

russia's online social nostalgia in the internet age

Born and raised in remote Russian towns, Alexei and Nikolai met in 1980, in Afghanistan, where they were fulfilling their “international duty” as Soviet soldiers. Both were wounded and ended up in different hospitals. They lost touch for 28 years. Tomorrow they are having lunch together.

This is one of many stories with a happy ending, thanks to the overwhelming popularity of Russia’s online social networks. While western countries are old hands at online networking – through sites like [facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com), [classmates.com](https://www.classmates.com), [myspace.com](https://www.myspace.com) and [linkedin.com](https://www.linkedin.com) – the phenomenon is relatively new in Russia.

The most popular social network, [odnoklassniki.ru](https://www.odnoklassniki.ru) (translated as “classmates”) appeared in March 2006. Today it reports over nine million users. Its founder, Albert Popkov, said he expects that number to more than double in 2008. “The main purpose of this project is to help people find each other,” Popkov said. “We created this site mostly for people 23 and older. Teenagers do not know what it’s like to lose a paper address book when they move somewhere. They grew up with the internet and mobile phones. Besides, teens have not yet had a chance to ‘get lost’ properly.”

Popkov said that he got the idea for [odnoklassniki](https://www.odnoklassniki.ru) five years ago, when he met Jason Porter, creator of the British social network [friendsreunited.co.uk](https://www.friendsreunited.co.uk). Popkov studied other foreign prototypes, such as Classmates and Facebook, and then launched his Russian descendant. “I built Odnoklassniki like a puzzle,” he said. “I simply took everything that works well on other networks and added something of my own.” For instance, apart from the usual “pick your school and college” options, Odnoklassniki has sections like “troop unit” and “vacation spot,” for those who want to find army buddies or summer flames. Yet finding



networks



PHOTOS COURTESY MARIA HUTSON



Maria Hutson (nee Yaralova) lives in Austin, Texas, but she grew up in Moscow (see her 1986 third grade class picture, at left). Online networking allowed her to get back in touch with her Moscow classmates, some of whom also live in the U.S.

classmates seems to be users' main goal. "I went to four schools and made many friends, who are now spread around lots of cities and republics of the former USSR," said Andrei Tikhonov, who lives in Yaroslavl. "Thanks to the site, I found dozens of people that I now keep in touch with. The funniest thing is that one of them lives in the apartment building right next to mine."

Experts and users agree that one of the reasons such sites are so popular is because they allow people to reconnect with a past that predates the collapse of the USSR, adaptation to market realities, and, in some cases, emigration, regardless of their age. "In Russia, not many people my age know how to use a computer," said Natalya Surukina, 58. "But their children register them and find their classmates for them. Though I have only found a few childhood friends so far, finding them amid our troubling times was like finding myself."

Dr. Alexander Asmolov, a psychologist and member of the presidium of the Russian Society of Psychologists, concurred. "The thing that distinguishes our century and our civilization is the phenomenon of loneliness in the crowd. We used to know our neighbors very well, but nowadays, if you ask anybody, 'Who lives next door to you?' you will be met with an



COURTESY NADEZHDA ANTONOVA (BOTTOM)

The students of the Washington, DC, Soviet embassy school in the 1980s (above) shared a unique educational experience. Getting back in touch 25 years later, to reminisce about their halcyon days, was invaluable to Konstantin. “They were the only people who could understand me,” he said.

outrageous lack of information. This symptom is closely linked to another: loss of our own identity and raising questions such as ‘Who am I?’, ‘Where am I going?’, ‘What are my values?’ Finding someone from your school or hometown can help answer these questions. Thus, people search for their lost connections, and in the process search for their own lost identity.”

The value of these connections is all the greater because Russian children have historically moved around less than, say, their American counterparts. Russian children typically spend a decade in school and five years in college with the same groups of friends. Classmates and collegemates thus become lifelong friends. Losing them is like losing a family member. “I now live in Austin, Texas, with my family,” said Maria Hutson (nee Yaralova). “And I was absolutely thrilled to get back in touch with my Moscow classmates. It turned out that some of them live in the U.S. too, so now we can also meet outside of Odnoklassniki.”

