

Digital Methods for Internet Research

# Russian fashion dominance on the Web

A Study on Local Googles in post- Soviet Countries.

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## INTRODUCTION

Even after the dissolution of physical borders, can we still see the cultural influence of a particular country on the others? Can these social conditions be seen on the Web? The countries belonging to the USSR used to revolve around Russia and Russian language. After the collapse of this empire Russia still remains a leading economic power. But what about culture? Are the former USSR countries nurturing their own (online) cultural independence, or are there still some remains of Russia's cultural dominance?

The local Googles can be peep holes through which we may see how much content on the local webs of the former USSR countries is really local, and how much is global or imported from other countries. The plural form "Googles" is used on purpose, since the results obtained from different geographical locations (different local Googles) differ to a great extent. Some scholars even talk about the "transition of the Internet from "cyberspace", which invokes a placeless space of email and packets, to the web of identifiable national domains" (Rogers et al. 1), therefore, forming a network of many national webs (spheres). Precisely because of these local differences the internet can be useful for studying local cultures. As Richard Rogers says, "the Internet is a site of research for far more than online culture and its users. With the end of the virtual/real divide, however useful, the Internet may be rethought as a source of data about society and culture." (Rogers, *The End of the Virtual*)

A starting point of this research is a claim made by Daniel Ford and Josh Batson on their Google Research Blog, "The language webs of many former Soviet republics link back to the Russian web, with the strongest link from Ukrainian. While Russia is the major importer of Ukrainian products, the bilingual nature of Ukraine is a more plausible explanation. Most Ukrainians speak both languages, and Russian is even the dominant language in large parts of the country."# This research tests the relevance of this claim for Ukraine and other former USSR countries. It is a study on the national webs in six Russian speaking countries, i.e. the countries in which more than 10% of the population are native Russian speakers. Thus, the analysis does not include all post-Soviet countries, since some of them, like Armenia and Moldova, do not have a significant percentage of Russian native speakers# and, therefore, we assume that Russian online content plays relatively insignificant role in their national webs.

We attempt to see to what extent the web in Belarus, Estonia, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan rely on Russian content related to fashion. The query "fashion" was used to find out the degree to which those countries have developed their own tastes and trends visible online, and to what extent they look up to Russian fashion trends and import them to their culture. More specifically, what is the proportion between local and non-local content per country when using national search engine?

Since for using most search websites it is necessary to choose a language in search settings, another question was posed: to what extent do the search results differ depending on the language identified in the search settings? To check this, the query was googled twice in Russian, but with different language preferences (once with a preference set on the dominant language of the country, and once with Russian language preference).

It should be mentioned that this research does not aim at showing Russian dominance in a sense of deliberate imposing of values, language or culture on other countries. That is why the query chosen for the analysis is not politically or morally charged, but relates to tastes and trends. We assume that the presence (or absence) of

Russian websites among results on local Googles is a result of an organic process, and these particular websites are simply the most popular and most viewed in a particular country.

## METHODS

In order to research national webs and the extent of the influence of Russian culture in Russian speaking countries, we have selected a search query that is commonly used and has cultural connotations: “fashion”. Because we attempt to study the influence of Russian culture and language, only countries with Russian native speakers larger than 10% of the whole population were included into the list for the analysis. The list is composed of the following seven countries: Russia, Belarus, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Latvia, and based on CIA reports. (Appendix, Excel Sheet 1)

### Search Engines

The most used search engines were identified with the help of Alexa.com *Top Sites* list for each country. Google appears to be the most used search engine in Belarus, Estonia, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Ukraine, whereas in Russia and Kazakhstan Yandex holds the top position. (Appendix, Excel Sheet 2) The local versions of both websites were used (e.g. Google.by for Belarus and Yandex.kz for Kazakhstan). Mozilla Firefox was used as a browser (it had not been used for personal purposes) in order to eliminate the possibility that the researchers’ browsing histories and preferences would influence the search.

In order to receive the most typical search results rather than personalized ones, the following preferences were made on each local Google and Yandex home page.

#### *Google search preferences:*

Google account: signed-out

SafeSearch filters: moderate

Google Instant predictions: Never show Instant results

Web history: Customization based on signed-out search activity is disabled.

Language (at advanced search settings): any language

#### *Yandex search preferences:*

All the cookies deleted from a browser

Yandex account: signed-out

SafeSearch filters: moderate

Region#: Moscow (yandex.ru), Astana (yandex.kz)

Language (at advanced search settings): any language

Before querying the search engines, the keyword “fashion” was translated into Russian: “Мода”. Then, we proceeded to query each of the selected search engines with the keyword. In order to extract the hosts from the pages with 50 top search results, the Harvester# tool was used with the following settings:

- Only return hosts
- Only return uniques
- Exclude URLs from Google and YouTube.

