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## Going Online, Going Global: The Pandemic Meetings of a Russophone Book Club

Angelos Theocharis

The Waterstones Russian Book Club (WRBC) is the largest Russophone book club in Britain. In the pre-pandemic era, the book club members used to meet once per month at the Waterstones Piccadilly to discuss contemporary Russian literature, but following the announcement of the lockdown in Britain in March 2020, they decided to go online for the first time. This article explores the transition of the WRBC from an offline to an online setting, as well as

its effect on the mission of the book club and the members' reading identities. Drawing on interviews with participants and online observations, I argue that the digital practices introduced during the pandemic led to the formation of a hybrid shared reading paradigm, enhanced the transnational character of the WRBC, and laid the foundations for the creation of a global Russophone reading community.

**Keywords:** anthropology of reading, book clubs, COVID-19, digital diaspora, digital transition, literary practices, lockdown, Russophone diaspora

Following the World Health Organization's declaration of an international public health emergency over the COVID-19 outbreak on the 30th of January 2020, most countries announced national lockdowns and other types of restrictions as measures to tackle the pandemic and hinder the expansion of the virus. These measures against the coronavirus resulted in a global disruption of socio-economical life since traveling and movement were restricted, and offices, universities, and non-essential shops were closed. On a global level, meetings, classes, celebrations, and various social gatherings transferred to online platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Skype, which allow people to connect easily, regardless of their location. These platforms already had a global network of users, but the global pandemic led to their unprecedented expansion. Digital media supported the continuation of social and cultural life, 'normalizing' the prolonged disruption caused by the pandemic (Athanasakou and Mertzani 2020).

This article investigates the influence of digital media on the community and the shared reading experience of Russian-speaking readers in Britain

during the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, I examine the transition of the Waterstones Russian Book Club (WRBC), a Russophone book club in London, from in-person gatherings to online 'Zoom meetings' from April to October 2020, an experience shared with many other community initiatives. The first part of the paper introduces the reader to offline and online reading groups, the U.K. Russophone community, and the pre-pandemic practice of the WRBC. The second part zooms in on the pandemic WRBC meetings aiming to capture the adaptation of the book club to the online environment and the intended-as-temporary change of mission. The digital turn of the WRBC led to the formation of a new hybrid paradigm for book clubs and contributed to the enhancement of the group's transnational and global character. I contend that the digital transition allowed the WRBC to transform from a London-based book club to a global Russophone reading community.

### Reading from Face-to-Face to Online Book Clubs

The history of reading groups goes back to the Middle Ages when a community gathered together to listen to one of its members read a book aloud. In their present form, book clubs have existed since the nineteenth century but have been particularly popular since the 1990s due to the success of Oprah Winfrey's Book Club (1996–2011), a book discussion segment of Winfrey's talk show (Long 2003; Rooney 2008). An informal, non-academic reading group meets regularly to discuss a book chosen by its members, listen to the participants' literary experiences, and explore possible interpretations. As the book club members 'reexperienc[e] a book through other readers, the author, other media, and through visits to physical places', their opinions and interpretations of the book under discussion are being confirmed, informed, or contested (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2013: 206). The meeting can take place in a private space (a member's house) or a public one (bookshop, library). Book clubs can be very diverse in terms of the genres read and the demographics of their members, yet Jenny Hartley's (2001) research showed that they often consist of middle-class, middle-aged or older, well-educated women, who prefer to read fiction and are looking to inform their reading with other peoples' opinions.

The popularity of reading groups especially in the Anglophone landscape and the fact that they 'constitute one of the largest bodies of community participation in the arts' (Poole 2003: 280) explains the increased academic interest. Research has focused on book groups in the U.S.A. (Radway 1997; Long 2003), Canada (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2013), and the U.K. (Hartley 2001; Peplow et al. 2016), but, as James Procter and Bethan Benwell (2015) have argued, 'it would be a mistake to assume that book groups are merely a "First World" phenomenon' (p. 5). Their monograph titled *Reading Across Worlds* (Procter and Benwell 2015) analyzed book talks from 30 different reading groups around the world (Nigeria, India, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, England, Scotland, and Canada) looking at how fiction produced in London was received and consumed by this transnational audience and how they

'establish[ed] imaginative connections elsewhere as they conjure up analogies, patterns, differences and allusions' (p. 57).

Reading communities exist in both online and offline settings. A simple search on the internet reveals to readers a variety of options for collective engagement with literature such as online book clubs, listserv book discussions, book-related blogs, fora, and Facebook groups. Synchronous or asynchronous online book discussions might be the only option for readers who either do not have access to face-to-face book clubs (Rehberg Sedo 2011) or are looking for language-specific and genre-focused groups. For Daniel Allington and Stephen Pihlaja (2016), the internet has transformed reading, as it promotes flexible and hybrid interactions among readers as well as between readers and texts. The role of locality, the types of membership, and the formation of hierarchies of taste are constantly being reformed and reconfigured, requiring a rather dynamic research approach.

