-long popularity of the topic – all of these testify that the theme did not emerge on the net incidentally but has deep social and cultural roots.

City rivalry: brief history

In the year 2003, Russia celebrated the tercentenary of St. Petersburg. The festival had been conceived as a political and cultural event of national and international scope.[4] Besides celebrating the contribution of the city to the country's history, culture and science, local organisers and government sponsors sought to boost the city's image, restore its historical centre and invigorate regional economy by attracting investors. The anniversary was envisioned as an opportunity to make the most of that "unique resource" known as the "Petersburg cultural and spiritual climate" and contribute to the residents' education, promoting the city's cultural values and creating new ones".[5] The publicity campaign preceding the festivities, the festival itself, and not least the expenses needed to prepare it served as new triggers, adding fuel to the rivalry that has always marked the relations between Moscow and St. Petersburg[6]. However, this time it concentrated in a new arena – *Ru.net*, that area of the Internet where communication is conducted in Russian.

---

[3] See e.g., discussion organised by the Russian service of the BBC,
http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/russian/talking_point/newsid_2932000/2932056.stm
(accessed 15-3-2011); a thread in the Russian-language IT forum in Germany,
http://it-ru.de/forum/viewtopic.php?t=73825 (accessed 5-4-2011); and a thread in the forum "Russian Home in Norway",
http://www.dom.no/modules.php?name=Forums&file=viewtopic&file=viewtopic&t=10601
(accessed 5-4-2011).
[4] The decision to celebrate the tercentenary as the national event was formulated in the edict issued by the then President B. Yeltsin on 31-8-1998,
http://docs.kodeks.ru/document/901716263 (accessed 15-3-2011). Actual preparations for the festivities and the campaign popularising numerous cultural events marking the ter-centenary were carried out during the first term of V. Putin's presidency. Putin was the first head of the state since 1917 born and brought up in Leningrad (as St. Petersburg was called in the Soviet era). His political career began there, and in the popular opinion Putin's ties with the city played an important role in recent reassertion of St. Petersburg's historic significance and some reinvigoration of its economy.
[5] http://www.ksp.assembly.spb.ru/printdoc?tid=&nd=8336430&prevDoc=8351273
(accessed 9-2-2011).
[6] Shortly before the celebrations, an influential paper *Delovoi Peterburg* (Business Peters-burg) published the article "St. Petersburg's tercentenary won't be clouded by regional jealousy". The very first lines of the article, however, contradicted the headline admitting

One reason for the competition between the two cities was the repeated transfer of the capital from Moscow to St. Petersburg and back[7]. In a country with strong centralised power, the capital has always concentrated power and wealth and has been the centre of important events and decisions. Moreover, transfers of the capital were accompanied by the rise and fall of elites. At best, those at the losing end were stripped of their positions, but others were subject to purges and exile.

The 18th and 19th centuries saw a differentiation of functions between the two cities. St. Petersburg became the city of bureaucrats and aristocrats, but also of scientists and artists. Moscow, on the other hand developed trade, commerce and industry, and its merchants were the driving force behind new developments in the city, including efforts to develop culture and art. Domestic and foreign observers often noted that the young capital, St. Petersburg, was dynamic and full of energy, while Moscow was considerably slower in the pace of life. Ideologically, Moscow came to be associated with preservation of traditions, and St. Petersburg with modernisation and westernisation[8], thus representing two poles in the never-ending debate about what path of development is best for Russia.

After the last transfer of the capital in 1918, Moscow concentrated not only unlimited political power but also full control of financial and human resources. A command economy determined the city's budget on the basis of a complex hierarchy assigned to regions, towns and villages. Moreover, since everybody was

that the scope of the festivities had caused "natural jealousy, in the capital and in other regions of the country":
http://www.dp.ru/?ArticleID=22f8581f-caaa-480e-a3b7-e57d6c3b1aad
(accessed 25-3-2011).
[7] Moscow received the status of the Russian capital in the latter half of the 15th century. In 1712 the capital was transferred to St. Petersburg, the newly founded city in the delta of the river Neva. In 1728 the capital was moved to Moscow, but in 1730 St. Petersburg regained its status and preserved it until 1918 when the capital of the Soviet state was transferred to Moscow. In the first decade of the 21st century a transfer back to St. Petersburg was debated but in fact only the Russian Constitutional Court moved there.
[8] Reflections about the specific way of development peculiar to Russia can be traced to the 17th century, and debates about it reached their peak in the middle of the 19th century. The most vocal proponents of "Russia's special way" were Moscow intellectuals dubbed Slavophiles by their ideological opponents, the Westernisers. The main premise of their philosophical writings was the view that ancient Russia had a higher potential for social and spiritual development because the state was formed not as a result of wars and conquests but by peaceful and voluntary expressions of people's will. Slavophiles were convinced that reforms undertaken by Peter I introduced alien elements into Russian life that disconnected elites from the people (Voronin 2005). In most western studies, Slavophiles are presented as nationalists defending outmoded values, and Westernisers as proponents of liberal ideas. However, the true attitude of the Russian intellectuals to Europe and their vision of Russia on the East-West axis were much more complex and can hardly be presented as dichotomous (Rabow-Edling 2006.)

a state employee, the most prominent managers, engineers, researchers and artists from big cities, including Leningrad[9], were often transferred to Moscow. This situation was perceived as a humiliation for the ex-capital and gave those who were left behind the feeling that Moscow would snatch away whatever or whoever was first-rate. In common parlance such transfers were referred to as being "taken to Moscow" or "promoted to Moscow".

In the period of Stalin's rule, Leningrad was viewed by the dictator as the nest of opposition. It was there that the "Big Terror" of 1936-1938 started. Mass arrests were preceded by suppression of culture. As the historian of culture Solomon Volkov observed, Stalin was a master of using culture for political goals. Although his actions in political and cultural spheres were not always identical, the general strategic direction of his manoeuvres was the same in both spheres. Furthermore, toughening control over culture generally preceded hardening of the political line (Volkov 2004, p. 471). The last wave of purges directed against Leningrad was a series of trials held behind closed doors in the late 1940s. They came to be known as the "Leningrad case" and hit hundreds of people holding executive positions, as well as their families and relatives[10].

Despite the policies suffocating the city, official Stalin's propaganda always praised it for being "the cradle of revolution" and after World War II for withstanding an unprecedented 900-day siege. Awarded the title of a "hero city", Leningrad became the symbol of staunch determination to survive and its residents won an unprecedented esteem and reputation in the entire country. The two aspects of the city's image, beauty and suffering, converged and became rooted in the national mentality of the second half of the 20th century (Volkov 204, pp. 505-506)[11].

After Stalin's death, the policies of limited investment and strict control over culture continued until the end of the Soviet period, taking a toll on the city's reservoir of talent. Due to a lack of funds, preservation of architectural ensembles – the pride of the city and an essential characteristic – was getting harder, and as a result the city gradually became dilapidated and shabby. The prominent Leningrad

---

[9] In 1914, because of the anti-German feelings that arose when World War I started, St. Petersburg was renamed Petrograd, which was a mere translation from German. In 1924, allegedly at the request of the residents, the city was named Leningrad. It regained its pre-revolutionary name in 1991.

