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Monks, Blogs and Three Media Cases: Russian-Speaking Buddhist Communities in the Era of Social Media

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the problem of how Buddhism was reinstitutionalized in Russia in the frame of the meta process of mediatization. The empirical part of this study included two stages and was conducted during 2020–2024. In this paper, the authors focused mainly on the peculiarities of constructing strategies in the Internet and new media via traditional Gelug ethnic offline organizations, the Russian branches of the International Karma Kagyu Community, International Dzogchen Community and Russian-speaking community of Theravada converts. The methodological framework of the research included the institutional perspective developed by the Danish media scholar Stig Hjarvard for studying the mediatization of religion and the concept of "mediatized public religion" by Mia Lövheim and Marta Axner, as well as the concept of "digital religious innovators" by Heidi Campbell. The authors revealed that the processes of digitalization and mediatization have resulted in the emergence of Russian mediatized Buddhism. Various trends in modern Russian Buddhism are disproportionally represented in the public sphere of media; representation directly correlates with the strategies that Digital Buddhist creatives of different streams—Gelugpa traditional, Dzogchen, Theravada or Karma Kagyu—have chosen in relation to the Internet and new media.

Keywords: digital Buddhism; Gelug; International Dzogchen Community; International Karma Kagyu Organization

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, sociologists have exhibited a heightened interested in studying mediatization and digitalization trends impacting religions. This interest has been reinforced by the fact that digitalization, though initially restricted to transference of analog data and work routine into a digital format, over the years has developed to become a considerable milestone in the process of global social transformations. In modern sociology, this meta-process is commonly referred to as mediatization. The media literally stitch through the entire canvas of communication practices, acting as significant drivers for cultural change in various institutions. In modern societies, the media form a public sphere linking different social institutions to each other. The public sphere of media brings to the very surface the institutional concepts of society. It forms a reality of shared experience in which the cultural foundations of various institutions become transparent and representative (Hjarvard 2013, p. 68). Owing to the media, institutional concepts become the object of public scrutiny and discussion, which, in turn, encourages the relevant institutions to generate discourse concerning their own regulatory frameworks (Hjarvard 2014, pp. 215–17). One of the key changes introduced by mediatization has been the influence of digital media on so-called "life horizons" and social interaction in all spheres of society, among which is religion (Lundby 2013, p. 197). In the case of religion, mediatization has resulted in mediatized religion with various forms of self-presentation and representation of religion in the cultural public media sphere.

Religions enter the cultural public sphere of media as hybrid mediatized institutions represented by religious mass media and other media outlets and journalism on religion, as well as films, various talk shows, TV series, etc. (Hjarvard 2012). Digital discourses of religious blogs, public sites, podcasts and the like also contribute to the development of the mediatized public sphere of religion (Lövheim and Axner 2015). Diverse media are becoming interfaces of religion in the cultural public sphere. It is in this mediatized mode that religions come into contact with new, unprecedented formats of modern reality.

The Internet and new media technologies have catered to an upsurge in translocal interactions between religiously involved users. This communication transcends conventional associations with sacred loci, such as offline temples, churches, datsans, monasteries, etc. (Hepp and Krönert 2009). This interaction leads to shaping new meanings and reinterpreting religious practices and religious authorities, while unsupervised by institutions or congregations. Through the digitalization of religious sacred texts, media accessibility of sacred knowledge devalues traditional religious education and calls into question the epistemic authority of religious professionals (Cheong 2021; Campbell and Bellar 2023). New digital media challenge traditional religious values, as they make space for new religious authorities to emerge and for new ways of influence on a certain religious group to develop. In fact, mediatization has brought about shifting authority, which was previously assigned to religious professionals with conventional training, institutional status and authority (Campbell and Bellar 2023, pp. 83–86). Since the 2015s, sociologists have been extensively reporting the complete eradication of the difference between online and offline communications and religious activities. Research focus has shifted onto studying the traditions, authorities and identities being transformed in the mediatization of religions (Radde-Antweiler 2019).

As reported previously (Ostrovskaya et al. 2021), sociological studies on religion and digital media usually underline that Buddhism is a developing area on the Internet that needs to develop adequate tools for its online and offline correlations. Sociological studies of online American Buddhism have shown that the majority of users classified as "cybersangha" are actually looking for information about offline communities via the Internet or try to find something for bedtime reading (Tweed 2002). Criticizing the current state of affairs, the researchers propose revising the concepts of "cybersangha" and "online religion and religion online" by comparing Buddhist digital activity (websites, apps and blogs) with offline belonging to the Buddhist communities (Ostrowski 2015, pp. 191–203; Connelly 2015, pp. 59–60).

The past decade saw articles reviewing Russian Buddhist sites and electronic resources (Aktamov et al. 2015), providing online cartography and analysis of Buddhist communities on the social network Vk.com[1] featuring the general characteristics of the Russian-speaking Buddhist Internet segment (Dondukov 2019), navigating Buddhist pilgrimage and cyber pilgrimage (Lamazhaa et al. 2020) and observing digital strategies of Russian-speaking Buddhist communities (Ostrovskaya et al. 2021).

The research papers cited above usually include a general review of Buddhist sites, some social media accounts and a case study of Russian Buddhist digital strategies which have been favored by the Russian audience over the past thirty years. They tend to either describe somewhat all-Russian Buddhism or talk about the feud between traditional Buddhists and convert Buddhists. However, they do not research into how leaders of different streams of Buddhism use the Internet and digital media in their media strategies to advance their authority in the competitive field of Russian Buddhism.

Our previous study has shown that Russian-speaking digital Buddhism is a heterogeneous reality in which online communities, sites, webcasts and public pages in social media developed or used by offline Buddhist organizations coexist with online communities of so-called online Buddhists (Ostrovskaya et al. 2021). We argued that the digital mapping of this reality should be carried out not analytically, as foreign colleagues suggest, but by means of a quantitative benchmark survey. The mathematical-model approach allowed us to create a digital map of the Buddhist online communities on the Vk.com social network.

We found that the "Buddhist niche" of the popular Russian social media Vk.com is represented by online communities of the followers of offline Russophone Buddhism, and by various quasi-Buddhist communities that have no offline alternatives. The Buryat, Kalmyk and Tuvan online communities of the Gelugpa school and the online group of the Russian Association of Communities as part of the Karma Kagyu International Organization prevail in terms of quantity and their online activity. The number of online communities of the Russian-speaking part of the International Dzogchen Community and the Theravada is considerably less. In addition, there are precious few Dzogchen communities on the Vk.com network, and they are predominantly private. The Russian-speaking Theravada groups are not consolidated. Comparison of the results obtained for Vk.com with data on online communities, public pages and groups on the Fb.com showed that the digital activity of the Russian-speaking Buddhist organizations in these social media outlets is different. In the Buddhist niche of the Fb.com platform, personal blogging accounts of members of the Dzogchen Community and the Russian-speaking Theravada prevail. We supposed that digital mapping of Buddhist online communities, public pages and blogs on Fb.com, combined with a qualitative study of this environment, can shed light on the peculiarities of building relationships with the Internet and new media by traditional Gelug ethnic offline organizations and the Russian branch of the International Karma Kagyu Community.

Digital mapping of the Buddhist niche in Vk.com has revealed a significant gap in knowledge about the online profiles of the Russian-speaking part of the International Dzogchen Community and Theravada. The next study phase made it possible to identify the media used and the types of Buddhist digital creatives, whose efforts worked towards shaping of media technologies. Our analysis of strategies employed by the Russian-speaking part of the International Dzogchen Community and Russian Theravada communities has revealed fundamentally different strategies for online activity. They are conditioned by differences in communal Buddhist identity. Representatives of Russian-speaking Dzogchen communities view themselves as part of the inner translocal space of Buddhist practice distanced from the uninitiated, in accordance with Chögyal Namkhai Norbu's method. The strategy of the Russian-speaking Theravada was developed in a completely different way. In this case, a positive attitude towards the Internet and new media technologies is associated with the desire to popularize Theravada Buddhism in Russia (Ostrovskaya et al. 2021).

In this paper, we would like to study the mediatization stages of Russian Buddhism between 1990 and 2024. We will focus mainly on the peculiarities of building relationships with the Internet and new media by traditional Gelug ethnic offline organizations and the Russian branch of the International Karma Kagyu Community. The two Tibetan Buddhist streams, each in their own right, claim to represent "traditional Buddhism" of Russia in the public sphere of media. This research could clarify how Buddhism was reinstitutionalized in Russia after the persecution of monks and sangha and the destruction of monasteries in Soviet times. This research will focus on learning how their positioning as Russia's traditional Buddhism within the Russian Buddhist framework has affected their strategies in relation to the Internet and new media technologies.

2. Materials and Methods

The methodological framework of our research includes the institutional perspective developed by the Danish media scholar Stig Hjarvard for studying the mediatization of religion, the concept of "mediatized public religion" by Mia Lövheim and Marta Aksner and the concept of "digital religious creatives" by Heidi Campbell.