Most online reading groups are text-based, in contrast to their face-to-face counterparts, which affects the format and content of interaction between readers. Online book club members are not situated in the same physical location that allows them, on the one hand, to connect with readers living in different cities or countries, but, on the other one, leaves them with fewer opportunities to bond and connect on a social level. David Peplow, Joan Swann, Paola Trimarco, and Sara Whiteley (2016) observed the absence of a 'social chat' in online groups at the beginning of a meeting or a conversation, as the participants moved swiftly to the book discussion. These groups are usually open and constantly accept new members, yet they 'were not friendship based, and members did not usually know each other outside their reading group interaction' (p. 20). Hence, online participants still manage to express their 'positions of familiarity and foreignness, inside and outside, distance and proximity' when they introduce themselves to their fellow readers (Procter and Benwell 2015: 39). At the same time, virtual reading communities can be more 'democratic, diverse and non-hierarchical' than offline groups (Round 2016: 243) since members are dispersed and often anonymous in the online environment, and social status and cultural difference are less evident in typed discussions (Procter 2010).

### **The Community Literary Practices of the Russophone Diaspora in Britain**

The Russophone community in Britain represents a diverse social, demographic, and ethnic group comprised of U.K. citizens and residents of Russian and Soviet heritage, including expatriates and migrants from the former Soviet Union, the Russian Federation, and neighboring countries, bound by one common denominator: the Russian language. Russophone migration to Britain kicked off after the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. in 1991 and involved the resettlement of highly qualified specialists, workers, and even oligarchs around the country but especially London, transforming the city into a predominant hub for diasporic culture (Kliuchnikova 2016; Malyutina 2015; Morgunova 2007, 2009).

Statistic data and estimates of the Russian-speaking population in the U.K. have been disputed for their ability to capture the actual presence of the community in the British society today, which ranges from 67,000 (Office for National Statistics 2011) to over 300,000 people (IOM 2007).

Community members maintain a highly active and visible position in the British cultural life, preserving a constant dialogue with Russia and participating in the global Russophone ideoscape (Appadurai 1996). Given the nodal role of literature and readership practices in Russian culture (Berg 2000; Lovell 2000), one observes a great number of Russophone literary events, including book festivals and fairs, events with writers and book presentations, as well as community events, such as book clubs, poetry gatherings, and children poetry reading competitions. Zooming in on the Russian-speaking book clubs, they represent an opportunity for diasporic readers to stay in touch with contemporary Russian literature, to practice their language skills in an intellectually challenging environment, and to socialize with 'compatriots' who share their passion for fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. Along with the many unofficial, in-house Russophone reading groups, I have located four public book clubs across the country: the Waterstones Russian Book Club, the Russian Book Club in Cambridge, the Manchester Book Club, and the Bacchus Book Club in Newcastle upon Tyne.

In the following section, I present my case study, the Waterstones Russian Book Club, drawing from my ethnographic fieldwork between 2018 to 2020 and from the interviews I conducted with the club's members and moderator.

### **The WRBC: An Offline Reading Group with an Online Presence**

The Waterstones Russian Book Club was founded in February 2017 and held its first official meeting the following month at the mezzanine floor café of the Waterstones Piccadilly, London. At the time, Waterstones Piccadilly housed on its fourth floor the Russian Bookshop, a well-informed and extensive Russia-oriented section, which was the initiative of the then owner of the bookstore chain, the Russian oligarch Aleksandr Mamut. The founder and moderator of the WRBC is Katia,<sup>12</sup> a Russian speaker who for eight years ran a small in-house reading group consisting of a handful of friends, also migrants from post-Soviet countries. Katia recounts her visit to Waterstones Piccadilly that inspired her to launch this literary initiative:

'The book club appeared because I accidentally came by the Russian book section and I understood that I could not choose any book. I did not know 90 percent of the names. I came here and I understood that there wasn't a Russian book club. And I thought that it has to be organized. I organized it' (2018, personal communication<sup>3</sup>).

The WRBC reads at its monthly meetings works by contemporary Russian-speaking writers, regardless of the country of origin and settlement.

In the first three years (March 2017 to March 2020), the book club voted for and read 33 books. Only three of them belonged to non-fiction and the remaining books belonged to the following genres of fiction literature: historical fiction—40 percent; fantasy—34 percent; thriller—13 percent; science fiction—seven percent; short stories—three percent, and mystery—three percent. The writers are predominantly male (70 percent), reside in Russia (84 percent), and only in two cases they belong to the diaspora. There is no admission fee, and contrary to the usual practice of other book clubs, participants are not being asked to buy copies of the month's book at the bookshop.<sup>4</sup> Even though the WRBC predominantly consists of Russophone migrants, everyone interested in Russian literature is accepted if they are fluent in Russian. Participation in the book talk is not required and listeners are welcome. Apart from the book discussion, the club occasionally hosts meetings with writers and critics, literary games, and cultural events with other diasporic community groups. The variety of cultural activities and the successful networking with cultural organizations in Britain and Russia progressively transformed the WRBC into the leading U.K. Russophone book club attracting the moderators and members of the other reading groups, who follow its events and discussions from a distance.

The main source of information for newcomers and existing WRBC members constitutes the Facebook group where the voting for next month's book takes place. On this page, the moderator posts literary news, book propositions, articles, information about upcoming diasporic events in London, and from time to time—pictures and short videos from their gatherings. The members' activity is usually limited to comments and reactions to these posts, yet online discussions take place in private group chats. The members of the Facebook group grew from 600 on the first anniversary of the WRBC in 2018 to 900 a year later, reaching almost 1,700 in March 2021. The online WRBC members are dispersed across and outside Britain, representing most places of settlement of the Russophone diaspora around the world. In the pre-pandemic era, a typical gathering was attended by 25 to 40 members, while the total active WRBC members joining the face-to-face meetings did not exceed 100. The ever-changing landscape of attendees represents different levels of involvement between the regulars, or core members of the book club, and the intermittent ones, who attend only if the book of the month interests them. Although the moderator reported in the interview that men constitute 20-25 percent of the participants in each meeting, I observed that the numbers of male members vary significantly, ranging between 5.7 percent (March 2019) to 21.4 percent (March 2018).