[10] Although the trials were neither open to the public nor covered in the press, the sheer number of people arrested, imprisoned and sentenced to capital punishment couldn't remain unnoticed, causing subdued rumours, fear and anxiety in the city. In 1954 the victims were rehabilitated, some of them posthumously (Belova et. al 1992; Smirnov 2009).

[11] Residents of the city are well aware of its popularity in the country. It is carefully cultivated but is also teased in folklore. The collector of St. Petersburg folklore Naum Sindalovskii quotes a recent *chastushka* (a four-line ditty): If we look for shelter,/ For a friendly hearty welcome/Don't fret, it's just enough to say: /"Hello, we're from St. Petersburg" (Sindalovskii 1999, p. 53).

writer Daniil Granin summarised the city's decline in a phrase that became so popular that it functioned as a saying: "The great city with a provincial fate". The competition with Moscow seemed to have been buried in the past, but the first decade of the new millennium witnessed a new cycle.

Images of Moscow and St. Petersburg in literature and folklore

Comparison of Moscow and St. Petersburg emerged as a distinctive theme in the Russian literature of the 19th century. K. N. Batyushkov, A. S. Pushkin, N. V. Gogol, F. M. Dostoevsky, V. G. Belinsky, A. I. Herzen, as well as others created captivating comparative portraits of the two cities. The impulse for comparisons was the controversial attitude to St. Petersburg in Russia. The author of the seminal investigation of the literary phenomenon, the supertext known as "St. Petersburg text", the semiotician V. N. Toporov, wrote that whatever the attitude to St. Petersburg, the overwhelming feeling among the intellectuals was that St. Petersburg was an extraordinary phenomenon in the country's history and culture and was unlike any other town in Russia. It was this uniqueness that triggered its juxtaposition with Moscow. Depending on the attitude of the writer to the two capitals, the opposition was structured along two lines. One scheme presented St. Petersburg as devoid of soul, official, barrack-like, excessively planned, abstract, artificial, lacking cosiness and non-Russian, while Moscow emerged as soulful, family-like and intimate, cosy, concrete, natural and Russian. The other scheme conceptualised St. Petersburg as a civilised, cultured, properly organised, logical and correct, harmonious and European, whereas Moscow was viewed as chaotic, disorderly, illogical, some sort of a semi-Asiatic village. Toporov pointed out that those two groups of attributes formed diagnostic clichés and underlay a multitude of images created by writers and artists. Furthermore, these attributes guided the style of comparisons, with the antithesis brought to extremes, sometimes leaning towards derision and paradox (Toporov 1984, pp. 7-8). Despite natural fluctuations caused by the passage of time and accumulation of events, the early 20th century writing and some of the Soviet-period literature were consistent with these schemes and continued the 19th century tradition of antithesis between Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Folk culture too has always been sensitive to the complex relations between the two capitals, and this is best reflected in the proverbs and sayings. Some of those created over a century ago are still quoted and alluded to in literature, movie, media and informal talk. Here are some examples.

Both cities emerge as vitally important for Russia:

Peter is the head, Moscow is the heart.

The latest variation of this proverb but using technological metaphors instead of anthropomorphic has recently appeared on the website where users post and evaluate maxims:

> *Peter* emits light and Moscow gives warmth, and this electricity supports all life in Russia.[12]

Pride in the uncontested urbanity of the "correctly" built St. Petersburg over chaotically growing Moscow is expressed in the saying circulating in St. Petersburg, but not in Moscow:

> *Peter* is a city, and Moscow is a kitchen garden.[13]

In Russian the antithesis of city – kitchen-garden is reinforced by paronymy: *gorod –ogorod*. Both Moscow and St. Petersburg have always attracted migrants from the provinces and were known to be tough with newcomers who dared leave their homes and look for their fortune in the big city:

> Father *Peter* has worn off my sides.

> Moscow has no trust in tears.

Both in literature and in folklore Moscow is associated with femininity and St. Petersburg with masculinity, and they were often called mother-Moscow and father-Petersburg.

> *Peter* gets married and takes Moscow as his wife.[14]

> Moscow is renowned for its white loaves, and *Peter* for men with big moustaches.

The folklore of the antithesis Moscow – St. Petersburg did not dry up during the Soviet period neither is it stagnant today, and the celebration of the tercentenary of St. Petersburg gave it a new impulse. Here are two sayings that continue on the themes familiar since Soviet times. One derides Moscow for concentrating resources and abusing its power at the expense of St. Petersburg, the other implies that Moscow lures by opportunities still unattainable in St. Petersburg:

> What does one make of it: St. Petersburg is 300 years old, but roads are being repaired in Moscow?

> However often you say St. Petersburg, Moscow residence permit[15] won't change.[16]

---

[12] M. Gus'kov, http://www.aphorism.ru/721.shtml (accessed 5-7-2011).

[13] Quoted in Sindalovskii 1999, p. 54.

[14] Indeed, there was a surplus of male population in St. Petersburg in the 19th century, but even in the post-war Leningrad, when women prevailed in numbers everywhere in the USSR, the saying "Bridegrooms are in Leningrad, and brides are in Moscow" was well known in the city. As Sindalovskii aptly observes, this did not imply the gender composition of the population but the stereotypes associated with the residents of the two cities – the high educational level and broadmindedness of young people in Leningrad and the excellent housekeeping skills of the Moscow beauties (Sindalovskii 2006, p. 175).
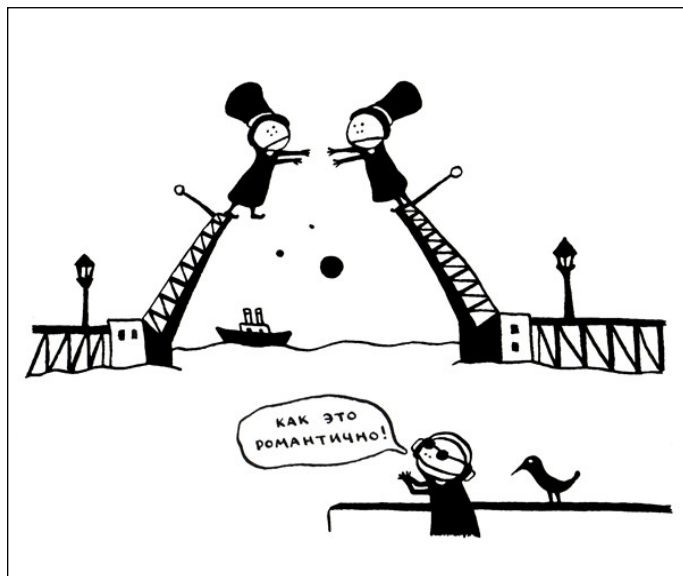
"Wow! It's so romantic", says a Muscovite looking at the drawbridges across the Neva river. "Damn it", says a resident of Peter cut off from his beloved by the huge mass of metal and asphalt going up in the air (Lukas and Povalalayeva, http://bordur-porebrik.livejournal.com/2009/08/28/)