For this study, the concept of the "public sphere of media" should be elaborated on as it is crucial for the institutional approach to the mediatization of religion. According to Hjarvard, the "public sphere of media" is a reality of shared experience in which the cultural foundations of various institutions become transparent and representative (Hjarvard 2013, p. 68). The media reality of institutions includes the political public sphere and the cultural public sphere. Owing to the media, the institutional contents of various social domains of

society become the object of public scrutiny and discussion, which, in turn, encourages the relevant institutions to generate discourse concerning their own regulatory frameworks (Hjarvard 2014, pp. 215–17). At the microlevel of media communication, the reality of extended and shared experience arises, which constitutes an indispensable component to new identities and communities. The public sphere of shared experience created by the media involves interaction and communication in new cultural contexts (Hjarvard 2013, pp. 37–38). Thus, the microlevel of reality concept added to the methodology means that the research focuses on identifying cultural meanings that enter the public sphere of media through individual and group media practices. At the macro level, the media form a public sphere that links the cultural meanings of different social institutions in a completely new way. In the public sphere of media, various institutions undergo a structural intersection of their modes action. According to Hjarvard, "media create a public space for society to reflect on itself, that is, the very forum that makes various institutions visible to everyone and initiates a discussion about what resources and rules should be available and applicable to almost every aspect of public life" (Hjarvard 2014, p. 216).

The concept of "mediatized public religion" by Lövheim and Axner is based on selected theses from the theory of mediatized religion by Hjarvard and the concept of public spheres of discourse by Jurgen Habermas. For research in this view, the most applicable methodological thesis of Lövheim and Axner is that religion in public spheres of media should be analyzed against several criteria: types of actors (religious and non-religious), types of media spheres that provide a public format for discussions and the context of discourse about religion (secular or religious). Thus, "mediatized public religion" involves public discourses about religion propagated by the media spheres of journalism, religion, popular culture and digital spaces. The definitions of each of the spheres almost fully align with the definitions proposed by Hjarvard for the spheres of mediatized religion. Lövheim and Axner introduce the fourth media sphere to the typology of decrees, labelling it the religious digital spaces of blogs, websites, podcasts, etc. They argue that religious blogs are eligible for research as they present a mediatized public discourse that can transform intrinsic cultural perspectives on religions (Lövheim and Axner 2015, pp. 47–48).

We have applied the concept of "religious digital creatives" proposed by Campbell to our differentiating research design previously. This study investigates the strategies created by Buddhist communities when relying on digital technologies to build their own identity, authority and boundaries. Campbell offers three types of "religious digital creatives" whose activities shape digital religious discourses. These are digital professionals, digital speakers and digital strategists (Campbell 2021, pp. 48–54).

The design of the given paper relies on the aspects of Lövheim and Axner's concept that concern types of actors, media spheres and discourses in order to establish the formats of mediatized discourse about traditional Buddhism in the public media sphere of Russian society. Campbell's typology helps to construct a sample of respondents for expert interviews and serves as an analytical framework for interpreting the interviews. Further, the responses of the interviewees are to be reviewed for semantic blocks indicating the respondents' motivation to use the Internet and digital technologies for religious purposes.

The empirical part of our study included two stages and was conducted from January 2020 to October 2022. In the first stage, we used quantitative software methods for collecting social network data with customized software—a data crawler. As a result, a graph model was built; clusters of Buddhist online communities in the Vk.com social network were identified and described. The analysis of the clusters resulted in a somewhat online map of Russian Buddhism with major players being the Buryat, Kalmyk and Tuvan branches of the Tibetan Géluk school, the Russian Association of Communities that are part of the International Karma Kagyu Organization, the Russian department of the International Dzogchen Community and the Russian-speaking Theravāda. It should be emphasized that the "Buddhist" niche of Vk.com accommodates both digital representatives of offline Russian Buddhism and a variety of quasi-Buddhist communities which have no offline counterparties (Ostrovskaya et al. 2021).

The findings helped to draw a map for the Buddhist online communities of the Vk.com platform and to analyze the structural relations between them. The findings also helped formulate objectives for the second stage of our research, which was a random study of selected Buddhist online communities on the Vk.com platform with qualitative methods of sociological research.

At the second stage, we conducted a case study of Internet and media strategies favored by Buryat, Kalmyk and Tuvan Buddhism, the Russian association of the International Dzogchen Community, representatives of the Russian-speaking Theravāda and the Russian Diamond Way Karma-Kagyu Association. The digital infrastructure and media communications of these contemporary Russian Buddhist schools are hardly studied at all. Therefore, it was decided to combine biographical narrative and expert interviews. Sampling was executed with the following criteria: involvement with the community's development; productive digital activity of at least 5 years; a clear profile of online activity, the account being written on behalf of an organization or community, a website or blog. A total of 30 interviews were conducted. All respondents were offered to answer the same set of questions, which fell into two topical categories: biographical and the repertoire and targeted use of media by the Buddhist community of a particular lineage.

3. Socio-Cultural Context of Re-Institutionalization of Buddhism in the 1990–2000s

3.1. Mediatization of Russian Buddhism: From the Underground to Various Identities

Specifics of traditional Russian Buddhists' involvement with media are immediately related to the unique history of Russian Buddhism as a whole. The problem is that Buddhism labeled "traditional for Russia" was institutionalized during the imperial period of Russian history mainly in Buryatia and Kalmykia. Each of these Russian regions has its own local characteristics. However, the socio-cultural model for reproduction was similar to monasteries and religious and educational centers supported by laypeople. This model was borrowed from the Tibetan–Mongolian Gelugpa model, known for its monastic education system, which trained experts in canonical texts and its rigid division into monks, novices and laypeople. The Russian adaptation was developed relatively autonomously under the patronage of imperial confessional policy.

The history of Tuvan Buddhism is somewhat different since the region became part of the Russian state as late as in 1914. The institutionalization of Buddhism in Tuva was a unique case as Buddhism had started spreading across this region in the XVII century, when numerous Tuvan tribal nomads were part of the Qing Empire. Socio-cultural consolidation of Tuvan Buddhism largely coincided with the reception of written heritage initiated by local nobility, who sought to create islands of Buddhist scholarship and practice in a short time, sending their children to study in Mongolian Buddhist centers. Commoners' Buddhist consciousness and practice was formed in symbiosis with autochthonous shamanism and animistic beliefs (Mongush 2001, p. 5; Khomushku 2005, p. 116). The end result was similar to the Buryat and Kalmyk socio-cultural patterns, which meant reproduction of Tibetan–Mongolian Gelugpa Buddhism within a framework of monasteries (khure), collectives of Buddhist professionals (monks and novices) and laypeople, with a focus on written heritage and the development of traditional Buddhist education. However, the unique feature defining Tuvan Buddhism was incorporation of local cults and rituals into both the belief system and practice.

In Soviet times, the imperial socio-cultural model of Buddhism was cancelled in the regions: the clergy were repressed, monasteries were destroyed and potential laypeople were socialized under atheistic ideology. The Buddhist traditions of Kalmykia and Tuva suffered an irreparable damage. In 1943, the Kalmyk ASSR was legally liquidated, and Kalmyks were forcibly deported to the regions of Siberia (Holland 2015, p. 953). During deportation and exile to the eastern regions of the country, the rituals of Kalmyk Buddhist tradition were practiced underground by monks who held prayer services at homes and by families of lay followers Buddhists who preserved Buddhist texts and ritual objects (Bakaeva 2012, pp. 41–42). The 1930s' repressions of the supreme Tuvan lamas and

the destruction of monasteries discontinued the monastic tradition of Buddhist clergy reproduction and started a pattern of illegal practice in prayer houses in remote areas of Tuva (Tenzin 2018, p. 87).

It was not until the end of World War II in the late 1940s that state authorities started to relax their grip on Buddhism. In 1946, the Central Spiritual Board of Buddhists (TsDUB), a new structural body on the territory of Buryatia headed by Pandido Khambo Lama, was founded for the centralized management of Buddhism in the USSR (Bakaeva 2012, p. 38). In the aftermath of this event, it was allowed to rebuild and reopen Aginsky and Ivolginsky Buddhist datsans, though with a 20-monk limit requirement.

By contrast, in many regions of Buryatia, lamas had been illegally practicing on their return from prisons and exile (Vanchikova 2012, p. 130). For many decades, the Ivolginsky Datsan remained a spiritual outpost for all those who wished to practice Buddhism, notwithstanding atheistic propaganda and high ideological risks. Kalmyk Buddhist laity would come to Datsan for the sake of rites, conducting rituals after the funeral of relatives, and so on (Bakaeva 2015, p. 8). In the late 1950s, Tuvan lamas and novices established contact with the Ivolginsky Datsan.

