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RUSSIA'S CULTURAL STATECRAFT

Edited by Tuomas Forsberg and Sirke Mäkinen

Russia's Cultural Statecraft

'This book is a fascinating contribution to both IR and Russian studies, as it elaborates a useful tool for understanding the role of culture in international politics and presents the analysis of various domains of Russia's cultural statecraft thus exploring an important but largely neglected aspect of its international activity'.

Olga Malinova,
Higher School of Economics, Russia.

'This innovative analysis of cultural statecraft shifts the focus away from the competitive and ultimately reductionist notion of 'soft power' to the inherent grace of cultural achievement and interactions at the state and interstate level, theorising the elements of contention and cooperation and combining them into a coherent new paradigm. A brilliant and original team effort'.

Richard Sakwa,
University of Kent, UK.

This book focusses on Russia's cultural statecraft in dealing with a number of institutional cultural domains, such as education, museums and monuments, high arts and sport. It analyses to what extent Russia's cultural activities abroad have been used for foreign policy purposes and perceived as having a political dimension.

Building on the concept of cultural statecraft, the authors present a broad and nuanced view of how Russia sees the role of culture in its external relations, how this shapes the image of Russia, and the ways in which this cultural statecraft is received by foreign audiences. The expert team of contributors consider: what choices are made in fostering this agenda; how Russian state authorities see the purpose and limits of various cultural instruments; to what extent can the authorities shape these instruments; what domains have received more attention and become more politicised and what fields have remained more autonomous. The methodological research design of the book as a whole is a comparative case study comparing the nature of Russian cultural statecraft across time, target countries and diverse cultural domains.

It will be of interest to scholars and students of Russian foreign policy and external relations and those working on the role of culture in world politics.

Tuomas Forsberg is Director of the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies (HCAS) at the University of Helsinki and Professor of International Relations at Tampere University.

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Studies in Contemporary Russia is a series of cutting-edge, contemporary studies. These monographs, joint publications and edited volumes branch out into various disciplines, innovatively combining research methods and theories to approach the core questions of Russian modernisation; how do the dynamics of resources and rules affect the Russian economy and what are the prospects and needs of diversification? What is the impact of the changing state-society relationship? How does the emerging welfare regime work? What is the role of Russia in contemporary international relations? How should we understand the present Russian political system? What is the philosophical background of modernisation as a whole and its Russian version in particular?

The variety of opinions on these issues is vast. Some see increasingly less difference between contemporary Russia and the Soviet Union while, at the other extreme, prominent experts regard Russia as a 'more or less' normal European state. At the same time, new variants of modernisation are espoused as a result of Russian membership of the global BRIC powers. Combining aspects of Western and Soviet modernisation with some anti-modern or traditional tendencies the Russian case is ideal for probing deeper into the evolving nature of modernisation. Which of the available courses Russia will follow remains an open question, but these trajectories provide the alternatives available for discussion in this ground-breaking and authoritative series.

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Acknowledgements

The origins of the project can be traced back to the Academy of Finland's Centre of Excellence in Russian Studies – Choices of Russian Modernisation (2012–2017), coordinated by the Aleksanteri Institute and with researchers from the University of Helsinki and Tampere University. In one of the workshops run by the foreign policy cluster of the CoE, we set about brainstorming new projects as the CoE was heading for closure. A number of those present were already working on issues that they considered diverse aspects of Russian soft power. As Professor Richard Sakwa, who was attending the meeting as a member of the Advisory Board of the CoE, voiced his dissatisfaction with the concept of soft power, we coined the neologism 'cultural statecraft' as a concept bridging culture and state power but leaving it open as to how tightly they were interwoven, and the techniques and effects of employing culture as a means of power. Particularly after the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea, the political linkages between culture and politics in Russia's external relations could not be ignored, but there was a danger that a perspective that connected politics to culture could easily lead to a vantage point that put all of the emphasis on politics.

We held a preliminary workshop on the book in Helsinki in June 2017, and we also organised a number of panels at various conferences, including the Aleksanteri Conference in 2017 and 2018, ASEEES in 2018, as well as BASEES in 2019. We are grateful to all panelists who accepted our invitation to present their research in these workshops. Besides the authors of this volume, they included Johan Eriksson, Pallavi Pal and Hanna Smith. The plurality of the themes discussed was important for us, although not every paper found its way into this book. We also received useful comments from our discussants and from the audience, which helped us to sharpen our

1   Introduction

Russia's cultural statecraft

Tuomas Forsberg and Sirke Mäkinen

Culture is of fundamental importance not only to humanity as a whole but also to relations between states. However, conceptions on the role of international cultural relations in world politics are split. According to the first view, which can be termed 'the UNESCO view', cultural relations are not conflictual but based on mutual interest in doing things together and learning from one another. Cultural relations are thus seen as conducive to peace and cooperation between states. They can be developed and fostered even when political relations are otherwise strained, and their positive repercussions will be an enhanced mutual understanding of issues of high politics as well. The opposite view is that cultural relations are a vehicle for power in times of conflict and struggle between states. This can be termed 'the Cold War view' of culture. Insofar as cultural relations have an effect, it is not one of mutual gain but of one culture triumphing over another.

Which of the two views of culture and international relations that prevails depends on the time and context. In totalitarian states, culture has always been part and parcel of politics, but liberal states have also been keen on promoting their cultural presence and visibility abroad for political purposes. Cultural relations were highly politicised during the Cold War (Shaw, 2001; Gould-Davies, 2003; Johnston, 2010; Mikkonen, Scott-Smith, and Parkkinen, 2019). The role of state leadership and agencies was essential in regulating and directing cultural relations across the Iron Curtain, but culture also had a political impact between the allies and with the neutral states. After the end of the Cold War, culture seemed to become a more depoliticised field and was perceived as a realm of activities between civil societies that the state could facilitate and support but not direct. At the same time, culture was increasingly framed as a commodity that had economic value.

The alleged erosion of the liberal order has led to a renewed perception of the politicisation of culture. The hegemony of the West as the source and trailblazer of global culture has been challenged. During the Cold War, the United States used its culture as a means of convincing others that it was a land of freedom, equality, opportunity and innovation, whose cultural progress matched its military prowess. However, the terrorist attacks in

2001 alerted Washington to the fact that this message was no longer taken for granted (Krenn, 2017). Diverse European countries, as well as the EU have also developed cultural diplomacy in order to boost their global role (Isar, 2015; Carta, 2020). The European Commission aims at putting culture 'at the heart of the EU international relations' in order to promote 'international peace and stability, safeguard diversity and stimulate jobs and growth' (European Commission, 2016; see, Figueira, 2017, p. 81). However, what is labelled as culture, when understood as a reflection of certain group beliefs and practices, has become a potentially sensitive issue when it crosses civilisational boundaries. Culture has become particularly contentious in relations between the West and Islam, but it has also been much discussed in relation to the rise of China. Increasingly, culture has likewise become a political issue in the relations between Russia and the rest of the world (see, e.g. Ociepka, 2019).

This book focusses on Russia's cultural statecraft. It deals with a number of institutional domains that represent culture in order to analyse to what extent different cultural activities have been used for foreign policy purposes, and perceived as having a political dimension. Much has been written on the threat posed to Western civilisation and values by Russia's information campaigns and hybrid power in cyberspace (e.g. Jonsson, 2019; Jankowitz, 2020; Jasper, 2020). The international role and influence of the Russian Orthodox Church (see, e.g. Curanović, 2012; Suslov, 2014), as well as the role of the Russian language has also been covered in many studies (see, e.g. Mustajoki et al., 2020; Noack, 2021). In this book, however, we concentrate on areas that have not been the focus of attention thus far but are nonetheless part of the overall picture of the role of culture in Russia's foreign policy and external relations. We need both a broader and a more nuanced view of how Russia sees the role of culture in its external relations, and how various cultural activities shape the image of Russia abroad. In other words, in addition to Russia's own view of its cultural presence and attraction across borders, we explore the way in which different dimensions of Russia's cultural statecraft are received by foreign audiences.

In this introductory chapter, we firstly discuss the key concepts of culture and statecraft and introduce 'cultural statecraft' as a concept that we consider to offer some advantages compared to other notions, such as cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, international cultural relations and, in particular, soft power, which also refer to cultural elements in world politics. On that basis, we construct the theoretical framework on which the analysis of Russian cultural statecraft is based. Secondly, we examine how cultural statecraft was developed in Russia after the end of the Cold War, and particularly during the Putin era after the mid-2000s. At the same time, we review existing research and formulate our general empirical questions. Finally, we outline the chapter structure and key contents of the book.

From cultural diplomacy and soft power to cultural statecraft

Culture is one of the most ambivalent, contested and obscure concepts that researchers in various disciplines have to address on a regular basis. There is no commonly shared single definition of culture, or consensus on what the term comprises, entails and, sometimes even more importantly, what it excludes. As with other concepts, the meaning depends on the context of use. There are both broad and narrow, high and low, as well as deep and superficial understandings of culture. For our purposes, Edward Burnett Tylor's classic definition offers a good starting point: 'Culture … is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by [a human] as a member of society' (see, e.g. Bennett, 2015, p. 547). This definition is useful as it serves as an umbrella for various human activities, as well as emphasises the learnt, 'acquired' nature of culture. Yet, depending on the scholarly perspective, culture can be seen as learned behaviour, as an institutional sphere devoted to the making of meaning, as creativity or agency, as a system of symbols and meanings, and as practice (Sewell, 2005). For this book, the idea of culture as an institutional sphere that includes various arts, education, museums and sports comes closest.

The role of culture in international relations has been studied under the headings of cultural diplomacy, international cultural relations, public diplomacy and soft power. As a result, the literature has remained somewhat fragmented. Traditionally, cultural diplomacy has referred to 'the deployment of a state's culture in support of its foreign policy goals or diplomacy' (Mark, 2010, p. 64), implying an 'intervention by the state' (Goff, 2020, p. 31). Yet, the concept is elusive and evolving, and the lines that separate it from public diplomacy and soft power are blurry (Goff, 2013; 2020, p. 30). From a narrow perspective, cultural diplomacy is exercised only when people representing the state, such as diplomats or other governmental institutions, employ culture to advance national interests (Arndt, 2006). Cultural diplomacy is thus state-driven, whereas civil societies and companies engage in transnational cultural relations that are spurred either by profit or by the willingness to enhance culture and foster cultural interactions (Ang et al., 2015, p. 365). However, the division into cultural diplomacy and transnational cultural relations has been difficult to uphold, and hence cultural diplomacy often refers to 'any practice that is related to purposeful cultural cooperation between nations or groups of nations' (Ang et al., 2015, p. 366). It is, of course, an oversimplification to assume that state-driven or sponsored cultural activities always serve a clearly defined national interest or calculated nation-branding campaign, or that the idea of promoting cultural exchanges for the sake of mutual cultural enrichment and understanding stems from hypocritical motives (Ang et al., 2015, p. 379; see also, Gienow-Hecht, 2010).

The concepts of cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy largely overlap. Cultural diplomacy can be seen as a particular practice or dimension of public diplomacy (Cull, 2008, p. 32; Ang et al., 2015, p. 368). Yet, the terms are not synonymous (Mark, 2010, p. 65). Public diplomacy is usually understood as a form of diplomacy where a state or its government (or, by extension, any entity) aims at communicating directly with the people of another country in order to gain support for its foreign policy (Melissen, 2005; 2013; Cull, 2008). Its contents and channels are constantly evolving. Public diplomacy consists of several practices and dimensions such as international broadcasting, political advocacy or exchange diplomacy, which do not necessarily rely on cultural institutions but which are, of course, not devoid of culture if we interpret culture more broadly. When public diplomacy is understood as 'a means of aggregating soft power' (Banks, 2020, p. 66) or an instrument of soft power (Hayden, 2012, p. 5), it also overlaps with the notion of soft power.

In recent decades, 'soft power' has become the most popular concept linking culture to international relations. For Joseph Nye (2004), soft power is the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce, apply force or give money as a means of persuasion. He suggests that soft power rests on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and as having moral authority). Consequently, Nye's idea is that some forms of power are hard and others soft. Yet, this is not a strict dichotomy but better conceived of as a continuum where punishment is the 'hardest' of the hard power instruments, followed by compulsion and inducement, whereas soft power instruments start with agenda-setting, persuasion and finally attraction, which is the softest of the soft power instruments.

However, the term 'soft power' is loaded, contested and often misconceived (Ohnesorge, 2020; Penne, 2021). If we take Nye's concept of soft power as an analytical category, are we bound to accept his definition of it? Or should we agree with its critics that it is too vague and ideological to merit the fame it has achieved (Fan, 2008; Hall, 2010; Kearn, 2011; Rothman, 2011; Hayden, 2012; Baldwin, 2016, pp. 164–171; see also, Bakalov, 2020)? While for Nye, soft power is the 'ability to shape what others want' and hard power 'the ability to change what others do', hard power is also exercised by influencing preferences and their ordering. It is also sometimes suggested that hard power is tangible, whereas soft power is intangible, but this dichotomy is problematic, too. Military power consists of intangible elements, such as 'national will', whereas soft power can be based on some highly tangible resources such as universities. The attribute 'soft' could refer to the effectiveness of the instruments, but that is not what Nye means, although 'soft' often refers to the legitimacy of the instrument. This move, however, can be questioned too, since some means of shaping what others want, such as the manipulation of information or lying, are not normally perceived

as legitimate ways of wielding power. Moreover, it would verge on tautology to claim that soft power is legitimate if foreign policies are legitimate. Finally, it is questionable as to whether 'attraction' should be conceptualised in terms of power at all. There are two related problems here. First, if attraction is in the eye of the beholder, then it is not a resource that can be possessed and used. Second, if power implies responsibility, it is often difficult to hold 'attractive' actors responsible for what others do because of their attraction.

Furthermore, the problem with Nye's understanding of soft power is that there is no objective way of defining what attraction is. As critics have argued, if soft power is based on liberal values, we should first explain why and how these values have become 'universal' or attractive. That is why Nye's concept is seen as ethnocentric (Fan, 2008) or as resting on a 'liberal bias' (Keating and Kaczmarska, 2017). Soft power is a concept that was invented in the context of US foreign policy, and even if it is applied to many other actors, such as China, the EU and now increasingly to Russia, it tends to acquire different meanings each time it is applied. Sometimes soft power is extended to economic power (Hill, 2006; Tsygankov, 2006). Nye (2013a; 2013b) claims that the Russians have misunderstood what soft power means when they equate it with governmental propaganda and information campaigns. It is sharp, rather than soft power (Nye, 2019).

It should also be noted that soft power has not always been the primary concept with which cultural aspects (or intangible sources) of power have been grasped. For example, in the case of China, where the notion of soft power has recently been endorsed, there was previously some discussion about 'comprehensive national power', which also entailed 'soft factors' (Zhang, 2010, p. 386). Other neologisms, such as 'smart power' and 'normative power' – the latter of which is used particularly in the context of EU foreign policy – that describe a preferred form of power are easily seen as similarly biased: we and our allies have soft, smart and normative power, but our adversary relies on propaganda, covert action and sharp power. Nye (2007) may be right in claiming that his concept of 'soft power' is often turned into a straw man, but the fact that so many scholars shun the concept indicates that it is loaded and distorted.

Against this background, we have used 'cultural statecraft' as the concept structuring our investigation (see, Forsberg and Smith, 2016). The concept of cultural statecraft focusses on the attractiveness of various cultural assets and how states promote their culture abroad for possible political purposes. It also reflects the tripartite view of power that sets 'culture' apart from military and economic aspects of power (Carr, 2001 [1939], pp. 97–134). Statecraft is a concept that has been linked to the military and the economy but not explicitly to culture, which we consider to be a shortcoming. While military power or statecraft often relies on coercion by means of destruction and threats, as well as providing protection against such threats, economic power or statecraft relies on the ability to produce and trade items and use

financial instruments for political purposes (Baldwin, 1985). Cultural state-craft, by contrast, relies on meaning-making and attraction and is under-pinned by information, values, framing and image-building. Hence, its extension does not differ that much from common definitions of soft power or cultural diplomacy.

While power – a word that has many connotations and definitions – often refers either to the power base or to the outcome, statecraft puts more emphasis on the influence techniques and instruments available for leaders: 'the skill of conducting government affairs'. This skill may generate attrac-tion (and thus strengthen soft power) or rely on soft power resources such as universities or the arts. Reflecting on the term 'economic statecraft' intro-duced by David Baldwin (1985), we could therefore have an analogous con-cept of 'cultural statecraft' that comprises a variety of techniques of both a positive and a negative nature (on statecraft in general in contemporary world politics, see, e.g. Al-Rodhan, 2009). Cultural statecraft here is duly defined as an activity and a skill that a state can utilise in order to further its interests. Non-state actors are indispensable for cultural statecraft, even though their objective in this activity may be different from that of the state, which is mainly about enhancing the attractiveness and supporting certain foreign policy goals. Cultural statecraft overlaps with and is sometimes syn-onymous with cultural diplomacy, but it goes beyond diplomatic actors and channels and is, therefore, a broader concept than the traditional definition of cultural diplomacy as governmental activity.

The concept of cultural statecraft stresses the role of the state: soft power may exist independently of the government, but cultural statecraft refers to the manner in which the government and other authorities employ, direct and control various manifestations of culture. Of course, this may lead to bias in overemphasising the role of the state and its unitary nature, and con-sequently to seeing politics as being behind all kinds of cultural activities crossing the borders (particularly when we discuss present-day Russia) (see, e.g. Hadley and Gray, 2017). However, whatever the role of the state, the purpose is not to belittle or to deny the role of all kinds of non-governmental actors or individuals. The state needs the 'support of non-governmental actors such as artists, curators, teachers, lecturers, students' in order to achieve any of its objectives in cultural diplomacy (Glenow-Hecht in Goff, 2020, p. 31). We can be agnostic about the precise nature of the relationship. The motivation for and self-understanding of what various non-governmental actors, including influential individuals, are doing in the field of culture may often differ from that of the state authorities. States both cooperate and compete with other actors when it comes to cultural interactions (Ang et al., 2015, p. 371; Snow, 2020).

As with other forms of statecraft, cultural statecraft can be used for any purpose that a state so chooses. It can be seen as a tool for influence that can be wielded for narrow self-interest or the greater common good, purposes

that can be morally good as well as bad. There is no reason to believe that the form of statecraft and the nature of state interest correlate systematically. It is an open question as to what extent cultural statecraft is aimed at strengthening mutual understanding for the sake of the common good or influencing others tactically for achieving tangible benefits for oneself, or to what extent its role is more connected with state branding for the purposes of status or even simply for self-esteem (see, e.g. Buhmann et al., 2018).

Finally, views have diverged on the extent to which soft power is effective. For Nye, soft power is increasingly significant in world politics, but for realists, soft power still depends on other, material resources. As for cultural statecraft, it has surely not replaced military or economic statecraft in world politics, but its instrumental value is again widely recognised. Various cultural resources, and the way in which they are instrumentalised in foreign policy, do play a role in world politics. A more interesting question, therefore, is not if but when cultural statecraft is effective. To what extent do cultural elements of power depend on the overall power relations, or to what extent does a positive image based on cultural achievements and interaction generate respect and admiration, which, in turn, helps in advancing other political goals (Chatin and Gallarotti, 2016, p. 341)? Or does culture form its own domain or a variety of rather autonomous sub-domains that are not closely related to any overall power relations? It is difficult but not impossible to trace the process of how cultural statecraft, seen as ideational persuasion, is operating from the intention of the sender state to the attitudes and then behaviour of the target state (see, e.g. Kroenig, McAdam, and Weber, 2010). From the perspective of process-tracing, the first two steps need to be sufficiently analysed before any conclusion about the real power of cultural statecraft in any situation can effectively be reached.

The rise of Russia's cultural statecraft

For the Soviet Union, culture was an integral part of the communist modernisation project, and its importance in fostering political aims abroad was particularly underlined during the Cold War (see, Gould-Davies, 2003; Velikaya, 2020). In a similar vein, culture can be seen as an asset for post-Soviet Russia's position in the world (see, Solov'ev and Smirnov, 2008). Many famous Russian artistic and other cultural achievements and brands are recognised all over the world: 'It has great music, great literature, great theater, great dance' (Wiarda, 2013, p. 59). Russians have always been proud of their culture, and their cultural heritage is an essential aspect of their identity (Levada, 2019).

The Russian authorities themselves have adopted a rather broad view of culture. Vladimir Tolstoy, who prepared the key document outlining Russia's 'state culture policy' for President Putin, explained it as follows (President of Russia, 2014):

> I think the most important point is that we need to see culture in much broader terms than just the sector covered by the Culture Ministry: theatres, archives and libraries. Culture is a basic concept, a fundamental part of a person's identity and the foundation of the national character and even of the state. It includes moral values, broader public education, youth policy issues, and the kinds of cities and villages we live in. We have tried to take an all-encompassing approach to culture.

Tolstoy also regarded the role of culture which, in his view, 'has a particularly important historical role to play at this moment in our country's life', as important both for domestic politics as well as for foreign policy in unifying the nation and presenting Russia's greatness to the world (ibid.).