Between soul-searching and commercial gimmicks

The websites discussing relations between Moscow and St. Petersburg can be divided into institutional portals, such as online newspapers and magazines and web sites of commercial companies, and non-institutional resources, such as chatrooms, interest group discussion forums, blogs and humour hubs. My search suggests that the first online discussions comparing the two cities were triggered by media publications, TV interviews and panel shows uploaded to the net. Some of them featured politicians, famous historians, scientists, journalists and show-business celebrities, which increased the interest in the theme among members of the lay public. In 2003 there was a dramatic increase in the number of posts singing the praise of St. Petersburg or seeking to attract attention to it. These were essays about the city's history and urban legends, selections of poems glorifying the city's beauty, slide shows presenting its most famous sights and even schoolchildren's

---

[15] In Soviet times domestic migration was controlled with the help of residence permits stamped in passports. Since the quality of life in Moscow was known to be considerably better than anywhere else in the country, obtaining a Moscow residence permit was a dream of many young and ambitious people living in provincial towns. Those born in Moscow knew it was a privilege and few would agree to give it up.

[16] http://www.youfrase.ru/aphorisme.php?theme=712&p=1 (accessed 5-7-2011).

compositions in which adolescents reflected on their city under the proposed title "What I would do for my city if I were the Governor".[17]

Many participants in informal discussions mention that as schoolchildren they had to do projects in history and literature about differences between the two cities and their rivalry. Due to the ubiquity of computers, the continued popularity of this theme in the curricula has led to a somewhat shocking development. In recent years, numerous sites have sprung up promising "help" to schoolchildren and students. Model essays, project reports and even graduation papers can be downloaded for free or ordered for money, and various aspects of relations between Moscow and St. Petersburg are among those on offer.[18]

Linguists were another group that paid tribute to the theme of differences between Moscow and St. Petersburg. The Association of Lexicographers "Lingvo" posted a Moscow-Petersburg dictionary containing 76 entries that deal with lexical differences in the speech of the two cities.[19] Although these differences are minor and due to intense migrations are not always noticeable, this publication reported in the central press (Novoselova 2005) gave rise to folk-linguistic reflections and passionate online discussions as to which regional version is more correct. Well-known linguists were summoned by the media as arbiters, but failed to reach consensus (Pisarenko 2005.) Residents of other towns as distant from the center as Ekaterinburg in the Urals, Nizhniy Novgorod on the Volga, or Tumen' in Siberia, got involved in the discussion, giving examples of local usage aligning either to the Moscow or to St. Petersburg norm.[20] Notably, debates about linguistic subtleties were peppered with reflections about historical antecedents of speech differences and social criticism:

> I heard on the radio today that a Moscow-Petersburg phrasebook is being prepared for publication. […] A Muscovite coming to *Peter* often fails to understand what residents of *Peter* talk about and vice versa. […] Congratulations, Muscovites! People fail to understand you even in *Peter,* let alone in the provinces. What has been urgently needed for quite a while is the Moscow-Russia phrasebook. There is

no way for us, provincials, to understand Muscovites!!! And it's not only their speech that we fail to understand.[21]

Discussion about the regional speech differences inspired composition of an online quiz that should determine whether a test-taker is a true Muscovite or a dweller of St. Petersburg.[22] The test became popular on *Ru.net*. Many users posted links to it in forums and on their personal pages, and it was circulated as a viral e-mail message. I personally received it several times in 2006-2007 from friends residing in Russia, Germany, Greece, Israel and the U.S.A. The test recycles the same word pairs that are given in the Moscow-St. Petersburg dictionary. When a user completes it, one of the two results appears on the screen:

> You might be living in some other town, but Muscovites would accept you as one of their own. Even if you don't resemble a person who comes from Central Russia, your chances to survive in Moscow are considerably higher. At least you won't have to hear too often "Wherever have you all come from?"

> You might be living in some other town, but you speak the language of a true resident of *Petersburg*. Let them make fun of your way of saying "chicken" or "sidewalk border" – you are above it. You will forever remain linked to the cultural[23] capital even if you are far away from home.

Note that the result given for Moscow does not deal with speech habits at all, but brings up the theme of Muscovites' intolerance of *others*, in particular of those newcomers who are not ethnic Russians. Another point of interest is that implicitly, the whole of the country is divided into people affiliated either with Moscow or with St. Petersburg. The majority of comments following the test express amusement and satisfaction at recognising familiar speech habits: "Yes, I am from *Peter!*", "Precisely)))) I do live in *Peter*. Well done, author!", "Sure I am a Muscovite☺))) Yes. It was fun. Thank you." Those who live in other cities are particularly pleased with being affiliated with Moscow or St. Petersburg: "Hurray! I live in the cultural capital!!!!!!!!!!!!!", "A cute test☺! Oh, Moscow, you are in me forever☺" Many commentators admit that they were not aware of the existing regional differences in lexis and are content that they managed to prove their links to the city they love.

    In 2007, the online discussion was invigorated by multiple posting of comic lists "15 facts about residents of *Peter*" and "10 facts about Muscovites." Texts classified as comic lists are structured as glossaries and instructions, rules and

---

[21] http://www.bibo.kz/kipa/354490-iikne-ljubjat-pitercy-moskvichejj-bfs-nu-tak-my.html (posted 18-7-2005, accessed 20-3-2011).

[22] http://aeterna.qip.ru/test/view/6050/ (compiled by *Zlondinka,* posted 21-9-2006, accessed 5-1-2007).

[23] The adjective *kul'turnaia* used in the original text can be translated into English as "cultural" and "cultured" depending on the context.

recommendations, and definitions of various groups, objects and phenomena, and so on. The latter type usually combines irony as regards the phenomenon itself and auto-irony as regards popular stereotypes presented in the list (Radchenko 2010, pp. 74-77). In some cases comic lists are created by individual authors, but quite often they present results of a collaborative effort of an online community. One of the members suggests the theme and others send in their contributions. The process of compilation is then accompanied by clarifications and suggested modifications sent by community members and debates as to whether the resulting text captures reality or distorts it (Yelenevskaya 2012). If successful, these lists keep reappearing on other web pages for years with modifications or without them.

In characterising residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg, the authors of the two comic lists present them as antagonists poking fun at each other. The Moscow list was written as a response to the list describing residents of St. Petersburg, so the categories chosen for descriptions are almost identical. The St. Petersburg list still circulates almost unchanged or with minor additions, while its Moscow counterpart exists in several versions, although emphasising the same features allegedly characteristic of Muscovites. Both Muscovites and residents of St. Petersburg are shown to have inflated notions of their city's significance which makes them feel privileged over others. Attachment to one's city is depicted not as a virtue but as narrow-mindedness and irritating self-centredness. Ignorance – the most frequent attribute of humour about the *other* (Davies 1990, pp. 43-82) – is manifested in the lack of knowledge about the rival city and about the rest of the country. Interestingly, atmospheric phenomena typical of each city also turn into a characteristic essential for describing the nature of the city and its residents. This and the frequently emerging topic of weather in online discussions about Moscow and St. Petersburg give additional evidence that there are close links between climate and place attachment and place identity (Knez 2005). In fact, although the authors of the lists attempted to create two contrasting images, the result showed more similarities than differences. Here are some items from the lists to illustrate this:

> If you buy a train ticket and tell a friend from *Peter* about it, he'll be genuinely astonished if you are not going to *Peter* but elsewhere.