A typical meeting starts with the moderator welcoming the participants and explaining the structure of the event. In the beginning, everyone presents themselves in a circle and shares their reading experience. Then, those who have read the book of the month or at least a significant part of it take a piece of paper with a single question on it, prepared by the moderator. The number of questions varies from 20 to 30 and they are usually content-related, but the aim is to initiate a broader literary, political, and philosophical discussion. The participants who have not read the chosen book are not excluded

from the discussion and they regularly share their thoughts and opinions. At the end of the two-hour meeting, the club discusses new releases and book suggestions, nominates some of them for online voting, and sometimes, breaks into small groups that continue the conversation over drinks.

The above presentation of the WRBC is based on the ethnographic research conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic and offers glimpses into the book club practice. This image will be challenged and reconfigured in the next sections, where I discuss the impact of the digital turn on the WRBC as a reading community.

### **The WRBC Goes Online**

At the end of March 2020, the WRBC coordinator and the club members discussed on the Facebook group the temporary transfer of their meetings to an online platform. In the past, the book club had posted on Facebook a handful of videos from its meetings, mainly capturing its games and meetings with other community groups, to which participants would respond with comments and emoticons. Given this occasional and limited online presence, the WRBC was not prepared for the digital transition, and the adaptation of the meetings to the online environment lasted for over a month. Although I had completed my offline fieldwork just before the pandemic reached London, I decided to resume it and study the WRBC virtual meetings in comparison to the pre-pandemic ones. Taking into consideration that 'digital formations facilitate and transform the possibilities for diasporic affiliations' (Ponzanesi 2020: 978), I participated in the pandemic meetings to observe any impact of this new form of connectivity between the WRBC readers on community-building and the enactments of the participants' transnational cultural identities. In the present section, I offer an overview of these gatherings following a virtual ethnographic approach (Hine 2015; 2017) tailored to the transition from an offline to an online setting.

The data collection at this stage of my fieldwork took place from April to October 2020 and centered on participant observation of nine online meetings, which included oral discussions and text-based conversations taking place in the Zoom Chat. I also took fieldnotes with regard to the discussions, collected the Facebook posts that followed or preceded the meetings, and conducted asynchronous e-interviews (Kozinets 2010) with six WRBC members. My previous in-person ethnographic research with the WRBC equipped me with a deep culturally and experience-grounded understanding of this reading community, its identity, and group dynamics. The asynchronous online interviews (Bampton et al. 2013; Burns 2010) were conducted with selected members of the book club whom I had already interviewed in person before the pandemic. I initially tried to organize synchronous interviews on Skype or Zoom but most respondents explained that they spent a significant part of their days online and they would prefer to write their answers to any additional questions. In two cases, although the respondents accepted to participate in a follow-up

interview, they later disappeared and returned only after a couple of months, noting their 'pandemic' burnout in part caused by their dependence on the internet. Moreover, I informed all members about my continuing research with a post on the Facebook group, as well as orally at the beginning of the meetings as part of my short introductions, ensuring that no one objected to my presence there.

The first online WRBC meeting took place on the 6th of April 2020 and was attended by 24 members, all of them female. Among the regular members of the book club, there were also attendees who joined the meeting for the first time or returned after a long absence. I noticed that three members did not turn their cameras on and five opted for an automatic wallpaper to hide their background. The meeting started with the participants introducing themselves as they signed in and was followed by the moderator's invitation to pour a glass of wine and sit comfortably. As part of the introductory comments, a member expressed her deep satisfaction with the transition to online meetings since she lives on the outskirts of London and would be unable to join the face-to-face gatherings ('I have never attended in person because I have to be home for the kids on Monday night. I'm certainly more comfortable on Skype'). The well-established rules of the WRBC meetings were adapted to the functions and etiquette of Zoom (i.e., click the 'Raise hand' button if you want to contribute, mute the microphone, and unmute only when you are about to speak). The participants moved swiftly to the chosen book and the reading experience, following the typical structure of the WRBC meetings, with the moderator asking questions inspired by the book and the members answering them in rounds.

The online discussion took place in a more orderly fashion than at the face-to-face gatherings, as the participants did not interrupt each other and waited for their turn, no one tried to huddle up, and any side conversations moved to the chat. During the discussion of *Magi bez vremeni* (2019), the book's writer Sergei Lukyanenko joined to the surprise of the WRBC members, who were unaware of the moderator's communication with him. For forty minutes, the readers chatted cheerfully with the writer about his latest book, the writing process, and briefly about his personal experience of the pandemic. After Lukyanenko's departure, the participants continued with the analysis of his book. Although the WRBC had organized meet-the-author events in the past, it was the first hybrid session combining a book talk and a conversation with a writer. In meet-the-author events, the book of the month is rarely discussed, since the focus lies on the invited writer and their oeuvre as a whole. At the end of the meeting, a book club member showed a flower bouquet to the camera saying, 'This is for you, Katia, for your amazing work for the book club.' The moderator thanked her and responded that she had bought some Russian chocolate treats for the meeting but, being unable to offer them to the WRBC members, allowed her children to consume them. The virtual symbolic gestures mimicking those usually performed during the pre-pandemic offline gatherings enhanced the sense of familiarity and acted as reciprocal expressions of attention and attentiveness. The participants decided to meet



again two weeks later to discuss a new book, contrary to their usual practice of gathering once per month.

