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The Russian-speaking community in Western Australia and Russia's "Compatriots Project"

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What is “community” for Russian-speaking migrants and its role in cultural (re)production?

In WA, several important, active community groups choose a strategy of loyalty to Russian politics and are included in implementing its various initiatives and programs involving other community members.

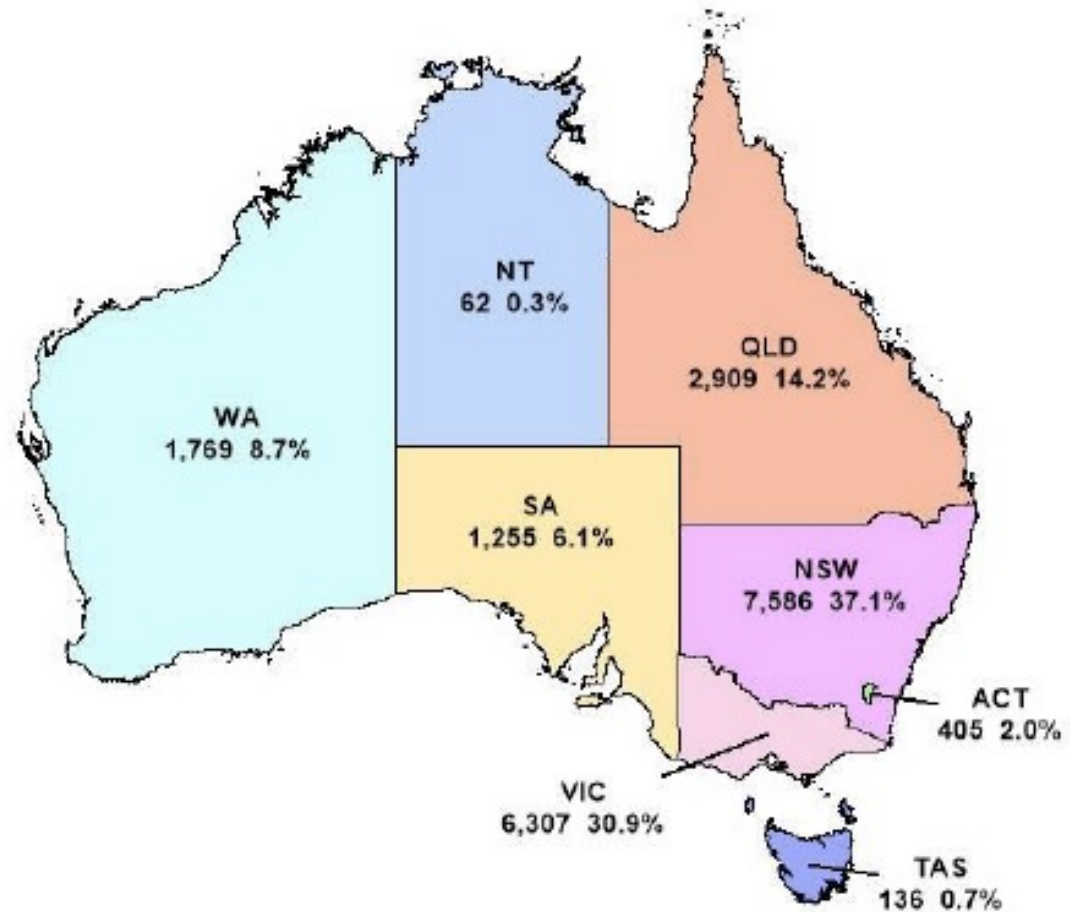
The questions:

- Why in WA, a state with a small number of Russian migrants, Russia successfully implements “the compatriots project” (Byford, 2012): certain “cultural products” (such as activities for children and public events) reproduce some official symbols and rhetoric?
- What is “community” for small migrant groups of Russian-speaking migrants in WA?