> Most residents of *Peter* are convinced that no other city in Russia has museums.

> The sun doesn't exist.[24] It is the product of sick imagination of Muscovites. They will always show off.

> Venice doesn't exist. It is merely a prototype of heavenly *Peter*.

> The Chosen people are not Jews but residents of *Peter*.[25]

---

[24] St. Petersburg is known for its clouded skies. The average number of days with precipitation is 190 and of sunny days only 60:
http://www.meteo.nw.ru/articles/index.php?id=2 (accessed 15-7-2011).

A Muscovite is convinced there is no life beyond the Moscow Circular Highway.

Most Muscovites will be surprised if during your weekend visit to Moscow you go to the Tretyakov Gallery and to the Armoury[26]. They might even ask where they are located.

A Muscovite knows that there is just one town in Russia and a couple of Moscow suburbs: Nizhnii Novgorod, *Peter*, Surgut.[27] Pushkin is a poet[28].

Every Muscovite keeps a globe of Moscow in a well-hidden closet.

White nights[29] don't exist. It's merely an advertising campaign of a Moscow suburb.[30]

Overall, residents of St. Petersburg emerged more sympathetic than Muscovites, and the response to these lists ranged from amused agreement, through irritated objections to furious disclaimers. Many commentators remarked that the frequency of flaming could serve as evidence that the lists had hit right on target.

Once again the discussions were boosted in August 2009 when the writer Olga Lucas and the philologist Natalia Povalayeva launched a blog in which they posted humorous essays – satirical comparisons of stereotypical Muscovites and residents of *Peter* illustrated by cartoon-like pictures. The protagonists are placed in the situations typical of urban environment anywhere in the world, although some of them, such as confrontation with bureaucracy, interaction with people from provincial towns and coping with such natural phenomena as heavy snowfalls have a distinctive national flavour. The way residents of the two cities manage their

---

[25] http://denismajor.livejournal.com/104721.html (posted in Denis Major's blog, 30-1-2007, accessed 25-3-2011).

[26] Both of these museums are on the list of the "musts" of every tourist coming to Moscow.

[27] Surgut is an industrial city in Siberia, a large river port and cross-section of rail- and auto-routes. It is also one of the biggest centers of the Russian oil-mining industry, and so it is well known in the country.

[28] There is hardly anyone in Russia who is not familiar with Pushkin. His poetry accompanies Russian speakers throughout life and is greatly appreciated. It is not accidental that the popular saying goes: "Pushkin is our everything." So the sentence "Pushkin is a poet" which does not carry any new information for potential addressees derides self-importance of people pronouncing obvious truths as revelations. It reinforces the stereotype of the Muscovite being Mr. Know-all.

[29] "White nights" is the period of about 50 days from the end of May to mid July when twilight may last the whole night in St. Petersburg. This is the period when the city is considered to be most attractive for visitors. "White Nights" is the title of a story by F. M. Dostoevsky, and is one of the better known symbols of the city. As such it is highly marketable and is used as the name of a world renowned festival of arts, and many local events and products.

[30] http://users.livejournal.com/lisa_alisa_/2007/01/31/ (posted in lisa_alisa's blog,
31-1-2007, accessed 25-3-2011).

lives is completely different and portrays the Muscovite as down to earth, entrepreneurial and pragmatic, while the resident of St. Petersburg emerges as a dreamy and slightly bohemian personality more inclined to reflections about moral dilemmas than to actions. The community has accumulated 4,182 members and is watched by 8,114 users, and the numbers are gradually growing.[31] Each post collects on average 40 comments evaluating the narrative and adding users' account of his/her own experience related to the theme of the post. Some of the members of the community live in provincial towns and post comments about "how it is done" in their towns. It is these comments providing subtle details familiar only to local residents that render the feel of the place (Tuan 1977, p. 183) and enjoy special popularity among the blog readers. Many commentators explain specific features of our contemporaries' behaviour by searching for clues in the past. Thus, the post about different attitudes to buying, storing and consuming food was followed by 140 comments, a large part of which were devoted to memories of the siege which taught residents of Leningrad / St. Petersburg, even those born many years after the war, to be careful and never throw out food, in particular bread.

In April 2010 some texts posted and discussed in the blog were published as a book (Lucas 2010). Fragments of the narratives and illustrations by N. Pavalayeva keep reappearing on a multitude of sites. The blog remains active and its owners continue publishing new stories about the same ludicrous protagonists.

The current cycle of popularity of Moscow - St. Petersburg relations did not remain unnoticed by businesses. Naturally, among the first to capitalise on this are travel agencies. Many of them have forums, where clients can share their impressions. Here is one example:

> You may disagree with me, but there has always been overt and covert rivalry between the two capitals – Moscow and St. Petersburg. That is why my "Moscow" soul used to oppose trips to Leningrad (sorry for the old name but I was born when the city was still called Leningrad). With time, uncompromising attitudes of youth evaporated, and now I cannot imagine my life without trips to St. Petersburg.[32]

The theme of Moscow - St Petersburg rivalry is also given as the background for describing other cities. Thus the article "The Issue of Capitals" about Budapest and Vienna starts with a blurb: "The old argument between Moscow and St. Petersburg has the same nature as the rivalry between Budapest and Vienna in the times of the Habsburgs." In the introduction the authors carry on with the comparison of Moscow and St. Petersburg vs. Budapest and Vienna, as if making the relations

---

[31] http://bordur-porebrik.livejournal.com/profile (accessed 21-7-2011).
[32] http://www.turizm.ru/russia_sankt/stories/ (accessed 7-7-20119.

between the two central European capitals clearer and the cities more appealing to the Russian reader.[33]

   Companies that are not related to tourism don't lag behind in utilising the popular theme of discourse. For instance, AMF, the international chain of flower shops, advertises its Moscow and St. Petersburg branches on *ru.net* using the theme of city rivalry as the main motif. The online promotional text of the company opens with the statement that the "two great cities are eternal rivals competing in everything: beauty, significance, business, science, culture and education." Further the text explains that because of its location and climate, in the past St. Petersburg could hardly compete with Moscow in greenery. But the city "wouldn't give up" and thanks to the "green oases" of flower shops today can compete with Moscow as an equal. In a humouous tone the author urges the readers to leave the virtual world and immerse themselves in the reality of the real shops but warns that every such visit exposes clients to the "stress" of making choices among the multitude of flowers. Various services and cutting edge technologies used by the flower industry are presented as "secret weapons" used by residents of St. Petersburg "to gain leadership in the greening of cities". The concluding paragraph emphasises the healthy side of the rivalry: "Moscow and St. Petersburg – competition won't stop. It's good because everyone benefits from it".[34]