For students of cultural statecraft, the case of Russia is interesting because Russia has systematically developed its public diplomacy and other tools of 'soft power' during the past two decades (see, Rukavishnikov, 2011; Simons, 2011; Kiseleva, 2015; Sergunin and Karabeshin, 2015; Mäkinen, 2016a; 2021; Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016; Just, 2016; Velikaya and Simons, 2020; Ageeva, 2021; Gavra and Bykova, 2021). In his famous Munich speech, President Putin complained about how American hegemony was visible not only in the economy and politics but also in the 'cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?' (President of Russia, 2007). Consequently, various initiatives were launched in order to boost Russia's cultural soft power and presence abroad. As Russia's foreign minister Sergey Lavrov (2012) declared:

> As for soft power, it is obviously one of the main components of countries' international influence. We cannot deny that Russia is well behind other countries in this respect. The Russian world is a huge resource that can help strengthen Russia's prestige globally. We should actively, purposefully and daily work to preserve and develop it.

The foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation, adopted in 2013, defined 'soft power' as 'a comprehensive toolkit for achieving foreign policy objectives building on civil society potential, information, cultural and other methods and technologies alternative to traditional diplomacy', and asserted that it was 'becoming an indispensable component of modern international relations' (President of Russia, 2013).

The trend of mobilising various cultural assets for political purposes is therefore clear. But what choices are made in fostering this agenda? What aspects of Russian culture were taken to be most suitable for promotion? How do the Russian state authorities themselves see the purpose and limits of various cultural instruments in improving the national image and achieving political goals abroad? To what extent is it possible for the authorities to shape these instruments? Which cultural domains have received special attention and become more politicised, and which have remained more

autonomous and displayed cultural interaction without much top-down political guidance? How has Russia's cultural statecraft been perceived in the neighbouring countries and in the Western world, particularly in Europe?

When it comes to the role of culture in world politics, in general, and in Russia's foreign policy in particular, the two positions of seeing intercultural exchanges both as a threat and as an opportunity constantly interact. On the one hand, culture is often framed in a competitive manner: it is seen as underlying Russia's superior civilisational position over other nations, and foreign cultural elements are treated as a form of domination and infiltration (see, Abgadzhava and Petrova, 2018). On the other hand, culture is also framed in cooperative terms as something that 'may serve as the background to the dialogue needed for a stable system of international relations' (Klimov, 2017, p. 245). The question is, to what extent can Russia develop its cultural assets as effective foreign policy tools when the country's self-image largely rests on the idea of a traditional military great power reflecting a worldview of a constant power struggle. Is a national brand that emphasises cultural statecraft compatible with Russia's great-power status or does it contradict it? If cultural statecraft is subordinate to power political purposes, does it undermine its potential soft power effectiveness?

Particularly against the background of the crisis and conflict in Ukraine since 2014, Russia's cultural statecraft, or its soft power strategies, have garnered increasing attention in the Western world. For many, Russia's soft power poses a real danger, for some, it is just an irritating nuisance, while for others, it is a healthy corrective in a world dominated by otherwise one-sided Western information (see, Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016). Studying these perceptions of Russia's cultural statecraft in the West as well as in other 'target' countries opens up a new perspective for a better understanding of Russia's multifaceted and changing image abroad. Moreover, by analysing Russia's cultural statecraft, we can shed light on the overall aims and logic of Russian foreign policy, its identity and worldview, and the interplay between state and non-state actors. In a way, Russia's objective to modernise itself and to strengthen its position as a traditional great power in world politics is reflected in its international cultural relations (see, e.g. Forsberg et al., 2021).

Russia's conscious efforts to boost its soft power and develop cultural statecraft have largely been expended in reaction and in relation to the West (Kiseleva, 2015, p. 317). Russia has both adopted the key concept of soft power and the belief in the importance of cultural diplomacy from the West, but it has formed its own policy in order to undermine Western hegemony. Russia has tried to gain status by emulating Western soft power practices, but more importantly by resisting Western hegemony and by incorporating some 'indigenous characteristics' into its use of soft power. Cultural statecraft has become important in this process, as Russia has 'shifted the focus from political sources of soft power (democracy and human rights) to

cultural ones' (Kiseleva, 2015, pp. 321–322). This development has created certain dilemmas for Russia since it has always stressed the European roots and nature of its culture but has increasingly sought to distance itself from Europe, turn to the East and foster Eurasianism as a civilisational sphere. Moreover, the politicization, and even securitization, of culture has created further obstacles for genuine cross-cultural interaction. Russian national security strategy 2021 sees culture through the lens of security and calls for protection of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values, culture and historical memory as Russia's 'cultural sovereignty' is perceived to be at risk due to Western attacks (President of Russia, 2021).

The nature and aims of Russia's cultural statecraft depend on the target. Anna Velikaya and Greg Simons (2020, p. 18) characterise Russia's public diplomacy activities as having 'a relative sense of flexibility in practice and approach to different publics, different situational contexts and different goals'. The key distinction lies between the former Soviet Union and the West and other countries in the world, as well as between Russian-speaking and non-Russian-speaking audiences (see, e.g. Saari, 2014; Feklyunina, 2016). Many cultural activities are designed to reach out to specific groups that are not primarily involved or even interested in politics. While Russian politics and politicians are negatively associated with Russia, culture and arts are seen as the most positive elements of the country (see, e.g. Simons, 2015, pp. 11–12). In addition to examining how Russia promotes a given cultural domain abroad, and how it attempts to project or wield power with the help of this particular field depending on the context, it is also important to study how the cultural activities are received and evaluated by a given audience in the 'target' countries. This is all the more important because the role of audiences as active meaning-makers in the consumption of cultural diplomacy products has to be taken into account: 'there is no guarantee that the way they read, interpret or understand such products will be in line with the original intentions of cultural diplomacy' (Ang et al., 2015, p. 375).

Many specific institutions that can be seen as instruments of cultural statecraft have been established and strengthened since the mid-2000s, hand in hand with Russia's growing desire to gain a more active role in world politics (see, e.g. Feklyunina, 2008; Ageeva, 2021). The Valdai Discussion Club, an annual gathering of foreign experts together with the Russian president and other prominent members of the Russian foreign policy elite, held its first meeting in 2004. *Russkiy Mir* Foundation, aimed at promoting the Russian language and Russian values, was created in 2007 (see, e.g. Popovic, Jenne and Medzihorsky, 2020). Two separate think tanks with almost identical names in English, the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation and the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation (IDC), were founded in New York and Paris in 2007 and 2008, respectively, with the aim of participating in the debates on the nature of state sovereignty, democracy and human rights. The Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute, founded in 2016 and based in Berlin, works in the broad area of international cooperation but has a

specific aim to address cross-cultural challenges and opportunities in light of international values and philosophical traditions. *Rossotrudnichestvo* – the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation – aiming, as its lengthy nomenclature indicates, to forge ties with people living in the area of the former Soviet Union – was established in 2008, replacing its predecessor *Roszarubezhtsentr* (the Russia Abroad Centre) (see, Mäkinen, 2016b; Fominykh, 2017). Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Foundation, a think tank promoting Russia's foreign policy goals abroad, was established in 2010. In addition, Russian culture and values are also boosted internationally by media outlets, such as RT (formerly Russia Today), a TV channel targeted at foreign audiences launched in 2005 and Sputnik, a restructured Russian news agency, website and radio broadcast service, established in 2014.

Along with the establishment and substantial strengthening of many cultural institutions and programmes designed to foster Russian cultural presence abroad, Russia's cultural policy took a more conservative turn in the 2010s (Jakobson, Rudnik, and Toepler, 2018; Romashko, 2020). This can be partly explained by the consolidation of the Russian state and the increased financial resources that can be allocated for such purposes. Conservative values also helped to brand Russia as an independent centre promoting an alternative understanding of the world order than the one based on Western liberalism (Ćwiek-Karpowicz, 2013; Makarychev, 2013; Keating and Kaczmarska, 2017). However, it is not clear to what extent the various cultural programmes share a unified agenda in boosting Russia's cultural presence abroad. Although the idea of Russian cultural diplomacy being based on conservative values is widespread, the issue is also debated inside Russia (see, Andreev, 2016, pp. 125–127, 132). It has been argued that there is a lack of coordination between different institutions of cultural diplomacy such as *Rossotrudnichestvo*, *Russkiy Mir* or Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Foundation when promoting Russia's external image (Astakhanov, 2018, p. 229).

Not everything can be traced back to the Kremlin: its role is palpable in some questions, but this is not always the case. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its embassies often have an important intermediate role in conducting and organising cultural statecraft abroad, but other ministries such as the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and, for example, the Ministry of Sports as well as specialised agencies such as *Rossotrudnichestvo*, Russian Centres of Science and Culture, and diverse foundations mentioned above are of key importance. Moreover, the influential role of many prominent oligarchs that have close connections to the Kremlin but who also develop their own agendas by running and supporting various cultural institutions is typical of Russian cultural statecraft.

In addition to addressing how Russia promotes given cultural domains to international audiences and how such promotion is perceived in the target

countries, we will study what Russians (authorities, politicians, etc.) themselves think about the success and importance of this. To some extent, cultural presence and interactions can have a direct 'influence' on producing political outcomes, but interpreting all cultural interactions from an instrumental perspective of power would surely be misguided. For Russia, cultural relations have also been valued for reasons of status or self-esteem. As Russia has compared itself to the West, it has tried to emulate many practices and the mere presence of these practices can sometimes be seen as sufficient reason to justify them (Kiseleva, 2015; Mäkinen, 2016a).

Given that the effectiveness of cultural statecraft depends on the perceptions of the audience in the target countries, it is important to map what these perceptions actually are and how they have changed. As Li Ji (2017, p. 83) notes, research on soft power has focussed on resources, instruments and discursive constructs but 'neglected the analysis of empirical evidence of audience reception'. Our purpose is not to 'measure' the outcome of Russia's cultural statecraft in terms of some direct outcomes beyond these perceptions. Instead, we will discuss the way in which Russian authorities and actors in the field of culture themselves perceive these activities and how they conceptualise and assess success in the relevant domains. There are some differences in the dynamics of cultural statecraft depending on the way the cultural domain is representing Russianness or shared culture performed admirably by Russians.

The question of the nature of the real purpose and effect of Russia's cultural statecraft has become politically loaded. As mentioned above, the debate on Russia's hybrid influence encompasses views that are often almost diametrically opposed, depending on prior assumptions about what kind of state Russia is. Yet, an analysis of the effectiveness of Russian cultural statecraft should not depend on whether the effects are taken to be positive or negative. When Russia's cultural statecraft is seen as influential, its effectiveness is often linked to its top-down nature and particularly to manipulative information operations in cyberspace. But sometimes, its significance is related to the deeper cultural and even religious attributes that constitute Russia as an independent, anti-liberal, conservative centre in world politics (Keating and Kaczmarska, 2017; Aktürk, 2019). Moreover, its cultural richness, and particularly the institutions, products and representatives of high culture are renowned and admired by many abroad independently of their political allegiances.

Those who see Russia's cultural statecraft as a marginal force often regard the close linkage between culture and the power-holders as a handicap. For example, Joseph Nye (2013a, p. 34) is sceptical about Russia's soft power: 'although Putin has urged his diplomats to wield soft power, Russia does not have much'. Russia's efforts to control and instrumentalize culture and other soft power resources have been regarded as counterproductive for Russia (e.g. Rotaru, 2018). The image and public perception of Russia is negative, especially in the West. For example, the top four things that Americans

associated with Russia in 2003 were communism, the KGB, snow and the Mafia (Avgerinos, 2009). Russia's brand as a great nation of culture may have suffered as a result of its image as a political and military great power rather than benefited from it. Although Russia's image started to improve during the 2000s, it deteriorated again in the 2010s due to the Ukrainian crisis (Osipova, 2017). In an international survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2018), Russia's image was largely negative. Moreover, the soft power indexes of the English media company Monocle and Soft Power 30 rank Russia far behind other great powers and most European countries. The extent to which branding campaigns and transnational interaction in diverse fields of culture currently shape, or could be used to craft, Russia's image duly remains to be seen.

The structure of the book

The book consists of case studies that deal with diverse fields of cultural statecraft. The chapters examine how various cultural domains have been part of Russia's external brand in history, and how this field has been part of the new wave of 'Russian soft power' since the mid-2000s. They analyse the activities and goals of the Russian state, and consider its reception abroad. Even though the key actor examined is the Russian state, the authors also critically assess the agency of the Russian state together with non-state actors in the given field. Methodologically, the chapters analyse texts, broadly understood, with the help of content analysis, generally based on a mix of inductive and theory-driven deductive coding. The texts analysed comprise media materials, official documents, research literature and interview transcripts, including interviews with experts and stakeholders conducted by the authors, as well as those published in the media. In addition, some authors have conducted in situ observation as part of their fieldwork. We start our journey with chapters dealing with education, moving on to art museums and war memorials, continuing with literature, cinema and music, and finishing with international events and sport. The concluding chapter surveys the whole field.

   We start with education, which is a broad cultural statecraft field. In her chapter, Sirke Mäkinen analyses how and for what purpose Russian higher education is promoted abroad. In addition, the chapter examines how Russian higher education is received in the post-Soviet space and the EU. The chapter focusses on six target countries, three of which are post-Soviet states, namely Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, while three are EU member states, namely Finland, Germany and Latvia. The main primary data for this chapter consist of semi-structured expert interviews conducted by the author, coupled with an analysis of state-level documents, websites and media materials. The analysis shows, first, that there are no major differences between 'promoters' and target country representatives in how the rationales for Russia's actions are presented – a political rationale of

education diplomacy is certainly acknowledged. However, education diplomacy co-exists with socio-economic and academic rationales. As for the main research question of the chapter – whether it is plausible to state that higher education is used as a tool of Russia's cultural statecraft – the analysis shows that Russia's higher education is only a limited tool of cultural statecraft outside of the Russian-speaking world. However, in the bigger picture, Russia is seeking status in world politics, and in this context, gaining recognition as an educational great power plays a significant role.

Julia Bethwaite looks at the role of museums in international relations. Museums may implement and reproduce state power, also beyond national borders with international exhibitions and satellite museums. Along with revenue-seeking and branding, museums may also have diplomatic functions. The concept of 'museum diplomacy' highlights that museums can carry out diplomatic practices. The Russian state has also promoted the international role of its museums. In her chapter, Bethwaite focusses on the Russian Museum's first European branch in Málaga, the *Colección del Museo Ruso*, established in 2015, and asks whether this satellite museum may be taken as a case of museum diplomacy, and whether it may thus contribute to Russia's cultural statecraft by serving Russia's foreign policy objectives. Bethwaite analyses state-level documents, media materials, and interviews with museum and state officials, artistic experts and sponsors for her case study. She argues that despite the fact that the satellite museum was established at the request of Málaga's mayor, and has both public and private funding, it represents Russia's cultural presence in Spain, and hence may have an impact on Russia's image. Russian state actors also see the satellite museum in Málaga as an example of museum diplomacy. It has the potential to build diplomatic relations as well as connections between different social networks. Moreover, it may widen the existing image of Russia and act as a 'bridge' to promote mutual understanding. On the Spanish side, the museum was also believed to promote an understanding of Russian art and culture in Spain. However, the museum, together with other museums in Málaga, was often perceived as a city-branding instrument that would attract more tourists and investments to the city. All in all, Bethwaite concludes, museums' power in international relations can be explained by the interaction of multiple domains and fields, as diverse actors – from museum experts and businesspeople to city authorities and diplomats – cooperate in the context of international exhibitions motivated by different objectives, with museum diplomacy being just one of them.

Lina Klymenko's chapter discusses Soviet war memorials abroad. Over the past decade or so, the Russian government has intensified commemoration of the end of World War II (WWII) and used it as a means of collective identity construction among Eastern European and post-Soviet countries. In Russia, the celebration on 9th May symbolises the victory of the multinational Soviet Union over Nazi Germany. Russia considers the Soviet offensive in Eastern Europe at the end of WWII a 'liberation', and it, therefore,

demands to be perceived as a European great power. Klymenko investigates how Russian political actors have enacted a feeling of shared history and common identity through Soviet War memorials in Berlin, Vienna, Sofia and Tallinn. The WWII commemoration policy is promoted not only by state officials but also by pro-Russian societal groups. Klymenko duly argues that Russia's aim seems to be to win the support of Russians and Russian-speaking communities from the former Soviet republics by giving them a sense of collective belonging to societies from which they might otherwise feel rather excluded. While the Soviet monuments and the commemoration of Victory Day have caused incidents in some of the target countries, the impact of the war monuments on the local societies has generally remained limited.

Vlad Strukov's domain is the cinema (see, Strukov, 2016a). Cinema played a salient role in the Soviet Union because it was seen as a modern, progressive form of art that had the ability to reach the masses effectively. From Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) to Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979), many Russian films have been recognised as world classics. However, the Soviet film industry was never able to compete with the global influence of Western films and Hollywood productions in particular. Despite the Soviet heritage, Russia has not invested a great deal in its cinema as a form of cultural diplomacy. Many newer Russian films have, however, achieved international fame outside of Russian-speaking audiences. While the most widely viewed Russian film – Fyodor Bondarchuk's *Stalingrad* (2013) – was a typical war film with human underpinnings but a patriotic theme, the most talked-about Russian film of recent years – Andrei Zviagintsev's *Leviathan* (2014) – is different because it paints a very sinister and cynical picture of corruption in Russia from the perspective of living on its Arctic periphery. It was met with disapproval by representatives of the regime despite the fact that the Russian Ministry of Culture had supported it financially. Strukov (2016b) analysed the *Leviathan* controversy in an article on Russia's manipulative soft power and argued that it simultaneously follows the logic of distraction, offence and appeal. Another interesting recent case that has already captured international attention also for political reasons is Andrei Konchalovsky's award-winning *Dear Comrades*! (2020), which was produced by Alisher Usmanov, who also happens to be a fierce opponent of Alexei Navalny. The film itself can nonetheless be seen as anti-regime as it depicts a silenced brutal Soviet incident of 1962: the massacre of demonstrating local workers in Novocherkassk in the Don Cossack region.

In this book, however, Strukov's chapter focusses on a recent science fiction movie, Fedor Bondarchuk's *Attraction* (2017), as an example of a new phase in Russian state crafting. Using the theoretical framework of popular geopolitics that connects Russian and Western cultural currents, Strukov examines the many meanings of the film. He argues that it is characterised not by an orientation towards the past but an orientation into the future, containing ideas about the future organisation of the Russian

state. Strukov considers the elements of cultural statecraft – a means of constructing a state identity, a foreign policy strategy, and a means of legitimation and cultural security – from the aesthetic, cross-sectoral and institutional perspectives. The chapter argues that in the Russian case, the aim of cultural statecraft is to introduce and maintain neoliberal policies, borrowed from the West while naturalising the neoliberal ideological discourse. An outcome is a form of neoliberal nationalism, that is, a political system which employs neoliberal policies for nationalist reasons. Since the dissolution of the USSR, Strukov argues, Russian cultural statecraft has emerged from a top-down system into a competitive system with state-funded, corporate and private stakeholders using the medium of film to their advantage, including the development of brands, the promotion of foreign policy, and participation in the global debate about future challenges such as climate change.

Angelos Theocharis looks at Russian literature in the framework of the promotion of Russian culture abroad. He argues that although the Russian classics are globally renowned, literature was of marginal importance for Soviet and early post-Soviet Russian cultural diplomacy. In world culture, Russian literature is connected to three famous authors – Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Anton Chekhov. The 19th-century writers with their major contributions to fiction, short stories, philosophy and theatre have been an essential part of the Russian and Soviet brand ever since. Although other major figures of the 20th and 21st centuries have tended to escape the attention of most Western readers, the Russian classics are regularly exported globally not only in the form of books but also through their adaptations into successful plays and films. Nevertheless, Russian literature has not been as intensively promoted abroad as it perhaps could have been given the high esteem it enjoys in the West. In his chapter, Theocharis first explores how *Russkiy Mir* and *Rossotrudnichestvo* promote Russian culture abroad, and then focusses on the *Read Russia* project. Established in 2012, this Russian organisation aims to promote Russian literature to foreign audiences by publishing translations as well as by participating in international book fairs. Theocharis draws on materials from fieldwork conducted during the London Book Fairs of 2018 and 2019, as well as interviews with directors of the organisation. Despite *Read Russia*'s objectives of promoting Russian literature to foreign audiences and aspiring to improve Russia's external image, Theocharis argues that audiences are often made up of Russian-speakers for the most part, even at English-speaking events, and therefore *Read Russia* should also be interpreted as a mobiliser of the diasporic communities.

Elina Viljanen's chapter deals with Russian classical music. She argues that the field is characterised by a conservative atmosphere and the continuation of the conformity of the former Soviet classical music elite in the post-Soviet space. Contrary to perceptions often held in the West, the chapter argues that in Russia, classical music culture has never been just a

mere passive victim that political authorities have used to their advantage. Instead, Russian classical music culture continues to balance between its own cultural goals of preserving and developing a variety of cultural and aesthetic philosophies, stemming in part from its intellectual traditions, dialogue with the modern global music markets and Russia's contemporary cultural statecraft, which secures its economically important position in the cultural hierarchy. After a critique of soft power theorising and a discussion of the Soviet cultural theory of music, Viljanen homes in on the case of Palmyra, Syria. The Mariinsky orchestra conducted by Gergiev performed there in May 2016 after the seizure of this famous cultural heritage site by the Syrian army, with the help of Russian forces. This represents a case of classical music being utilised in cultural statecraft. Viljanen argues that Russia challenges the global hierarchy of power through a civilisational argument in which classical music serves as a symbol of its own *kul'turnost'*. However, Viljanen criticises views assuming a simple instrumentalisation of culture and emphasises that classical music, or culture as a whole, cannot be completely controlled by the state. Instead, culture should be seen as an active agency the role of which is negotiated with its representatives seeking economic and social support for their cultural visions and projects.