In the following meetings, the digital practice of the WRBC started consolidating gradually, in parallel to the formation of an identity distinct from the pre-pandemic one. The mission of the book club seemed to have changed. In a conversation I had with the book club moderator, she revealed to me her intention behind the pandemic meetings: 'Well, many people go into depression, which is why I'm activating them through distraction' (Katia 2020, personal communication<sup>5</sup>). The distraction that the literary gatherings offered consisted in providing emotional and psychological support through entertainment, as other community groups did during the pandemic. Fiction is often read for 'entertainment and pleasure,' constituting support for life, an act of self-care (Thumala Olave 2018: 421). By entering and exploring a fictional world together, book club members create imaginative bonds as they temporarily share the same reality and participate in the same meaning-making processes. This feeling of co-presence and togetherness facilitates community-building and the formation of affective relationships between the readers. In the context of a pandemic lockdown with the subsequent restriction of movement, the transition to a digital reading format helped the WRBC members to 'retain a sense of normalcy amid ongoing events' (Coward-Gibbs 2020: 3) by engaging in the same communal cultural activity as before. Therefore, the book club members tried to limit the pandemic-related conversations to the minimum, but occasional mentions and reflections still permeated the discussion:

Katia: 'What memories from this book will you have in a year?'

Anna: 'We have to go through this year to understand what is worth remembering.'

Katia: 'We will definitely survive.'

Given that the new version of the book club's mission was to 'distract' and cheer up its members, the moderator tried to invite to the online sessions as many writers as possible. The pandemic had resulted in the cancellation of book fairs, promotion tours, and meetings with readers, and the writers were willing to participate in or host online events. For example, the Russian publishing house AST organized the literary project 'Korona Dekameron', inspired by Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1353). The project lasted from the 6th of April to the 16th of May and involved twenty famous Russophone writers reading in turns excerpts from their books and answering questions from the readers. In addition to the four book discussions and the hybrid session I described earlier, the WRBC held seven meet-the-author events between April and October 2020.<sup>6</sup> Most writers' events attracted record numbers of attendees, which can be explained by their reputation and critical acclaim,<sup>7</sup> while the book discussions were not different from the regular offline meetings in terms of attendance. For the authors, these events provided 'a sense of connection with their audience' and 'a publicity tool that helps to generate interest in their books' (Long 2003: 208). At the same time, readers were afforded the 'rare opportunity to hear the author live and see what kind of person he is, because

this is also important, and not just read his biography,' as one of the WRBC members stated.

The digital transition was welcomed by the book club members, who were grateful for the continuation of the WRBC meetings and, as most migrants, were familiar with the use of digital communication technologies (Madianou 2019). Anastasia commented under one of the meet-the-author events on Facebook, 'I am glad that quarantine gives us such meeting:) Thanks!',<sup>8</sup> and in the interview she admitted that 'during the pandemic, the club's support was excellent' (Anastasia 2020, personal communication<sup>9</sup>). At the same time, Oksana (2020, personal communication<sup>10</sup>) referred in her interview to her experience of the pandemic sessions as 'quite large, thanks to Covid-19 (this is sarcasm)!' The discursive strategy of expressing gratitude and appreciation by thanking the cause of the disruption (the virus) and its countermeasure (the quarantine) shows their willingness to highlight the positive effects of the pandemic, even if that is possible through playfulness and sarcasm. The book club members regarded the pandemic sessions of the WRBC as a much-needed substitute to a stimulating social and cultural life:

'Undoubtedly, it was a form of support in the sense of [organizing] some interesting events. You couldn't and can't still go to theaters, concerts, and so on. This has become quite a good substitute instead of just sitting at home alone or with loved ones' (Oksana 2020, personal communication).

'Of course, participating in the book club meetings and discussing various books helped me get through almost four months of quarantine (lockdown), although I can't say that I somehow suffered emotionally from the "imprisonment." I personally felt good and comfortable at home with all the members of my large family' (Vera 2020, personal communication<sup>11</sup>).

As shown in the above excerpts from the interviews, the lockdown was experienced differently by the WRBC members, which subsequently affected the role of the literary events in their lives. In any case, the organization of six gatherings from the beginning of the spring lockdown until it started easing out at the end of May 2020 indicates the collective need of its members for such events. On the 15th of June 2020, the Waterstones bookstores opened again for the public, and since no group meetings were allowed, the WRBC discussed its next steps. The interim 'lockdown' mission of the book club seemed progressively outdated, as people could meet again outdoors, go to the cinemas, or visit an exhibition. The moderator asked the members to vote for the format and the frequency of future meetings. According to the Facebook poll, the majority of the readers preferred to gather once per month in order to have sufficient time to read the chosen books. However, they were divided in reference to the format, with 55 percent opting for meetings with writers against 45 percent that voted for 'traditional' book discussions without the presence of an author. Therefore, the club decided to increase the number of book-focused gatherings but to meet from that point onwards on a monthly basis.