   Some businesses found that the theme of Moscow and St. Petersburg was a good gimmick for their large-scale promotional campaigns. One of them, Alpha Bank, launched its image-making effort stating that its main goal was to "unite the two capitals by one bank that knows and understands both cities, even though residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg use different words to denote the same objects".[35] The location chosen for the campaign was the railway connection between the two cities. The bank had billboards installed in all the stations where Moscow-St. Petersburg trains stop. Each billboard marked with the bank's logo, had two lines: the first gave a pair of words from the Moscow-Petersburg dictionary, mentioned earlier, e.g., "*baguette* or *loaf*?"; the second line read: "Two capitals. Two points of view. One bank." The first campaign held in 2009 was successful, and in 2010 the management decided to follow up on it, using different pairs of words from the same dictionary. Numerous websites posted articles devoted to this image-making campaign quoting texts of the billboards or providing their pictures.[36]

---

[33] Chaikovskaya 2011, http://www.geo.ru/puteshestviya/ctolichnyi-vopros
(posted 6-6-2011, accessed 16-6-2011).
[34] http://www.kernel.lv/rus/statja_10 (accessed 18-6-2011).
[35] http://www.alfabank.ru/press/news/2010/10/4/1.html (accessed 5-7-2011).
[36] See, e.g.,
http://www.adme.ru/alfa-bank-218367/alfa-bank-rasshiril-moskovsko-piterskij-slovarik-200305/
http://www.sostav.ru/news/2010/10/05/r9/ (both accessed 20-6-2011).

Another successful campaign was mounted by Sony Ericsson to promote a new model of telephones with the function of smile recognition, "Smile Shutter". According to the company's press release, the concept of the project was based on "the eternal competition of the two biggest Russian cities, Moscow and St. Petersburg, for the title of 'the real capital'".[37] The company hired four popular Russian comedians to act as "smile hunters", entertain residents of the two cities in public places and record their smiles with the cell phones being promoted. When the results of the two-week campaign were announced, they contradicted the sociological survey conducted by Sony Ericsson prior to the promotion campaign and based on city residents' self-reporting. While the survey indicated that Muscovites smiled more frequently, residents of St. Petersburg appeared to be more amused by the comedians and the city won the title of the "real", that is, the "smiling capital" of Russia.[38] Two things are notable about this campaign: one is that in post-Soviet Russia readiness to smile and be amused has become part of the socially acceptable positive image of a personality, which was not the case in the Soviet times, when official ideology cultivated seriousness. Secondly, like in most of the other examples cited in this section, we see that Sony Ericsson emphasised the fun part of the juxtaposition of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Does this mean then that the cultural divide has been overcome and what is left of the past philosophical and social debates is just superficial spoofing?

Moscow. End of the year. A Muscovite is always in a rush trying to fill every minute and set a record in making connections. (Lukas and Povalalayeva, http://bordur-porebrik.livejournal.com/2009/08/28/)

---

[37] http://www.sotovik.ru/news/smile-hunter-sony-ericsson-akcsia-comedy-club-i-kvn.html (posted 28-4-2009, accessed 1-4-2011).
[38] http://www.mobiset.ru/articles/text/?id=3420 (accessed 28-4-2011).

Negotiating City Identities

It would be wrong to think that most of the users involved in talk about Moscow and St. Petersburg merely seek entertainment. In fact, comic lists, essays and jokes are often used as gambits for discussion on the quality of urban life in Russia, urban policies, and socio-economic opportunities in various regions of the country. Participants reflect on what attracts or repels them in a big city like Moscow and St. Petersburg and try to create a shared portrait of the people who inhabit them. Expressing their views, discussants summon personal experience and relate family stories. There are many references to sociological surveys posted in the media. Quotations from literature and history books, as well as allusions to folklore, primarily jokes, are also widely used when differences between the two cities are explained in terms of their history and traditions. Many of the comments in the analysed discussion threads are highly emotional and occasionally they turn into flaming exchanges. An aggressive tone demonstrates a disinhibition caused by the lack of social context clues (Hines 200, p. 16), but also anger against local and central government policies.

Some of the threads about Moscow-St. Petersburg rivalry start with claims that the theme is too old to be interesting, that "only the lazy ones haven't expressed their opinion on the topic" and that all the arguments are nothing but trite stereo-types. Many online discussants claim that the two cities are so different that it makes no sense to compare them. These declarations, however, fail to discourage heated debates, some of which last for weeks and even months.

Another point that characterises the discussion is the frequency of the word "myth" used in the meaning of an "invented story" and juxtaposed with the nouns "truth", "reality" and "fact" in the title of articles and discussion threads. Muscovites, in particular, feel the urge to dispel what they perceive as unfair criticism of their city: "Moscow vs. *Peter:* myths and the truth", "Five myths about Moscow and periphery", "Moscow-St. Petersburg route: myths and reality", "Which myth about Muscovites is the most mythical?", and so on. In many of these threads we witness the clash of auto- and hetero-stereotypes when Moscow is discussed. On the other hand, residents of St. Petersburg seem pleased with the favourable image of their city and try to reinforce it in their posts.

Analysing the sample I singled out nine pairs of categories that frequently emerge in informal *ru.net* discussions about Moscow and St. Petersburg:

Central	Peripheral
Powerful	Weak
Rich	Poor
Dynamic	Stagnant
Commercial	Culture-oriented
Russian	European
Female	Male

Cruel   Friendly
Vivacious   Romantic

While the main line of comparisons remains the same in most of the discussions, the attribution of some of these qualities to one or the other city is the issue of continuous negotiation.

The first three oppositions appear to be essential for the identity of the city and closely interrelated. As in the Tsarist and Soviet eras, the centre connotes power, prosperity, a wealth of opportunities and lifestyles unattainable in other cities. Some trace the emergence of "frontline between Moscow and other regions"[39] back to the Soviet era, when Moscow was "like a vacuum cleaner sucking in everything." Today the gap between the centre and periphery is as annoying as in the past:

> I've been to Russia many times and the impression is that… […] everything is focused in Moscow… everybody goes there… everybody does one's best for it… but nobody thinks about other towns… somehow, they are forgotten…

> For years, Moscow has been milking the whole of Russia and never let anyone develop normally.

> It hurts but Russia broke into the Kremlin-retainers and the rest of Russia.