In their co-authored chapter, Mari Pajala and Dean Vuletic focus on the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC). The annual contest has featured prominently in the cultural diplomacies of European states since it began in 1956. During the Cold War, Eastern European states did not participate in Western Europe's ESC but instead had their own Intervision Song Contest (ISC); after 1989, however, Central and Eastern European states also joined the ESC, with Russia making its debut in 1994. Pajala and Vuletic examine the reasons why Russian political leaders have considered the ESC to be an important tool of Russia's cultural diplomacy. The 2009 ESC was the first international mega-event that Russia staged after the collapse of the Soviet Union; it served as a springboard for Russia's hosting of bigger mega-events that have reflected the Russian government's economic and political aspirations on the international stage, such as the Winter Olympic Games and the World Cup. Over the years, Russia's entries have attracted considerable positive attention among audiences abroad. However, in recent years the ESC has also been affected by Russia's conflict with Ukraine and the political tensions with the West, especially with regard to the Russian government's policies towards sexual minorities. Some Russian politicians have consequently called for the ISC to be revived as a Russian-led alternative to the ESC, but this chapter argues that such calls are ill-informed as the ISC was never a Russian- or Soviet-led affair during the Cold War.

Pia Koivunen's chapter addresses international events in the toolbox of Russia's cultural statecraft. Since Vladimir Putin's first presidency, Russia has bid for and hosted more international events than ever before in its history, the most notable being the Winter Olympic Games in 2014 and the FIFA World Cup in 2018, both of which can be regarded as mega-events

attracting global attention on a large scale. By analysing media materials, interviews and previous studies, Koivunen examines Russia's cultural statecraft through two case studies: the Winter Olympic Games and the 19th World Festival of Youth and Students, both held in Sochi in 2014 and 2017, respectively. The hosting of international events has become one of the channels for communicating with foreign audiences. However, Russia has not been able to offer any one clear image of post-Soviet Russia. Rather, the most important outcome has been that Russia can now be seen as a capable and reliable host for international events. In addition, Koivunen contends that a new culture of hosting international events, together with the required infrastructure and a model of communication with domestic and foreign audiences, has been created within Russia.

Tuomas Forsberg examines sport, focussing on the Kontinental Hockey League (KHL). As President Putin has been seen as the 'father' of the league, it is plausible to surmise that there are political interests in the background. Homing in on the case of *Jokerit* Helsinki in Finland and *Dinamo Riga* in Latvia, the chapter discusses attitudes towards the league among the political elite, the general public and sports enthusiasts alike. Forsberg concludes that the KHL has only been marginally discussed and perceived as a political project in Latvia and Finland despite the fact that the media often represent KHL as a part of Russia's 'hybrid threat'. While this seems exaggerated, the league has not been able to separate politics from sport entirely, as political controversies have arisen related to Western sanctions on Russian owners of the clubs, the political situation in Belarus, and national COVID-19 restrictions. However, the low political profile of the league may turn out to have the greatest political impact by creating an image of Russia as a normal country with which fans in the West can share a common culture of enthusiasm for sport.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, Sergei Medvedev revisits the whole broad field of cultural statecraft from the perspective of Russia's geopolitical position. Medvedev considers that culture and history have formed a significant symbolic resource for the current regime, which has consolidated its ideological base around conservatism and traditional values. Cultural goods have increasingly been employed in foreign policy as well, but in this respect, the Russian government has not prioritised the assets in high culture and science. The instrumentalisation of cultural resources is easier in other dimensions of soft power, where it can champion a past-oriented 'retropolitics' that builds on historical achievements and traditional values. In that process, Russia has been able to rather effectively convert its historical role, past greatness, image and mythology, fears, prejudice and expectations into geopolitical influence. At the same time, many of the internationally recognised award-winning Russian figures working in various fields of culture reside outside of Russia and are critical of Putin's regime.

This book neither starts nor ends with any bold claims about the political repercussions of Russia's cultural statecraft. The two positions, one that

Russia's cultural activities reflect its hard power in disguise, and the other that culture is a more autonomous field of transnational interaction generating meaning-making and leading to mutual understanding and peace, are both partly true but partly incorrect. In this book, we have been able to deal with some but definitely not all of the important cultural domains. Many possible domains are not explored here: Russian science and technology have been a traditional strength (see, e.g. Kharitonova and Prokhorenko, 2020), spearheaded by space technology (see, e.g. Eriksson and Privalov, 2020) and nuclear technology (see, e.g. Aalto et al., 2017), but most recently demonstrated by the *Sputnik V* vaccine (see, Sonin, 2021). Various other areas of both high and popular culture, or cultural fields concerning lifestyle such as cuisine or fashion, could and even should be studied in more detail. Moreover, the geographical focus in this volume has mainly been Western Europe and partly the former Soviet Union. Widening this geographical scope to other parts of the world, not least to China, would surely enrich our understanding of Russia's cultural statecraft.

The variety of domains and case studies discussed in this volume nevertheless reveal parallel patterns of cultural interaction between Russia and the outside world. Russia's determined aspiration to develop its cultural presence abroad is inherently coupled with its overall policy to boost its position as an independent great power and resist the Western hegemony. In many cultural domains, the links to the Kremlin are palpable, but a top-down approach would neglect the role of various intermediaries, such as wealthy oligarchs and other commercial actors, and the national pride of many cultural actors themselves in promoting Russian culture abroad, although many famous artists are also known as critics of the Kremlin. The strained relations with the West, aggravated by the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine, have tied cultural interactions more visibly to political agendas, but at the same time, many cultural domains have often been successfully separated from the tensions of high politics and preserved as more autonomous fields for bringing civil societies closer together. Undoubtedly, there are many examples of how culture serves as a bridge across the national divides, but many of Russia's cultural activities abroad function conspicuously as instruments tying the Russian-speaking diasporas together. The cultural domains that have been promoted by the Kremlin reflect the Russian self-image as their leaders perceive it, and they are often content with being able to strengthen that self-image as a civilised and normal country, rather than with achieving some tangible political goals.

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2 Higher education as a tool for cultural statecraft?

Sirke Mäkinen

Introduction

This chapter analyses Russian higher education (henceforth HE) from the perspective of cultural statecraft. Education, and particularly HE, has traditionally been regarded as one of the crucial cultural soft power assets possessed by a country. The high reputation of American universities and their international appeal have been widely understood as one of the major cultural background factors for US hegemony and status in the world. This has not gone unnoticed in Russia, which has actively promoted both the international recognition of its leading universities and created programmes for international students.

Since the mid-2000s, Russian state authorities have increasingly emphasised the importance of promoting Russian HE abroad, recruiting international students and taking part in the global education market. The importance of 'education export' (*ėksport obrazovaniia̐*) has been highlighted for example in the project for the Development of the Export Potential of the Russian System of Education (2017), according to which Russian universities should be able to attract more international students and generate more income from their tuition fees. This project stresses both the political and economic rationale for promoting Russian HE (see, Mäkinen, 2021b). Thus far, the economic rationale for the internationalisation of HE or even for 'education export' has not been at the forefront in Russia, but more research into the political motivations and beliefs that actually drive these activities should be carried out (see, Mäkinen, 2016). Russia's quest for recognition is one possible interpretation of its education diplomacy, as will be suggested in this article.

Education diplomacy refers to an activity in the internationalisation of education in which the education provider has a political motivation and goal (among other goals) when promoting its HE abroad, when recruiting international students, or engaging in international academic cooperation (on rationales for the internationalisation of education, see, de Wit, 2002). The political goal has to do with fulfilling interests in the education provider's foreign policy, for example. There is always an audience to which this

activity is addressed, or with which it is implemented – in this case, particularly potential students and their parents, academics or administrators and officials at different levels.

The key actors in Russia's education diplomacy have been the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation (henceforth *Rossotrudnichestvo*), together with ministries in the field as well as HE institutions (henceforth HEIs) themselves. As the part played by these authorities and state universities has been of key importance, the concept of cultural statecraft that emphasises the role of the state applies rather well to this field. In the field of HE, the Russian state has tried to manage the activities quite decisively according to political priorities that entail various foreign policy goals (Mäkinen, 2021b; see also, Chankseliani, 2020 on the role of the Russian state in 'education export' as a 'former coloniser').

The link between international education and foreign policy has been addressed in previous research dealing with soft power and public diplomacy or, more precisely, university soft power (Bertelsen, 2012), educational soft power (Wojciuk, Michałek, and Stormowska, 2015), education diplomacy (Mäkinen, 2016) and science diplomacy (Royal Society, 2010; Ruffini, 2020). Most studies addressing international HE as a part of a state's public diplomacy and soft power have focused on the United States, analysing how the US government has used international HE, such as educational exchanges, in its public diplomacy in order to promote its wider foreign policy goals and, conversely, the kind of impact that international HE has had on US foreign policy (Altbach and McGill Peterson, 2008; Nelles, 2008; Snow, 2008; Bertelsen, 2012; Pisarska, 2015). Along with the United States, there has been growing interest in studying Chinese HE and its internationalisation as a form of soft power (Yang, 2010; 2012; Wheeler, 2014; Lo and Pan, 2020). Russian scholars have been interested in the linkages between HE and soft power, too (e.g. Petrovich-Belkin et al., 2020 on the UK). Yet, the international dimensions of Russian HE and its political aspects have not been examined in detail (excluding Fominykh, 2008; 2017; Chepurina, 2014; Chankseliani, 2020; on Russian science diplomacy, see, e.g. Krasnyak, 2020).

In this chapter, I analyse how Russian HE is promoted abroad and, in particular, how key actors in the field see the international dimension of Russian HE from a political perspective. More precisely, I will look at how HE may (or might be imagined to) contribute to strengthening cultural statecraft, particularly regarding the political motivation for international education and hence education diplomacy. Education diplomacy can be seen as part of a state's cultural statecraft. I argue that in the context of Russia and its relations with others, the notion of recognition is crucial, also when analysing the motivation for education diplomacy. Recognition is linked to the notions of status and self-esteem. Self-esteem is gained when your activities are valued and respected by your peer group and by those from whom

you seek respect and recognition (see, Browning, 2015). HE can certainly be taken as an activity that is valued both inside and outside of Russia. In other words, it can be used in the quest for recognition. 'Recognition refers to the inter-subjective process through which agents are constituted as respected and esteemed members of a society, in this case the society of states, and is thus a co-determinate of their identity' (Nel, 2010). The analysis will reveal how these ideas about recognition, status and self-esteem may be helpful in understanding Russia's motivation for education diplomacy.

Moreover, I examine what kind of effect these education diplomacy policies and activities have in the selected target countries in the post-Soviet space and in the EU in terms of perceptions. I seek to answer the question of whether it is plausible for HE to be used as a (successful) tool of Russia's cultural statecraft. As argued in the Introduction to this book, this requires looking at the audiences, and how they perceive Russian activity in the given field of cultural statecraft.

The main primary data for this chapter consist of semi-structured expert interviews conducted by the author, coupled with an analysis of state-level documents, websites and media materials. In terms of interviewees, in Moscow, those who represented education providers, 14 altogether, were in higher administrative positions, such as vice-rectors, deputy vice-rectors, deputy deans, heads or deputy heads of Russian university international branch campuses (*filialy* in Russian), heads of international affairs departments and heads of relevant research centres. Moreover, the acquisition of Russian HE is studied in three post-Soviet countries – Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan – as well as three EU countries, one of which has also been a Soviet republic: Germany, Finland and Latvia. I interviewed 32 experts from the target countries[1] concerning their perceptions of Russian HE and its promotion and recruitment activities in 2017–2019. The interviewees comprised those working for government or private agencies connected with international education, researchers in the field of international education, and/or those familiar with Russian HE in that particular country, as well as Russia-based experts in the field of international education. They included vice-rectors, heads of international affairs departments, professors and associate professors and administrators in universities and heads or coordinators/specialists of particular agencies in the field of quality assurance or academic mobility. The experts were more keenly aware of perceptions towards Russian/Soviet HE in their country than individual students because they were accustomed to following the situation for many years, some for decades, and because they had read or written reports on the internationalisation of education or HE in their country, and had conducted research on this topic; in Russia, these experts are themselves engaged in the processes, planning or implementation of the promotion of Russian HE abroad or the recruitment of international students.

The country cases were chosen due to the numbers of students that they send to Russia (absolute and relative numbers in their respective

geographical/political group). In addition, from previous studies, we know that the post-Soviet space has been a priority in Russia's education diplomacy (Mäkinen 2016), that the EU has also been a key partner in cooperation in the field of education (Deriglazova and Mäkinen, 2019; 2021b), and that Germany and Finland have been among the most active EU partners. The country cases are also different enough when compared with each other in terms of the position of the Russian language, and political, economic and social relations with Russia to allow for interesting comparisons. All of these countries have a Russian-speaking minority,[2] but the position of the language varies greatly: in the post-Soviet cases, the Russian language has been or still is an important language of tuition in HE, whereas in Finland and Germany, this is not the case. The geographical proximity to Russia also played a role in the selection process: Belarus, Kazakhstan, Finland and Latvia share a border with Russia, and there are educational opportunities in close proximity on the other side of the border.

In the following sections, I will first outline the history of Russia's education diplomacy, then move on to the analysis of my primary data by introducing how the promotion of Russian HE is argued for by the Russian authorities and university representatives. I will also discuss how Russian HE is perceived in the target countries. The analysis shows first that there are no major differences between 'promoters' and target country representatives in how the rationales for Russia's actions are presented – a political rationale is certainly acknowledged, but it co-exists together with socio-economic and academic rationales. Second, according to the analysis, Russia's HE is only a limited tool of cultural statecraft outside of the Russian-speaking world. However, it is significant when seen as part of the bigger picture. As will be argued in the conclusions, Russia is seeking status in world politics, and in that context, the recognition of its role as an educational great power enters the picture (see also, Mäkinen, 2016).

Education diplomacy of the Soviet Union

The Soviet Union was active in education diplomacy during the Cold War. In particular, international education was part of the Cold War struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States (Tsvetkova, 2008); it was a 'battle for hearts and minds' (Katsakioris, 2019, p. 282). According to Tsvetkova (2008, p. 199), there were two main forms in which this was implemented: the first was to recruit students to American or Soviet HEIs, and the second was to try to expose students to 'ideas and practices in line with the dominant ideology of the American or the Soviet system', either in the United States or the Soviet Union, or in the target countries.

The Soviet Union recruited students from the 'Third World' (African, Asian and Latin American countries) in particular, and so-called satellite countries in Europe (Tromly, 2014; see also, Katsakioris, 2019) to universities in the Soviet Union. When recruiting, priority was given to those engaged

in an anti-imperialist struggle, those with a pro-communist mindset, and those with a worker or peasant background (Tsvetkova, 2008, p. 203). The Soviet Union also financially supported the establishment of special centres and HEIs where 'working-class youths' were provided with 'a historical materialist understanding of society' (ibid., p. 205). In addition, the Soviet Union trained 'the future technocratic elites' in Soviet vocational institutions or in 67 HEIs around the world, also built by the Soviet Union (ibid.). Soviet leaders hoped that Soviet-trained engineers would be appointed to leading positions in politics in their home countries, and that they would either oppose the old elite in countries not yet under Soviet rule, or 'become agents of Soviet domination in those countries that had previously been subject to the USSR' (Tsvetkova, 2008, p. 205). The latter has been called the 'Sovietization of the countries of people's democracies' (Tromly, 2014).

But did Soviet education diplomacy work, and do we have evidence of any results? Natalia Tsvetkova (2008) argues that Soviet education diplomacy was not as successful as that of the United States and refers to Russian government reports in which it is stated that only 5% of graduates from Soviet HEIs, recruited from 'lower status families', would have reached leading positions in their countries. Moreover, there is no research on whether those in leading positions would have worked in accordance with Soviet foreign policy goals. However, what we do know is that graduates from Soviet HEIs established oppositional political organisations or other socialist movements, or became the leaders of a coup d'état – for example in Guinea, Congo and Libya (Tsvetkova, 2008, p. 210). As a consequence, education diplomacy was successful if 'national dominant groups were loyal to Soviet ideology or local pro-socialist movements were ready to revolt to take power' (ibid.). As for Soviet attempts to Sovietize academic curricula or HEIs as a whole, they were, as a rule, confronted with considerable opposition and resistance in the target countries (Tsvetkova, 2018). International students were not interested in studying Marxism, and teachers in the target countries were not willing to give such lectures (ibid., p. 212; see also, Tromly, 2014). However, the image dimension of education diplomacy is neglected in these discussions, namely the meaning of HE for the status and self-esteem of the country as such, and for recognition as a great power (or superpower). In the following section, I will look at the contemporary context in the light of international student figures, followed by a discussion on Russian HE providers' perceptions of Russian HE and its promotion.

Evolution of the flows of international students in Russia

When we look at the figures, we can see that whereas the Soviet Union was one of the key recipient countries of international students in the world,[3] the situation changed rapidly in the 1990s. In the last whole academic year of the Soviet Union in 1990–1991, there were 2.8 million HEI students and 89,600 international students[4] in universities in the territory of the Russian
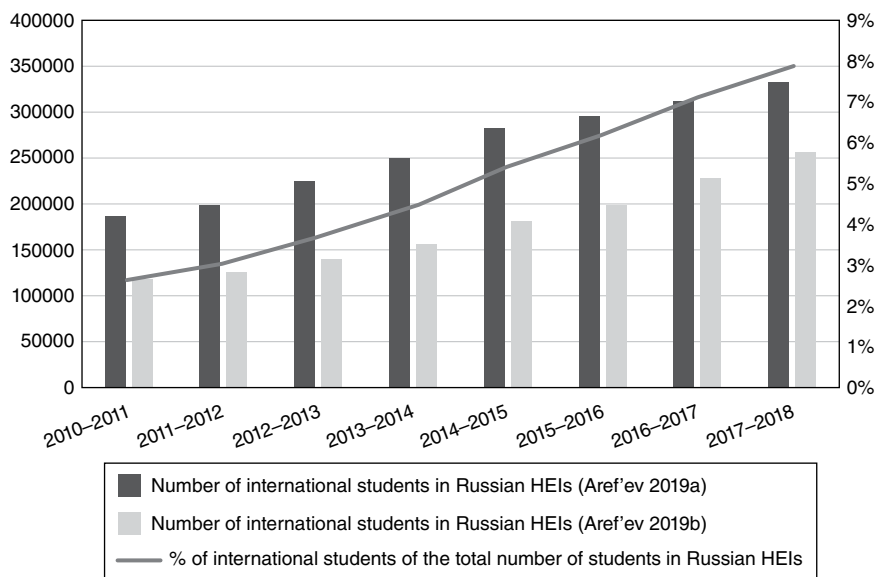
Figure 2.1 The number of international students in Russia in academic years 2010/2011–2017/2018 (Aref'ev, 2019a, p. 30[7]; 2019b, p. 21[8]).

Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, making up 3.17% of the total (Aref'ev, 2019a, p. 29). Almost the same percentage was reached again in 2011–2012, namely 3.05% (Aref'ev, 2019a, p. 30, please see the Figure 2.1).[5] However, in 2012–2013, there were almost 6.5 million students, so the absolute number (198,500) of international students was much higher compared to the 1990–1991 academic year. According to the latest available Russian statistics,[6] in 2017–2018, there were 334,500 international students (*ochnaĭa/ zaochnaĭa forma*) in Russian HEIs, which accounted for almost 8% of all students (Aref'ev, 2019a, p. 30). As we will see below in the analysis of the perceptions of Russian HE providers and receivers, one of the motivations for the recruitment of international students must be the huge decrease in the total number of HEI students due to the demographic situation in Russia.

As for the motivation of international students to go and study in Russia, the cost of HE is one possible incentive. In the 2017–2018 academic year, approximately 37% of full-time international students in Russian HEs at different levels (preparatory faculties, Bachelor, Specialist, Master, Candidate, Doctor) studied in Russian government-funded budget places, meaning that they did not pay for their tuition (Aref'ev, 2019a, p. 38). However, it should be mentioned that at the Bachelor's level, almost half (48.1%), and at the Master's and Candidate (Russian PhD) levels, more than half (54.9% and 62%, respectively) did not pay for their tuition (ibid.). In addition, there are huge differences as to the source country of students. Around 97% of international students studied in state HEIs (Aref'ev, 2019b, p. 10). The most

CIS countries	53,0%
Asia	25,2%
Middle East & North Africa	8,6%
Africa (other than North)	5,7%
Western Europe	2,4%
Latin America	2,1%
Baltic countries	1,3%
North America & Oceania	0,8%
Eastern Europe & Balkans	0,6%
Northern Europe	0,3%
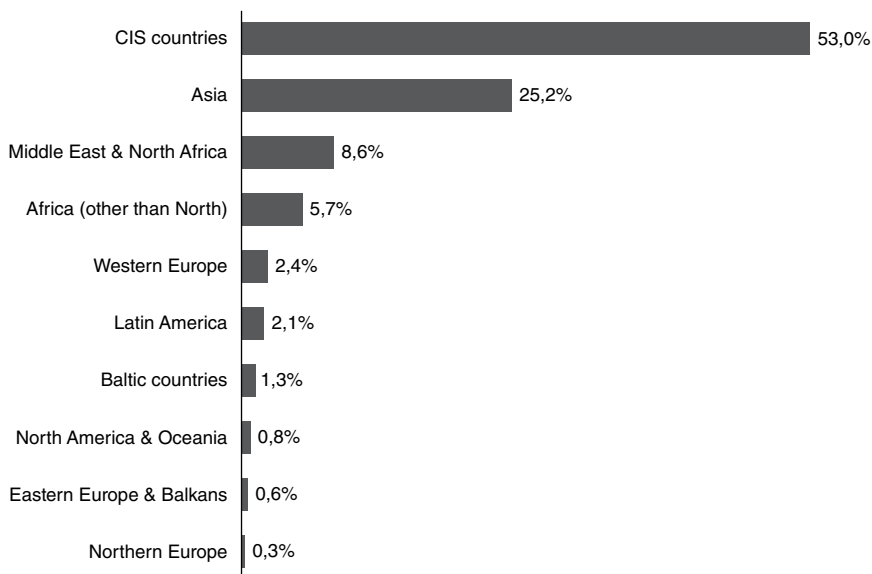
Figure 2.2 The source regions of full-time international students in Russia in 2017–2018 (reproduced from Aref'ev, 2019b, p. 29).

popular fields of study were 'engineering-technical' fields and medicine (Aref'ev, 2019b, p. 11).