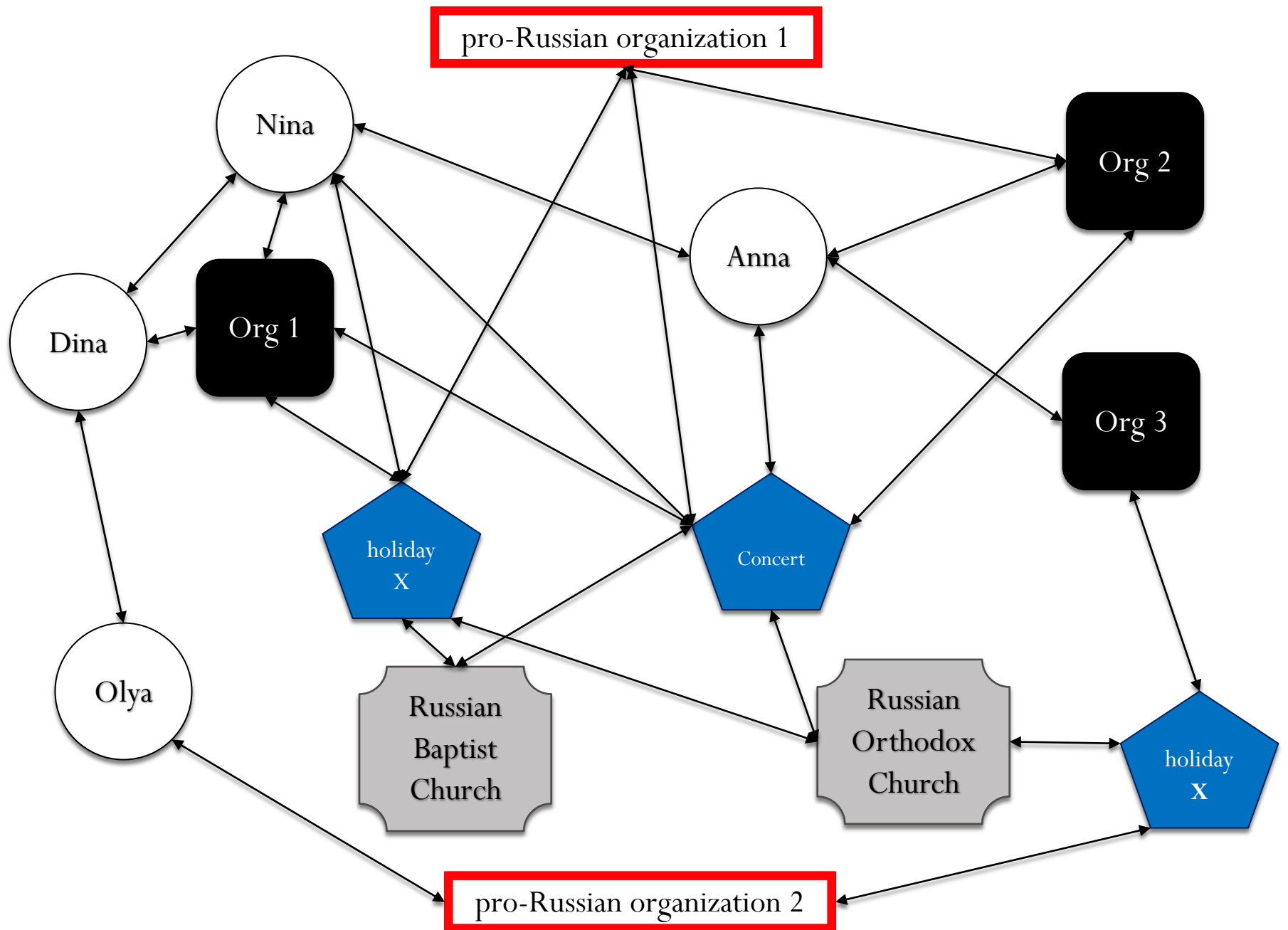
Small community

According to the census 2016, there are 20,425 Russian-born people in Australia, and **1,769** in WA.

Census, 2021:
23,864 in Australia,
2,083 people in WA –
0,08%



RESULTS



Russian-speaking community

In the process of studying the Russian-speaking community of Perth, I drew attention to several specific features that acted as its important characteristics.