The following section shows that the digital transition resulted in a new hybrid model of meetings that transformed the formats of discussion,

promoted the experimentation with new genres outside the comfort zone of the book club, as well as challenged the sense of familiarity and community among the online participants.

### Hybrid Reading Practices and the Digital Turn

The digital turn and its effect on sociocultural practices drew the attention of researchers long before the Covid-19 pandemic (Gorham et al. 2014; Gritsenko et al. 2020; Koumachi 2019; Westera 2013;). Rozália Bakó (2016) defines digital transition as 'the vast array of social, economic, and cultural transformations enabled by smart mobile technologies, [which are becoming] more and more affordable for individuals and organizations' (p. 145), while for David Kergel and Birte Heidkamp (2017) it represents a 'process in which the structure of media in society is redefined' (p. 15). Digital media have created a continuous global space where online and offline practices meet and inform each other conducting to their ongoing hybridization. According to Néstor García Canclini (2005), hybridization is not a phenomenon of the digital era, but it is the new media that accelerate and intensify these processes through cross-cultural exchanges.

Diasporic communities have employed digital media for sharing information, socializing, and mobilization since the emergence of Web 2.0 (Brinkerhoff 2009). On that basis, the relatively new paradigm of digital diasporas captures the emerging hybrid practices of migrants 'across borders and networks, online and offline' (Ponzanesi 2020: 12). More specifically, diasporic social life in the host society involves navigation and participation in both offline and online spaces, in parallel to the exclusively mediated, long-distance relationships with kin and friends at home. During the pandemic, these socializing patterns were challenged, with the diasporans having to temporarily transfer their face-to-face community groups and functions online. In the case of the WRBC, its members had previously shown a clear preference for offline, in-person meetings, choosing this book club instead of numerous online literary fora and reading groups. For that reason, the activity on the Facebook page had been limited, as had the interest of the 'active' members (who attend the book club sessions) in engaging with those members following the book discussions from a distance.

The digitalization of the pandemic WRBC meetings quickly contributed to their hybridization. For Anouk Lang (2012), hybrid reading practices reflect the democratizing character of the internet and its limitations regarding access to information and texts; serve as platforms where readers can challenge literary hierarchies and produce their own canon; redefine the mediation of textual experience among readers and the performances of their reading identities. In the formation of its online meetings, the WRBC combined elements from two types of online book clubs. On the one hand, there is the anonymous, text-based, and often asynchronous book discussion usually taking place in fora or mailing lists (Peplow et al. 2016). On the other hand, one can

find groups conducting an amalgam of oral and written synchronous book talks with simultaneously familiar and new faces (Allington and Pihlaja 2016). Readers usually opt for either form of online engagement with literature for its flexibility, anonymity, and less hierarchical structure (Procter 2010; Round 2016), in the absence of face-to-face book clubs (Rehberg Sedo 2011) or when they are looking for language-specific and genre-focused groups (Tselenti 2015). In the case of the WRBC, the main focus was the oral discussion during the meetings, which was accompanied by text-based conversations taking place in the platform's chat (synchronously) and sometimes continuing on the Facebook page (asynchronously). This complex modus of interaction and book-related exchanges between the readers arguably establishes a new, hybrid paradigm of communication for reading communities established in the continuum of digital and offline reality (Candidatu et al. 2019).

Furthermore, during the online WRBC meetings, the existing hierarchies of taste were questioned and reaffirmed. In early May 2020, the readers met with Marina Arzhilovskaia, a young Russian journalist and up-and-coming writer from Moscow, and discussed her novel *Bliki* (2020). The readers appeared unenthusiastic about the book and the writer received very few questions from the 22 participants. Having stayed for less than an hour, Arzhilovskaia left, and a 'closed-doors' book discussion started. The majority of the WRBC members viewed the novel as lowbrow and poorly written ('There are terrible dialogues. Seriously. People say something to each other, but what they want to say, why, I do not know. A book needs a story, descriptions, and characters,' 'This is obviously a young, inexperienced writer,' 'I didn't finish reading the book and very rarely leave books, but I felt that it is bad fanfiction') and therefore, rejected it. The moderator supported that 'each book is written for its own audience' and that the disruption caused by the pandemic offered a unique opportunity for experimentation with genres and formats of discussion ('We rarely read popular fiction, but it has a large audience as not everyone wants to read the shortlist of the Big Book'<sup>12</sup>). The debate around genres showed that even those who dismissed the book of the month for belonging to pulp fiction occasionally read such books for relaxation and entertainment. At the end of the meeting, Katia asked the participants to vote by show of hands if they agreed to further experiment with genres and writers. The vast majority of the attendees voted in favor of sticking to their well-established practices of book selection.

Familiarity and the sense of community between the WRBC members have also been challenged and reconstituted in the hybrid pandemic meetings. Two weeks before the first lockdown in Britain was announced, the WRBC celebrated three years of literary gatherings, displaying and projecting its group identity multimodally through online and offline discourse, posts, group pictures, and videos. The pandemic format of meetings offered the readers an opportunity to reacquaint with each other by visiting their homes and taking a glimpse at their private lives. Victoria assessed positively the digital transition of the book club involving the change of the setting and the reconfiguration of the relationships between the participants:

'During the quarantine period, our club started meeting much more frequently and we were able to reunite with old friends who moved to live in other countries. Thanks to Katia's inexhaustible energy, our club has acquired a new, unexpected format. Meetings were held every two weeks, participants looked a lot more relaxed against the background of their home environment, meetings with writers gave new turns to book discussions and the boundaries between readers and writers became almost invisible' (Victoria 2020, personal communication<sup>13</sup>).