In terms of the geographical range of sending countries during the Soviet period, the biggest numbers of students came from Mongolia, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Cuba, Bulgaria and Syria. By contrast, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, students from former Soviet republics turned 'foreign', and in the academic year 2017–2018, more than half (52.9% of 256,864) of international students came from the CIS (and Abkhasia and South Ossetia) and one quarter (25.1%) from Asian countries (Aref'ev, 2019a, pp. 23–29, please see the Figure 2.2). Kazakhstan, China and Turkmenistan were the top three sending countries to Russian universities in 2017–2018 (Aref'ev, 2019b, p. 9).

Russian education providers: Perceptions of Russian higher education and its promotion

How do Russian authorities and university representatives perceive the demand and need for Russian HE abroad, and how do they seek to promote it? To start with the discussion on demand, the Russian interviewees were all well aware of the fields that attract international applicants, as well as the countries in which there is the strongest interest in studying in Russia. Various reasons were suggested for why international students choose to study in a Russian university. The fields that attract are medicine,

engineering sciences, mathematics, physics, IT and arts-related fields such as music and fine arts, while the main sending countries are the CIS countries, China, India, and some other countries in Asia or Latin America. As far as Europe is concerned, interest is largely in short-term mobility and in studying a Russia-specific field of some sort. What draws international students to Russian universities is the Russian labour market; hence, according to the interviewees in Russia, there is an economically driven interest to study there.

If we then use an adapted model of the rationales for the internationalisation of education (de Wit, 2002) in order to address the question of why Russia promotes or should promote its HE abroad, we can see that both political and socio-economic reasons and goals for promotion and recruitment are represented. In addition, reasons and goals that may be classified as academic are stated. However, all of these are usually intertwined.

In Russia, the promotion of HE abroad has been connected with the term education export, and particularly with the recruitment of international students to study in Russian universities in the country, or in their branches and programmes abroad (see also, Chankseliani, 2020 on international branch campuses of Russian universities). Key documents regarding 'education export' include a draft of the Concept for Exporting Educational Services of the Russian Federation for the Period 2011–2020. The draft was published in 2010, but due to changes that occurred in Russian politics and the change of cadres in the Ministry of Education and Science, it never became a project and no implementation took place (RUS-5, 2017; RUS-11, 2018).[9] Another key document is a project document with the title Development of the Export Potential of the Russian Education System. It includes ambitious goals, such as if in 2017, according to this document, there were 220,000 foreign students in Russian HEIs, in 2020 there should be 310,000 and in 2025 as many as 710,000. The number of those paying for their tuition should increase from 135,000 in 2017 to 175,000 in 2020 and 405,000 in 2025. Revenues should increase from 84,744 million roubles to 135,370 million in 2020, and to 373,147 million in 2025. However, when launching this project, the then Prime Minister Medvedev (2017) argued that the main goal of the export of education for universities should not be to earn money, but should be understood as 'one of the strongest factors of people-to-people communication, broadening cultural contacts and attracting more talented people to the national economy who may stay in the country'. In other words, Medvedev presented political, cultural and socio-economic goals for education export.

The state-level idea of education diplomacy, that is, the political reasons for and goal of internationalisation (Mäkinen, 2016), is partly adopted at the level of universities as well (Mäkinen, 2021b). University representatives connected the need for its promotion and for attracting students from abroad with the concept of image. In addition, according to them, the image

Figure 2.3 People's Friendship University of Russia has been the key recipient of international students in Russia since the 1960s (Sirke Mäkinen).

of education is directly linked to the image of Russia. For example, one of the interviewees argued that 'if foreign partners learn to know the university [name of the university omitted], and if this experience is positive, then it is reflected as a positive image of the country' (RUS-2, 2016). Another interviewee was convinced of the power of personal experience to change the image of Russia: 'there are a lot of negative things about Russia […] young people who have been here, they understand that it is not so […] our former students […] they have maintained good relations towards Russia. They understand that there is propaganda, and then there are people' (RUS-9, 2018). This is also linked with the idea of graduates as 'ambassadors': 'Our graduates are ambassadors of our university, Russian language and Russian education as a whole' (RUS-8, 2017). There were direct references in the interviews to soft power as well; for example, it was declared that when educating the elites of foreign countries 'we are agents of soft power' (RUS-8, 2017). Similar to the Soviet period, this also had to do with disseminating values: 'any highly developed country, and particularly one of the leaders, to which Russia belongs, should disseminate its values to the world as much as possible' (RUS-10, 2016). As for interactions with alumni, the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia claims to have a well-functioning system of interaction with their Russian and international alumni (PFUR,

2015). In the interviews with different university representatives, some also argued that there is interaction with alumni at the faculty level, but that universities do not necessarily have an active alumni association for international graduates of the university as a whole as yet. At the national level, there is also a Global Alumni Association (*Vsemirnai͡a assot͡si͡at͡si͡a vypusknikov vysshikh uchebnykh zavedeniĭ)*, which tries to gather together all international graduates from Russian/Soviet HEIs and functions through national alumni alliances. It defines itself as an NGO but cooperates, for example, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, and the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs *Rosmolodëzh'* and *Rossotrudnichestvo* (Global Alumni Association, 2020). For example, national associations have organised regional alumni meetings in cooperation with *Rossotrudnichestvo*. The Association's mission is to 'strengthen the position of Russian language and culture abroad, and increase the competitiveness of Russian HEIs as international scientific-educational centres by forming a positive image of Russian education in the worldwide education market' (Global Alumni Association, 2020). The Association also refers to weaknesses in the alumni activities of Russian HEIs (or lack thereof) and argues for the institutionalisation of these activities (Global Alumni Association, 2019).

At the institutional level, it was not only the country's image that was important but the image or prestige of the respective HEI. This is linked with both academic and economic reasons for the recruitment of international students. For example, having international students was seen as a sign or proof of the quality of the university, a fact which, in turn, would attract more students – both from Russia and abroad. This is also connected with a highly utilitarian way of carrying out the recruitment of international students. HEIs must recruit international students because of indicators, connected with state funding and/or rising in the global university rankings. In addition, in terms of academic reasons, it was simply stated that 'there is no national science, there is only international science' (RUS-11, 2018), or that 'fundamental science cannot be done without international cooperation' (RUS-2, 2016).

In addition to the given image or prestige-related factors, there were also economic goals for recruitment. HEIs would like to recruit fee-paying international students and students that would serve Russian academia or the labour market in the future. However, as explained by one interviewee, due to the quota system (Russian government-funded and government-selected students from particular countries), HEIs often have to take students that they would otherwise not select and, in addition, cannot obtain any tuition fees from, and hence the 'commercial interest' is hard to implement in practice (RUS-7, 2016). This means that state interests – the political rationale – override the economic and academic rationales and institutional-level interests.

As for the practice of promoting Russian HE, this is mainly handled by *Rossotrudnichestvo* and the Russian Centres of Science and Culture coordinated by it, embassies, and HEIs themselves. Two main websites dedicated to disseminating information about Russian HE are *Study in Russia* and *Russia.study*. The latter is designed for tuition-free education that is a quota programme of the Russian government and managed by *Rossotrudnichestvo*. Another way of promoting Russian HE is to take part in various fairs and exhibitions dedicated to the subject, or to pay visits to universities or other educational institutions. In the post-Soviet space, school visits and Olympiads for school pupils are a key vehicle for recruitment (Mäkinen, 2021b; see also, Chankseliani, 2018).

Target countries: Perceptions of Russian higher education and its promotion

The main finding in this section is that, regardless of the target country, the experts were of the opinion that there is not/would not be much demand for Russia-provided HE outside the Russian-speaking world. However, some experts did argue that China, India and other Asian countries would be more significant source countries for students, particularly for English-taught programmes in Russia in the future. All experts also agreed that Russian HE is strongest in mathematics, physics and IT or, generally speaking, in what they called either natural, fundamental or exact sciences.

According to the interviewees, one of the reasons for the lack of demand for Russian HE was its 'traditional', 'highly centralised', 'conservative' and 'hierarchical top-down system', also mirrored in approaches to teaching. As one of the interviewees put it, Russian HE is 'a frozen monument' (KYR-5, 2018). Regardless of Russian authorities' attempts to tackle problems connected with corruption (e.g. by closing down many branches of Russian universities – both state-run and particularly private ones; the introduction of a Unified State Exam, see, Denisova-Schmidt and Leontyeva, 2014), the selling of diplomas and other corrupt practices were also discussed as a feature that had a negative effect on the perceptions of Russian HE (on academic integrity in Russia, see, Denisova-Schmidt, 2016). However, it was also recognised that Russian HE has gone and is still going through a significant phase of modernisation (including optimisation, a revised hierarchisation of the HE field and new funding schemes). In addition, huge gulfs in the resources, opportunities and quality of education were identified between different universities (leading universities vs. the rest) and between different fields of studies. In particular, it was mentioned that social sciences and humanities are either not supported or that they lag behind.

In the interview data gathered from experts in the target countries, the reasons given for why Russia wants to promote its HE abroad in order to recruit international students did not differ from those given by Russian

university representatives or the authorities themselves. First of all, they cited (geo)political motives: to maintain or strengthen influence in the country in question or worldwide, which is linked to what was referred to about the search for status and recognition. Oftentimes it was mentioned, particularly in the post-Soviet space, that worldviews and networks are formed during school and university years, and hence the idea of 'Russian ambassadors' was duly absorbed (see also, Mäkinen, 2016). This is also linked to the question of external image or reputation, and the positioning of the country: one cannot claim to be a great power if HE is not respected at home and abroad (Mäkinen, 2021a; on the connection to university rankings, see, Hazelkorn, 2014).

Other reasons for promoting Russian HE abroad and recruiting international students were of a socio-economic (and academic) nature. For example, it was argued that due to the demographic situation in Russia, the country needs students in its universities and job market, and also wants to attract the best brains and talent to Russia in order to survive global competition. As mentioned above, the number of Russian HEI students dropped significantly in the 2010s, and hence, as one of the survival strategies, Russian HEIs and Russian society as a whole would need to acquire more international students and talent. This was more strongly emphasised in the target countries than in Russian universities. The situation is not unique to Russia, however, as most developed societies face demographic problems, and thus there has been much discussion about the competition for talent or the 'great brain race' (see, e.g. Sá and Sabzalieva, 2017). Another reason was the quality of education – international students and staff were regarded as a significant factor in improving the quality of education, or an important indicator of the good quality of a university. This is linked to the third reason identified, a hybrid academic and economic rationale, which could be characterised as more cynical, and instrumental: Russian HEIs need international students in order to obtain funding, in order to appear in global university rankings. In other words, the number of international students is an indicator. As shown above, this claim was also made by Russian university representatives.

The main reasons given by experts for any shortfall in global demand (or demand in their own country) for HE provided by Russian HEIs included the quality of education (or the way that it is delivered: organisation of education, pedagogical approaches), the language of tuition and the political situation in the country. However, the first two reasons were also the ones given to explain why Russian HE was attractive in the post-Soviet space, namely relatively good quality if compared with the target countries, and Russian as the language of tuition. In the post-Soviet space, the political dimension did not play such a significant role; economic attractiveness (free tuition, job market with opportunities) and social or cultural links seemed to be more important. In Kyrgyzstan, political relations with Russia were also suggested as a positive factor regarding the attractiveness

of Russian HE. However, in Kazakhstan in particular, there were also concerns about racism and security in Russian society, namely attacks on Kazakhs in Moscow.

Based on the analysis of expert interviews, I would argue, as could have been anticipated, that the two cases – the post-Soviet space on the one hand and the EU member states on the other – represent two very different contexts for Russian HE, and for opportunities for using HE as a tool for cultural statecraft. The cases studied among the former republics of the Soviet Union can still be viewed in part as being within the sphere of Russian influence in the field of HE (see also, Chankseliani, 2020), or as feeling vulnerable vis-à-vis Russian HE and HEIs. Specifically, the dependence has to do with Kyrgyzstan, which has been described as a country reliant on Russia, both economically and politically, in the sense that a large percentage of the Kyrgyz population emigrate to Russia and a large part of their economy is based on the remittances sent by migrants from Russia (see, Malyuchenko, 2015; Agadjanian and Gorina, 2019). The dependence has also been seen in the field of education, in that previously (and to some extent even today), many practices and features of legislation have been 'copied' from Russia, as pointed out by the Kyrgyzstani interviewees. This 'client state' position of Kyrgyzstan is refuted by Stefanie Ortmann (2018), however, who refers to the concept of seductive power. There seems to be either willingness or pragmatic reasoning in the Russia–Kyrgyzstan relationship in the field of education as well, as one of the interviewees also mentioned that 'we cannot afford to have bad relationships with Russia' (KYR-6, 2018). However, according to the experts, Kyrgyzstan is not 'picky' in this respect, welcoming different models and practices depending on the source of funding or sponsorship.

If we look at the target countries more closely, Kazakhstan is a very popular source of student recruitment and, in this sense, as in Kyrgyzstan, Russian HEIs were seen as a threat. Genuine fears were expressed in both countries about Russian HEIs taking their best students and, particularly in the Kyrgyzstani case, that those students would then remain in Russia and obtain Russian citizenship. This was evident in the interviews, for example, when looking at the reasons for and goals of promotion and recruitment. There were references to the demographic situation in Russia, to the need for the 'best' or 'smart' brains, and to Russian labour market needs. For instance, 'Russia is also ageing while our demography is rather favourable' (KAZ-4, 2017). These countries cannot offer education free of charge, the majority of students have to pay tuition fees, and therefore the competition is not seen as fair between them and Russian HEIs (or other international players). For example, it was argued that in Kazakhstan, only 20% of students study on a scholarship (KAZ-5, 2017).

Money-making was put forward as one of the reasons for Russian HEI recruitment, but this entails not only direct revenue from tuition fees but also indirect revenue in the form of state funding when international

students are regarded as one of the indicators of a university's status. It was also abundantly clear that Kazakhstani and Kyrgyzstani experts were aware of (geo)political factors: 'Maintaining its influence is important for Russia, and universities are one way to do this' (KYR-8, 2018), or 'they want to be leaders everywhere […] in the military sphere, education sphere […] they position themselves as a great power' (KAZ-5, 2017).

In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Russian recruitment was described as aggressive. Entrance examinations are organised in schools and universities, and a quota selection is also organised by *Rossotrudnichestvo*. For example, recruitment was defined as 'aggressive international politics trying to attract students from Kazakhstan […] they leave the country without even taking the UNT[10] […]' (KAZ-2, 2017). However, there were also claims that the Kazakhstani government supports Russian recruitment: 'The Ministry promotes Russian education on their website […] they have information about (Russian) scholarships' (KAZ-4, 2017). In Kyrgyzstan, entrance examinations for Russian universities are also organised, for instance, in the premises of the Slavic University (KYR-3, 2018) or at secondary schools (KYR-6, 2018; see also, Chankseliani, 2018). In the case of Belarus, it was mentioned that no specific promotion is required, as Russian HEIs can rely on tradition and the reputation of Russian HE (BEL-1, 2017). The Olympiads, a competition for students in certain fields of study, are also an active form of recruitment (also in Central Asia).

Kazakhstan clearly tries to diversify its educational cooperation and provide more opportunities for Kazakhstani students (on the Bolashak programme, see also, del Sordi, 2017). For example, there is a trilingual policy in Kazakhstan (on the situation in secondary schools, see, Kuzhabekova, 2019) whereby students learn Kazakh, Russian and English, and degree programmes in HE are offered in all three languages. 'As for the future, thanks to the trilingual policy, Russian HE may lose part of its attraction in Kazakhstan, with an increasing number of those fluent in English looking for other alternatives' (KAZ-2, 2017). As argued by one interviewee (KAZ-2, 2017) studying at a Russian university is a choice for those Kazakhstani students who do not know English, who do not have the money to go and study elsewhere (Russian HEIs offer tuition-free education), who live near the Russian border (i.e. in Northern Kazakhstan) and who may be considering emigrating to Russia. Similar points were repeated in other interviews too. For example, it was also mentioned that 'mostly our students look to the West', so if they could afford it (and had a good enough knowledge of English), they would apply to the US, UK, Germany, Finland, Norway or Asian countries such as Singapore or Malaysia (KAZ-3, 2017); or 'they do not want to go to Russia in particular, but rather to obtain higher education so it plays no role where […] and with as few expenses as possible' (KAZ-1, 2017). Moreover, in Kyrgyzstan, it was claimed that few show interest in going to Russia to study before hearing about the scholarships that are available (KYR-9, 2018).

However, it was also mentioned that Russian speakers want to send their children to study in Russia (KYR-2, 2018). One interviewee attributed this to the lower quality of Kyrgyzstani HE compared to that of Russia, and to the fact that career prospects are unsatisfactory in Kyrgyzstan. The good quality of Russian education was mentioned more often by interviewees in Kyrgyzstan than in Kazakhstan as the reason for choosing to study in Russia. Furthermore, social ties were mentioned more often in this connection. In the case of Belarus, government policies pushed students interested in social sciences or humanities towards Russian universities; the government supports natural sciences and IT, and there are very few tuition-free places available in social sciences and humanities in Belarus (BEL-1, 2017): 'Lawyers, economists, foreign languages, they go to Russia' (ibid.).

What should definitely not be overlooked is that Russian universities or joint universities with Russian participation are not the only international players in the post-Soviet space in the field of HE. Universities in Turkey, the United States and China (or their governments) should also be seen as important players in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Such universities might be private or based on government-level agreements, or the governments of these countries or the universities themselves may offer scholarships to students to go and study in these countries. For example, Kazakhstan has Kazakh-Turkish University, Kazakh-British University, Kazakh-American University and Kazakh-German University (interviews in Kazakhstan in 2017). The main Russian university in Kazakhstan is the MGU branch campus in Astana.

In Kyrgyzstan, in addition to Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University, there is Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University, Ala-Too International University (Turkey), Eastern University (International Kuwait University), Qatar University, the American University in Central Asia (funded by Soros), Kyrgyz-Uzbek University, Kyrgyz-Russian Academy of Education and the Aga Khan University (interviews in 2018; Chokusheva and Sirmbard, 2017, p. 4). Chinese actors are active in offering scholarships for studies in China. Some foreign actors also have schools or secondary schools. In Belarus, there are branches of Russian universities, while Polish and Chinese universities, for example, actively promote their educational offerings in the country (BEL-2, 2017). The role of the EU and EU member states is also important in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan but in a very different way. It is usually a question of short-term mobility, curriculum development or other forms of academic cooperation, and not necessarily the recruitment of degree-seeking students, and certainly not of establishing universities in those countries.

Having so many international players in the field of HE is also the major difference between the EU member states and the post-Soviet states studied here. In Finland, Germany and Latvia, there are almost no foreign universities. In Latvia, this has to do with the accreditation requirements, and in Finland and Germany also with tuition-free education offered to EU citizens.

For those EU member states with geographical proximity to the Russian Federation and with Russian-speaking minorities, the situation is also very different in the sense of vulnerability and attraction. This was also reflected in the expert interviews; the instrumental values of international recruitment by Russian HEIs were emphasised (rankings, funding), along with political, economic (global business, FIN-3, 2018; business model like elsewhere, GER-3, 2018) and academic reasons (better quality, internationalisation as a value in itself). In Finland, Germany and Latvia, for the majority of the population, studying for a degree in Russia is not usually an option, and the promotion of Russian HE is not visible, at least to Finnish-speaking, German-speaking or Latvian-speaking citizens. However, Finnish and German experts noted that the Russian government or HEIs had been taking a more active role in international professional or student fairs in recent years. In Finland, the Russian Centre of Science and Culture is tasked with taking care of the promotion of Russian HE, but 'it is not active, and there does not seem to be any modern marketing know-how […] they do not speak young people's language when communicating with them' (FIN-4, 2017). The most active promoter is the Finland-Russia Society, but it promotes Russian language studies in Finnish schools and Russian language courses in Russia (ibid.), not HE or degree studies. In Germany, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) promotes educational cooperation and mobility between Russia and Germany, but not degree studies in Russia.