In the 1950s–1970s, a model of practicing Buddhism under ideological pressure was developed. The major innovation to this model was the inclusion of laity, both lay ethnic Buddhists and those of a different decent. There were three autonomous branches of underground Buddhism. One was constituted by ethnic lay Buddhists (Buryats, Tuvans and Kalmyks) initiated by monks who never broke their vows and communicated the tradition to the laity. The other two branches represented the underground Buddhism of non-ethnic conversion.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the so-called underground Buddhism originated and took over university departments of Oriental studies and philosophy, as well as research institutes. The founders and leaders of underground Buddhist groups came from different Soviet republics. They would take risk and go to Buryatia in search of a Buddhist mentor; they would take refuge with him; they would stay at datsans for a long time, studying the doctrine and practice of Buddhism. Their spiritual mission meant such educational activities as translating Tibetan texts into Russian and establishing contacts with Western Buddhists and the Tibetan diaspora in India. Interestingly, this non-ethnic Buddhist community was heterogeneous. It involved groups that established contacts with The Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamshala and held secret meetings in Moscow and St. Petersburg. They aimed to create first paper and later digital media about Tibetan Buddhism. They engaged in translating Tibetan Lamrim into Russian, as well as publishing its paper and digitized volumes; they wrote for the journal Buddhism of Russia and managed its website; they cooperated with the like-minded creators of the website and the YouTube channel Save Tibet.

Another group united followers of the Buryat Buddhist mentor Bidiya Dandaron, whose teaching tradition was closer to Dzogchen than to Gelug, characteristic of Buddhist regions in Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva. In the early 1990s, they initiated the publication of the paper historical Buddhist magazine *Garuda*, a new medium for Russian Buddhism. This illustrated religious medium was issued between 1992 and 1998 featuring translations of Sutra passages, teaching texts and famous mentors' biographies.

In the early 1990s, marked by ideological mainstream revival of Russia's religions heritage and the new federal law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations", attempts were made to revive traditional Buddhism of the Imperial Russia and the Soviet TsDUB. Both attempts revealed the existing differences between Gelug followers in Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva. In 1997, the Buddhist Traditional Sangha of Russia (BTSR), the successor of the Central Buddhist Board, was established (Bernstein 2013, pp. 99–100). The confrontational nature of the BTSR for the regions and the country itself resulted in the emergence of alternative centralized organizations in Buryatia and Kalmykia. Each of them claimed to represent all Buddhists in Russia and strived to act as a single governing body (Bakaeva 2012). Decentralization was not the only way of diversifying religious institutions

in Buddhist regions. Buddhists of Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva chose their own Buddhist heads that sought to maintain contact with Gelugpa monasteries of the Tibetan diaspora in India. Traditional Buddhism in Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva would spend the following decades developing their own sangha of professional monks and novices, establishing communication of rituals to lay people and building monastic education systems.

The apparent difference in interpretations of Gelug Buddhist tradition by the regions resulted in a different attitude towards the Tibetan mentors sent from India to help restore monastic life. Datsans led by Pandito Khambo Lama sought to reinforce the Buryat ethnic oriented version of the Gelug. Consequently, Tibetan mentors either left Russia or founded their own autonomous centers. Tibetan Buddhist centers built in Ulan-Ude in the first decades of the 2000s abandoned the idea of unification, pursuing their own interpretation of traditional teachings and practices (Bernstein 2013, pp. 102–3; Garri 2014, p. 162).

In the 2000s, the majority of newly rebuilt datsans and Buddhist centers of Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva had their own websites. However, it took them a long time to build their identities prior to that. Their qualms were well articulated by one of our interviewees. He was on the panel developing the first website for the Ivolginsky Datsan and the website for the first Russian media, *Buddhism in Russia*, in 2001–2002. His biographical narrative describes in detail the realities of those years when information about Buddhism, Russian institutions and centers and any interaction concerning Buddhism were mediated by electronic bulletin boards and the Russian branch of echo conferences on the FidoNet[2]. At that time, it was still widely believed that one could learn about the true Gelug tradition only in monasteries of Buryatia:

> *I had a Fidonet network node. It was much more popular than the Internet in our country until the early-mid 2000s. There was a large Buddhist echo conference ru.dharma. The first Buddhist I talked to in ru.dharma told me to check the Ivolginsky datsan. I ended up there, in Ulan-Ude. I took a bus and arrived at the Ivolginsky datsan, there is no one there. It was empty. I went through the gate, at random. I looked around: still no one to see. I tried some house and found Buryat huvaraks there. They told me to join them. 'Sit down. We'll pour you some tea, tell us what you want', said they. I told them that "I came from St. Petersburg. I was interested in Buddhism. I wanted to know how everything worked there. 'What are you doing?' they asked. I was like, "'Well, I'm doing websites in St. Petersburg in a web studio'. They go: "Sites! Great! And we just need to launch the Ivolginsky Datsan website the day after tomorrow, but we have none, we have nothing, we are in complete panic. I was taken to Dasha Choykhorlin Institute, where a Russian guy is trying to put up the site and fails. There is a portrait of the Dalai Lama hanging [. . .] In two days we made the website of the Ivolginsky datsan and posted it on my personal server. We launched it. Then, the photos. I photographed the datsans myself, scanned the photos. The first photos that appeared on the site were also my photos. Now, of course, it has already been changed many times.*

The narrative in question also describes the dilemma faced by a non-ethnic Buddhist who wanted to convert to Buddhism in the early 2000s, which was the need to choose between the Buryat and Tibetan versions of the Gelug tradition:

> *Me and two Russian guys, with whom we made a website, took refuge with Yeshe Lodoy Rinpoche. We talked about it there for a long time, with this lama. They were in fierce opposition; the Buryats were very jealous of the Tibetans. This confrontation between the Buryats and Tibetans was very clearly felt. I remember when I told them that I wanted to go to the center that is being built by Yeshe Lodoy Rinpoche, I caused a whole storm. Then the abbot of the Ivolginsky datsan said: "You, Europeans, all go there—you come and all you think of is Tibetans. What did they do for this place? We came when everything had already been done. We have been in these terrible conditions for decades. Our morality may have degraded, our knowledge may have degraded, but we have been here all these difficult years, and the Tibetans came all in white coats. And you do not recognize our achievements, but go to them instead of supporting those akin." This was very much contrary to my ideas about Buddhism—why arrange some kind of inter-clan showdown*

> *and competition when we needed to unite. Therefore, when the choice was where to take refuge, with the Buryats or with Yeshe Lodoy Rinpoche, I went to him. Moreover, they did not have a procedure there. He was just starting to build the center, there was a pile of bricks and two sheds. He lived in one shed, and there was a reception room in the other. So, I arrived there out of curiosity and left as real Buddhist. And then I came to St. Petersburg, met A., offered him help. Then I began to make up all sorts of texts from the magazine "Buddhism of Russia". I made the sites of "Buddhism of Russia" and Narthang too.*

The dilemma of choosing between mentors mentioned in the quote seems to be typical of Russian Buddhism during its re-institutionalization in the post-Soviet period. Initiated in the early 1990s, the revival of Buddhism traditional for Russia was understood mainly as a recreation of the traditions of Buddhism in Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva. Thus, two very contradictory trends became evident. One was the desire of each region to construct its own communicative patterns of Buddhism focused on historical, ethnically oriented versions of Buryat, Kalmyk and Tuvan Buddhism of the Tibetan–Mongolian root. This trend revealed itself in confrontations between Buddhist institutions of Buryatia and Kalmykia over creating a single centralized governing body for all Buddhist organizations in Russia. In addition, for a long time, representatives of traditional Buddhism in the regions took a very skeptical approach to Buddhist communities and organizations created by Buddhist teachers from Europe and Asia and representing other streams of Buddhism (Zen, Theravada, Karma Kagyu, Dzogchen, etc.).

The second trend was for Russian Buddhist movements of the 1990s–2000s to seek cooperation with one another. In our opinion, this trend stemmed from the Soviet period when Buddhism was professed by groups associated with the underground.

3.2. Digitalization of Russian-Speaking Buddhism in Stages: From Paper Media to Forums and Websites

Interviewees who converted to Buddhism in the 1990s would usually voice hopes and aspirations for an all-Russian Buddhist communicational platform. The main media claiming to represent the entire Russian Buddhism of the 1990s–2000s were the magazines "*Buddhism of Russia*", "*Garuda*" and the Buddhist Forum on the website "Association of Buddhism on the Internet".

For the research into the history and tradition of media involvement, it is fundamentally important that the first Russian Buddhist magazine was created by a convert (non-ethnic) follower of Géluk-Andrey T. He associated with the "Buddhist underground" of the late 1970s and represented a secluded group of professional Buddhologists and Buddhists from different parts of the USSR. In a series of interviews with the YouTube channel Save Tibet with Andrey T. there is a section dedicated to this topic:

> *As atheism prevailed back in the 70s, it was very difficult to find any literature or even any information about Buddhism. So, I got in touch with the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamshala. Its director Gyatso Tsering would send me some books, and I would send him our publications about Buddhism in return. My name was familiar to them and they helped us with some things. Then, around 1985 or so an American Buddhist monk Alan Wallace came to St. Petersburg by chance. He was still a monk at that time. The team working on Lamrim gathered in my apartment, [. . .] someone brought him as well. He got into our Lamrim seminar. He was impressed. He realized that we had no contacts with the Buddhist community and we were in dire need of teaching and he advised us to invite Alexander Berzin who was then one of the Dalai Lama's translators. The next year he came. We arranged secret, conspiratorial lectures here. We invited only the most reliable Buddhists. Lectures were in Moscow and St. Petersburg. People came here from Estonia, Lithuania. The best people of underground Buddhism and Buddhology gathered here. Alex was impressed. Berzin, he was a close person to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Upon his return from Russia, Berzin told him in detail about everything that happened here. When perestroika began, we managed to take over a Buddhist temple*

> *which was under the state. We registered ourselves as a Buddhist association and received a Buddhist temple as such. Then we wrote a letter to the Dalai Lama. We asked him to give us advice on how to organize Buddhist life here, to give us rules to follow, and we asked him to send spiritual mentors. As a result, a delegation came to us in November 1990. They observed what was happening in the temple and came to some conclusions. Soon, in December of the same year, I went to India, to Dharamshala. When we were negotiating the Buddhist temple there, they called a Kashag meeting and decided to help us. Then I met the Dalai Lama personally. When the Dalai Lama*[3] *later went to Russia, they wrote to me that I would accompany him as an interpreter.* (Terentyev 2015)

The given quote grasps the essence of the 1990s, when, along with the restoration of the Géluk tradition in the regions of its origin, converted Buddhist communities were organized by representatives of the former Soviet Buddhist underground. They also created the first Buddhist media of those years—the magazines *Narthang Bulletin* (later renamed "*Buddhism of Russia*") and *Garuda*.