In Victoria's account, the pandemic meetings brought the old and new WRBC members closer and made writers more accessible as they were regularly included in the book discussions. The depiction of the book club members at home holding a drink and surrounded by books<sup>14</sup> resonates with the traditional image of the solitary reader (Long 2003). The sense of familiarity generated by the mediated but live encounters with the writers is also reported by the WRBC moderator in a Facebook post:

'Many of you have written that in the zoom-format, communication with the writer is much more personal and reminds more of an apartment party than a lecture or an official meeting. This is absolutely true; an exchange of human warmth and positive energy definitely took place at the meetings.'

Familiarity is conceptualized as the opposite of formality and is connected to the feeling of warmth, friendliness, and comfort present in house gatherings and relaxed, intimate discussions. An example of such an informal and intimate conversation constitutes the April meeting with the writer Marina Stepnova. During the event, Stepnova was often interrupted by her little daughter and had to turn off the camera a few times when her daughter needed her outside the room. Although the author apologized for her absences, the all-female audience seemed to be very understanding, and it was even suggested to end the event earlier, recognizing that they were constantly facing the same issues themselves. In this framework, the discussion moved freely to more personal topics such as motherhood and the influence of death and family issues on her writing. At the end of the meeting, the author introduced her daughter to the WRBC members, who wished her good night.

For some of my respondents, the informal and relaxed discussions in the book club facilitated by the new hybrid format of meetings did not translate into a sense of closeness. Even though the online gatherings allowed readers to reacquaint themselves with the writers, the feeling of coming-together principally refers to the relationships between the book club members. Oksana maintains that community building relies on direct, personal communication between members, promoting bonding initially with some of them and then with the group as a whole:

'Convergence with other members of the club occurred only partially because we were deprived of the possibility of direct communication with them. Yet, the fact that you saw familiar faces on the screen, yes, it was undoubtedly pleasing. It was mainly the joy of being in a "party", that everyone gathered in spite of everything, and everyone was doing well' (Oksana 2020, personal communication).

Digital platforms might be bringing dispersed people together, overcoming the limitations posed by a lockdown or other movement restrictions, yet Oksana is not content with the mediated co-presence they afford her. For Mirca Madianou (2019), 'co-presence was traditionally assumed to imply physical proximity while mediation was considered a form of impoverishment compared to the gold standard of face-to-face communication' (p. 581), a position apparently embraced by Oksana. The online WRBC meetings are less flexible and direct, as the members participate in more structured discussions (only in turns), debate moderately since they can be easily muted (although it did not happen in my presence), see their fellow readers only if they have turned on their cameras, have side conversations with the limitations of the text-based Zoom chat and without the possibility of continuing a discussion in a pub. In other words, hybrid meetings help the reading community sustain itself during the pandemic ('everyone gathered in spite of everything'), supplementing the pre-pandemic face-to-face interactions between the WRBC members.

Based on my observations and the conducted interviews, I contend that the pandemic engagement with Russophone literature did not result in a simple transition of the offline literary activities to a digital platform, but it rather challenged the identity of the WRBC, potentially forging a new, hybrid model for book club meetings. More specifically, the hybridization of the reading practices during the pandemic led to a 'blended' format of discussions, combining elements of online and offline book clubs (synchronous and asynchronous, oral and text-based modes of communication, mediated material symbolic gestures, visual presence, and anonymity); created a space for experimentation with genres and writers discussing canon formation (Lang 2012); capitalized on digital media affordances (Madianou 2019) enhancing the sense of familiarity with the invited writers while sustaining the feeling of community among the dispersed WRBC members. In the next section, I examine another type of hybrid literary event organized within the framework of the WRBC pandemic activity, discussing their ability to bring together a global community of readers.

### **Enhanced Globality and the Russophone Reading Community**

On the 29th of June 2020, the WRBC organized, in collaboration with the Moscow-based literary critic Galina Yuzefovich, the 'Forum of Book Clubs'. Branded as a 'Celebration of Russian literature and its readers', the event aimed to bring together Russophone book clubs from all over the world for a book discussion with the co-authoring literary couple Marina and Sergey Dyachenko. The couple, originally from Ukraine and currently living in Los Angeles, started their shared literary career in 1994 and since then have produced 26 critically acclaimed novels in the science fiction and fantasy genres. The meeting started with a short introduction first by the WRBC moderator and then by Yuzefovich, who welcomed 99 participants representing 12 book clubs and reading communities from Canada, the U.S.A., the U.K., Spain, the

Netherlands, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine, Jordan, and Australia. The discussion lasted almost an hour and a half and was organized in turns as a 'relay race,' with each book club moderator asking one question or yielding to a member of their club. The topics did not differentiate from the usual meet-the-author events: the readers asked about inspiration, working schedule, models of cooperation within the couple, and plans for future books.

Given the success of the first 'Forum of Book Clubs,' the WRBC held a second one in place of its October meeting, this time inviting the writer Marina Stepnova again. Since the April 2020 meeting, Stepnova had released a new novel and, being a book club favorite, this was proposed as the appropriate occasion to gather Russophone readers from Russia and the diaspora again. The meeting followed the same structure as the last 'Forum' and was attended by 133 participants and 14 book clubs (Toronto, London, Newcastle upon Tyne, Warsaw, Amsterdam, Vilnius, Visaginas, Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, and Irkutsk). Unlike the event with Dyachenko, the October Forum was streamed live on Facebook, allowing those who were not members of the participating book clubs to watch the discussion.