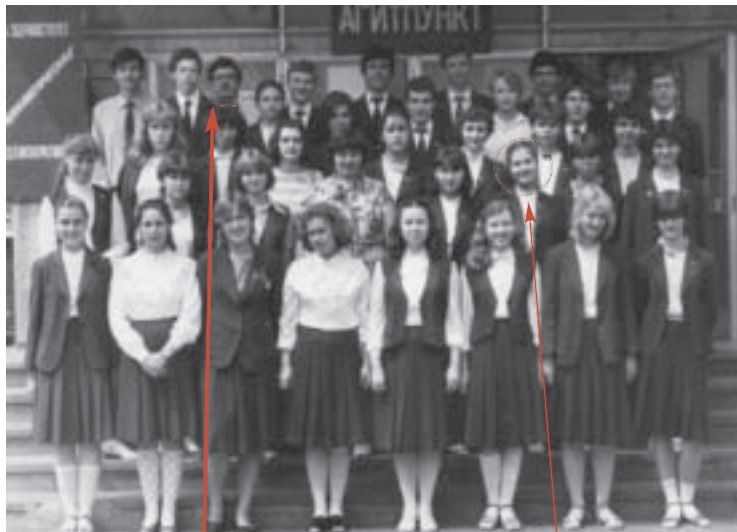
An even more unusual story was shared by Konstantin L., 35, who attended the Soviet embassy school in Washington, DC, in the mid-1980s. “Those four years were both weird and unforgettable,” he said. “I was among those rare Soviet kids who chewed bubble gum, watched MTV and thought it was perfectly natural. When I returned to Moscow in 1986, it was like arriving on another planet. My schoolmates stole pens and erasers from me because they were made in the U.S. I had a painful need to reconnect with my embassy classmates, who seemed to be the only people who could understand me.” The “historic” reunion happened 25 years later in a Moscow restaurant. One of the first toasts was to Odnoklassniki.

Still, not all such reunions end with warmth and fuzziness. “Last weekend I went to my class get-together, organized through the web,” said Elena D., 41. “Can you believe it? Everyone is a top manager now. I didn’t feel like checking that out or lying about my great success either. I just went home half an hour later to spend time with my beloved ‘unsuccessful’ family.”

Using such sites for boasting about one’s success can be seen in the many photos posted in users’ photo albums: “Me in Barbados;” “In front of our office in Paris;” “At the wheel of my BMW.”

Dr. Asmolov said such online bragging stems from the same society-wide loneliness. “This subconscious urge to prove to the others that your life is fully complete,” he said, “indicates a great inferiority complex. The person with body odor never talks about it, because the scent does all the talking. Again, these are all consequences of the most horrible loneliness, loneliness in the crowd.”

Anastasia and Sergei were friends in high school, but nothing more. When they met up 20 years later through an online network, they fell in love. Anastasia divorced her long-time husband to be with Sergei.



Despite the current boom, some suggest that Russian online social networks can only run on nostalgia for so long. “Sooner or later you will find everyone you were looking for and maybe even meet up with them,” said Dmitry Fish, a Russia-born programmer and web administrator who now lives in New York City. “Finally, there will be an inevitable question: ‘Now what?’ We should also consider that Runet [the Russian language realm of the internet] is approximately two years behind the American internet. Just as the social network craze passed in America several years ago, it will soon pass in Russia.”

Perhaps that is why Odnoklassniki may soon be overtaken by major rival vkontakte.ru (“in contact”). A virtual clone of Facebook, Vkontakte allows users to upload music and videos, create thematic photo albums, and organize interest and discussion groups. Since the site was initially created for students and recent graduates, its user base is younger than Odnoklassniki. Yet it already numbers over 7 million. According to alexa.com, the web ranking site, Vkontakte is the most popular site on the Runet. Founder Pavel Durov, a 23 year-old graduate of the Philology Department at St. Petersburg State University, was also the creator of the largest student forum on Runet. “This top ranking is especially important for us,” Durov said, “because the site has never advertised anywhere. In 2007, we managed to debunk the myth that the main basis for the success of a product is its promotion and advertisement.” Durov’s Vkontakte also offers its users great privacy, like Facebook, allowing one to choose who can and cannot see their profile. “I used to like Odnoklassniki better,” said Irina Merkusheva, 30. “But being exposed to everyone made me feel very uncomfortable. So, eventually I chose Vkontakte.”

Internet privacy or, to be more exact, the lack of it, leads many users to delete their accounts soon after logging on. One urban legend has it that Russian social networks were initiated by the Federal Security Service, in an



COURTESY ANASTASIA LAPINA (BOTM)

effort to facilitate information collection and processing. Network founders can only smile in reply. “No, we do not cooperate with special services,” says Odnoklassniki’s Popkov. “But if some law-enforcement authority ever asked us to help find a murderer or a maniac, we would do our utmost to make sure he was caught and punished. No kidding!”