From 1992 to 1998, the *Nartang Bulletin* was an electronic magazine which was sent out to subscribers or worked as Bulletin-board systems. In the self-description, the *Nartang Bulletin* was defined as "the only monthly issue reviewing Buddhism in the former USSR published by the Russian affiliate of the Narthang Publications publishing house under the Department of Information and International Relations of His Holiness the Dalai Lama."[4] The analysis of the earlier publications revealed that this magazine positioned itself as the one associated with the Tibetan Géluk tradition and its spiritual leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama XIV. At the same time, the magazine chose to focus on the Buddhist environment in Russia—events in Buddhist regions, chronicles of registered Buddhist associations and the emergence of Buddhist media. In 1995, the magazine assumed the new name "*Buddhism of Russia*", expanding its repertoire beyond short digests and chronicles on Buddhist communities. It published excerpts of Russian translations of Lamrim, the fundamental text for the Géluk School. In the 1990s–2000s, a number of convert lay Buddhists from different cities on the former Soviet territory gravitated towards the magazine to translate Lamrim. The group focused on preparing both hard and digitized copies of Lamrim volumes in the Russian translation, creating content and maintaining the website of the *Buddhism of Russia*, as well as collaborating with an associate website and the YouTube channel of the same name "Save Tibet".

The *Garuda* magazine was established by Russian followers of the Buryat teacher Bidiya Dandaron and was positioned as a journal of Buddhist history. From 1992 to 1998, this illustrated religious edition published excerpts from sutra texts, teacher texts and biographies of famous mentors in Russian translation. It was positioned as representing Russian Dzogchen, and, therefore, associated with the teachings of Chögyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche. However, the very first visit of Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche to St. Petersburg and Moscow made it evident that a joint community was out of the question.

The peculiar environment of the 1990s defined by the revival of Buddhism as a religion of Russian historical heritage also meant that the Géluk tradition lost its unique status on Russia Buddhist landscape. In a short time, Russia saw a raise of communities following not only Tibetan teaching, but also the teaching of other Far Eastern and Southeast Asian countries. Meanwhile, Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva were focused on finding their own authentic versions of the Géluk tradition, while building strict managerial boundaries, establishing a system of training Buddhist clergy involving lay followers. For a while, ethnic Buddhists were reluctant to accept the new socio-cultural realities, such as the emergence of other Buddhist communities established by Tibetan mentors from abroad and communities initiated by Buddhist converts (Ostrovskaya 2015).

Foreign influential Buddhist mentors and centers with the Dalai Lama XIV and the Tibetan diaspora at the helm enjoy a high religious authority and act as a significant source of religious charisma, while being virtually independent of Russian communities (Badmatsyrenov and Rodionov 2020, p. 65). Groups of "non-ethnic" Buddhist converts positioned in large cities tend to view the "traditional" Buddhist clergy of Buryatia, Tuva

and Kalmykia as limited to their ethnical identity and, therefore, not as a sufficiently legitimate source of religious Buddhist wisdom and certainty (Agadzhanyan 2009, p. 228).

When analyzing the collected interviews, we noticed that respondents would consistently refer to their involvement with the Buddhist Forum created in 1998 as an interactive unit of the website Buddhism on the Internet Association. Up until the Russian-language versions of social media on Vk.com, Facebook and Instagram emerged, The Buddhist Forum served as a discussion media platform for various schools of Russian Buddhism.

The very emergence of the public media platform to discuss the doctrine and traditions of Buddhism was in tune with the socio-cultural situation of the late 1990s–early 2000s. Russia witnessed the introduction of new socio-cultural models for various Buddhist traditions. Their followers were in close interaction with each other: they practiced together under the guidance of various mentors, exchanged literature and translations and attended lectures and retreats of major Buddhist teachers who came with short-term visits from different countries. Moreover, the early 2000s saw comprehensive organizational and communicative profiles for Buddhist movements taking shape. This was consolidated in the new media reality of the Internet. Since the second half of the 1990s, websites of particular Buddhist organizations, communities, magazines and publishing houses have been introduced on a regular basis.

The website of the Association Buddhism on the Internet became the first and only media resource of its kind. It provided everything that was previously accessible only through electronic bulletin boards, community mailings or the Fidonet network. The content of the site included both general information on the history and doctrine of Buddhism and up-to-date information about Russian Buddhism, specific communities in various cities and countries and new publications of Buddhist books, visits and lectures of teachers and mentors. In his biographical narrative, the creator of the site stressed that he had deep knowledge of practices and discourses of various Buddhist communities. His experience as well as his expertise in media technologies encouraged him to build a platform representing Russian Buddhism on the Internet. The major innovation of this website as opposed to all the Russian sites of Buddhist communities, datsans, khure, khuruls and various associations of convert Buddhists that operated at that time was the interactive platform called the "Buddhist Forum":

> *In 1996–1997, the first Buddhist websites began to emerge. By that time, I had made a website for the local Buddhist community Lotus. We exchanged information with other providers of Internet resources. And at some point, I had the idea to create a website that would link information sources on the Buddhist Internet. So, in 1998, the project "Association of Buddhism on the Internet" was launched to consolidate the Buddhist digital landscape. We discussed this project with Andrey T., M*., and A*. The Internet was only beginning to reach out to the public, and I had the opportunity, by virtue of my work, to create a resource accessible to those who had the Internet. As a result, the site became a news resource. I accumulated information from other Buddhist sites there, published news about different schools. The site maintained a catalog of Buddhist resources. And a little later, a news subscription News of Buddhism was created. Again, some time later, a Buddhist forum was launched on the site. It was meant as a communication tool for Russian Buddhists. It used to be on such a simple text engine. I still have the first web-branches. They are so funny compared to what it grew into. Its structure finalized in the first few years, and it has remained unchanged so far. People discussed Buddhist traditions, compared ideas, schools, texts. According to data, the majority was representatives of Tibetan Buddhism, and the pattern remains the same to this day. They were followed by Zen adherents as a more well-known movement and Theravada as the path of those who are genuinely interested.*

Further digitalization of Russian Buddhism, which started with the spread of the Internet, resulted not only in the creation of community websites, but also in the introduction of community boundaries and conceptual foundations of doctrinal discourses. The Buddhist Forum became the one and only digital platform for self-assertion reinforced through

the "inter-Buddhist" virtual discussion. Gradually, the forum's discourse diversified into separate branches with moderators who regulated the discussions of Tibetan Buddhists of Géluk, Karma Kagyu and Dzogchen followers, as well as representatives of Zen, Chan and Theravada Buddhism:

> *There were fluctuations in interaction between representatives of different traditions, who behind the closed doors were resentful to each other. We worked out the principles of coexistence in the same information space in order to avoid escalation. A single media platform—it was a wonderful experience of sharing one space. Something was created; we discussed translations, terms, etc. Now that everything has spread over the Internet and become isolated, well, I don't know if it's wrong or just a stage of development. The Forum has served as a single media platform for many years. Its engine has changed several times. The Forum has very strict rules, which is why people have begun to leave. In my opinion, the forum is a platform which offers some useful information for people. This was my vision. Not everyone liked it, and some people began to slip away in order to create their own platforms. Anyone can enroll in the forum even non-Buddhists, but you need to fill out an online questionnaire where you'll be asked about it. There were followers of Ole Nydahl on the Forum, they also stayed, but they did their own thing as well. In 2000, Karma Kagyu created their own media resource and went into their own space at buddhism.ru. In 2005 I had a conflict with the administrator of the karma kagyu website buddhism.ru. He registered my domain buddhism.org.ru which hosted the website of the Association and the Buddhist Forum to his name. We did some correspondence and reached an agreement that buddhism.org.ru will link to my new website buddhist.ru. But after some time the agreement was terminated. This is an old story, of course, now it is not so important.*

The interviews with the creator of the website and the Buddhist Forum have revealed that as community discourses diversified, representatives of various Russian Buddhist movements showed an increasing need to distance themselves and create their own media platforms. In our interviews of 2021–2024, many respondents noted that in the late 1990s they had engaged with Buddhist forums but then lost interest in them. The majority of interviewees reiterated that "later" they returned to the media communications of websites, forums, public social networks and streaming services that were created by representatives of various Russian-speaking Buddhist schools. Our 2022–2023 questionnaire was updated with a question about Buddhist media that the respondents used themselves and would recommend to others. Interestingly, none of the respondents referred to the Buddhist Forum. In fact, no one mentioned a single media resource popular with all Russian-speaking Buddhists. Respondents usually named either their own website/blog, or the website or account of their community, datsan and organization. The similar answers to this question emphasized the exclusive importance of online activities and media repertoires associated with the community/organization or branch of Buddhism to which the respondent belonged.