1. Institutionalization

It has pronounced
institutionalization (RARC: 19
organizations), in comparison to
the small number of Russian-
speaking migrants in WA

• WA Russian Music and Arts Association Club



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2. Confrontation

The **tensions** and **contestations** that characterize migrant relations turned out to be a characteristic feature of the relationship between representatives of different organizations.

This is some kind of power, isn't this? The dominance of one kind of grouping over another, let's say ... Well, but what is there to share here? We have such little knot of people here, in fact, living here. And there is some kind of an incomprehensible tug of war, instead of uniting and making a common cause. For example, doing these concerts but together. Yes? Well, in general, there is some kind of struggle for the audience, some struggle for some heads. It is impossible to understand what [it is].

Definition

The Russian-speaking **community as a structured social space** is a **space of positions of community leaders and migrant institutions**, who compete for the entitlement to speak on behalf of the community to produce legitimate Russian-speaking culture

(drawing on Bourdieu's field theory (1993a, 1993)).

What is “community”?

1) Power relations

Russian-speaking migrants form a community not through a horizontal network of relationships between people but through a system of power relations between people and institutions.

2) Community leaders (re)produce and construct a set of ideas and beliefs

What can be represented as the needs of migrants and migrant heritage depends on who plays the role of cultural leaders in the community, which can be considered an ideology that is constantly disputed (Brubaker, 2004; Bourdieu, 1993).

Some pro-Russian organisations can be viewed as a type of diaspora institution (Gamlen, 2014, 2019) created by Russian governments to implement their political and ideological goals.

Community as a structured space

The Russian-speaking community, like any structured social space, creates struggles and competitions.

- There are few differences between the leaders in the sense of the resources they possess which are important to represent a Russian-speaking community.
 - As a result, they generate a wide range of cultural products, but are often inexperienced.
- Their positions are unstable and always disputed: representatives of different groups accuse opponents of unprofessionalism, poor taste, and misinterpretation of the essence of Russian culture.

Representatives are trying to accumulate different resources and are interested in cooperating with the Russian officials who provide them with them.

- The RARC creates five types of different awards for “compatriots”: Orders, Medals, Certificates of Honor, Letters of Commendation, and Diplomas of the RARC.
- This considerable number of medals and certificates is a symbol of gaining recognition as a legitimate community representative, which is very important in light of the absence of other legitimizing markers.

Награды Совета Российских Соотечественников Австралии 2020г



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Наталья Наумова

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Фото к статье - Сергея Михайлова

- Membership in these pro-Russian networks allows the representatives to gain access to the distribution of various resources, such as organizing various Russian competitions, meetings with Russian officials, and many others.



Commemorations of Victory Day

The pro-Russian organisations allow the leaders to accumulate the symbolic capital necessary to maintain their positions during the struggle in this network.

This leads to the fact that certain performative rituals, symbols, and narratives constructed within the Russian soft power policy are reproduced in the community of WA and acquire the status of legitimized symbolic goods.



The photo from the website of the RARC



The photo from the website of the Horizon Russian Weekly Newspaper (Lun'kova, 2019)

Interviewer: *You said you don't really like public events — is that about all of them?*

Respondent: *No, Victory Day — I do not like this euphoria when everyone is happy, and they put on military uniforms on children — it's absolutely dreadful for me. (...) I don't like the way it is represented... If you noticed, we were on 9th May. We arrived there half an hour earlier. (...) We stood there, looked, talked with the children, and left for the beginning of the event. (...) This is new militaristic rhetoric. ... I don't know how it appeared [here].*

Migrants have different ideas about what is part of the collective memory and cultural tradition and how it should be transmitted, but community leaders produce a limited repertoire of cultural products that involve the reproduction of certain official symbols and narratives.

Conclusion

- The Russian-speaking community of Perth, like the community in Australia, is characterized by active institutionalization, fragmentation, and confrontation.
- In the struggle for legitimacy, community leaders have a limited arsenal of strategies to achieve it.
- The cooperation with pro-Russian institutions and official Russian structures has allowed them to acquire additional resources in this competitive struggle, such as institutional recognition.
- This leads to the fact that certain performative rituals, symbols, and narratives constructed within the Russian compatriots project are reproduced in the community of Western Australia