The notions of centrality and socio-economic significance remain inseparable from the capital.[40] One may have already noticed that St. Petersburg is consistently referred to as a capital. It has become a tradition in Russia that any town known as

---

[39] The volume of this essay doesn't enable me to cite the nickname of the user (if available), and the address of the website after each quoted statement in this section. Instead, I list the addresses of the quoted websites here:
http://www.lovehate.ru/opinions/17914/1
http://passat-b5.ru/archive/index.php/t-125834.html
http://kattrys.ru/node/1678?page=1
http://shkolazhizni.ru/archive/0/n-32894/
http://www.76-82.ru/forum/viewtopic.php?t=2340&postdays=0&postorder=asc&start=0
http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/Russian/talking_point/newsid_2932000/2032056.stm,
http://forum.leit.ru/index.php?topic=94.0
http://www.webpark.ru/comment/2154
http://cityopen.ru/forum/index.php?showtopic=4286,
http://forum.barrikady.ru/subdmn/index.php?topic=1580.0 (all accessed 20-7-2011).
[40] One of the reasons why St. Petersburg was considered to be unfit to be the capital was its geographic position, away from the center of the country and close to the sea. This was a theme of folklore and literature (see Lotman 1984). For example, N. V. Gogol wondered what strange whim of fate "threw the Russian capital to the ends of the world" (Gogol 1950, p. 107). The city's geography was one of the chief arguments behind the capital transfer in 1918, and it was invigorated again in the discussions about partial transfer of capital functions in 2003-2004.

a centre of some industry or a producer of certain valued goods is dubbed a capital. Thus, Ivanovo in central Russia is referred to as the "textile capital" and the "capital of fiancées", a polar-zone city of Noril'sk prides itself on being the "polar", "copper" and "nickel" capital, and Tula is called the "armoury", "ginger-bread" and "samovar" capital. The list of "informal" capitals is long, and the same attribute may be appropriated by several cities. The word "capital" serves as a gimmick boosting the town's image and commercial value of its products. The addition of attributes has become so pervasive that the noun "capital" has partially lost its original semantics of uniqueness. Even Moscow in my sample is referred to as the "official", "political", "bureaucratic", "business", or "financial" capital. Compared to other towns, St. Petersburg has most serious credentials to carry the proud title, and recent discussions about capital transfer back to St. Petersburg have added weight to the theme of "one country, two capitals":

> I live in Petersburg, and the feeling is that Petersburg is a capital and Moscow is a capital ☺ I don't know how it is possible, but it never occurred to me that Petersburg is not a capital… So we don't have complexes.

> Moscow and *Peter* have two features in common: 1. Both cities are capitals of Russia. 2. Both are beautiful. In everything else they are completely different. *Peter* was better, is better and will be better. In all respects… The capital of the empire, so it was, so it is… and Moscow is the capital of the Union [the Soviet Union].

> What is there to compare… A "mega-city" and the "cultural capital", each one has something of its own. I have been to both capitals (I hope this is not offensive to either capital city, and for me both are capitals – the official and the cultural – however the authorities perceive these concepts.)

In the repertoire of attributes ascribed to St. Petersburg – "imperial", "northern", "seafaring", but also the "criminal"[41] – the adjective "cultural/cultured" is the most pervasive one, an essential feature of the city's cultivated image and identity. Contextually the notions of "cultural" and "cultured" blend in most discussions. While prototypical residents of St. Petersburg are described as being hospitable, friendly, unpretentious and cordial, inhabitants of Moscow are portrayed as in-fatuated with consumption, obsessed with money-making and egocentric. Although some discussants aptly observe that cultural life in Moscow is as rich if not richer than in St. Petersburg today, the label of "cultural capital" remains firm in the language use.

In comments about St. Petersburg its image of the "cultural capital" is often contrasted with the pitiful state of streets and houses. Preparations for the ter-

---

[41] This notorious title was "awarded" to the city by the media in the 1990s when organised crime was on the rise and local politicians and businessmen were implicated in law violations. Two widely popular TV series about St. Petersburg "mafia" spread the ill fame of the city as the nest of gangsters throughout the country.

centenary did improve the centre of the city, but many discussants make angry comments that the changes were purely cosmetic and freshly painted facades disguise neglect and decay. The nationwide attention the city received due to the jubilee and various international meetings held by Putin during his presidency in the newly restored Tsarist palace also triggered controversial response. Lavishness of ceremonies was perceived as inappropriate and offensive when many regions were in dire need of finances. Anger was directed against the centre as embodied by Moscow and St. Petersburg together:

> Muscovites and residents of *Peter* are trying to butt each other or find out whose city is better. The trouble is that behind the facades of the two capitals, one cannot see the rest of Russia.

> These two cities are parasites sucking the sap of Russia.

Occasionally, there are voices that contest St. Petersburg's right to be called a capital. The reasons are differences in the opportunities offered by Moscow and St. Petersburg and in their pace of life:

> Moscow is a city for work and business. Only in this city one can earn decent money. In *Peter* salaries are lower: however hard you try, it's not a capital.

> *Peter* is not a capital. Please forgive me, dear residents of *Peter*. The city is subtle, cultured, with rich history and very interesting people, but it is not a capital. The pace of life is wrong…

In many discussions participants say that Moscow attracts by its wealth of opportunities, by giving one the feeling of being "in the very centre of events", where "everything can be achieved if one is eager and capable of using the opportunity." Notably, when explaining the city's success in attaining high standards of living, Muscovites tend to attribute this to their education, competence, and willingness to work hard, while people from other towns tend to name "nearness to the Ministry of Finance" as the main reason. Tension between natives and newcomers is felt in virtually all forums, and among the key words used when Muscovites talk about new populations are those associated with military actions: "offensive", "conquering" and "occupation". The newcomers themselves, however, see their relations with the capital in a different light, emphasising the city's "cruelty":

> Moscow is a city of plenty but it's cruel.

> Moscow is a cruel city. Not everyone survives here. Many of my friends have returned home. I am still here (Knock on wood!)

In many discussion threads those who call themselves "native Muscovites" deny that they live in a more privileged situation than residents of St. Petersburg and other regions. Aware that in national public opinion polls Muscovites rate very low, they ironically refer to themselves as "fat cats" and complain about high

prices, tough competition and overcrowding – pressures familiar to residents of most mega-cities in the world. But it is difficult for Muscovites to persuade those who live on the periphery of the country that their view of life of the capital might be limited or distorted. The most accessible and pervasively marketed information about the centre reaches a layperson in the form of media gossip about glamorous life styles of the so called "New Russians" and show-business stars, and soap operas that give an impression that every Muscovite has servants, drives expensive cars and owns an extravagant mansion.

Massive migrations caused by geo-political changes of the 1990s led to the increase in xenophobia in Russia (Evgenieva 2004). In the post-Soviet period, when control over internal migration once implemented with the help of domicile registration was lifted, big cities, Moscow and St. Petersburg in particular, were flooded by people coming from various areas of Russia and other countries of the FSU. Besides intolerance of the "blacks" – pejorative nickname tagging people from the Caucasus and Middle Asia – one has to admit there are numerous manifestations of dislike for newcomers from Russia proper as well. In the discussion about Moscow and St. Petersburg this is reflected in talk about rootedness. Only one post in the sample mentions the new freedom of domicile as a social benefit; in many others, however, rudeness, alcoholism, dirt in public places and unattractiveness of residential neighbourhoods are attributed to the prevalence of newcomers over the natives. Those who can trace several generations of ancestors in Moscow or St. Petersburg say so with pride, and use this biographic fact to add weight to their opinions. Discussants from various parts of the country often lament the disappearance of "natives" from both cities:

> There are few native Muscovites left, and this genus is facing extinction.