4. Discussion

4.1. Mediatized Public Traditional Buddhism: Online Discourse on Russian Buddhism of the Gelug Tradition

From 2019 to 2024, we were monitoring Russian Buddhist presence of the traditional Gelugpa stream on the social network VK.com. The largest cluster of online maps for Russian Buddhism in social media constitute Vk communities that gravitate towards the well-received-in-Russia Tibetan–Mongolian Gelugpa tradition. The subscribers of these communities predominantly come from the "Buddhist regions of Russia"—Buryatia, Tuva and Kalmykia. This cluster includes accounts about the Dalai Lama, including his "verified" profile[5], as well as a network of groups under the spiritual leadership of Geshe Jampa Tinley, which have their offline communities registered in Russia and the neighboring countries. The other part of this cluster comprises communities from datsans of Buryatia

and the Trans-Baikal region, Novosibirsk and the Irkutsk region, Khuruls of Kalmykia, Khure of Tuva and Kure of the Altai Republic.

The cluster of Gelugpa Buddhist communities is dominated by accounts and groups representing Buryat and Kalmyk monasteries, as well was lay followers' Buddhist organizations. Tuvan Buddhist VK communities make up a small fraction of this large cluster of online maps for Russian Buddhism. Most of the Tuvan Buddhist communities do not interact with offline temples or communities. The survey of these communities has revealed that they are short-lived and are used as nametags or posts generated for a special event, such as a Buddhist mentor's visit to Tuva. Those which represent physical offline khure and Buddhist centers are few in number. It is also noteworthy that they exclusively appeal to Tuvan Buddhists as they communicate in Tuvan (Badmatsyrenov et al. 2020, p. 127). The interviews with various community media creators of 2022–2024 have shown that when asked about regional Buddhist media the interviewees never mention Tuvan bloggers, Tuvan religious media or Tuvan social media accounts.

Having considered the followship, frequency of updates and the repertoire of posts typical of large Gelugpa VK communities, we conducted a series of expert interviews with the creators and leaders of these communities. In the interview session, we learnt that the creators and administrators of most major Buddhist Gelug VK accounts were monks with Geshe degrees who led the datsans or khuruls of Buryatia and Kalmykia. The biographical narratives of these respondents demonstrated similar segments: the interviewees belonged to the mid-1970s or early 1980s generations. At an early age, they decided to embark on the path of Buddhist obedience, receive a traditional Buddhist education, and take monastic vows. Most of the respondents studied at the Buddhist University "Dashi Choinkhorlin named after Damba Darzha Zayaev" at the Ivolginsky Datsan. Some have interned at the St. Petersburg Datsan Gunzechoyne and had training experience at Drepung Goman in India. When asked about their attitude to the Internet and new media technologies, respondents invariably replied that both were an important component of modern life, since digital media were embedded in the communicative practices of everyday life and, therefore, were applicable to Buddhist enlightenment.

A separate question block in the interview concerned the permissibility of using Buddhist practices in online communication. The Gelugpa monks emphasized that they did not see a fundamental difference between online and offline discussion of the doctrine, when applied to prayer services, sermons or educational lectures on the Dharma. Hereafter, we state a passage from an interview (2022) with one of the most popular blogger monks, the rector of the Buddhist University "Dashi Choinkhorlin named after Damba Darzha Zayaev" at the Ivolginsky Datsan. He managers a large VK account, as well as a YouTube blog. In the interview, the rector made clear that for the Gelugpa tradition, the issue of transmitting religious practices online is treated differently. According to the respondent, their approach directly correlated with the Gelug discourse about the Internet and new media in religious practice:

> *We stand apart from other streams of Buddhism. The Gelug tradition is more focused on the study of philosophy. Other Buddhist traditions, especially Tantric ones, are limited in terms of bringing their practices online. Previously, when those who wanted to study Tantra gathered, they would retreat as a group, receive personal initiation and practice. This is not possible online. It's easier for us under the Gelug: we deliver prayer services and lectures on Teaching online. As for Tantra, We hold different opinions on the practice: it is one thing if the teacher is ready himself and he personally knows people who are sitting somewhere in other places. But there are also opponents of taking such practices online –the idea is that there is no personal transfer. Technically, there is no difference whether a person listens to a live online or to the record. It is especially true for lectures on Buddhist philosophy. They are not comprehensive any way and require listening on repeat. It is the same with personal training, which, in fact, we received at the University: many times we revised the same topic with different teachers. Buddhist philosophy is multifaceted; one should reread and revise it.*

Both in this interview and in other expert interviews, the respondent monks emphasized that the repertoire of Gelugpa media has by far reached out beyond the sites of datsans, khuruls, accounts and communities in VK.com over the last five years. This was significantly facilitated by lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, commenting on the reasons for creating his own blog on YouTube, the rector of the Buddhist University noted that it was during the lockdown that it became evident that new media provided an opportunity for translocal interaction for students from the separated regions of Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva:

> *During the pandemic, many teachers relocated to the Internet space. Now they conduct online training sessions in Zoom, YouTube. Before the pandemic, everything was moving slowly. If they wanted to teach online, they would shoot short 5–7 minute videos and upload them to YouTube. In the spring of 2020, we set up a schedule. Before the winter, we had tried to teach offline, and in March, with the start of the new school year, we introduced the online format. First, we tried Zoom, but there were listeners who didn't have access to it or who found it difficult to tune in. We switched to YouTube that was easier to use, which was good for older people. For nonresidents who usually could not attend offline classes, the transition to online was a win. They now had the opportunity to log into classes and watch the recorded version. In addition, it was beneficial for those who would previously miss 2–3 weeks due to personal issues, and then, of course, would forget what had been said previously. Now they could watch the recording and sort out the missing material. Switching to online format facilitated our interaction with students in a certain way: offline studying meant a lot of time wasted on logistics, discussions after the lecture, traffic jams on their way back. Online lectures were read at one thirty and that was it. Trips to Moscow were an even bigger problem, for example, since you had to leave all your business here. And now we introduced weekly online meetings on Zoom and YouTube. There were Q and A's in Zoom after the lecture, answers were written in other places, I am responsible for answering them.*

As follows from this interview and other interviews with Buddhist mentors from Buryatia, their lockdown media communications have shown that YouTube was a convenient platform for growing followership and drawing attention to traditional Buddhism.

The analysis of answers to the block of questions about the preferred media repertoire suggests that private chats in Viber and WhatsApp messengers are prevalent for the interaction of mentors with students and laity. VK public accounts and social network communities serve for educational purposes and appeal to laity and all those who would like to embark on the path of Buddhist teaching. The creator and manager of "Buddhism | Mahayana | Gelug", one of the largest Buryat Buddhist public sites in Vk.com, stressed that he had chosen this social network because of its great popularity and accessibility to people. At first, the group was created to discuss Mahayana Buddhism, but over time, lay followers from different cities of Russia began to subscribe and enquire about the doctrine, requirements and practices. Gradually, the public had assumed the clear-cut role of the "Buddhist Teaching transmitter":

> *Why did I tie Buddhism, Mahayana and Gelug? It is Buddhism, Mahayana and Gelug that is our tradition. At first, there was a public server for communication. Since Mahayana was extensive, they wanted to communicate with the Tuvan brothers, with Kalmyks. We did communicate. Then, people would start to join, those who got interested. Now we did not only communication, but also the transmission of Teaching. I try to write in small patches. People don't read much, like in the news, they need short texts. I'm putting out Lamrim, extracts from the lectures of great Buryat teachers. I try to write four lines, at least two lines every day. There's no point in writing more, well, it's important to be consistent, every day like this. Well, one thought as it goes.*

According to all the interviews of 2012–2024, with no exception, the YouTube digital platform became the leading media for educational communication practices, reaching the widest possible audience. In the interview, we asked respondents to name YouTube

channels that were popular with the Russian-speaking Buddhist sphere. Our further analysis of these channels and expert interviews with their creators revealed the following. On the YouTube digital platform, branded (collective) channels of individual Buddhist datsans and khuruls and personal vlogs (video blogs) of reputable teachers, mentors and rectors of datsans have been predominantly authored in Buryatia. By far, a smaller number of those have been made in Kalmykia. In addition, there are journalistic podcasts about Buddhism in Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva, presenting original programs about Buddhism on the relevant regional digital TV. Their number is small, and they were mainly uploaded in 2012–2024.