Experts in these three EU member states were of the opinion that Russian HE represents an option only for Russian-speakers (or those 'searching for their roots' in this part of the world), those specialising in Russia in their studies, for example in Russian history, language, literature or certain niche fields unavailable in these countries, or fields where the competition is fierce, such as the arts or medicine in Finland. Even though it was admitted that the quality of education in physics, mathematics, IT and other engineering fields might be high in Russia, the language of tuition does not encourage students from these countries to consider this option. In addition, the quality in social sciences and humanities in particular raised concerns (also in the post-Soviet cases): 'I would recommend a very limited number of universities to Western students […] Russian programmes lack scientific topics' (GER-1, 2018). However, it was emphasised that 'the biggest problem abroad (regarding Russian HE, studies in Russia) is the lack of trust in the system […] the huge amount of corruption' (FIN-1, 2018).

In general, the free HE in Germany and Finland does not generate any financial motivation for degree studies abroad, with mobility providing a stronger incentive. As far as studying for a degree is concerned, the UK, Sweden and Estonia are the most preferred options for Finns (Opetushallitus, 2019), and Austria, the Netherlands and the UK are the most popular destinations among Germans (Statistisches Bundesamt [Destatis], 2019). In Latvia, which charges EU citizens as well as its own citizens tuition fees, the

possibility to pay less in Russia might be a reason, along with social ties. The political situation may also pose a problem – a couple of experts emphasised this in the interviews in Finland and Latvia. However, in Germany, it was mentioned that Russia has become more interesting for short-term mobility, as a result of '"bad" news having a marketing effect', for example (GER-5, 2018). Among these three EU countries, Latvia was the only one that had hosted branches of Russian universities, or where Russian universities had tried to set up a branch, but all of these were closed by 2007 (LAT-5, 2019; Cf. Chankseliani, 2020).

Conclusions

Overall, HE has not become a highly politicised field in Russia's external relations despite its recognised importance as a dimension of a country's soft power, and despite forming the backdrop to a strong ideological battle that was carried out in the educational field throughout the Cold War. Both the Russian education providers and education receivers abroad defined the reasons for and goals of the promotion of Russian HE and recruitment of international students to Russian HEIs in a similar vein: there is both a (geo)political motive for this (maintain the connections, make students 'Russian ambassadors', a quest for recognition) and socio-economic reasons such as the demographic situation in Russia, or a need for the 'best brains' to guarantee the competitiveness of the country. Instrumental value was also recognised in both groups: Russian HEIs need international students to secure their funding and their reputation. As for the question of whether HE is a significant tool of cultural statecraft, I first addressed the issue of how Russian HE was perceived abroad, for example, and whether and why there was any demand for HE provided by Russian HEIs.

To summarise, Russia can arguably be classified as a significant regional player in the field of HE, particularly in the Russian-speaking sphere in the former territory of the Soviet Union. In addition, certain fields in some leading universities might be attractive worldwide – if the language of tuition is not Russian. The EU member states case shows some evidence of this. The factors that have prevented Russia from becoming a global player in HE are the quality of education (or reputation regarding quality and way of organising HE and the learning process), the language of tuition and the political situation in the country. However, the quality of education and teaching offered in Russia make it an attractive option in the post-Soviet space, in addition to the Russian job market and particularly in terms of being provided free of charge by Russian HEIs.

Coming back to the more theoretical question of the precise way in which HE may (or might be imagined to) contribute to strengthening cultural statecraft, particularly regarding the political motivation for international education and thus education diplomacy, my analysis provides some proof

of the claim that recognition is one of the goals that Russia has aspired to, as has also been argued in previous studies (see, Neumann, 2005; Clunan, 2009). In this case, recognition is connected to status and self-esteem. If we think about the 'value' of HE, we may argue that being respected and having a high status in HE (that is, measured in terms of the number of international students, staff, citations, ranking positions, etc.) constitutes part of Russia's great-power status. In other words, Russia seeks recognition (by different means – tangible and intangible) of its status, including educational great-power status (Mäkinen, 2016). Russia cannot be a great power in the contemporary context of the knowledge economy without having a respected HE sector. This status forms part of the national self-esteem. Without a recognised great-power status, Russia would be deprived of its self-esteem. The same applies to the institutional level; universities seek recognition of their status in the global education market, and this status (recognition from peers, ranking positions, international students and staff) is a building block of their self-esteem.

When it comes to the influence of education diplomacy, it is even more complicated to prove. The Russian authorities may wish to exert influence in the long-term, as argued above about the Soviet period, and they may aspire to train those who would be in leading positions in their countries of origin, duly making a positive contribution to the relations between the two countries, or more widely to the role of Russia in world politics. However, they cannot really claim to have succeeded in this endeavour during the period of the Russian Federation as the numbers of international students only started to increase in the late 2000s, and those students are now in their thirties, and not necessarily in positions that their 'trainers' would like to see. It follows that the authorities have to resort to giving examples from the Soviet past as evidence of their success in education diplomacy. As a significant proportion of international students come from the post-Soviet space (excluding the Baltic states), this may nevertheless be taken as a tool of influence in that particular territory.

To conclude, it is highly unlikely that HE could successfully be used as a tool for strengthening Russia's cultural statecraft globally, although regionally, in the post-Soviet space and particularly in the Russian-speaking world – vis-à-vis Russian speakers – it may be classified as a relevant tool. When thinking about the future of Russia's influence in HE in this region, the Russian language clearly plays a significant role (Mäkinen, 2021b). As for the EU (and more globally), and seeking recognition from the non-Russian-speaking world, it would be important to introduce teaching in English in those fields that are already respected among experts in these countries. Moreover, approaches to teaching and learning should be modernised, along with management cultures. That said, it might be that recognition in the field of HE will not suffice when it comes to positively transforming Russia's image, if the political situation remains the same. Without any significant democratisation of the regime and a less aggressive foreign policy,

HE reforms are unlikely to bring about a favourable outcome as to the level of recognition that Russia seeks from others, particularly in the 'Western world'.

Notes

1. Even though these six countries are labelled as 'target countries', this only refers to the approach taken here, namely focusing on Russia as an HE provider and international student recruiter, and how these activities are perceived abroad. The respective countries themselves are also HE providers for and active recruiters of international students, either regionally or even globally.
2. In official statistics, either the percentage of ethnic Russians, that of Russian citizens, or that of Russian speakers is given, and therefore, the figures are not completely comparable with each other. The percentage of Russians is as follows: Germany 0.3% (Statistisches Bundesamt [Destatis], 2020), but the percentage of Russian speakers must be higher because of Ukrainians, for example, and those who have emigrated from Kazakhstan; Kazakhstan 19% (Komitet, 2020) and Kyrgyzstan 6.2% (Natsionalnyi, 2020). The percentage of Russian speakers is as follows: Finland 1.5% (Tilastokeskus, 2019), which is the largest percentage among non-native Finnish speakers, Latvia (as a mother tongue) 36%, able to speak Russian 50% (CSB, 2017); 80% in Kazakhstan read and write Russian, 94% understand Russian (Zakon, 2010); while in Kyrgyzstan, more than 80% understand Russian (Stan Radar, 2013).
3. In 1989/90, 10.8% of all international students studied in a Soviet HEI, that is, the Soviet Union occupied the third position after the United States (35.9%) and France (11.6%) (Aref'ev and Sheregi, 2014).
4. Russian sources refer to 'foreign students' (*inostrannye studenty*), which I have replaced here with 'international students'.
5. Aref'ev (2019b) gives different figures for international students (see, Figure 2.1); the explanation for this discrepancy must be that in 2019a there were both part-time and full-time students, and in 2019b, only full-time students. Cf. Aref'ev (2019a, p. 18; 2019b, p. 8).
6. UNESCO statistics provide lower numbers. However, not all necessary figures are available from public UNESCO sources; therefore I have systematically referred to Russian statistics.
7. Dinamika obshchei chislennosti inostrannykh grazhdan, obuchavshikhsya v vuzakh RSFSR/RF v 1950/1951-2017/2018 akademicheskikh godakh po ochnoi i zaochnoi forme i izmenenie ikh udel'nogo vesa v sostave vsekh studentov rossiiskikh vuzov [Dynamics of the total number of foreign citizens studying in HEIs of the RSFSR/RF from the academic year 1950–1951 to the academic year 2017–2018 either full time or part time and the change in their share of the total number of students in Russian HEIs].
8. Chislennost' inostrannykh grazhdan, obuchavshikhsya v rossiiskikh vuzakh v 2006/2007–2017/2018 uchebnykh godakh, chelovek. [The number of foreign citizens studying in Russian HEIs from the academic year 2006–2007 to the academic year 2017-2018, a number of people).
9. In order to guarantee anonymity, I refer to interviewees with a country code and a number. RUS = Russia, BEL = Belarus, KAZ = Kazakhstan, KYR = Kyrgyzstan, FIN = Finland, GER = Germany, and LAT = Latvia.
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3 Fine arts and international relations

Russian museum diplomacy

Julia Bethwaite

Introduction

The practice of international art exhibitions has encouraged museums to establish and maintain international relations with foreign audiences, experts and diplomats. Today, museums have become more globally mobile than ever before: the Louvre, the Guggenheim and the State Russian Museum – or, for short, the Russian Museum – are among the many cultural institutions that have extended their international operations by establishing satellite museums abroad (see, e.g. Goff, 2017). This practice has been a growing trend among both public and private museums operating in multiple domains. It has generally been motivated by additional income and brand awareness for the museums and advancement of the cultural diplomacies of their home states (Davidson and Pérez-Castellanos, 2019, pp. 1–2).

Museums have typically been seen as cultural institutions, but they can also be perceived as political sites. As Christine Sylvester (2009, p. 184) has noted, museums are spaces of power. They can be central platforms for statecraft (De Cesari, 2019, p. 166). Moreover, in the context of neoliberal policies and the commercialization of culture, museums have been increasingly seen as economic assets, not least as famous tourist attractions. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social fields (e.g. Bourdieu, 1993), museums engage a variety of fields, namely the bureaucratic, cultural, economic, political and social, and they can be viewed to attract and possess respective capital and power. Although the political role of many museums has traditionally been analyzed in their national contexts, the trends of globalization and internationalization have transformed museums into possible vehicles for states to strengthen their nation branding and transmit political messages across national borders.

The Russian state has also promoted the international role of its museums. Russian museums have been engaged in international cultural exchanges, from traveling art exhibitions to the restoration of cultural sites such as in Palmyra, Syria (RIA Novosti, 2019). Still, fine arts, including museums, have not yet been perceived as being 'at the forefront of Russia's cultural statecraft', as have, for example, education, media and sports (Forsberg and

Smith, 2016, p. 131). However, as the arts have increasingly been playing 'a key role in Russia's resurgence' (McDaniel, 2015, p. 220), the museums' objective to increase their international presence has also reflected the interest of the Russian state to promote its national culture abroad (The Russian Government, 2016). Russian art museums are thus intriguing cases to examine within the framework of cultural statecraft and museum diplomacy.

This chapter discusses the Russian Museum's first European branch in Málaga, which was established in response to Málaga's mayor's request in 2015. Even if the project was not initiated by the Russian state, it has been in line with the broader diplomatic purpose of the Russian government. The satellite museum in Málaga shows exhibitions of Russian art borrowed from the Russian Museum, and it thus symbolizes a Russian cultural presence, promotes mutual understanding, fosters international relations and generally benefits the image of the Russian state. Furthermore, the satellite museum has the potential to act as a mechanism of position-takings aimed at different fields, such as the field of power, by being instrumentalized by different actors.

Considering the museums' connection to the Russian state, and thus their limited autonomy, the concept of cultural statecraft can work well in framing museums' agency and their effects on international relations. However, top-down cultural statecraft does not grasp all of the central dynamics involved in museum diplomacy. It would be reductionist to focus solely on state actors involved with the museums. With their international art exhibitions and expert exchanges, and a mix of private and public funding, museums create spaces of interaction between a variety of different fields and actors, from corporate sponsors to national embassies. Moreover, museums are unique transnational actors due to their structures, purposes and influence (Goff, 2017). Their complex nature is illustrated by the suggested new definition of a 'museum', according to which 'museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures', formulated by the International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2019). This definition has received also a lot of criticism for its ideological language and has thus not been confirmed yet (see also, Hudson, 1999; ICOM, 2019).

In this chapter, I will first briefly discuss the central concepts of my research and present historical and contemporary reviews of Russian and Soviet cultural diplomacies. After framing my research, I will introduce the case study – the Russian Museum's satellite branch in Spain – and move on to examining it through two different perspectives. First, I will discuss Russian attitudes towards it, namely those of political actors, museum experts from different museums, corporate sponsors and the central facilitators of art exhibitions. Second, I will examine Russian and Spanish receptions of the museum project in Málaga in order to assess whether it has been successful and can be considered a form of museum diplomacy. My analysis will also consider the value that the satellite museum brings

to the Russian state, and what Russian state officials and museum experts think about the relationship between such cultural projects and national politics.

The data for the case study consist of state-level documents, media materials in Russian, English and Spanish, as well as interviews in Russian and English with museum and state officials, artistic experts and sponsors. Twenty-one interviews were collected in Russia and Spain in 2017 and 2018. Interviews with the Russian actors will be presented anonymously, but their connections to different institutions – or *domains* or *fields* – will be mentioned. Together with the personal interviews, I recorded public presentations of museum officials at the annual Intermuseum conference in Moscow in 2017 and the Saint Petersburg International Cultural Forum in 2018. The media materials from sources in Russian have been collected using the Integrum database, and the media materials in English and Spanish from the Google and Nexis Uni databases. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software.

Museums in international relations

Museums perform a role in international relations (Sylvester, 2009; Aleksandrov, 2012; Koksal, 2014) and there is an emergent field of museum studies in the discipline of International Relations (e.g. Luke, 2002; Gray, 2015; Goff, 2017; Grincheva, 2019; 2020). Art museums represent and constitute both visible and hidden elements of international relations (Sylvester, 2009, p. 137). Nations are performed in national museums, making museums political spaces that reflect 'local conditions of nationalism and wealth, international connections, identity and competition, individual and corporate interests, political and economic relationships, diplomatic efforts' (Knell, 2011, p. 6). Furthermore, museums can function as platforms for statecraft, producing and reproducing the nation and its institutions (De Cesari, 2019). They can also shape public opinion with international effects (Aleksandrov, 2012). For example, the Russian authorities have accused American museums of distorting 'facts' about historical events, such as the World War II (Medinskiĭ, 2020).

Museums can be closely connected to and instrumentalized by hegemonic forces and dominant social groups (Marchart, 2020). National museums are related to nation-states and, considering that one of the state's functions is the production and canonization of social classifications (Bourdieu, 2017, p. 61), museums can become instruments in this process. Art carries a social function in the context of museums, where it 'can produce shared meanings, cultural capital reserves, and aestheticized lifestyles that promote cohesion, economic growth, and political stability' (Luke, 2002, p. xxi). Museums are collective expressions of what a society perceives to be valuable in culture, and these institutions can thus offer spaces for reflection and debate on national and social values (Bishop, 2014, p. 75).

Considering their value-imposing and nation-building powers, national museums fit into Pierre Bourdieu's concept of a bureaucratic field. The state constitutes hierarchies and embodies symbolic power, which is based on the accumulation of various forms of capital, one of which is cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1994, pp. 2–4). Culture – so museums as well – is centrally related to state power, as culture constructs national identity by unifying the people through a legitimate, dominant culture, which consequently allows the state to manage mental structures and impose categories of thought (ibid., pp. 7–8). National museums can be influenced by the bureaucratic field and become implementers and reproducers of state power. By establishing satellite museums abroad, national museums can extend this process beyond the borders of a nation-state.

Besides the bureaucratic field, there are also other fields related to the mobility of museums. Lee Davidson and Leticia Pérez-Castellanos (2019, p. 10) have pointed out three domains that function as drivers of international art exhibitions: the diplomatic, mission and market domains. These domains can coexist simultaneously. The diplomatic domain is connected to a state's foreign policy objectives and can thus engage state actors. The mission domain is related to institutional activities, such as strengthening of a museum's brand and fostering of partnerships with other cultures and institutions (ibid., p. 11). The market domain functions according to a market logic, and it is inherently connected to sources of revenue, such as sponsors and tourism (ibid.). A mix of different domains influences production of international exhibitions, and the idea of three domains illustrates that there are various cross-domain relations and agendas involved, which are necessary to take into account (ibid., p. 9).

Culture has functioned as a context to promote not only political but also commercial interests between different countries (Wang, 2018, p. 734). Yunci Cai (2013, p. 140) notes in her study about Singapore–France cultural collaboration that the museums served, besides diplomatic objectives, as 'a means to achieve economic and societal objectives' and forge city branding. In her case study on British museums, Melissa Nisbett (2013, p. 571) found that while the museums used political rhetoric to secure funding for their international activities, they were interested mainly in organizational, not political, objectives, acting 'as the makers of policy, its implementers, and the recipients of the funding'. However, while this highlights museums' active agency in finding funding, it is also worth considering other driving forces beyond the financial.

Museums function under different funding schemes, often involving both public and private sources. Decreasing government support of the arts has been a wider trend in many countries (e.g. Alexander, 2018). Some museums have been seen as victims, and some as executors, of 'predator-capitalism', being affected by the commercially driven art market practices and becoming financially reliant on art patrons and corporate sponsors. Philanthropic practices, such as supporting the arts, legitimize and reproduce elites

in a society, being a lucrative activity for the financial establishment (Schimpfössl, 2019, p. 107). Museums can thus be used as vehicles of elites' social games and power plays, helping to change and secure actors' positions in the field of power. Supporting the arts can lead to both direct and indirect consequences related to politics and power (see, e.g. Bethwaite and Kangas, 2019).

When museums fall in between state and private sponsorship it affects their soft power role. As museums gain access to international resources and establish connections with international audiences, they are less dependent on the support or patronage from their national governments. Natalia Grincheva (2020, p. 110) suggests that, by attracting international funding, 'museums are capable of generating soft power on behalf of their nation-states, precisely because they act autonomously from their respective governments on the global stage'. Hence, museums that seem autonomous and execute their own agendas internationally still foster cultural diplomacy.

The instrumentalization of culture and museums: Soviet and Russian experiences

Culture in general, and the fine arts in particular, occupied a central place in the Russian self-image already in tsarist times. This approach was not abandoned after the communist revolution in 1917, and the Soviet Union was the first country in the world to establish a Ministry of Culture, doing so in 1953. Already before that, culture had been politically instrumentalized to serve the Soviet state (Khestanov, 2013, p. 35). Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin acknowledged that culture was one of the most important elements in the construction of socialism, and a 'cultural revolution' was thus a crucial accompaniment to the regime change (ibid., p. 40). To increase people's loyalty to the new regime, cultural policies aimed to educate the masses; the state's political agenda became cultural in nature, and cultural agendas gained political undertones (Kagarlit͡skiĭ, 2013, p. 55).

Together with the new regime, Soviet museums acquired explicit ideological functions (Zabalueva, 2017, p. 41). For example, the State Tretyakov Gallery had to begin building its art exhibitions according to the new ideology, aiming to cultivate a Marxist worldview among the public and to have an agitational meaning (Kovalenskai͡a, 2015, p. 307). In the early 1930s, the Tretyakov Gallery started using explanatory panels next to artworks, describing their contexts, historical conditions and class backgrounds, thus making art approachable to the masses and decreasing museums' elitism (Ėfit͡s, 2020). Art museums were supposed to expose the role of art in the class struggle, teaching the audience how to apply art as a 'weapon' (Kovalenskai͡a, 2015, p. 307). The artistic qualities of Soviet performers were meant to symbolize the progressive nature of the regime (Gould-Davies, 2003, p. 208). During the Cold War, culture played a significant role in the ideological rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States. As

Nigel Gould-Davies notes, underlining the political nature of cultural relations, '[t]he 'low politics' of cultural relations were, in fact, high politics' (ibid., p. 212).

An important element of Soviet cultural diplomacy was VOKS [*Vsesoi͡uznoe obshchestvo kul'turnoĭ svi͡azi s zagranit͡seĭ*], the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, which existed from 1925 until 1957. VOKS was a seemingly autonomous entity that focused on managing the image of the Soviet Union and cultivating relationships with foreign publics. It acknowledged the potential of arts in the practices of cultural statecraft, and had departments for different cultural genres, such as the graphic arts, music, literature and museography (Fayet, 2013, p. 41). VOKS presented itself as a non-governmental society, cultivating connections with the domestic intelligentsia and foreign bourgeois intellectuals whose opinions were believed to have an impact on public attitudes (David-Fox, 2011, pp. 35–37; see also, Koskinen, 2018, p. 221). In reality, VOKS was under the control of the secret police, and the leadership of the Soviet Communist Party participated in the organization's decision-making processes (David-Fox, 2011, pp. 41–42).

Museums in contemporary Russia have been influenced by Soviet practices, and cultural heritage has been used 'in the construction of politically engaged collective memories' (Zabalueva, 2017, p. 48). For example, the strategic significance of the State Hermitage Museum was specially acknowledged when Boris Yeltsin came to power in 1992 and, since 1998, the museum has had the status of being directly under the patronage of the president of the Russian Federation (Norman, 2018, pp. 199–200). This has made Mikhail Piotrovsky, the director of the Hermitage, not only a cultural actor but also a political figure as a museum director actively involved with politics (ibid., p. 200).