> The strength of any city is in its native residents. All the Muscovites I had the honour to meet were wonderful people – funny, cheerful and witty.

> Hatred is typical of newcomers who become Muscovites and residents of *Peter* and forget their provincial roots. Natives of *Peter* are cultured, and so are Muscovites (although a bit less))))!

There is an overwhelming consensus that "true natives" of Moscow and St. Petersburg are a special breed. They are seen as exponents of high culture and specific mentality inherited from pre-revolutionary times which are difficult to find today. Some participants mention that many of the "true natives" fell victim to Stalin's purges or died of starvation during the siege of Leningrad. As to those members of the old generation who remained they were of the "White Guard survivor type." In all these statements there is nostalgia of the past and discontent with consumerism and infatuation with material values seen as the hallmark of present-day Russia. Posts authored by residents of large and small towns alike testify that rootedness is still considered to be a matter of pride, whether one lives in the capital or in a small provincial town. At the same time, discussants like to mention that in some sense

they are affiliated with either Moscow or St. Petersburg, be it through relatives or friends or because they used to study in these cities.

Although the special status of *the* capital is seldom denied, the advantages of living in one are often contested. One reason is the pace of life, which is seen by many discussants, including Muscovites, as a factor affecting human nature and interpersonal relations:

> I don't like Moscow because it is noisy and fussy… this gives me a bad feeling. In *Peter* everything is much more peaceful, people are more pleasant and the air is cleaner. One breathes differently there.

> What I like in Petersburg is lack of haste – nobody rushes, people don't push each other, and you don't have the feeling everything around moves in a crazy rhythm, so that if you lag behind, you'll be trampled to death. This is the feeling I always have in Moscow.

Even those who praise Moscow for being dynamic and responsive to everything new admit that the "galloping" pace of life wears one out and makes people self-centred and inconsiderate of others. The slower and "more relaxed" atmosphere of St. Petersburg, on the other hand, is enjoyed by its residents and attracts visitors. As a result, many perceive Moscow as a place for work and St. Petersburg for leisure.

Another reason that is repeatedly mentioned as a disadvantage of the capital is the army of bureaucrats creating inconveniences for rank-and-file residents when roads are blocked by corteges that aggravate traffic jams plaguing the capital. Moreover, because there are more people from St. Petersburg in the upper echelons of power than ever before since the 1930s, discontent with the government is again translated into Moscow-St. Petersburg opposition:

> Dear all, let me tell you: most Muscovites don't give a damn where the capital is. As far as I am concerned, let all the deputies [members of the Russian parliament, State Duma] move wherever they wish, be it *Peter* or the moon.

> I visited Leningrad… A beautiful city… Only let your cadres, in particular those who come to power, stay at home… You may take them back, Moscow won't be upset…

> Your city [St. Petersburg] is, indeed, one of the most beautiful and cultured cities of the world. But there is one thing I cannot grasp: how come such noble place breeds governments that don't care about their people or value their history?

Such outbursts might sound as revenge or helpless letting off steam, but one should be aware that with press freedom curtailed and opposition demonstrations treated violently, angry remarks in internet forums and subversive jokes are among the few means left to a man in the street to criticise the government without endangering himself.

An incidental encounter: "How lucky, I was just looking for you!" St. Petersburg is full of mystery; such is the way of life of a resident of Peter. How does one meet people there? Just go for a stroll along Nevsky Avenue and you will meet all those you'd like to see, including Muscovites (Lukas and Povalalayeva, http://bordur-porebrik.livejournal.com/2009/08/28/)

Opposition or mutual attraction?

Unlike public opinion polls determining citizens' attitudes to cities, Internet forums do not present reality as a logical and neatly organised system. In the absence of predetermined scheme, the multitude of voices creates a patchwork that at times looks contradictory. Thus, Moscow is seen as "stately and at the same time cosy", "as a truly Russian city" and as an "oriental bazaar", as "kind to friends" and "concerned solely with money-making". In its turn, St. Petersburg is claimed to be "lively and vibrant" but also "dead", the city whose "every generation breeds talents" but also the place which "empties the soul and deprives you of creativity". It is viewed as "Russia's phantasmagorical dream of Europe" and a "memorial to the past glory of Russia which is lost forever." In the Soviet era, most of the great cities of the world were described as "cities of contrast" to ensure that Soviet people deprived of free travel would not idealise them. The two collective portraits created on *ru.net* seem to fit this description perfectly, although few discussants seem to pay attention to this.

Talk about confrontation of the two cities alternates with declarations of love for both. These abound in anthropomorphic metaphors, which retain the folkloric gender differences between the two. While Moscow is presented as a "pretty, merry and frivolous maiden that is a little vulgar, noisy and flippant but kind and tender with friends", Petersburg is shown as a "pensive gentleman, cultured but

cold, elegant and mysterious." Notably, secrets and mysteriousness are often mentioned as inherent and attractive features of both cities.

Whatever the attitude to Moscow and St. Petersburg, their significance is seldom doubted. They are perceived as living organisms with genes of their own, as two different cultures, two civilizations and even two planets. And it is these differences that are seen as most important for the country as a whole:

> Don't engage in petty quarrels. Love the whole of Russia, it is inconceivable without Petersburg and Moscow.

> There is no opposition between these two cities – Russia needs both of them, each one has its own function!

Sadly, reconciliatory remarks appealing to love each and both cities often come with a nationalist tinge, and search for a common enemy is perceived as a means of achieving agreement and unity.

> I adore Moscow, I like *Peter* a lot, because *Peter* is Russia. It's senseless to argue which one is better; we have to unite against the common enemy: Georgia, the U.S.A. and the like.

> These cities cannot be compared – each one is unique, each one is beautiful. We love each of them. […] Comparing them is as stupid as comparing life … in Russia and in the U.S.A. In the U.S.A., the living standards are higher, and Russia is my Fatherland.

Conclusions

Online comparisons of Moscow and St. Petersburg, reflections about their role in the life of contemporary Russia, and group portraits of their residents are presented by a variety of genres in which text and visuals are often combined. Purposes of the users involved in creation of these complex ensembles range from product promotion to socio-political critique and from entertainment to search for self-expression.

Some of the discussion threads are limited to trading stereotypes, because the schemes they offer simplify the task of making sense of social complexities of urban life. Although some of the stereotypes associated with the two cities have reversed under the influence of post-Soviet socio-economic changes, those that evolved in literature and folklore in the 19th and 20th centuries are still deeply grounded in the mentality of contemporary Russophones.