Regarding our study of mediatized Russian traditional Buddhism, it is noteworthy that branded channels of datsans or khuruls entered YouTube earlier than personal vlogs and journalistic podcasts. The emergence of Buddhist branded YouTube channels as an independent type of communicative media practice about Buddhism appeared within 2012–2016. In terms of the mediatization of Russian Buddhism, these years are associated with the separation of various Russian Buddhist streams from each other in hope of creating their own interfaces in the public media sphere of Russian society. Thus, this period coincided with major datsans of Buryatia and Kalmykia updating the contents of their websites, tagging them to their public accounts on the social network VK.com and creating branded YouTube channels. The next step was their outreach to regional media or engagement with journalistic programs about Buddhism on digital TV channels, which resulted in topical podcasts on YouTube.

One of the digitalization pioneers in Buryat Buddhism was the Traditional Buddhist Sangha of Russia (BTSR) under the leadership of Pandito Khambo Lama D. Ayusheev. According to the expert interviews, back in the 1990s, at the dawn of digitalization, the Khambo Lama decided to use the Internet and new media technologies for Buddhist enlightenment and spreading Buddhist awareness. Many of the respondents, creators of communities and public sites of Buryat datsans in Buryatia, mentioned that it was Pandito Khambo Lama D. Ayusheev who inspired them to rely on the media to appeal to novices and laity. As we mentioned earlier, the Ivolginsky Datsan website was launched back in the early 1990s and was subsequently changed a number of times to accommodate the ever-expanding repertoire of Internet technologies.

In 2015, the BTSR public page for VK.com was created. In 2016–2018, communities and public accounts of other Buryat datsans were added. Pandito Khambo Lama fostered media cooperation with digital channels of Buryat television. Meanwhile, in 2016, BTSR became the founder of the digital "Public information and journalism TV channel Selenga-TV". Starting from 2017, the podcast on this YouTube channel has been broadcasting live performances of prayer services from Buryat datsans, interviews and lectures of reputable lamas, as well as reporting on Buddhist events and calendar holidays. Another milestone in BTSR communication practices was the weekly program Buddhist Environment (2018) on the municipal digital television and the radio channel Tivikom. The podcast "Buddhist Environment" has its own platform on the website of the Ivolginsky Datsan, as well as on the YouTube channel of the TV channel "Tivikom". The interview with the press secretary of the Ivolginsky Datsan and the creator of the program Buddhist Environment explains the nuances of Buddhism mediatization by means of journalism on religion:

> *The very idea of tapping into the Internet belongs to the Khambo Lama. All the episodes of Buddhist Environment have been fully dedicated to Buddhism. I invite experts from museums, the rector or vice-rector of the Buddhist University to a conversation. There are some things that they instruct me to say since a lama can't speak publicly about certain thing. Wherever I go, I need to spread the teaching. When quarantine began in 2020, people began to leave requests for prayer services on the website, on Fb, on Instagram. Now, the website allows you to apply for prayer service, to send names in. And then I suggested that I would regularly talk on television about the meaning of various khurals so that people would know which prayer service to send an application for. I was doing so for three months. Later, people from television sent me a video, and I posted it in social*

> *media. Since then, every 3 days I have posted interpretations of khurals on Fb. I wanted to stop it when the lockdown ended. But subscribers began to write to me in person and asked me to continue. So that's the kind of enlightenment that went on.*

The quote and the interview itself illustrate how mediatized Buddhism relies on cooperation between journalism and Buddhist professionals. Striving for its public media brand, the Buddhist organization has hired professional journalists and audio and video production people. The journalist can bring forward topics that are inaccessible to a monk due to religious vows. The journalist creates an agenda and a repertoire of topics with the digital audience in mind. Buddhist professionals, in turn, can verify whether the content complies with the doctrinal and ethical provisions of Buddhism.

Alongside this interaction with secular media, journalism on religion started to develop interest in traditional Russian Buddhism in their due course. A striking example of such interest was one of the first documentaries about Buryat Buddhism and the phenomenon of the "incorruptible body" of Khambo Lama Ethigelov, which was produced by a secular director and secular producers in 2020 with the support of the Presidential Grants Fund[6]. Among other vivid examples of journalists featuring Buddhism in the regions of the traditional Gelug were YouTube podcasts of the Bumba Media Holding and the TV program The Buddhist Way by Tuva 24 TV Channel.

The launch of the Bumba Media Holding podcast in 2012 is directly related to the the media tradition of Kalmyk traditional Buddhism. The Central Khurul of Kalmykia has its own website that was registered in 2013 and was consistently updated in 2008–2023, as well as a large VK public account and a branded YouTube channel (13.1 thousand subscribers). Cooperation with public media has become a separate area of business. Therefore, the podcast case on the YouTube channel Bumba Media Holding (39.2 thousand subscribers) is very interesting.

This podcast was created by a lay follower Kalmyk man who had supported monks from the Central Khurul of Elista for decades. He knew the struggles of the Kalmyk Khuruls, the fate of those who, at the dawn of the revival of Buddhism, embarked on the path of monasticism. In an interview, the creator of the Bumba Media Holding stressed that, having by the will of fate witnessed the modern history of Russian Buddhism and the revival of the Buddhist educational monastic tradition in Kalmykia, he decided to record it in chronicles. The blog started as a series of his films about young people killed in Chechnya, about the fate of deported Kalmyk families who returned to their homeland and about young Kalmyk novices who studied at Drepun Gomang in India. The success of these topics and letters from subscribers led to other stories about the life of the Central Khurul and interviews with Buddhist mentors on various aspects of Buddhist Teaching:

> *In my past life I worked in television and did well for myself. Then, I began to understand that state controlled television, both good and bad, would have its own agenda. There was a youth organization there that began to promote the Kalmyk language, traditions, and Buddhism. But my first acquaintance with Buddhism was with our monks when they were still studying at Gomang in India. And I got a dream. They told me about their studies in India, celebrations of our national holidays. I thought to myself they were monks and they also celebrated our national holidays. I gradually realized that I was going to leave television. I wanted to make my own content. I started with a project called Radioboomba, a successful project, but I understood that people were watching YouTube. <. . .> And I made our first film in 2015. It was called ""When will I come back?". Then were " They could, and we can" and "I'm a monk". I began to realize that we Kalmyks have a great history. These are the old Buddhists of Siberia who prayed in secrecy, that's how they hid Buddhist symbols. People would need them later. They would be interested. I understood that what I was shooting now: holidays, some events related to khuruls, could be watched later. That's how it was, that what monks were like. We make astrological forecasts every year. We've been shooting Astrological forecasts (it's only once a year) for 7 years. Then again, Buddhist lessons, Kalmyk language lessons.*

Tuvan Buddhism is represented on the digital YouTube platform by the podcast of the weekly TV program The Buddhist Path broadcast by the digital TV channel Tuva 24 (created in 2013). The program is presented by its creator, a well-known Tuvan scholar of Tuvan Buddhism and a sociologist. The podcast is broken down in topics related to the history of Tuvan Buddhism and features interviews with Tuvan Buddhist mentors, novices, monks and nuns. In addition, the podcast gives a regular weekly review of news about modern Tuvan Buddhism, such as lectures by visiting Buddhist mentors and interviews with researchers of Buddhism and Tuva.

Personal blogs of Buddhist teachers and mentors appeared mainly during the lockdown period due to the 2020 pandemic. The exception was the blog Lama Oleg, one of the most popular Russian-language vlogs on YouTube.

Most expert interviews rendered the Buryat blog Lama Oleg (12.4 thousand subscribers) by the rector of the Kurumkan datsan the most popular Russian YouTube blog. In the interview, the author of the blog stressed that he came up with the idea of creating his own blog channel in 2013. He had received many letters of people from different regions of Russia asking him to become a mentor for them. They would learn about the Buddhist mentor residing in the Kurumkan district of Buryatia from their friends who had attended yoga tours organized for laity by the datsan's rector. In the early years, the blog mainly provided monthly then weekly astrological forecasts. To write those, Lama Oleg had to study the literature on Buddhist astrology in Tibetan and Mongolian and adapt it to the realities of modern society. Later, at the request of a rapidly growing Russian-speaking audience, he introduced lectures on the basics of teaching and meditation and began to shoot and uploaded short documentaries about his Buddhist pilgrimages with groups of subscribers, his interviews, mountain climbing, etc.:

> *Through the blog I am appealing to not only the Buryats, but everyone. We are Buryats now, and then we will die and will be reborn in another state, in the guise of another person. The first regular update was "Zurkhai" which created thanks to my wife. She asked if I could make a prediction that would be useful for people. As I started making Zurkhai posts, there was a sharp increase in subscribers. Many people wrote to me and said they were checking the blog. I have tried to make everything accessible and logical. All Buddhists work with astrology in Buryat and Mongolian. They were written for cattle breeders. I expanded it as now there were few cattle breeders. People order personal forecasts from me; they contact me via Telegram, Vk, Viber. The Internet boosts opportunities. We can do a lot even with the Internet we have in the region. <. . .> In recent years, a lot of people have asked to become their teacher. As soon as I started arranging yoga tours, people who did them began to reach out. I explain to them that I don't have such capacity yet. I can't be a teacher to them, but I can be an assistant, an adviser. Huge armies of people received initiations not only from the Dalai Lama, from various teachers, they wanted to study further, but there was nowhere to go. Teachers came for a short time, communicated information to us, gave us initiations, and what do we do about it, what do we do next? I've been thinking about it a lot. Maybe this is one of my missions—to help implement what we got. Yoga tours are about this. When we go into the shutter.*

The quote highlights implications to mediatized Buddhist communication: blog subscribers, attracted to the digital discourse about Buddhism through the media activity of a Buddhist blogger, become involved in the offline interaction of laity with Buddhist mentors and gain the desired opportunity for personal discipleship and interaction with a chosen Buddhist mentor.