Banks are not kidding either. Some have started using social networks to track down loan defaulters. A bank employee who requested anonymity explained how it works. Armed with only a debtor’s name, a bank can sometimes find and identify a perpetrator by their posted photograph. Then an agent of the bank registers on the social networking site as a good-looking woman or man from the defaulter’s high school or college. The “victim” is then enticed to attend a “high school reunion” or to share his or her phone number. The rest is easy, the employee said. And what about the ethical issues of these methods? “It’s no more unethical than evading one’s loan repayment,” the employee chuckled.

Jealous wives and girlfriends have been known to use similar methods. After registering as their husband’s gorgeous “classmate,” they start a virtual conversation and eventually ask him out. If he agrees, they make a scene, this time in real life. Runet blogs are filled with gossip that Odnoklassniki and Vkontakte are making significant contributions to Russia’s divorce rate. Sometimes rediscovering a high-school flame can evoke strong feelings, and people have been known to leave their families to be with someone they have not seen for years. “I know of such cases,” Popkov said, “when, thanks to Odnoklassniki, people got divorced from people they married out of spite or because they were getting older. I think it’s great when such a family breaks up: before Odnoklassniki, there were three miserable people, afterwards there are two happy ones. Which math is better?”

Anastasia Lapina’s story proves Popkov’s point. She and Sergei Ayzenberg were friends in high school, but were never in love. Both got married young and did not communicate for more than 20 years. “By the time I met Sergei on the net, I had been married for 19 years,” Lapina said. “When we started exchanging messages, I was amazed by his intelligence, kindness and sense of humor. Soon I was falling in love. A month later I asked my husband for a divorce.”

“She thought I would be scared off by the fact that she had a husband and two sons,” Ayzenberg said. “But I just said: ‘I’m in love with you, you’re in love with me, let’s get married.’” Their wedding took place in July 2007.

Celebrities may join abandoned husbands and wives in wishing online social networks never existed. Many have fallen victim to virtual impostors – people who register under a famous person’s name and start communicating on

their behalf. Journalist Vladimir Soloviev confronted Popkov on a live radio show about a Soloviev imposter on Odnoklassniki. Soloviev claimed it was not the work of a lone individual, but of the website itself, seeking to build popularity through scandal.

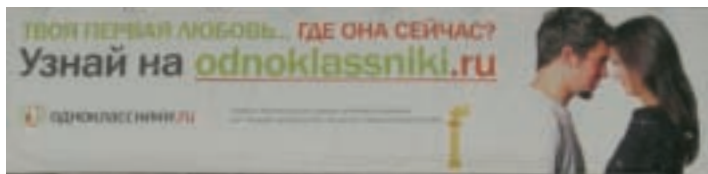
Popkov denied the claims. “If a star wants their profile deleted, they should send us a message,” Popkov said. “How else would we know that the profile is not actually theirs? They could have registered like everybody else.” Russian legislation offers no defense against such impersonations.

To date, Russian social networks do not charge their users for access, as is the case with some American sites, for fear of turning away their potential audience. Even professional networks that exist to help users make business connections and pursue employment goals are free. One of the most popular of these, moikrug.ru (“my circle”), is owned by yandex.ru, Runet’s gigantic search engine. Moikrug is a clone of linkedin.com and is based on circles of connections. You invite your close friends into your “first circle,” their friends become your second circle, etc. Eventually, people from your fifth or tenth circle may help you make new professional contacts or find a well-paying job.

Another professional network, webby.ru, offers analogous services and its creators say many companies like to use their service so that they can search for personnel through references instead of resumes. Yet many Russians are wary of professional networks. “What if my boss logs on and sees my resume?” asked Oksana Narodenko, 22. “I could get in trouble if he found out that I am looking for a job.”

Another social community that tries to “break through the clutter” is vnezapno.ru (“suddenly”). It is a site (still in beta at press time) that helps users connect to people with similar interests – like the American meetup.com, but more focused on one-to-one appointments. If, for instance, you want to go to the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg and want some company, you can make a post on Vnezapno and find a dozen art lovers, one of whom may want to go with you. The site is easily and pleasantly structured, with divisions by city and intent. There are options like shopping, dancing, sight-seeing, having a business-lunch and even “falling in love.” According to one of the site’s developers, Yuri Podorozhny, “it doesn’t matter whether people know each other or not. It’s the appointment that matters.”

Or, perhaps better put, it’s the connection that counts. The current boom in online social networking indicates that Russians are looking for new ways to overcome their isolation, to find long lost friends. Indeed, new online social networks continue to sprout “like mushrooms after the rain”: mates.ru, findlinks.ru, vspomni.ru are all relatively new sites chasing the same lonely souls. As the German novelist Jean Paul said, “Recollection is the only paradise from which we cannot be turned out.” RL



A Moscow billboard asks, “Where is your first love now? Find out on odnoklassniki.ru” Many use online networks to seek out lost childhood flames.