Following the end of the first 'Forum of Book Clubs' with Stepnova, Katia, the WRBC moderator, posted on her personal Facebook page the video recording of the event, tagging the coordinators of all the book clubs. In the text that accompanied the video, Katia referred to the unprecedented 'surge of energy [...] coming from the opportunity to feel the unity of Russian-speaking readers around the world' during that 'unreal meeting.' This post marks a change in the use of the discourse of unity from capturing the sense of community within the book club (usually at celebratory events) to suggesting the existence or formation of a global Russophone reading community through the 'Forum of Book Clubs'. The moderator further thanked 'the modern technologies for the opportunity to be at the same time in Irkutsk, San Francisco, Warsaw, Moscow, Canada, Holland and many other parts of the world,' for which she was ready to disregard the digital burnout that everyone was experiencing. In this way, Katia defined as constituting elements of a global community the synchronous multipresence around the world, the engagement with a particular activity, and the amity among the participants. Starting from the latter, the Facebook video of the book club meeting with Stepnova received almost 100 comments by Russophone readers expressing gratitude to the organizers of the events, noting 'that life in our club is in full swing despite the surrounding situation' and asking for the 'continuation of the tradition.' A common emotion in most comments was 'warmth,' with one of the readers elaborating that it was 'warm family-style, but at the same time in a truly international company.' In the case of two participants, the first being the moderator of a book club in Newcastle upon Tyne and the second—of a Moscow-based reading group, Stepnova's novel ignited a nostalgic conversation under Katia's post, continuing the book discussion of the previous day:

M1: 'Rita, I didn't have time to answer to you in the meeting's chat—it was nice to see a person from the same region as your kins.'

M2: 'Likewise! It was really nice to read about familiar places in the novel, too.'

M1: 'Oh, Yes! It was a special, extra treat! I never would have thought that I would read so unexpectedly about Bitiug and the seasonally washed-out roads. One of the most vivid memories of my early childhood—we went to visit relatives in the fall, the car got bogged down, and my boot sank in that road mud It was incredible!'

M2: 'That's for sure, memories from childhood will never compare to anything in life!'

The sense of kinship and geniality among the dispersed Russian speakers expressed synchronously during the event or asynchronously later suggests the ongoing formation of a virtual community, partially overlapping with various physical communities (i.e., the book clubs), yet bringing them together for distinctively new digital interactions (Brinkerhoff 2009: 44-45). Supported by digital media and the geographical expansion of the language (Athique 2016), the emerging Russophone reading community is deterritorialized, less hierarchical and voluntary, given the 'low barriers to entry, low barriers to exit and interpersonal relations shaped by mutual adjustment' (Galston 2002: 43). An indication of the reading community's geography can be found in the following table showing the top countries and cities where the WRBC members reside:

**Table 1. Distribution of WRBC members (January 2021)**

Top Countries		Top Cities/Towns	
United Kingdom	1,169	London, U.K.	891
Russia	157	Moscow, Russia	105
Ukraine	38	Kyiv, Ukraine	14
United States	34	Manchester, U.K.	14
Israel	15	Saint Petersburg, Russia	12
Germany	11	Edinburgh, U.K.	11
Canada	11	Riga, Latvia	9
Latvia	10	Reading, U.K.	8
Estonia	10	Yekaterinburg, Russia	8
Belarus	9	Brighton and Hove, U.K.	7



During the pandemic, the book club members increased by 65 percent, as Katia, the moderator, received 577 membership requests on Facebook.<sup>16</sup> I discussed the surprising rise in members with Katia who explained that most requests came right after the two 'Fora' and included moderators and members of Russophone book clubs around the world. The newcomers were interested in the consumption of literary goods produced inside and outside Russia and the engagement not only with Moscow-based writers (Stepnova) but also with diasporic ones residing in the United States (Dyachenko), reaffirming the reading paradigm of the WRBC and challenging the country's central place in the cultural imaginary of the global reading community. Moreover, the 'Fora' were the reason for the creation of the private Facebook group 'Moderators of Book Clubs', managed by Yuzefovich and Katia. The purpose of this group was to bring together the moderators of Russophone reading groups across the world, creating a space where they can support each other, co-organize events, and coordinate the activities of their clubs. In March 2021, the group numbered more than 300 members.

The response of the WRBC members to the two 'Fora of Book Clubs' was fragmented concerning their ability to bring together Russian-speaking readers regardless of their location. The first group of respondents embraced the narrative that the 'Fora' constitute celebrations of Russian literature and readership ('This is really a celebration of literature and the soul when meeting with other countries and authors!') uniting the participants ('Literature really unites'). Anastasia described the pandemic lockdown as an opportunity for the book club to finally implement ideas about new projects, one of them being its geographic expansion:

'One of the advantages of the quarantine was finding new clubs, new potential members for the community, and [establishing] connections with writers. It was interesting to find out to what extent Russian book clubs are popular abroad and that the issues faced by these clubs are almost identical. We had a relay of clubs asking questions to writers, which gave this meeting a sense of absolute unity among Russian speakers around the world. Our club has reached a new level' (Anastasia 2020, personal communication).