4.2. Traditional Russian Mediatized Buddhism in the Format of the Russian Association of the Karma Kagyu International Organization

Against the new landscape of Russian Buddhism, the Dzogchen communities of Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche as well as the Karma Kagyu communities created throughout Russia and the CIS by the Danish Buddhist mentor Ole Nydahl stand out. They did not

associate in any way with the traditional Buddhist organizations of Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva, since they represented other schools of Tibetan Buddhism and other structural models, whereas communities of Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche did not seek to be registered as religious associations and did not oppose themselves in any way to Buddhism of historical heritage (in detail: Ostrovskaya et al. 2021). Communities of the Karma Kagyu lineage took a different path (Ostrovskaya 2015).

Since 1989, Ole Nydahl has visited Russia and CIS countries on a regular basis, helping his followers to build local branches of the international Karma Kagyu organization. All of them operated on a single model of dharma centers where lectures would be read by traveling Karma Kagyu teachers and regular collective meditations and ritual practices would be conducted. They would have a library with books of the community publishing house. Karma Kagyu communities sought to obtain official status of a religious association and gain a public image of a Russian Buddhist Traditional confession. As early as in 1994, the Buddhist center Karma Lekshey Ling in St. Petersburg began publishing the Russian magazine *The World of Kagyu* and founded its own publishing house Diamond Way to publish translations of books by Lama Ole and those Tibetan teachers whose texts were recommended to followers (Ostrovskaya 2016, pp. 79–85).

As soon as the first Lama Ole's communities were established in Russia and the CIS, they embarked on a mission to popularize Karma Kagyu Buddhism and expand the community. Over time, this attitude led to them dropping their confrontation with the "conservative Géluk monastic tradition" prevailing in Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva, which karma kagyu started in the 1990s. In the 2000s, Ole Nidal's followers began to promote a different self-presentation in public media—the idea of the Tibetan Karma Kagyu movement as one of the Russian traditional confessions. The digital activity of the community with the introduction of its own media brand buddhism.ru testifies in favor of this hypothesis. In this context, digitization resulted in the community magazine *Kagyu World* receiving a new name "Buddhism.ru". The websites of local Karma Kagyu communities which used to be filled with various designs and content in 1996–1998 were updated in accordance with a media unification principle—an international logo and a uniformed visual presentation were introduced.

In an expert interview, a Board member of the Russian Diamond Way Karma Kagyu Buddhist Association interpreted the undertaken unification of all Ole Nydala's Karma Kagyu community sites as the delineation of the digital boundaries for their own media niche, separating the doctrines and practices adopted by the International Association of Karma Kagyu Communities from those on other Russian-language Internet resources about Buddhism:

> *As early as large desktop computers were introduced, we began to make websites of our centers. The first Russian websites were launched in 1996. I remember working on texts for the first websites in 1998. Then, of course, it all started to come together, because we have centralized and local organizations. For a while, we enjoyed a lot of freedom: local organizations were free to do what they wanted to on their websites—both writing and posting pictures. Then, we began to put it all in order. We worked on a visual style, an international logo. And we all took up this style, the general vision. The vision is to present it so that people better understand who we are and what we do. And for this, we need to publish something that explains our approach. Other approaches are fine too. We used to publish a lot of them, maybe to prove it to ourselves and others that we were not in-troverts. Now that's not the thing. So, we've downsized the range of topics. On our official website there is Buddhism in general, Kagyu School, teachers, teachings, contacts, etc. Official sites are standardized all over the world, centers and local organizations are connected to this big cap. Each center has its own subpage, but all are made in the same key. Basically, it's a white background with a red-fire wheel as a logo. Inside it, there is the letter "K" which stands for the first letter of our name and the name "Karmapa". The red stripe is our universal logo. Our logo is red, white with a touch of yellow. It is well*

> *known everywhere. And the overall style is simple; something in-between eastern and western designs, but more of the West to it.*

In an interview with board members of Russian Karma Kagyu communities, the editors of the "Buddhism.ru" website and mobile application emphasized that the Karma Kagyu community has an "analog" strategy. That is, they teach the doctrine, transfer initiations to practices and discuss the Buddhism of the Karma Kagyu school only offline. According to respondents, this strategy was passed down by Ole Nydahl himself who forbade his followers to create any accounts or blogs about Buddhism on the Internet. Moreover, he strongly recommended refraining from participating in any discussions on spiritual topics on forums or social networks at all. Here is a quote from an interview with the chairman of the Moscow Karma Kagyu community regarding their main media strategy:

> *We have an established line of behavior in the network. Disputes and discussions in open and closed groups, as well as in Telegram chats, for example, are not encouraged. It is better to clarify issues face to face. The ban on blogging and social media activities comes from Lama Ole. Now and then, he sends emails over our internal network dwbn.org on topics that he considers relevant. These letters come to the centers, where we translate them and pass them onto our newsletter. Ole himself does not write anything on social networks. It's all about people not getting dragged into discussions and not giving their own teachings. The volume of information is immense, and there is more confusion. In the live analog format, we continue to be very open.*

This attitude of Lama Ole was interpreted in the interview as the one stemming from the very essence of Karma Kagyu doctrines, which is to treat oral transmission of sacred knowledge "from mouth to ears", from teacher to student, as the only possible way of teaching. In the interview with the board member, he says the following:

> *You see, our school has the word "kagyu" in its name, which means oral succession. Oral transmission implies a personal meeting of the teacher and the student. We know a story of Mar-pa who would cross the Himalayas to reach his teacher. And now, when the covid began, Lama Ole received a lot of letters asking if they could give lectures online and the like. He replied that we would never change our basic approach: in order to get practice, you need to meet a person in person. In a personal meeting, not only information is transmitted, but also a certain blessing and the experience of a particular person in practice. Lama Ole said that he would regularly give us lectures on streaming, broadcasting via the Internet, even about Mahamudra, about the Supreme. We have our international network specially made for this. There is a local one, there is a centralized one in Russia, and there is an international one. There are servers for streaming. Streaming is free. There is a button "make a donation". Before covid, streaming was secondary; it was in-troduced in 2001–2002 for people who wanted to watch from afar. It used to be a bonus, but now it has become the only way to listen to Ole. He would allow it for only as long as the pandemic lasts, when there is no opportunity to meet with him personally. Ole also conducts meditations online. Generally speaking, we are aiming for this to stop completely. That is, streaming will remain but practices and everything that requires presence will only be taking place in person. We are conservatives! As long as we are alive, there will be no transition of practices online.*

As the interview suggests, translocal religious media practices in streaming date back to the period of 2019–2021 and are considered contradictory to the strategy of limiting religious communications to the offline format of face-to-face interaction. Media communication about the Buddhist doctrine and practice of Ole Nydahl's followers is limited to a closed streaming site dwbn.org. This requires registration and presenting evidence of personal initiation received from Lama Ole.

5. Conclusions

In the recap, we would like to list the key findings of this study. The processes of digitalization and mediatization have resulted in the emergence of Russian mediatized

Buddhism. Various trends in modern Russian Buddhism are disproportionally represented in the public sphere of media; representation directly correlates with the strategies that digital Buddhist creatives of different streams—Gelugpa traditional, Dzogchen or Karma Kagyu—have chosen in relation to the Internet and new media.

Digitalization of Russian Buddhism fell into three main stages: the creation of media in the fashion of those that had already been made by foreign communities of a similar school (newspapers, magazines and Internet connections); the emergence of common discussion platforms (Buddhist Forum) and the creation of community websites and the introduction of their own intra-community streaming sites, social media accounts and media branding of particular schools.

The emergence of community discourses about the Internet and new media technologies was directly related to the introduction of offline boundaries for Russian Buddhist communities. Newly acquired freedom of religion as well as opening of the borders in the 1990s meant that those who wanted to practice Buddhism no longer had to go to Buryatia or find a mentor from the former Buddhist underground. Russia welcomed mentors of other Tibetan schools, as well as Buddhist mentors from other Asian countries. They opened centers throughout the country and did not require their followers to accept monastic lifestyle or to live at a monastery. They offered an accessible path to the Dharma to people of the European mindset. The most popular mentors of the time were Chögyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche and Ole Nydahl.