Many Russian fine arts museums have been principally funded by the state. Today, they are encouraged to work in a 'Western manner' by seeking external funding from and working with sponsors, thereby moving away from the Soviet tradition of state funding and control (State B, 2018). This applies also to the federal museums, which are highest in the national hierarchy of museums and are managed by the Ministry of Culture. They include such well-known institutions as the Russian Museum, the Hermitage and the Tretyakov Gallery (Museum F, 2018). Federal museums need to apply for a special permit to take artworks abroad to international exhibitions (Museum C, 2018). Usually, their boards of trustees include significant state officials (Museum H, 2018). According to a representative of the Ministry of Culture, museums' exhibitions as such are not controlled by that ministry, which nonetheless expects the museums to achieve a certain number of exhibitions and visitors as well as to gain external funding from sponsors (State B, 2018). This has led to what Grincheva (2019) has called, in relation to the Hermitage, 'hybrid diplomacy', when the funding does not come from the Russian government, and the museum has a global brand and a

broad international network with diversified funding channels. Indeed, Piotrovsky perceives the Hermitage not only as a world museum with multicultural exhibits but also as a museum for the whole world (Norman, 2018, p. 269). Thus, by utilizing 'Western' museum management approaches, the state does not only gain economic benefits but also makes Russian museums fit more easily into a 'Western' framework of perception, thereby increasing the museums' diplomatic potential.

When the document 'The Foundations of the State Cultural Policy' was issued in 2014, culture became officially listed among national priorities for Russia's current stage of development (President of Russia, 2014). 'The Foreign Policy Concept' from 2016 sees culture as serving the state's national interests and strategic national priorities. Among the main tasks listed in the document are the popularization of Russian culture and the increase of Russia's involvement in the humanitarian space (President of Russia, 2016, pp. 1–3). The state intends to apply public diplomacy and international cultural and humanitarian cooperation as instruments to establish dialogues between civilizations and to reach mutual understanding between different nations (ibid., p. 21).

Concerning relationships with countries in Europe, Russia wants to build 'constructive, stable and predictable cooperation' based on mutual benefits and partnerships (President of Russia, 2016, p. 26). Spain is mentioned as one of the European countries with which relations are particularly important for promoting Russia's national interests in Europe and the world (ibid., p. 27). Such a focus on Spain is not an entirely novel tendency in Russian foreign policy. In 2009, Russia and Spain signed a document on strategic partnership that covers a wide range of issues, including cultural relations and the establishment of centers of Russian language and culture in Spain, but also others such as energy policies, business relations, transport infrastructures and defense cooperation (President of Russia, 2009).

The role of the Russian state in managing museums and their international activities is essential but limited. Much of museum diplomacy is not based on state initiatives but rather on the results of projects initiated by non-state actors. In the contemporary Russian context, the current elites have become socially responsible for giving back to society, and many wealthy people have chosen to support the arts, join museums' friends' associations and take care of some of the responsibilities that originally belonged to the state. As Elisabeth Schimpfössl (2019, p. 118) has observed, Soviet ideologies have been merged with philanthrocapitalist practices, and the existing practice of giving reinforces the power of economic capital in Russia.

Russian museums' main foreign target audiences have so far been mostly in Europe. For example, the Hermitage has an established satellite in Amsterdam and is discussing opening another one in Barcelona. There is also an interest to enter new markets beyond Europe. Museum diplomacy plays an increasing role in relations between Russia and China, where the Tretyakov Gallery, the Hermitage and the Russian Museum, among others, have been active in organizing exhibitions and virtual branches.

The history of contemporary relations between Russia and Spain

The right-wing dictatorship of Francisco Franco, who ruled Spain from 1939 to 1975, ideologically opposed communism and viewed the Soviet Union as the Spanish government's main enemy (Sagomonîan, 2018, p. 332). After World War II, business relations, such as through the fishing industry (ibid., p. 337), sports in the form of football (Filatov, 2018, p. 338), and cultural ties, such as through poetry, music and dance, played a central role in facilitating the limited relations between the two countries. Madrid and Moscow officially established diplomatic relations in 1977, two years after Franco's death (Sagomonîan, 2018, pp. 339–341). Today, relations between the countries are to some degree determined by the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Dunaev, 2018). However, Spain does not view Russia as a threat, and the former is considered to have a benevolent attitude towards Russia, partly due to the geographic distance and the relatively low amount of economic collaboration between them (ibid.). Since 2011, there have been official attempts to bring the nations closer by organizing Dual Years between Russia and Spain dedicated to culture, tourism and language and literature (TASS, 2019).

The contemporary Spanish media has often been critically inclined towards Moscow, and the Ukrainian crisis has strengthened a negative image of Russia (Cherkasova, 2015, pp. 189–195). Russia's active role in world politics has increased the Spanish media's interest in it (Pirozhenko and Îurchik, 2018, p. 427). The Spanish government opposed the referendum concerning Russia's annexation of Crimea, as Spain has strong views on questions related to territorial integrity due to its own concerns about Catalonia and the Basque Country (Cherkasova, 2015, p. 192). Spain is accordingly one of the five European countries that have not recognized Kosovo (Dunaev, 2018). According to polls, the Spanish public finds Putin and Russia 'abhorrent', viewing them 'as a blend of authoritarianism with homophobic, militaristic, and macho posturing' (de Borja Lasheras and de Pedro, 2017, p. 21). The Spanish government under the Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy (2011–2018) was more restrained regarding negative comments on Russia, trying to balance between three positions: a pro-European, pro-engagement with Russia, and geo-economic, which views 'diplomacy as a tool for business promotion abroad' (Ibid., 20). Although the Spanish public does not have a very favorable view of Russia, a positive element is Russian 'high' culture, including classical music, ballet, literature and, of course, fine art (Pirozhenko and Îurchik, 2018, pp. 428–430).

The Colección del Museo Ruso in Málaga

This case study focuses on the Russian Museum, one of the leading museums of Russian art, and its first European satellite museum, the *Colección del Museo Ruso*, which was opened in Málaga in 2015 with a ten-year contract.

The Russian Museum was established in Saint Petersburg in 1895 by Tsar Nicholas II and it stores the largest collection of Russian art. Funded by the state, it is a federal museum and thus functions under the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation. The project in Málaga is not the Russian Museum's first experience of going abroad: the museum's first foreign branch was opened in Japan in 1994, but the financial crisis in Japan forced it to shut down the project in 1998 (Museum A, 2017). The experience with Málaga has turned out to be successful and encouraging for the Russian Museum, resulting in further satellite museum projects. By November 2018, the Russian Museum had already signed agreements for satellite museums in Cuba as well as in Japan, underlining its new tendency for international museum collaborations (Gusev, 2018).

There are different views regarding whose intention it was to establish the satellite museum in Málaga. According to the museum management, the idea to establish it was not the initiative of the Russian Museum. It was the mayor of Málaga, Francesco de la Torre, who wanted to bring *a* Russian museum to the city, and he contacted the Russian ambassador to Spain, Yuri Korchagin, to discuss different museum options (Aguilar, 2017). The locally well-known lawyer Ricardo Bocanegra – who was not only the president of the International Spanish–Russian Forum (Foro Internacional Hispano Ruso), but was also dubbed 'the mafia's lawyer' for having helped wealthy Russians to get Spanish residence permits in the 1990s – was instrumental in establishing contacts with the Russian Museum (Locals A, 2017; see also, Carey, 1997). Perhaps de la Torre's initiative was inspired by the long-discussed plans to build a Hermitage museum outpost in Barcelona (Muñoz-Alonso, 2016). Others claim that 'Russian businesspeople came up with the museum idea and lobbied the St. Petersburg museum's administration to take up the idea' (Novikova, 2015). One interviewee, in turn, highlighted the strong role of Ambassador Korchagin and considered him to be a central actor in initiating the project and helping the Russian Museum from the very beginning (Sponsor A, 2017; see also, El Correo, 2018). These views highlight that the Russian Museum acted more in response to an invitation from abroad rather than as an active initiator of the project in Málaga. At the same time, while Mayor de la Torre can be considered the initiator behind getting *a* Russian museum to Málaga, Ambassador Korchagin was central in suggesting *the* Russian Museum for this purpose.

Only a few days after the inauguration of the *Colección del Museo Ruso*, Málaga also welcomed a satellite of the French contemporary art museum Centre Pompidou, which received exhibition space by the port in the center of the city. The *Colección del Museo Ruso*, on the other hand, is located further from the city center in Tabacalera, an old tobacco factory, which provides the museum with an extensive space totaling 2,300 m² (see, Figure 3.1). Annually, the Russian Museum sends one annual and several temporary exhibitions to the *Colección del Museo Ruso*. By May 2020, there had been six annual exhibitions organized, representing blockbusters of Russian art

Figure 3.1 Colección del Museo Ruso in Málaga (Julia Bethwaite).

history, and over twenty temporary exhibitions (Colección del Museo Ruso, 2020). While the annual exhibitions have been thematic, the temporary exhibitions have often been dedicated to individual artists, such as Vasili Kandinsky and Kazimir Malevich. These exhibitions have also attempted to highlight the Spanish influence on Russian art, as is suggested by the exhibition 'Cervantes in Russian Art'.[1] Besides displaying Russian fine art, the exhibitions have contributed to increasing and widening their visitors' knowledge of Russia by pointing out unexpected and less known factors about its culture and history. For example, some exhibitions have guided visitors through the history of the Romanov family or introduced them to famous cultural characters, such as the poet Anna Akhmatova and the film-maker Andrei Tarkovsky. Besides exhibitions of visual art, the *Colección del Museo Ruso* also offers cultural activities in the form of music, cinema and workshops, which are more directed towards the local audience rather than tourists (Aguilar, 2017).

On the day of my own visit to the *Colección del Museo Ruso*, it was hosting two exhibitions: one of them was dedicated to the Romanov dynasty, exhibiting portraits of the imperial family, and the other exhibition was titled 'Kandinsky and Russia'. While the Romanov exhibition seemed to perform more of an educational function, discussing the history of the last tsarist family before the end of Imperial Russia, the exhibition on the world-famous Kandinsky underlined the artist's Russian origin. Regardless of

their seemingly differing themes, both exhibitions were impressive and professionally put together and, thanks to attentive curating, they were able to provide the audience with deeper insights into Russian cultural and political history.

The satellite museum in Málaga is a project funded primarily by the City of Málaga, costing it 3.5 million euros a year. Málaga hosts nearly forty museums, and the local government's aim has been for the city to become branded as Pablo Picasso's birthplace as well as 'The City of Museums' (Kassam, 2015). The *Colección del Museo Ruso* fits well this city branding purpose. Besides the City of Málaga, there have been two Russian companies involved in sponsoring the activities of the Russian Museum's satellite: the Finsudprom Group and the Sistema Charitable Foundation, funded by the Sistema Group (JSFC Sistema). The Finsudprom Group, which has shipyard business activities in Spain (Rusnavy, 2007; Flotprom, 2020), was the general sponsor of the *Colección del Museo Ruso* when the center opened. For years, Finsudprom provided diverse assistance for the satellite museum by, for example, organizing exhibitions and events and helping with Russian translation duties (Sponsor A, 2017). In March 2019, the Yaroslavsky Shipyard, which was managed by Finsudprom, was added to the United States' sanctions list, as the shipyard was building boats for the Russian Federation's Federal Security Service and Ministry of Defense and was therefore connected to Russia's activities in Crimea. Consequently, Finsudprom withdrew from the general sponsorship role of the *Colección del Museo Ruso*. Instead, a Russian entrepreneur and art patron, Igor Shekhelev, who was Finsudprom's chief executive officer until May 2015 and a member of its board of directors until April 2018, as well as a member of the board of trustees of the society 'Friends of the Russian Museum', is now credited with supporting the exhibitions in Málaga (Berezkina, 2019; The Russian Museum, 2019; 2020). Shekhelev owns a luxurious house in Marbella, and his motivation to support the museum project is explained by his genuine interest in Russian culture and art (Sponsor A, 2017).

Sistema Charitable Foundation, on the other hand, is not directly involved with the *Colección del Museo Ruso,* but it does support the project 'The Russian Museum: The Virtual Branch', the museum's online platform that operates in 179 centers, and which can also be accessed in the Málaga branch (Sponsor D, 2018). Similar to Shekhelev, Vladimir Evtushenkov, a business tycoon and an 'oligarch' who is chairman of the board of the Sistema Finance Investments, is also a member of the board of trustees of the society 'Friends of the Russian Museum' (The Russian Museum, 2020). Even though these are private and corporate sponsors, it is necessary to take them into account when examining the central actors in the museum project. These actors can act as central facilitators in realizing museum projects by, for example, connecting involved parties with each other and providing support of different kinds while simultaneously benefitting from the emerging deals. As one of the interviewees' notes, culture is not an extension of

diplomacy only, but also of business, as museums can function as a context for business meetings and for increasing one's personal status (Facilitator A, 2018). Furthermore, influential business elites can try to boost their positions in the field of power by 'strategic giving', that is, by supporting public projects to serve their personal interests (see, e.g. Frumkin, 2006).

The director of the branch in Málaga, José María Luna Aguilar (2018), regards the museum as a success in terms of visitor numbers. The travel platform TripAdvisor also confirms this, as the *Colección del Museo Ruso* is the fourteenth most-recommended thing to do in Málaga, and the museum has nearly seven hundred reviews on the site.[2] Out of the reviews, only four per cent of them are written in Russian, which suggests that Russian tourists are not the main target group of the museum.

Yet the museum pays attention also to the Russian population in Spain, organizing events in Russian approximately once a month (Aguilar, 2017). According to the president of the *Málaga Rusa* association, there are approximately 20,000 Russian-speaking inhabitants living in Costa del Sol and an additional 30,000–40,000 who spend from three to six months in the region every year, as well as more than 200,000 Russian-speaking residents elsewhere in Spain. Members of the Russian community have generally given positive feedback about the *Colección del Museo Ruso*, and they have perceived the museum as a special place for them. In 2017, for example, the museum organized a national party for Russian locals, and the event included popular music from Russia and uniforms from World War II. Director Aguilar (2017) noted that local Russians feel that the *Colección del Museo Ruso* is a piece of their country and that 'they [Russians] have a special relationship with the museum'. However, one local Russian-speaking interviewee did not see the project as being that popular among the Russian-speaking diaspora in Málaga (Locals A, 2017).

The satellite museum as a state-connected constructor of 'bridges'

The *Colección del Museo Ruso* illustrates a case of museum diplomacy as well as an example of cultural statecraft. Ambassador Korchagin, a frequent visitor to the *Colección del Museo Ruso* and one of the central actors behind the satellite museum's idea (Sponsor A, 2017), has expressed his deep satisfaction regarding the Russian Museum's first foreign branch (Fediakina, 2016). Korchagin believes that the exhibitions in Málaga will allow thousands of Spanish people to learn about Russian culture and art, and that the exhibitions could help Spaniards to get closer to Russia and change their stereotypes about it (ibid.). The ambassador has been convinced about the project's potential, stating that 'many people will fall in love with Russia and begin to take a deep interest in it, which will foster cultural and human relations that are not subject to political cooling and tensions' (ibid.). Other Russian state officials who were interviewed also highlighted the importance

of museum diplomacy in sustaining multi-channel communication and promoting cultural exchanges on the side of traditional diplomacy (State B, 2018). An official from the Duma, the Russian parliament, thinks that the Russian museums' international projects have a great political and diplomatic potential (State C, 2018).

Multi-actor cooperation has become a fundamental feature of museum diplomacy in the case of the *Colección del Museo Ruso*, too. A museum expert from the Hermitage sees cultural diplomacy as consisting of relations between museums, regions, countries, experts and individuals that the international museum projects engage with (Museum D, 2018). A representative of a corporate sponsor emphasizes such interactions between different fields and declares that the private sector and the state should cooperate (Sponsor C, 2018). Collaborating in the context of a cultural project, different actors can benefit from working together and reach their individual goals through fruitful partnerships. Yet, at the same time, museum diplomacy may suffer from the instrumental motivations of the diverse actors.

The interviewed Russian respondents believed that the Russian Museum's satellite has the potential to improve the overall image of Russia by promoting mutual understanding. They argued that museum diplomacy can widen the existing image of Russian culture and build diplomatic relations as well as connections between different social networks. In a similar vein, a desire to communicate about Russian culture (Sponsor A, 2017) and build networks (Museum A, 2017) seem to have been the driving forces for the *Colección del Museo Ruso*'s patron, Shekhelev. A representative of the Ministry of Culture highlights that culture is a sphere in which societies can better understand each other as well as the history of their relations, and this can help people to see each other not as enemies but as discussion partners (State B, 2018). He states that by showing 'Russia', 'we want to communicate the image of Russia. To demonstrate that Russia is not an aggressive country and it does not threaten anyone. By cultural means, we want to show that we want to be friends with everyone and build relations based on humanitarian values' (State B, 2018). A museum expert from the Russian Museum believes that the project in Málaga could increase understanding about Russia and manage its image, extending beyond kitschy stereotypes concerning 'matryoshkas, kokoshniki and bears' (Museum A, 2017). The many art exhibitions that have been sent to Spain from the Russian Museum – which, as mentioned above, holds the largest collection of Russian art – have been attempts to present 'the enormous cultural base' of the country. A museum expert from the Russian Museum notes that satellite museums and exhibition exchanges are 'propaganda' and they tell a story about the country's culture (Museum B, 2018). Yet, a representative of the Ministry of Culture insists that the ministry never gives any politically motivated directions to the museums – unlike in Soviet times, he says. Thus, museums are free to carry out their institutional missions. However, he agrees that museums' international projects are 'de facto part of a political process' (State B, 2018).

The sponsors stressed the museum's function in boosting mutual understanding. A few interviewees used the 'bridge' metaphor. Discussing motifs of corporate sponsorship, a representative of a large Russian corporate sponsor stated that the company wants to bring a piece of Russia to foreign regions that are important for the company's business activities, and cultural projects provide a bridge to communicate about the company to larger audiences, which can benefit the general sponsor economically (Sponsor C, 2018). The metaphor was repeated also by the representative of another sponsor, who noted that culture is a bridge that should bring people together and make them understand each other regardless of the political circumstances (Sponsor A, 2017). One of the sponsor interviewees explained that the support for Russian cultural projects abroad helps her company to introduce itself to a foreign audience and maintain relations with international partners by telling them about Russia and Russian traditions (Sponsor C, 2018). Another representative of a corporate sponsor said that culture can help to show the versatility of Russian creations beyond the stereotypes of 'bears, balalaikas and vodka' (Sponsor B, 2018).

Both state actors and non-state actors perceived the museum as having a more fundamental and permanent role than providing some short-term gains. A representative of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts thinks that culture is above politics, as 'it's older. Various relationships between countries change, but culture remains' (Museum E, 2017). This view is supported also by a Duma official, who emphasizes the value of international cultural relations by saying that 'regardless of what happens in political circles, cultural actors should work together' (State C, 2018). While sanctions may affect business, an official from the Ministry of Culture claims, they cannot touch culture, and thus culture is the only domain that can unite people in the most difficult times (State A, 2017). In a similar vein, a private art gallery owner from Moscow, who is active in organizing art exhibitions both in Russia and abroad, states that culture should be above politics. He believes that while politics and the nation-state are temporary, art is eternal (Museum I, 2018).

Cultural exchanges between Russia and the EU states are viewed as forming connections when political relations have been strained. A representative of the Ministry of Culture acknowledged that culture plays an important role in politically challenging times: especially during the period of sanctions and other tensions in the Russia–West relationship, culture is one of those fields in which interactions and mutual relations can still be sustained (State B, 2018). Yet, the political element occurs as a side effect which, the representative notes, is a great advantage of culture (State B, 2018). Organizing an exhibition based on political motifs is not likely to bring a desired benefit, but if one organizes an exhibition in honor of culture and mutual relations it will lead to political benefits as well, even if these were not part of the initial plan (ibid.). Such indirect political effects are what make museums powerful in international relations.

From the perspective of international relations, the *Colección del Museo Ruso* can hence benefit Russia's international standing, the image of which has suffered especially since the annexation of Crimea. The museum project has been run primarily by non-state actors and the direct role of the Russian state has remained limited, but nonetheless in line with the objectives of Russia's international cultural diplomacy.

The museum as a tool for city branding

Of the Spanish media reports collected, a great majority have either a positive or neutral slant towards the *Colección del Museo Ruso*, and there were only a few critical comments. According to my analysis of these reports, the museum functions as an instrument for city branding in terms of tourism and attracting investments, as well as for educating the local public, and these seem to be the key purposes behind its establishment. The initiative has received criticism due to excessive public funding and not reaching expected visitor numbers. Still, the significant difference between numerous positive comments and a low number of critical views suggests that the museum project has won the public's support.

The *Colección del Museo Ruso* is viewed mostly positively by locals as it is boosting Málaga's city brand as the *ciudad de museos*, the city of museums (Cenizo, 2018). The Russian Museum is considered to belong to the 'world elite of cultural institutions' and, with the opening of its satellite, Málaga is also seen to be shifting 'both qualitatively and quantitatively' to the elite of international museum circuits (Lopéz, 2015). The city's 'cultural metamorphosis', including the pursuit of attracting prestigious museum brands, has increased Málaga's competitiveness among other Spanish cities (Busutil, 2017). According to a ranking by *Observatorio de la Cultura*, Málaga is considered as one of the top five cities in Spain regarding both the quality and the level of innovation of its cultural offerings (ibid.). The municipal administration has been praised for being active in promoting the city and for such a 'collective success' as the *Colección del Museo Ruso*, comparing it to something like Málaga being appointed as the European Capital of Sports in 2020, or being ranked as the eighth European city in attracting investment, as designated by the *Financial Times* (de la Torre Prados, 2016).