In the above account, the invitation to 'the Fora of Book Clubs' is interpreted as the first step to the transformation of the WRBC from a London-based diasporic community group to a global one that incorporates dispersed Russophone book clubs. The ability of the reading groups to get together and form a major forum even for two hours every three months indicates the existence of the necessary foundation for the unification of the Russian-speaking readers. On the opposite end, other WRBC members were more skeptical about the success of these events, claiming that 'it is really difficult to unite the Russian speakers,' Vera, in particular, tried to deconstruct the narrative of unity, questioning its actual impact:

'The Forum of Book clubs was interesting and intriguing, but just that. Naturally, it was not the whole world that participated, but individual clubs scattered across different continents. The sample is neither

representative nor indicative. Nevertheless, the idea is new and, perhaps, promising, although I can't say that I was personally interested in listening to the questions and opinions of completely unfamiliar people from other clubs' (Vera 2020, personal communication).

Vera recognized the potential of online reading events to bring together Russian speakers from various diasporic communities and Russia, and of the WRBC to contribute to this cause with a digital platform for book discussion. Hence, the respondent challenged the global character of the 'Fora of Book Clubs' ('It was not the whole world,' 'The sample is neither representative nor indicative') and distinguished these events from the rest of the offline (pre-pandemic) and online (pandemic) WRBC literary activities. Given that the number of participants was much higher than at the regular meetings, there was not sufficient time for the attendees to introduce themselves and share their reading experiences, turning them into 'unfamiliar people' for the regular WRBC members.

In sum, characterized by the digital turn of the WRBC, the pandemic meetings and especially the 'Fora of Book Clubs' arguably broadened the horizons of the book club, enhanced the global awareness of its members, and promoted the merging of Russophone book clubs into a global reading community.

## Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an undeniably global impact on social life, igniting and accelerating the emergence of new socialities. Digital transition of face-to-face social relationships was necessary as many countries implemented movement restrictions and social distancing. In the case of diasporic communities which are particularly accustomed to mediated communication (Brinkerhoff 2009; Madianou 2019), these regulations resulted in the movement of offline, in-person activities and initiatives in the host society to an online environment. This paper demonstrated how the Waterstones Russian Book Club responded to the pandemic-related lockdown by going online for the first time and adding to its mission (i.e., reacquaintance with contemporary Russophone literary works) the community-driven entertainment, care, and distraction through literature.

In the first period of the pandemic restrictions in Britain (March to May 2020), the book club met every other week usually in the presence of a writer, while in the second period (June to October 2020) it returned to its book-focused monthly meetings, except for the two 'Fora of Book Clubs'. The new hybrid reading paradigm of the WRBC involved the experimentation with genres and formats (Lang 2012), and synchronous and asynchronous discussions, both oral and text-based. In this framework, the WRBC 'exploited the affordances' of digital media to promote co-presence (Madianou 2019: 581) by bringing together the club's regulars and attracting Russian-speaking readers residing outside London or the U.K., as well as by facilitating the

sense of community among the participants. The highlight of the pandemic experiments was the introduction of the 'Forum of Book Clubs', a new 'digital formation' (Ponzanesi 2020) that celebrated Russian literature by uniting book clubs and readers inside and outside Russia, thereby showcasing the potential of the WRBC to act as a digital meeting point and platform for a global Russophone reading community. The pandemic meetings showed that, regardless of their location, Russian-speaking readers are willing to come together and participate in a shared reading practice that transcends borders and connects them to the relevant global ideoscape.

1. All respondents have been anonymized.
2. Katia (2018, May 8) Personal communication, in-person interview.
3. All translations from Russian are my own.
4. In any case, the Russian bookshop declined after Mamut sold Waterstones in April 2018 and eventually closed in the summer of 2019. The remaining part of the Russian collection was sold to the bookstore chain Foyles and is available at their Charing Cross branch in central London.
5. Katia (2020, March 31) Personal communication, e-mail interview.
6. The invited writers were: 6th April—Sergei Lukyanenko, 17th April—Marina Stepnova, 27th April—Boris Akunin, 4th May—Maria Arzhilovskaia, 11th May—Shamil Idiatullin and Dmitrii Zakharov, 29th June—Marina and Sergey Dyachenko, 5th October—Marina Stepnova.
7. Stepnova's first event was attended by 49 members and the second by 133, Akunin's by 100, and the Dyachenkos' by 99.
8. This and other quotations (unless specified otherwise) are taken, with their authors' permission, from the Waterstones Russian Book Club's official Facebook group. Since it is a semi-closed group, I chose not to provide the links to separate statements.
9. Anastasia (2020, October 20) Personal communication, e-mail interview.
10. Oksana (2020, July 2) Personal communication, e-mail interview.
11. Vera (2020, July 23) Personal communication, e-mail interview.
12. The Big Book Award is a major Russian literary prize awarded annually for best prose in Russian. The award's website is: <http://www.bigbook.ru/>
13. Victoria (2020, August 8) Personal communication, e-mail interview.
14. The number of participants talking next to bookshelves ranged from ten to 35 percent.
15. I do not have data about those who watched the book discussion on Facebook live.
16. According to the data provided by the moderator, the WRBC had 1305 active members in the period from the 28th of March 2020 to the 24th of January 2021. Among the total number of members, 85 percent were female and 15 percent male.

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