With few exceptions, residents of Moscow and St. Petersburg express strong attachment to their cities ranking them among the great cities of the world. Most show pride in belonging to either of them. At the same time many go into raptures over the rival city too. Identification with one's native city is formulated in terms of attachment to memory places, in particular the historic centre in St. Petersburg

and islands of the old city remaining in Moscow. There is a strong consensus in the dislike of the delocalised chrome-and-glass architecture that is encroaching on Moscow and threatening to change the horizon in St. Petersburg. The city's identity and the writer's identification with it are primarily expressed in anthropo-morphic terms. The city is perceived as a friend or a lover, a living being with pulse and blood and its own distinctive spirit and soul.

Despite annoyance with the uneven distribution of resources between the centre and periphery, both Moscow and St. Petersburg are still perceived as the "heart and the brain" of the country, the cities attracting young and ambitious people from peripheral areas. Each in its own way, these two cities are admired and continue challenging those who want to "conquer" them.

Although in many cases the gambit for an exchange of opinions is a humorous text, a subsequent discussion takes a serious turn with participants summoning sociological data and personal experience in order to express their opinion about urban life in general and the benefits and problems of the two Russian mega-cities in particular. The exchange of views about the two "capitals" often turns into a debate about societal values in which the past is judged, and the future is probed.

References

Belova, L. N., et al., eds. (1992): St. Petersburg, Petrograd, Leningrad. Encyclopaedic reference book, in Russian. Moscow: *Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopedia*.

Carter, Denise (2005): Living in virtual communities: an ethnography of human relationships in cyberspace. *Information, Community & Society* 8, 2, pp. 148-167.

Chaikovskaya, Anna (2011): The capital issue, in Russian. *Geo. The Undiscovered World: Earth* 2011, p. 159, http://www.geo.ru/puteshestviya/ctolichnyi-vopros (accessed 20-3-2011)

Cuba, Lee; David M. Hummon (1993): Constructing a sense of home: place affiliation and migration across the life cycle. *Sociological Forum* 8, 4, pp. 547-572.

Davies, Christie (1990): *Ethnic Humor Around the World: A Comparative Analysis*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Evgenieva, T. F., ed. (2004): *This Is No Place for "Others"*, in Russian. Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, Center for Civilizational and Regional Studies.

Gogol, N. V. (1836/1950): The Petersburg Notes of 1836. In: N. V. Gogol: *Complete Works*, vol. 6, pp. 107-120. Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura.

Graham, Stephen (2004): Introduction. In: Stephen Graham, ed.: *The Cybercities Reader*, pp. 3-29. London: Routledge.

Gustafson, Per (2001): Meanings of place: everyday experience and theoretical conceptualizations. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 21, pp. 5-16.

Hall, Stuart (1996): Introduction: who needs 'identity'? In: Stuart Hall, Paul du Gay, eds.: *Questions of Cultural Identity*, pp. 1-18. London: Sage.

Hyne, Christine (2000): *Virtual Ethnography*. London: Sage.

Knez, Igor (2005): Attachment and identity as related to a place and its perceived climate. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 25, pp. 207-218.

Lewicka, Maria: 'Place Attachment, Place Identity, and Place Memory: Restoring the
    Forgotten City Past', in: *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 28 (2008), pp. 209-231.
Lotman, Yu.M. (1984): Symbolism of St. Petersburg and Problems of City Semiotics. In
    Russian. In: Yu. Lotman, ed.: *Semiotics of the City and City Culture: Petersburg.*
    Semiotic Systems, 18, pp. 30-45. Tartu: Tartu State University Press.
Lovink, Geert (2004): The rise and fall of the digital city metaphor and community in
    1990s Amsterdam. In: Stephen Graham, ed.: *The Cybercities Reader*, pp. 371-377.
    London: Routledge.
Lucas, Olga (2010): *Pavement Border Made of Trottoir-Border Stone: Comparative
    St.Petersburg - Moscowlogy*, in Russian. St. Petersburg: Komil'fo.
Norberg-Schulz, Christian (1984): *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of
    Architecture.* New York: Rizzoli.
Novoselova, Elena (2005): Trottoir vs. Pavement. In Russian. *Rossiiskaia Gazeta,* 21 June
    2005. http://www.rg.ru/2005/06/21/slovarj.html (accessed 20-3-2011.)
Pisarenko, Dmitrii (2005): What is "baguette" for a Muscovite is a "loaf" for a resident of
    Peter. In Russian. *Argumenty i Fakty*, 22 (May 2005) 516, p. 1.
    http://gazeta.aif.ru/_/online/moskva/516/05_01 (accessed 20-3-2011.)
Rabow-Edling, Susanna (2006): *Slavophile Thought and the Politics of Cultural
    Nationalism.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
Radchenko, D. A. (2010): Complex Texts in the Internet Folklore. In Russian. In: *From
    Congress to Congress. Proceedings of the 2nd Russian Congress of Folklorists,* vol. 1,
    pp. 69-82. Moscow: State Republican Center for Russian Folklore.
Relph, Edward (1976): *Place and Placelessness.* London: Pion.
Ryden, Kent C. (1993): *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense
    of Place.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
Sindalovskii, Naum (1997): *Legends and Myths of St. Petersburg*. In Russian.
    St. Petersburg: Norint.
Sindalovskii, Naum (1999): *Petersburg in Folklore*, in Russian. St. Petersburg: Magazine
    "Neva", Summer Gardens.
Sindalovskii, Naum (2006): *Speaking the Street Language: Stories about St. Petersburg
    Phraseology*, in Russian. Moscow-St. Petersburg: Tsentrpoligraph.
Smirnov, A.P. (2009): *People's Life Stories: The Leningrad Case*, in Russian.
    St. Petersburg: Norma.
Stedman, Richard C. (2002): Toward a social psychology of place: predicting behavior
    from place-based cognitions, attitude and identity. *Environment and Behavior* 34, 5,
    pp. 561-581.
Toporov, V. N. (1984): Petersburg and the Petersburg Text of Russian Literature. In
    Russian. In: *Semiotics of the City and City Culture: Petersburg. Semiotic Systems*, 18.
    Tartu: Tartu State University Press, pp. 3-29.
Tuan, Yi-Fu (1977): *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience.* Minnesota:
    University of Minnesota Press.
Twigger-Ross, Clare L.; David L. Uzzell (1996): Place and Identity Processes. *Journal of
    Environmental Psychology* 16 , pp. 205-220.
Volkov, Solomon (2004): *The History of St. Petersburg Culture since Its Foundation to the
    Present Day*, in Russian. Moscow: EKSMO.

Voronin, I. A. (2005): Slavophils. In: V.V. Zhuravlev, ed.: *Public Thought in Russia from the 18ᵗʰ to the beginning of the 20ᵗʰ centuries*, in Russian. Moscow: Russian Political Encyclopedia, http://www.bg-znanie.ru/article.php?nid=20505 (accessed 20-3-2011).

Yelenevskaya, Maria (2012): "You've lived in X too long, when…": A view of the world through comic lists (expatriates' humour on Ru.net). In: *Festschrift in Honour of Arvo Krikmann*.