It would be wrong to believe that community strategies were first introduced with the advent of the Internet or new media. We assume that new media technologies have made it possible for each of the schools to consolidate the ideas about interactions within the community and with external society. Thus, the Buddhist Forum which was meant as a digital platform for Russian-speaking Buddhists contributed to the differentiation of schools in terms of their views on the doctrine and practices of Buddhism. The procedure for building the Internet and new media strategies relied on regulations of communications about doctrine and practices adopted by a community. For example, the International Dzogchen Community and the Ole Nydahl Karma Kagyu communities regulate teaching and practice transmissions by limiting them to internal closed media. Either of these schools grants free access to their Russian-language website and digital media. This is the only similar feature in both strategies. The digital strategy of the International Dzogchen Community is characterized by acceptance of modernity and high sensitivity to a changing environment. This meant the introduction of communities' innovative digital media which would facilitate translocal communications of its members in different parts of the world and synchronize the religious practice of local communities.

The strategy of the Russian-speaking Theravada was developed in a completely different way. In this case, a positive attitude towards the Internet and new media technologies is associated with the desire to popularize Theravada Buddhism in Russia. In the early 1990s, there were only a small number of active Theravadins among the Russian convert Buddhists. Significant shifts towards the development of communities began only in the 2000s as a result of two circumstances. Firstly, some followers traveled to the countries of Southeast Asia to train and ordain as bhikkhu/bhikkhuni or to receive experience in Buddhist communities or meditation centers. Upon returning to Russia, some of them established new communities of the Theravada tradition that they learned in Asian monasteries. Secondly, the spread of the Internet and social media created a truly unprecedented opportunity to study dharma online. The Russian-speaking Theravadins opened a separate niche within the Buddhist Forum website developed in 1998 to hold their discussions and then created their own websites. They prefer blogging activity on the Facebook public page and on the VK group for popularizing the tradition, aimed at attracting a wide audience. Russian Theravadins see their mission as transmitting teachers' reflections on doctrine and the distribution of Russian translations of the canon texts and commentaries. Actually, acting as theo-blogians, they choose topics for coverage and teachers for online promotion and write their own educational articles. The dominant activity of the Russian Theravada

groups is independent translations of the Pa ̄li Canon. The respondents emphasized that Theravada Buddhism is a fundamentally new tradition for the Russian socio-cultural context, previously known to a narrow circle of professional Buddhist scholars. They do not set themselves the goal of opposing themselves to the Mahayana historically established in Russia. In view of this, they consider the digitalization of translations, online publication of materials about Russian-speaking Theravadins and discussion of doctrine and practice on forums as means to popularize Theravada Buddhism in Russia.

The strategy of the International Association of Karma Kagyu Communities and its Russian department was built in accordance with community's discourse on technological advances of our time as a threat to the tradition of oral transmission of sacred knowledge from the teacher to the student. Ole Nydahl himself and the community's administration recommend that Karma Kagyu followers refrain from media communications about Buddhism and resort to offline practice. Ole Nydahl's followers began to use new media technologies instrumentally—mainly in order to promote the brand Diamond Way of the Karma Kagyu tradition as that representing Russian Buddhism in the public sphere of media. As a result, the repertoire of Karma Kagyu media is limited to a website, a magazine website, a mobile application duplicating the content of the magazine's website and Vk accounts that serve as business cards of local communities.

The digital strategy of Ole Nydahl's Karma Kagyu communities is based on the community discourse about the distinction between ways of self-presentation in the offline public spaces and in the public sphere of media. According to the interviews with the board members, in their offline activity, Karma Kagyu representatives strive for achieving extensive public self-presentation «traditional Buddhism» by lecturing and holding seminars at universities, holding conferences with famous scientists and representatives of different confessions as guest speakers, engaging with the press and television, etc. The Karma Kagyu media platform has open and closed communication formats. In the Russian-speaking segment of the Internet, a website, a mobile application and a magazine website are freely available under the same logo and with the same design. So, in the public sphere of media, they represent the brand of the International Association of Karma Kagyu Communities and the address, according to the interviewee, newcomers, municipal and state officials, of prominent members of local communities.

Traditional Buddhism in Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva built their strategies for the Internet and new media on completely different premises. For a long time, traditional Buddhist regions have chosen a very cautious approach to new media, limiting themselves to the sites of datsans, khuruls and khure. This position, in our opinion, is largely held due to the fact that it was crucially important for the followers of the Gelugpa tradition to first rebuild the traditional pipeline for the Buddhist clergy in the regions and to reinstitutionalize their own ethnic patterns of Buddhist practice. The advent of social media in the early 2000s brought Gelugpa digital strategists into the broader semantic contexts of the cultural public media space. We believe that mediatization as a process of total inclusion of media in semantic reinterpretation of reality has revealed four key trends in the reinstitutionalization of Russian traditional Buddhism in Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva.

The first trend was the traditional Russian Gelug's acceptance of religious authority redistribution (shifting religious authority) between different streams of Buddhism. The acceptance was largely facilitated by the Gelug community discourse about the need to advance their pattern of reproducing Buddhism (monasteries and lay followers) in the Russian public media sphere. This trend appears characteristic of Buddhist interfaces in the public media sphere. Online cartography of the most popular Russian social network VK.com has demonstrated that communities and public accounts of the Russian Buddhist Gelugpa tradition prevail in terms of their number, followship and actual digital activity. In fact, Buddhist professionals of Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva—authoritative Buddhist heads in the regions, such as mentors and abbots—are actively involved with the content of programs about Buddhism in federal and regional journalism on religion. Thus, the advancement of traditional Gelug Buddhism is mediated into the public sphere of media

through media popular in Russian, such as the Russian social network VK.com, Russian legacy media and the YouTube digital platform.

The second trend in the cultural public sphere of media is for the traditional Russian Gelug Buddhism to promote itself as a collective religious brand. In the Russian-language Internet space, Russian Gelug Buddhism is mainly represented by the sites of datsans, khuruls and khure. Likewise, Russian Gelug Buddhism advances itself through communities and public accounts of monasteries, educational institutions, lay parishioners of specific monasteries and public digital communities of Buddhist mentors in the most popular Russian social network VK.com. As to the YouTube platform, it operates through branded channels of datsans and khuruls and associations of Buddhist organizations.

The third more recent trend, which became apparent after the 2020 lockdown, is a considerable growth in media strategies of traditional Russian Buddhism. Mediatized Gelug Buddhism communicates four discourses about Buddhism. The first discourse speaks of Buddhist strategists: monks and abbots who lead or supervise the activity of monastic websites and secular media about Buddhism. The second rapidly developing discourse is of Buddhist bloggers delivered through VK public accounts, branded YouTube channels of monasteries and blogs on YouTube. They provide the ever-growing Russian-speaking digital audience with access to Buddhist mentors from the Buddhist University and from various datsans, khuruls and hure in remote areas of Buryatia and Kalmykia. The third trend involves weekly editions of programs on Buddhism in regional digital media with secular journalists and scientists as authors and presenters. This trend also concerns media created by laity, among which are documentaries about outstanding Buddhist teachers, about the role of Buddhism in the history of Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva, about biographical narratives and about the formation of contemporary Buddhist preachers, teachers and mentors.

The fourth trend is the novel emphasis of traditional Buddhist mentors on the large-scale online promotion of Buddhism on various digital platforms and social networks. As our research has revealed, the media communications of Buddhist bloggers and Dharma bloggers are an intermediary on the way to the offline practice of Buddhism. Vlogs allow for personal contact with the author of the YouTube channel through the tagged e-mail addresses and links to accounts on other social networks. By means of online communication with mentors, subscribers of Buddhist blogs and public accounts can choose a suitable mentor for their offline practice. They come to their favorite influencer blogger in real life, take refuge with them, and become consistent followers of Buddhism. The trend of appealing to a wider Russian audience is indeed novel for traditional Buddhism of the regions.

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Notes

[1] VK (short for its original name VKontakte; Russian: ВКонтакте, meaning InContact) is a Russian online social media and social networking service based in Saint Petersburg. VK is available in multiple languages, but it is predominantly used by Russian speakers. VK users can message each other publicly or privately, edit these messages, create groups, public pages and events, share and tag images, audio and video and play browser-based games. According to Semrush, in 2024, VK is the 30th most visited website in the world with more than 100 million users per month.

[2] FidoNet is a worldwide computer network that is used for communication between bulletin board systems (BBSes). It uses a store-and-forward system to exchange private (email) and public (forum) messages between the BBSes in the network, as well as other files and protocols in some cases. For details, see (Driscoll 2022).

[3] The Dalai Lama XIV visited the USSR and Russia eight times: in 1979, 1982, 1986, 1991, 1992, 1994, 1996, and 2004. As dates suggest, His Holiness's paid visits long before perestroika. His visits had a lasting impact on the Buddhist environment both in the regions of ethnic Buddhism and in large cities of the so-called European part of the country.

[4] This self-description is given in all issues of the Narthang Bulletin, digitized and posted on the website of the Buddhism of Russia. See: https://buddhismofrussia.ru/buddhism-of-russia/ (accessed on: 15 September 2024).

[5] https://vk.com/dalailama (accessed on: 15 September 2024).

[6] The phenomenon of Khambo Lama Ethigelov is the Riddle of the Buryat Lama, URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SzY-NiQwumc (accessed on: 15 September 2024). On the phenomenon of Khamba Lama Etigelov in details see: (Quijada 2019, pp. 111–37).

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