The museum initiative appears to be motivated by a desire to construct the city brand of Málaga. A well-designed brand could attract the right type of tourists, the 'cultivated' ones who would visit Málaga for its heritage and various congresses, as stated by Mayor de la Torre (El País, 2017). With the city's abundant offering of museums, his administration is especially interested in increasing the 'quality' rather than the quantity of tourists (ibid.). The *Colección del Museo Ruso* has already been providing a platform for different high-profile events, such as the forum 'Futuro en Español' (The Future in Spanish), which brought together prominent Spanish and Latin American figures to debate and reflect on opportunities in the field

of innovation, technology and urban space management in Latin America and Spain (Peláez, 2016). Curiously, in 2017, the annual directors' meeting of the *Instituto Cervantes*, a Spanish government institution that promotes Spanish culture abroad, took place in the *Colección del Museo Ruso*.

Additionally, it is believed that the museum can function as a bridge in promoting an understanding of Russian art and culture. Director Aguilar emphasizes that the institution is primarily a cultural center, not a political project, and considers it as 'a bridge between two countries and people' (Aguilar, 2017). Also, Mayor de la Torre has applied 'the bridge' metaphor by saying that opening the museum creates 'a cultural bridge between Russia and the European Union' (de la Torre in Mellado, 2015). There is a desire to present Russian art to the local public, as such art is not well known in Spain (Griñán, 2015). As a Dutch expert in Russian art stated in a newspaper interview, 'we still have a lot to learn from Russian art, and that is why projects like the one in Málaga are so important to make them known to the local public and visitors'. He emphasized the special opportunity to see the artworks close-up and to accumulate cultural capital in the form of knowledge (Lopéz, 2016). Director Aguilar (2017) also claims that the museum's target audience are not only tourists but the citizens of Málaga, too: many activities – such as the different workshops that are organized mainly in Spanish – are offered for the locals. He sees the museum as having the potential to generate cultural capital among the citizenry. The satellite museum of the Russian Museum is not located in the historical center of the city, but a bit further out in Huelin: the neighborhood has even gained a new nickname since the *Colección del Museo Ruso* was established there: some call it 'Huelingrado' (Bujalance Málaga, 2016). According to the museum's satisfaction surveys, the acceptance of the new cultural institution by the local population is relatively high, partly thanks to its offering of a multitude of activities – from children's workshops to cinema – to the inhabitants of Huelin (Bujalance Málaga, 2016).

The desire to increase understanding about Russia and change the country's image has been explicitly expressed also by Spaniards (Aguilar in Bavil′skiĭ, 2017). Therefore, it is not surprising that the artists and themes that have been exhibited in Málaga have thus suited the cultural context where the center is located. For example, the first exhibition that took place in the *Colección del Museo Ruso* was dedicated to the figure of Sergeĭ Di͡agilev, who was also a friend of Málaga-born Picasso (Montilla, 2015). The relationship between the peoples of Spain and Russia is also strengthened by different events that the cultural center organizes.

However, not all locals are convinced by the project of the *Colección del Museo Ruso*, and it has been criticized together with the museum boom in Málaga. The main criticism has been of the museum's funding with public money (Lopéz, 2015; Lopéz, 2017; Gente Corriente, 2017; Locals A, 2018). As the museum is generously funded from the city council's budget, it is not seen as profitable. The museum boom is also perceived as being related

to touristification and gentrification. Some critics complain that Málaga is becoming a city only for tourists, which raises questions about sustainability (Gente Corriente, 2017). Tourism may bring in income for the city, but some view the 'cultural boom' that the city is experiencing as only an illusion and a bubble (Gómez, 2014). Moreover, one of the local interviewees in Spain did not believe in the museum's dialogue-building potential and did not perceive it to be popular among the Russian-speaking diaspora in the region (Locals A, 2017).

Furthermore, new museums have been accused of being part of the mayor's attempts to stay in power (Locals B, 2018). *The Colección del Museo Ruso* was opened just two months before a municipal election. The museum has also been criticized for the connections between the mayor and wealthy Russians (Locals B, 2018). If the museum helped the mayor to secure his re-election in Málaga, are there potential services that the mayor delivers in return? Utilizing personal relationships is also a part of the Russian diplomatic toolbox, and networks with influential Russians are potential channels of influence. When President Putin awarded the prestigious Pushkin Medal to Mayor de la Torre in November 2018, the museum initiative promoted de la Torre as a figure advancing Spanish-Russian relations beyond just Costa del Sol.

Conclusions

The Russian Museum's Spanish satellite is an example of Russia's cultural statecraft in West Europe. The satellite may not have been an original initiative of the Russian government, but the museum project supports Russia's strategic national priorities and benefits its diplomatic agendas. Russia has a strong brand in the arts, but this has been relatively little known in Spain. As a brand was being developed of Málaga as a city of museums, the Russian Museum fitted very well this purpose. Thus, the key motivation behind the museum seems to have been related to place branding and tourism industry. However, the museum has also served the purpose of fostering officially recognized cultural relations. Additionally, it has provided elites an opportunity to build relations across different social fields and national borders. Overall, the project has been a success in terms of the public perceptions of it: the *Colección del Museo Ruso* is seen mainly in a positive light by both the Spanish media and the Russian government.

Museums are closely connected to politics since they can secure and reproduce desired worldviews, thereby serving national interests. By extending the Russian state museums' activities abroad, their symbolic power effects go beyond national borders and manifest in the international space, introducing world-making cognitive categories to new audiences. This can be regarded as an especially valuable practice in a challenging context of international relations when states hold unenthusiastic or even hostile attitudes towards each other.

There is also an aspect of network diplomacy connected to the position of elites in the field of power. Museums' power in international relations can be explained by the interaction of multiple domains and fields, as diverse actors – from museum experts and businesspeople to city authorities and diplomats – cooperate in the context of international exhibitions motivated by different objectives. Influential figures beyond solely state actors can utilize museums in their strategies to enter new fields and to advance their positions on the wider field of power. Museums can facilitate relations between different elites across national borders. These personal agendas, as well as, relationships between influential actors can lead to diplomatic effects that occur in the international realm. The commonly used 'bridge' metaphor, mentioned by both Russian and Spanish actors in relation to the *Colección del Museo Ruso*, emphasizes the museums' diplomatic, relationship-building potential across different nations and fields, as well as between different elites.

Museum diplomacy is part of Russia's foreign policy toolkit and cultural statecraft. The nature of museum diplomacy does not necessarily imply a carefully crafted plan designed by the government, but more freely and even spontaneously forming relationships that can carry powerful effects. State institutions need not be directly involved in museum diplomacy as museums execute their missions in accordance with official cultural policy objectives, thereby benefitting the state as well. Although the case of the *Colección del Museo Ruso*, an example of international cultural cooperation, may not have been originally a Russian initiative, the Russian government regarded it as an opportunity for cultural diplomacy and the Russian Museum responded positively to the Spanish request. Moreover, while Mayor de la Torre can be considered the initiator behind getting *a* Russian museum to Málaga, Ambassador Korchagin was central in suggesting *the* Russian Museum for this purpose. This case study has illustrated how museums' international activities evoke indirect diplomatic effects, which have the potential to influence a state's international standing and international relations. It also shows that states do not necessarily need to initiate plans to benefit from them. Moreover, the case of the *Colección del Museo Ruso* has demonstrated that museum diplomacy also has potential political repercussions at the level of personal diplomacy among political, cultural and business elites.

Notes

1. Concerning the Spanish influences on the Russian fine arts, see Morozova (2018, pp. 216–222).
2. Out of all the reviews, 57 per cent are 'excellent', the highest possible rating, while 32 per cent are 'very good', which indicates that a large majority of respondents have enjoyed their experience visiting the museum. The reviews have been written in 13 different languages: Danish (4 reviews), Dutch (19 reviews), English (207 reviews), Finnish (3 reviews), French (27 reviews), German (9 reviews), Italian (12 reviews), Japanese (2 reviews), Polish (2 reviews), Portuguese (3 reviews), Russian (27 reviews), Spanish (359 reviews) and Swedish (6 reviews) (Tripadvisor, 2020).

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4 Forging common history

Russia's cultural statecraft and the Soviet Second World War monuments in Europe

Lina Klymenko

Introduction

In March 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed amendments to the criminal code of the Russian Federation that concerned the preservation of the Soviet Second World War monuments. Thereby, the Russian president introduced criminal liability for the destruction of military burial grounds, monuments and plaques dedicated to those who were termed 'the fallen during the defence of the fatherland.' The damage or the removal of monuments became punishable with a fine of up to 5 million Russian roubles or up to 5 years of imprisonment (State Duma, 2020). While discussing these amendments, the Speaker of the Russian State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin argued the following (State Duma, 2020):

> The destruction of military burial grounds, the damage done to monuments and obelisks which are established in memory of the Great Patriotic War is vandalism and does not have any excuses. We have to honour the memory of those without whom the victory over fascism was not possible and to whom we are obliged with our life and well-being. We have to defend those who cannot stand for themselves.

The actions of the Russian president were supposedly a response to the 2019 decision of the local council in the Prague 6 district in the Czech Republic to remove the monument dedicated to the Second World War Red Army Commander Marshal Ivan Konev. Russia reacted angrily to the statue removal in April 2020 and even opened a criminal investigation, as it was regarded as an attempt of the Czech authorities to diminish Russia's decisive role in defeating Nazi Germany (see, Janicek, 2020).

In fact, over the recent years, the Soviet monuments established in the aftermath of the Second World War became contested in a number of Eastern European countries. For example, in 2019, a monument dedicated to the Red Army commander Marshal Georgiy Zhukov was removed in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, albeit soon restored (Pʹi͡atyĭ Kanal, 2019). In the years following the amendments to the decommunisation law, more than

400 Soviet monuments, most of which were dedicated to Red Army soldiers, were taken down in Poland (Novikov, 2019). In 2005–2007, the monument honouring the Red Army in Tallinn, Estonia, became the centre of violent clashes between ethnic Estonians and the Russian-speaking community, and sparked tension in the Russian–Estonian relations (Brüggemann and Kasekamp, 2008). In recent years, Russia also had a dispute with Latvia over the Soviet war monument in the Latvian capital, Riga (Letko, 2016).

At the core of Russia's tension with Eastern European countries lies a divergent understanding of the role of the Red Army in the Second World War. Whereas the Russian leadership views the Red Army's advance in Eastern Europe in 1944–1945 as liberation from Nazi occupation, some Eastern European countries argue that the Soviet Union (read Russia) occupied the region and established Moscow-backed Communist regimes there that lasted for several decades. In fact, with the rise to power of Putin in the 2000s, the triumphalist narrative of the Great Patriotic War (as the Second World War is known in Russia) became the main means of cultural identification for Russian citizens and for the Russian-speaking communities abroad. The discourse of the 1941–1945 Great Patriotic War that originates in Soviet times frames the war in terms of the Soviet/Russian victory over Nazism in Europe. To this end, it eclipses the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Yalta Treaty and the repression towards the disloyal ethnic groups in new territories annexed by the Soviet Union during the war (Markwick, 2012; Malinova, 2017).[1] Many scholars have claimed that by promoting the narrative of the liberation of Europe, Russia wants to be accepted as a European great power. In the view of the Russian political leadership, the understanding of the Soviet Union as shaping political and social order in Eastern Europe following the end of the war serves as a kind of legitimisation of Russia's ambitions to influence the European development today (Zhurzhenko, 2007; Torbakov, 2011; Morozov, 2012; Kurilla, 2015).

But how exactly does the commemoration of the Second World War at the Soviet war monuments abroad serve as an instrument of Russia's cultural statecraft? Cultural statecraft is understood as the policy of a government in fostering a positive image of the state abroad through persuasion and attraction. In other words, in contrast to military power, the concept builds upon cultural elements of power that a state pursues through positive image making that emerges through information campaigns (Forsberg and Smith, 2016). Previous studies have explored how the Russian political leadership has used the history of the Second World War in their foreign policy agenda towards the EU and the post-Soviet countries, and more specifically as a source of soft power (Simons, 2015; Polegkyi, 2016; Rotaru, 2018; Beshkinskaya and Miller, 2020).

In contrast to previous studies, which mainly analyse the connection between historical discourses and foreign policies, this chapter examines more precisely *how these discourses are materialised*. The chapter sheds new light on the use of history as part of cultural statecraft in that it

conceptualises monuments *as physical locations of foreign policy formulation*. Along with other memory sites such as museums and cemeteries, memorials or monuments are material sites of (often clashing) historical narrative constructions that provide the foreign and domestic public with a means of identification and loyalty to the state. In her case study of the Jasenovac Monument Site commemorating the victims of the Second World War era fascist Independent State of Croatia, Jelena Subotic (2020) explained how the former concentration camp Jasenovac became a source of three different foreign policies: of post-Communist Serbia, post-Communist Croatia, and Bosnia's Republika Srpska. Subotic maintained that memory sites are an embodiment of the material location of foreign policy and serve as a physical manifestation of foreign policy claims such as reparations or apologies. Political leaders use monument sites to create a feeling of shared history that transcends state boundaries. Monuments can become a powerful tool for political actors who can mobilise the public and weaponise the monument sites for their political ends. In Subotic's case studies, the site of past atrocities was used by political leaderships of Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia's Republika Srpska to define state and national boundaries.

In this chapter, I argue that in the case of Russia, the government's use of historical narratives functions as part of Russia's foreign policy through which it aims at persuading the European leaders towards a positive image of Russia in both the past and the present. To exemplify this thesis, this chapter showcases how the Russian political leadership has used monuments to propagate its vision of the Second World War in four case studies countries: Austria, Germany, Bulgaria and Estonia. This chapter identifies how the monuments are appropriated by the Russian state and by grassroots popular movements (such as the Immortal Regiment Movement[2]) or marginal social groups (such as the Night Wolves motorcycle club[3]) to arouse feelings of shared history and a common identity among the locals abroad. The Soviet war monuments analysed in this chapter are dedicated to Red Army soldiers who fell in the battles for Vienna, Berlin, Sofia and Tallinn.[4] Erected in the aftermath of the Second World War, they became symbols of the Soviet power in Eastern Europe, but their meaning became contested following the demise of the Soviet Union and the emergence of Russia as an aggressive international player.[5] The selection of these case studies shows a variety of responses of the target countries to Russia's policy on preservation of the Soviet war monuments abroad. Each of the selected case studies is embedded in a national Second World War commemorative culture and reflects the divergence of political leaders' interpretations of the war.

The use of history as cultural statecraft

A number of studies (see, Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2017; Klymenko, 2020) previously identified how policymakers can create historical narratives (defined as subjective and selective interpretations of past events that are embedded

in a particular cultural and political context) as a cultural element of foreign policy and interstate relations. The creation of historical narratives plays an important role in forging a country's contemporary political alliances and partnerships, and in differentiating it from its enemies, real or imagined. In this way, historical narratives function as boundary-making, as markers of a community, and as resources for the promotion of shared identity. As such, stories of the past are further used by political actors to construct a positive image of their country abroad, to so win support from foreign governments and the international public.

The state's construction of historical narratives is particularly visible in countries pursuing integration with larger political entities. For example, in the European context, several studies explored how some countries gave importance to certain historical events, most notable the Communist era and the Second World War, to define their own place within the European integration project. This has been exemplified through the studies on (potential) EU candidates such as Ukraine or Serbia or the young EU member states, such as Croatia, Poland or the Baltic countries. In her case study on Poland and the Baltic countries, Maria Mälksoo (2009) showed how these countries negotiated the question of European identity with the old EU members. In their endeavour to become 'European,' they challenged the traditional Western-European understanding of the Second World War with its emphasis on the Holocaust memory and made the old EU member states recognise the Eastern European experience of the war and Communism, including the annexation of the Baltic countries by the Soviet Union in 1940, mass deportations, and ethnic cleansing. In a similar manner, Jelena Subotic (2016) demonstrated in her case study of Croatia that post-communist countries are anxious about acknowledging their complicity in the Holocaust and thus jeopardise their integration into the EU. By taking Ukraine as a case study (Klymenko, 2016; 2017; 2019), I also explored how Ukrainian political leaders used the commemoration of victims of the Second World War and the Communist regime (more specifically, the 1932–1933 famine known as the Holodomor) to make the EU countries acknowledge Ukraine's aspiration to become an EU member and move away from Russia. In another study (Klymenko, 2020), I scrutinised how by propagating narratives of political entities, such as the 9th-century Kyivan Rus, the 17th-century Cossack Hetmanate and the 20th-century Soviet Union, the Ukrainian political leadership has tried to promote an understanding that Ukrainians share similar historical experiences with the (Eastern) European EU member states – experiences which are different from those of Russia.

The argument on the use of history as cultural statecraft is also valid for states that regard themselves as great powers and which apply soft power to expand their (neo)colonial agenda and exercise influence over other states. In this case, as Bjørnar Sverdrup-Thygeson (2017) claimed, historical narratives created by great power states are made for the purpose of persuading foreign governments and the international public of the notions of shared

colonial history and identity, and hence of the validity of a country's vision of international order and that country's place within it. By competing with other major players in international politics, states aim at presenting themselves not only as different but also as better than the others. In his research on China's policy towards Africa, Sverdrup-Thygeson examined how Chinese foreign policymakers propagated a narrative of a shared Sino–African history to legitimise China's political, economic and cultural involvement on the African continent. Through the use of historical narratives of the travels of the 15th-century Chinese admiral Zheng He, colonial history, and the TAZARA railway project from the decolonisation era in the 1960s–1970s, China has tried to convey a friendly image of itself to the public in certain African countries and gain support for its policies. To contrast itself to its Western counterparts, the Chinese political leadership aimed at making the African public believe that due to their shared colonial history, China is able to better understand the challenges they face today.

Russia's vision of the European Second World War history

Seeing itself as a great power and seeking influence over the European integration project, Russia likewise challenged the EU's narrative of the Second World War. The amendments to the criminal code of the Russian Federation, outlined in the opening of this chapter, are only one example of Russia's attempt to use the history of the Second World War as cultural statecraft. In a series of other decrees and declarations, the Russian authorities introduced their own vision of European history. In 2009, the Russian Parliament adopted a statement in which it objected to the European Parliament's declaration proclaiming 23 August as a European Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Stalinism and Nazism. In contrast to the European Parliament's declaration, it denied the equation of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes and viewed this as an attempt to insult the memory of those who are regarded as 'having sacrificed their lives for the liberation of Europe' (see, Kurilla, 2015).

Furthermore, in 2009, Russian President Medvedev established the Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History at the Expense of Russian Interests (which ceased to exist in 2012). It was perceived by many commentators as an effort by Russia to defend the Soviet Union's (read Russia's) reputation as a liberator of Europe (Brandenberger, 2013). The events of the 2013–2014 Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine were described in the Russian mainstream media and by high-ranking Russian politicians through the use of Second World War vocabulary, that is, by portraying the Euromaidan protestors as 'fascists' and 'ideological heirs of Bandera, Hitler's accomplice in the Second World War' (Siddi, 2014). In 2014, President Putin signed a law that amended certain legislative acts of the Russian Federation. Being related to the history of the Second World War, this law introduced criminal liability for what is considered to be a 'denial

of facts' that were recognised at the International Military Tribunal (at Nuremberg) when punishing major war criminals. Moreover, deliberately spreading what is termed 'false information' on the role of the Soviet Union in the Second World War and disrespecting Russian military commemorative days and Russian symbols of military glory became a criminal offence (Rossiĭskaia Gazeta, 2014).

Further, in 2019, President Putin reacted to the European Parliament's resolution on the 80th anniversary of the start of the Second World War. The European Parliament accused the Soviet Union of cooperation with Nazi Germany and made it responsible for the outbreak of the war. Whereas the European Parliament condemned the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, the invasion of Poland in 1939 and the Baltic countries in 1940, the annexation of parts of Romania in 1940, and the occupation of some European countries after the defeat of the Nazi regime (European Parliament, 2019), the Russian political leadership regarded this a 'shameless and groundless lie' and 'an effort of falsification of historical truth.' The Russian president instead promised to educate the Russian and the foreign public about the victory of the Red Army, the tragic fate of Soviet prisoners of war, the heroic Soviet partisan movement, the shame of Nazi collaborators, and the tragedy of the Holocaust and other war crimes against civilians (Interfax, 2019).

Russia's policy on preservation of the Second World War monuments abroad

The preservation of Soviet war monuments, and other military burial grounds where Soviet/Russian soldiers are buried, is specifically regulated by the Russian Ministry of Defence.[6] The latter includes the Board on Perpetuation of the Memory of the Fallen in the Defence of the Fatherland. The board's tasks include the organisation of commemorative events in Russia and abroad, and the search for and identification of the remains of fallen soldiers. The Ministry of Defence established representatives of this board abroad (mostly at Russian embassies), and its members are involved in organising what is called 'military-commemorative work' in remembering the Soviet/Russian soldiers. The board is tasked with a broad range of activities: supporting the financing of the commemorative ceremonies; developing programmes for such commemorations and identifying the remains of fallen soldiers; creating an information database of the burial places of fallen soldiers; participating in the renovation and re-establishment of monuments and burial grounds in the territories of other countries; cooperating with public organisations, organisations of veterans and religious organisations; preparing publications and leading information campaigns; and studying the specific local context of commemorative traditions in the target countries (Russian Ministry of Defence, 2019).