The final list contains search results for each country received from a local search engine. (Appendix, Excel Sheet 3)

### **Language Settings**

To check the extent to which the search results differ depending on the language identified in the search settings, the query was googled twice in Russian, but with different language preferences (once with a preference set on the dominant language of the country, and once with Russian language preference). The language setting for search results (in advanced settings) was set as “any language” in each case. The changes were made only in a language in which the user prefers to operate.

The lists of obtained URLs were then compared in Triangulation# tool with the following preferences:

- Include in detailed analysis
- Insensitive

### **Categorization of results**

The websites were categorized according to the country of origin. The website was considered as belonging to a category of a certain country if it had the local domain (e.g. .by for Belarus). The domains .com, .net or .org were checked on www.whois.net and www.godaddy.com in order to locate the domain’s country of registration. If the country of registration was impossible to identify or was not included into the list of the countries for this study, the contact information (address) on a website was checked.

## **ANALYSIS OF RESULTS**

### **Russia**

#### *Russian language setting*

Russian websites	41
Ukrainian websites	6
Belarussian websites	1
<b><i>Total</i></b>	<b><i>48</i></b>

Not surprisingly, the results retrieved from Yandex with Russian language preference showed most Russian websites (85%). However, 15% of all websites appeared to be Ukrainian and Belarusian.

## Belarus

### *Belarusian language setting*

Belarusian websites	24
Russian websites	18
Ukrainian websites	2
Azerbaijan websites	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>

One might expect that if the user set his own language as Belarusian, he/she will receive the majority of Belarusian websites. It is true that the majority (53%) is Belarusian, however, 40% of them were Russian. Thus, the Russian-based websites are not dominant, but constitute almost a half of results.

### *Russian language setting*

Belarusian websites	34
Russian websites	9
Ukrainian websites	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>

Surprisingly, when a user changes his language preference to Russian, they receive the majority of websites (77%) based in Belarus. 20,5% of results were Russian. Even though this percentage is still significant, in this particular setting Belarusian content remains dominant on local Belarusian Google.

What is striking is the difference between results in two language settings. The language setting does influence the results displayed. After comparing lists of URLs in Triangulate, we can see that out of 61 unique websites, 32 were common for both Belarusian and Russian language setting (53%). That means that almost a half of results depends on the user language setting, even though the query was googled in Russian language and in local Belarusian Google in both cases. (Appendix, Excel Sheet 5)

## Kazakhstan

### *Kazakh language setting*

Kazakh websites	8
Russian websites	31
Ukrainian websites	8
Belarusian websites	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>

It is interesting that on the search results page Yandex returned the following statement: “При поиске отдано предпочтение сайтам из Астаны”#. However, only 17% of all websites appeared to be Kazakh what is equal to the percentage of Ukrainian websites. Russian websites had the dominant share of 65%.

### *Russian language setting*

The search results retrieved from Yandex after changing the setting to Russian language were identical to the results queried with Kazakh language in the settings. Thus, we can assume that Yandex does not adapt its search results according to the language indicated in its basic settings. Therefore, not depending on the set language preference, Russian content remains equally dominant in the search results for the query “fashion” in the Kazakh national web.

## Ukraine

### *Ukrainian language setting*

Ukrainian websites	32
Russian websites	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>

When setting Ukrainian as the language preference, 80% results were returned as Ukrainian websites. Only 20% of the results were Russian websites.

### *Russian language setting*

Ukrainian websites	32
Russian websites	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>

After querying Google for “fashion” using Russian language settings, 43 websites were returned, out of which 74% were registered in Ukraine or had Ukrainian domains and 25% were registered in Russia or had Russian domain name. We can assume that Russian influence on the Ukrainian web related to fashion is not high, as the number of Russian websites related to fashion constitutes to only a fourth of the total number.

The language settings did not significantly influence the final results. After comparing lists of URLs with the Triangulate Tool, we could observe that out of 43 unique websites, 33 were common for both searches with Ukrainian and Russian language preference (75%). (Appendix, Sheet 7)

## Kyrgyzstan

### *Kirghiz language preference*

Russian websites	25
Ukrainian websites	2
Bulgarian websites	1
Kyrgyzstan websites	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>

One might see that the results for “fashion” query in national web in Kyrgyzstan, even if a user sets the language preference to Kirghiz, are dominated by Russian content. 89% of the results are Russian-based websites. No locally produced content that matches the query “fashion” appears.

### *Russian language preference*

Russian websites	35
Ukrainian websites	4
Kyrgyzstan websites	2
Azerbaijan websites	1
Island Kingdom of Tonga websites	1
Unknown*	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>

\**city.info*

If a user sets the language preference to Russian, the results for “fashion” query in national web in Kyrgyzstan are also dominated by Russian content. 77% of the results are Russian-based websites. Surprisingly, setting Russian language preference does allow for one Kyrgyzstan-based website, whereas setting a Kirghiz language preference eliminates this website from the search results. When Russian is set as a preferred language, the search results are also more diverse - there are websites from countries like Azerbaijan and, surprisingly, the Island Kingdom of Tonga.

Here, too, there is the difference between the results with two different language settings. After comparing the lists of URLs in Triangulate tool, we can see that out of 53 unique websites, only 19 were common for both Kirghiz and Russian language setting (36%). That means that more than a half of results depends on the user language setting, even though the query was in Russian language and searched in local Kirghiz Google in both cases. (Appendix, Excel Sheet 6)

## **Estonia**

### *Estonian language preference*

Estonian websites	1
Russian websites	37
Belarusian websites	1
Kazakhstan websites	1
Ukrainian websites	5
Azerbaijan websites	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>46</b>

Querying the keyword “fashion” with Estonian language preference returned only one website with .ee domain. Most of the websites returned by our search (81%) were Russian websites. The rest of the websites are Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Kazakh and Azerbaijanian.

### *Russian language preference*

Estonian websites	0
Russian websites	41
Ukrainian websites	1
Azerbaijan websites	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>

When setting Russian as the language preference, our queries returned overwhelming quantity of Russian websites (98%).

Surprisingly, none of the websites in the results is Estonian. Using the Triangulate tool, we discovered that 75% out of all websites are common for the searches with both language settings. (Appendix, Excel Sheet 8)

## Latvia

### *Latvian language preferences*

Latvian websites	0
Russian websites	40
Belarusian websites	1
Kazakhstan websites	1
Ukrainian websites	4
Azerbaijan websites	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>47</b>

Similar to the results in Estonian web, our search in Latvian Google returned no local websites. 85% of the websites were Russian. A small number of websites were Ukrainian, Azerbaijani, Belarusian and Kazakh.

### *Russian language preferences*

Latvian websites	0
Russian websites	40
Ukrainian websites	3
Azerbaijan websites	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>

When setting Russian as the language preference, again no Latvian websites were returned. Russian websites are predominant (90%). A small share includes Ukrainian and Azerbaijani resources. 79% of all websites were common for searches with both language settings. (Appendix, Excel Sheet 9)

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Overall, the retrieved results showed websites based in the following countries: Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Bulgaria and Azerbaijan. Surprisingly, the search results did not show any websites from Estonia and Latvia. The results obtained from Russian Yandex were as expected: Russian content concerning fashion is visibly dominant in Russia.

There are big differences between the search results depending on the language preference, except for the case of Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Even though the query was Googled in Russian, results from the same local Googles usually differed to a great extent depending on what language the user specified, and only a part of the search results overlap.

The country that produces most of its fashion-related content (out of researched countries) is Ukraine. It seems that Russian influence on the Ukrainian web related to fashion is not high, as the number of Russian websites related to fashion is only a fourth of the total number. Thus, this research shows the results that contradict the claim made by Daniel Ford and Josh Batson which was taken as a starting point. The Ukrainian web, at least when it comes to the query “fashion”, does not rely that heavily on Russian web. On the contrary, it seems to enjoy its online independence.

The country that had almost a half-half division between their own content and a Russian one is Belarus. One can see a big influence of Russian content related to fashion on the Belarusian web, however the local websites are still dominant.

There are also countries that heavily rely on Russian content related to fashion. In case of Kazakhstan, the Kazakh Yandex returned a message: “The websites from Astana [capital of Kazakhstan] are a priority for this search”. However, more than a half of results were still Russian websites whereas Kazakh websites were in a minority. On Kirghiz web Russian websites dominate. In fact, there is almost no local content about fashion that Kirghiz Google considers relevant enough. A similar trend is visible on the Estonian web. Here, too, there are hardly any Estonian websites among the most popular results. The websites relating to fashion are mostly Russian, but also Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Kazakh, Azerbaijani. Similarly, the search on Latvian web returned no local websites. The vast majority of the websites were Russian.

One of the possible explanations for such dominance of Russian content related to fashion is that these countries do in fact produce content locally, but it does not have a capacity to compete with the well-known and established Russian fashion websites. Also, we do not know the exact algorithms of Google and Yandex search engines, thus, it is hardly possible to predict the reasons for this particular way of indexing.

### *Further research*

By analyzing these results further, one can also check what the proportion of shared URLs in the data set is, in order to see if countries have shared taste in fashion, and whether those tastes are local or “imported” from Russia. Can we say that there is a shared preference for Russian fashion among the former USSR countries?

This research focused on a quite neutral keyword “fashion”. There are many more possible factors that play a role besides simply Russian cultural dominance. In order to address the question of Russian cultural dominance on the webs in former USSR countries with more certainty, the same research should be done using different search queries. For example, the terms that are more politically charged (e.g. communism) or relate to the history of (Central and Eastern) Europe could tell more

about Russian interpretation of the history and its influence on the post-Soviet countries. Further research should also broaden the scope and include other former USSR countries, or perhaps even the former satellite states such as Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, etc.

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