A specific International Activity Division dedicated to the international dimension of the board's work clearly states that Russia is very much

interested in the preservation of Second World War memory that honours Russia as a great power that defeated Nazi Germany. Any other interpretations of history are seen by the Ministry of Defence as 'falsification of history' (Russian Ministry of Defence, 2019). The Ministry of Defence also reports on the activities of a number of intergovernmental commissions that have been set up to take care of Soviet/Russian monuments and burial grounds in countries, such as Slovakia (1995), Hungary (1995), Czech Republic (1999), Romania (2005), Latvia (2007), Turkey (2012), Serbia (2013) and Slovenia (2013).

In the case studies countries discussed in this chapter, the preservation of the Soviet war monuments is secured through bilateral treaties. For example, in Austria, the preservation of the Soviet war monument in Vienna is legally ensured by the State Treaty that Austria signed in 1955. The Austrian government took on the obligation to take care of Soviet war monuments and the graves of soldiers who fell in the Second World War. The State Treaty explicitly states that Austrians are obliged to protect those sites that mourn the Red Army soldiers that fought against Hitler's Germany. The treaty also covers the mutual identification and registration of such graves and support for the transportation of remains to the soldier's country of origin (State Treaty of Austria, 1955).

The maintenance of the Soviet war monuments in Germany is ensured by the German–Russian treaty signed in November 1990 between the President of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev and the German federal chancellor Helmut Kohl. The Treaty of Friendly Neighbourhood Relations, Partnership and Cooperation between the USSR and the Federal Republic of Germany ensured that both the German and the Soviet governments were obliged to take care of the monuments and burial grounds dedicated to Soviet and German soldiers and other victims of the war, respectively (Kodeks, 1990). The more concrete regulations were laid out in the 1992 Intergovernmental Treaty covering the care of military graves in both Russia and Germany (Russian Embassy in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1992).

In Bulgaria, the preservation of the Soviet war monuments is regulated through the 1992 Treaty of Friendly Relations and Cooperation between the Russian Federation and Bulgaria, and the 2003 Joint Declaration between the President of Russia Vladimir Putin and the President of Bulgaria Georgi Parvanov on deepening friendly relations and cooperation between the two countries. In both documents, the countries took on the responsibility to preserve the Second World War monuments, including military burial grounds, as part of their cultural heritage (Kodeks, 1992; President of Russia, 2003).

Unlike the previous cases, Estonia does not have a special intergovernmental treaty regulating the fate of Soviet war graves and monuments in Estonia. As the Russian news agency TASS reported, Estonia justifies its unwillingness to sign such a treaty with the accusation that the Russian authorities do not allow Estonians to map out the graves of Estonians

repressed in the Soviet Union and prohibit access to the archives documenting Soviet repressions (TASS, 2017).

In practice, Russia's policy on the preservation of the Soviet war monuments abroad is particularly visible during commemorative activities organised by Russian diplomatic missions on 9 May, known as Victory Day in Russia. On this day, the Russian embassies usually organise official ceremonies of wreath-laying to war monuments, to which they also invite representatives of the target countries. For example, in 2018, representatives of the federal state of Berlin, the Jewish community, the Left Party, and the Alternative for Germany party participated in the wreath-laying ceremony at the Soviet war monument in Treptower Park in Berlin (Sputnik, 2018). In the 2013 ceremony in Sofia, the Russian ambassador was joined by the Russophile movement, the Socialist Party, Forum Bulgaria–Russia, and the Moscow House in the wreath laying at the Soviet war monument (Koleva, 2015). In recent years, the Russian embassies have supported the annual Immortal Regiment movement and the Night Wolves motorcycle tour through Eastern European countries. The Russian embassies and the Russian Cultural Centres abroad have also assisted cultural activities linked to the Victory Day celebrations in other countries (Koleva, 2015; Zhurzhenko, 2017). The monuments are also used for wreath-laying ceremonies by the Russian embassies on 3 December, known in Russia as the Day of Unknown Soldier, and on 23 February, known in Russia as the Defender of the Fatherland Day (Russian Embassy in the Federal Republic of Germany, 2018). Moreover, President Putin usually visits the Soviet war monuments during his state visits. For example, in 2001, he laid a wreath on the monument in Tiergarten in Berlin (Stangl, 2003), and in 2014 on the monument in Vienna (Zhurzhenko, 2017).

Over the last decade or so, the Soviet war monuments have increasingly become a meeting point for the Russian-speaking community that would annually come to the monuments on 9 May. Daniela Koleva (2015) counted that on 9 May 2013, around 300–350 people came to honour the Red Army at the monument in the centre of Sofia. Mischa Gabowitsch (2017) reported that in 2014, more than 12,000 people visited the Soviet war monument in Treptower Park, Germany. In 2015, on the 70th anniversary of Victory Day, he observed that around 40,000 visited the monument (not counting the festival-like celebration taking place nearby). According to Mārtiņš Kaprāns and Elo-Hanna Seljamaa's (2017) observations, since 2007, the number of visitors coming to the Soviet war monument in Tallinn, Estonia, on 8–10 May has reached around 10,000 annually.

Whereas at first glance, the ceremonies at the Soviet war monuments in Vienna, Berlin, Sofia and Tallinn appear to be rather improvised and unstructured gatherings, the chain of events during these celebrations is strikingly similar in each case. This concerns the customs that visitors engage in on 9 May (people would lay flowers on the monuments, sing Soviet war songs, take pictures, organise picnics, socialise, etc.) and how they carry

them out (dressed in military uniforms, holding Soviet and Russian flags as well as flags of the former Soviet republics, wearing the St. George ribbon as a symbol of the Russian celebration of the Great Patriotic War, etc.).[7] Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Russia's support for the separatist movement in Ukrainian Donbas, the celebrations at the Soviet war monuments have become a platform to show support for Russia's aggressive policy towards Ukraine (Koleva, 2015; Gabowitsch, 2017; Kaprāns and Seljamaa, 2017; Zhurzhenko, 2017).

The contested meaning of the Soviet war monuments in the case study countries

Austria

In Vienna, the Soviet war monument at Schwarzenbergplatz became a point of contestation after the collapse of Communism in Central Europe. In the early 1990s, the debates on the Soviet war monuments in neighbouring Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia sparked a discussion of the monument in Vienna. The idea came from right-wing politicians, most notably from the Freedom Party of Austria. The party leader Jörg Haider posited that the liberation of Austria from Hitler did not bring freedom, but on the contrary, inflicted Stalin's ideology. Yet Haider's proposal to remove the monument did not find support among the Austrian population and even Stalin's quote as part of the monument decoration was not removed (Zhurzhenko, 2017).

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea and Russia's intervention in Ukrainian Donbas, sporadic signs of protest emerged. The monument has been damaged several times. In 2014, the pedestal was defaced with blue and yellow paint resembling the Ukrainian national flag, in 2015, it was daubed in black paint, and in 2017 red paint was thrown over the pedestal. The Russian embassy in Vienna reacted promptly to the actions of the anonymous culprits and sent a protest note to the Austrian Foreign Ministry urging it to address the damage and to punish those responsible (RT International, 2017).

Against this backdrop, the Russian ambassador to Austria, Dmitry Liubinsky, was satisfied with the Russian–Austrian cooperation on the protection of Soviet/Russian military monuments. In a media interview in June 2018, Liubinsky (2018) claimed that there is an 'exceptionally respectful attitude to the memory of the Soviet soldiers' in the Austrian society. As he explained, Russian military burial grounds in Austria are in good condition and receive a lot of public attention. Austrians participate in commemorative activities organised by the Russian embassy, including the Immortal Regiment procession on 9 May in Vienna and in other Austrian cities. He also praised the Austrian authorities for restoring those parts of the monument in Vienna that had been damaged.

Germany

Unlike Austria, following Russia's annexation of Crimea, some opposition to the Soviet war monument in Tiergarten arose in German society. In April 2014, the German tabloid *Bild* launched a petition to the German parliament for the removal of the two tanks that formed part of the monument. The newspaper pointed out that by annexing Crimea, Russia threatened the sovereignty of another state, and it urged the public to sign the petition to show that the use of military force in Europe is not acceptable today. It argued that the removal of the tanks was not intended to disrespect the Red Army soldiers that were buried next to the monument but to signal that there was no room for the hegemonic military force exerted by the incumbent Kremlin leadership. As the newspaper pointed out, 'At a time when Russian tanks are threatening a free and democratic Europe, we want no Russian tanks at the Brandenburg Gate' (Bild, 2014).

The petition did not resonate within the German society, however. The Petition Committee of the German Parliament received only a small number of signatures. It decided to abandon any further processing of the petition due to the argument that not only Germany's historical responsibility but also the signing of the German–Soviet treaty in 1990 obliges Germany to accept the responsibility to respect and preserve Soviet war monuments, including war cemeteries. It specified that the monument in Tiergarten is one such monument, which stands on a burial ground where more than 2,000 Soviet soldiers are buried. The tanks are an integral part of that monument, and thus the monument should be respected as a whole (Deutscher Bundestag, 2014).

In May 2015, however, the German authorities cancelled visas of some participants of the pro-Kremlin Night Wolves motorcycle group that embarked on a tour from Moscow to Berlin through some Eastern European capitals to commemorate Victory Day. The German Foreign Office and the Berlin Ministry of Internal Affairs claimed that the prohibition was related to securing order in the country. At the same time, they explained that they did not want the suffering of people under the Nazi regime to be instrumentalised. The Russian government reacted negatively to the decision and accused the German authorities of 'discrimination' (Die Zeit, 2015). Eventually, around 30 bikers arrived in Berlin on 8 May 2015 and first laid flowers in memory of the Soviet soldiers at the German–Russian museum in Karlshorst. The next day they placed flowers on the Soviet war monuments in Treptower Park and Tiergarten. A small group of their sympathisers from Germany and other European countries joined the ceremony (Dassler and Gathmann, 2015).

In this respect, the Russian ambassador to Germany, Vladimir Grinin, seemed to be only partially satisfied with Germany's role in preserving the memory of Soviet/Russian soldiers. In a media interview in 2015, he explained that the German government and the public are respectful

Figure 4.1 Night Wolves take part in celebrations to mark Victory Day in Berlin (Reuters, 2019).

towards the Soviet military burial grounds. Yet, he expressed concern that this tradition might be erased in the future. He asserted that at some commemorative activities that take place in Germany, the role of the Red Army in overcoming Nazism was either diminished or omitted. Instead, attention has been paid to the contribution of the British and American forces, for example, in liberating concentration camps and establishing democracy in post-war Germany. Moreover, he mentioned that the German authorities, in general, focus more on the Jewish genocide than on the annihilation of the Slavic people. He objected to the German authorities' decision to ban the Night Wolves from entering Germany and called on Russia to actively defend its historical memory (TASS, 2015) (see, Figure 4.1).

Bulgaria

In Sofia, the monument dedicated to the Red Army in the central part of the city became contested after the downfall of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe. Whereas some parts of the population saw in the monument the symbol of the Communist totalitarian past, Soviet occupation, and Bulgaria's political and cultural subjugation to the Soviet Union, others regarded it as a symbol of the pan-European fight against Nazism. In 1993, the majority of Sofia residents voted for the removal of the monument,

but after public protest and Russia's interference, the government decided to retain the monument. Between 2010 and 2012, several initiatives for the monument removal were organised by right-wing political groups. Some of them used the slogan 'The wall is fallen, but the monument is still here,' referring to the Berlin Wall (Koleva, 2015).

In more recent years, the monument has been appropriated by social groups, such as children, skateboarders, drug dealers, bikers and beer lovers. Various activities have taken place in front of the monument, such as a Christmas market, beer drinking and sports watching. A march for the legalisation of cannabis and a gay pride parade were organised in front of the monument (Koleva, 2015). In this context, in June 2011, the monument was 'redesigned': the Red Army soldiers in the composition were painted as popular American figures such as the Joker, Santa Claus, Superman, Ronald McDonald, Captain America and the like. The Soviet flag was painted over in the colours of the US flag, and the graffito 'Rolling with Time' was written on the monument. This monument transformation sparked a new discussion on the meaning of the monument in Bulgarian society and showed how polarised Bulgarians were about the Communist past in general and the Second World War in particular. The Bulgarian minister of culture and pro-Russian grassroots organisations called it 'vandalism' and 'dishonour of the memory of the Soviet soldiers,' others suggested awarding the creator of the installation honourable citizenship of the city. A state prosecutor launched a criminal case. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a memorandum in which it condemned the installation, and the monument was eventually cleaned up by the Bulgaria–Russia Forum (Balkan Insight, 2011; Koleva, 2015). The authors of the installation – a group of students, as it turned out – argued that the monument has long lost its meaning as a symbol of the Red Army's glory but became a site of artwork. With their painting, they explained, they wanted to send a political message: they aimed to show that from once being a Soviet subject, Bulgaria has now become subordinated to the US (Koleva, 2015).

Since then, the monument became a constant centre of public art. In February 2012, during the anti-Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) protest, *Anonymous* paper masks (as a protest symbol) were dressed on the figures. That same year, the figures received balaclavas in support of the Russian punk group Pussy Riot. In 2013, on the anniversary of the Warsaw Pact countries' 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia, the figures at the monument were pained in pink, apparently in solidary with David Černý's painting of the Soviet tank monument in Prague. Also, the message 'Bulgaria apologises' was written in Czech on the pedestal (Koleva, 2015). In February 2014, one of the sculptural figures was pained in the blue and yellow of the Ukrainian national flag, and the new graffito 'Glory to Ukraine' in support of the Ukrainian Euromaidan Revolution appeared on the monument (Balkan Insight, 2018).

In May 2020, the other Soviet war monument in Cherni Vrah Park in Sofia's Lozenets district became contested. The mayor of the district called for the removal of the monument, as he regarded it as a symbol of the totalitarian era. In this way, he responded to the clashes between Russia and the Czech Republic about the removal of the Soviet Marshal Konev monument in a district of Prague. The mayor suggested relocating the monument to a museum and the remains of Soviet soldiers, should any be found, to one of the city's cemeteries (Radio Free Europe, 2020).

Against this backdrop, in a media interview, the Russian ambassador to Bulgaria Anatoliy Makarov claimed that the memory of the Great Patriotic War should be kept alive and emphasised that 27 million Soviet people sacrificed their lives for the victory over Nazism. He found the initiative of the Lozenets district mayor to relocate the monument 'blasphemy' and 'cruel torture' to the memory of those who lost their life for the victory, including the Bulgarian veterans fighting in antifascist movements. He considered any effort to minimise the role of the Red Army in defeating Nazism beyond comprehension (Inosmi, 2020).

Estonia

Following Estonia's independence in 1991, the Soviet war monument in Tõnismägi Square in Tallinn was stripped of its meaning as a symbol of the Red Army liberating Estonia. Soon, the eternal flame was extinguished, and the Tallinn city council removed the plaque naming the Red Army a liberator of the city. They instead installed a new plaque with the more general message 'For Those Who Fell in the Second World War.' In this way, the monument sent a more neutral message. It was not demolished as such, as it was perhaps seen as a dead space that did not bear the meaning of Red Army glory (Brüggemann and Kasekamp, 2008; Kaprāns and Seljamaa, 2017).

However, in the period of 2005–2007, strong opposition towards the monument arose, following Russia's more assertive commemoration of Victory Day. In 2005, on the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, the monument became the epicentre of tensions between Russia and Estonia. The intensified celebration of Victory Day by the Russian-speaking community at the monument became increasingly disliked by ethnic Estonians. The conflicting parties clashed over the monument for several weeks until the police sealed off the area. Given this situation, the Tallinn city council organised a number of meetings to decide the fate of the monument, and the Estonian Prime Minister and the government subsequently became embroiled in the dispute. Due to a conservative shift in the Estonian government, it was eventually decided to relocate the monument. Following a violent protest by ethnic Russians in which one person was killed, the Tallinn city council decided to move the monument without further delay to the military cemetery in the city. As a result, Russia protested against

the relocation, the Kremlin-sponsored youth organisation *Nashi* blockaded the Estonian embassy in Moscow, the Estonian government website experienced a massive cyber-attack, and the Russian authorities imposed unofficial economic sanctions on the transit of Russian oil through Estonian sea ports (Brüggemann and Kasekamp, 2008, pp. 433–437; Smith, 2008).

Consequently, the Estonian political leadership reacted negatively to the few Estonian politicians who participated in Russia's annual commemoration of Victory Day. When in 2017, two deputies of the Centre Party took part in the Victory Day celebrations at the Soviet war monument at its new place at the military cemetery, Estonian Prime Minister Jüri Ratas conveyed to his fellow party members that the participation in events celebrating the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany was not acceptable, as in his opinion, 9 May is associated in Estonia with the Soviet occupation, in a form even more severe than the German occupation (ERR, 2017).

Against this backdrop, the Russian ambassador to Estonia, Alexander Petrov, expressed major concerns regarding Estonia's opposition to the Russian Second World War narrative. In a September 2017 media interview, he pointed out that Russian commemorative activities abroad are dedicated to what the Russian authorities call 'the liberation of Tallinn from the Nazi invasion.' The Russian ambassador's conception of the Red Army's offensive in Estonia as a 'liberation' was particularly vivid in the argument, in which he claimed that Estonia would have not existed if the Third Reich had won. He contended that it is the public's obligation to remember the soldiers – whom he called 'heroes' – who fought for the liberation of Tallinn and Estonia from the fascist occupation, and he urged the public to avoid equating liberators with aggressors (Sputnik Eesti, 2017).

Conclusion

This chapter has examined Russia's use of the Second World War history as cultural statecraft. Following the main concept of this book, cultural statecraft is understood as a state's policy through which it aims to persuade and attract foreign governments and the public by using cultural means of influence (Forsberg and Smith, 2016). Several previous studies have explored how, as part of foreign policy, a subjective interpretation of a country's past experience is often used by political leaders and grassroots movements to propagate commonality with other states or political entities and, through this, establish a sense of shared identity. In this way, history can be instrumentalised for political ends and political projects such as integration within larger political unions and the expansion of political influence.

To support this thesis, I took Russia's policy on the preservation of the Second World War monuments abroad as an example. With the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia made it a priority to maintain and preserve Soviet war monuments in Eastern Europe. In seeking to reclaim its great-power status, the Russian political leadership has promoted a specific Second

World War narrative that serves as the primary source of Russia's identification with Europe and as a tool of cultural diplomacy to convince the EU member states of Russia's Europeanness. This narrative, also known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War narrative, emphasises the Soviet (read Russian) efforts in overcoming Nazi Germany, while at the same time it diminishes the role of the Soviet Union in unleashing the war through the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact in 1939, organising terror in the annexed Baltic countries and Poland, and imposing the Communist order and repressions after regaining the annexed territories from Nazi Germany in 1945. The emphasis on defeating Nazi Germany has been staged by the Russian authorities through commemoration of the end of the Second World War on 9 May – called Victory Day in Russia – at Soviet war monuments abroad, including those in Austria, Germany, Bulgaria and Estonia.

The commemoration at these monument sites is a combination of Russian state efforts and (trans)national grassroots initiatives loyal to the Russian government. The Russian legislation on the preservation of Soviet war monuments abroad, the setting up of intergovernmental commissions taking care of the monuments and military burial grounds, and the establishment of special representatives responsible for commemorative activities at the Russian diplomatic missions abroad all indicate Russia's active involvement in festivities on 9 May at the Soviet war monuments in the case study countries. For example, besides the official ceremony of laying wreaths on the Soviet war monuments in Vienna, Berlin, Sofia and Tallinn on 9 May, the Russian embassies have supported (trans)national grassroots initiatives such as the Immortal Regiment Movement and the Night Wolves motorcycle club, as well as a broad range of cultural activities linked to the Second World War commemoration, including the distribution of St. George ribbons. As such, the Russian state-sponsored commemoration of Victory Day in the analysed case study countries mobilises those social groups and political figures who support the Russian political regime and/or celebrate the Russian language and culture. As a part of its cultural diplomacy, Russia's aim seems to be to win the support of Russians and Russian-speaking communities from the former Soviet republics by giving them a sense of collective belonging in societies from which they might otherwise feel rather excluded. However, the target countries' official engagement with the Russian Victory Day festivities remains limited. The celebration of Victory Day attracts only marginal political figures from the case study countries and seems to have little impact on the governments and the broader public.

Each of the case study countries has reacted differently to Russia's efforts. The difference in the case study countries' responses to Russia's promotion of the Second World War narrative embodied in the Soviet war monuments is rooted in each country's different interpretation of the war (see, Kattago, 2009; Siddi, 2017). In Austria, with the established culture of responsibility for Nazi crimes, the authorities have a respectful attitude towards the Soviet war monument in Vienna, seeing the Red Army as a liberator and

feeling indebted to the Soviet/Russian soldiers (Art, 2006; Rathkolb, 2009). Likewise, in Germany, there is the consensus today that 1945 stands for denazification and the condemnation of the criminal character of the Nazi regime (Troebst, 2010). Hence, Germany feels obliged to preserve the memory of the victims of Nazi Germany's policy of annihilation.

At the same time, however, in these countries, the Soviet Union's involvement in launching the war and the Stalinist totalitarian regime are condemned. In post-communist Eastern European countries such as Estonia and Bulgaria, the Second World War is perceived as the struggle between the two totalitarian powers – the Nazis and the Soviets – for hegemony in Europe. The end of the Second World War is thus regarded not as their liberation from Nazi occupation but as the beginning of a new era of oppression (Smith, 2008; Mälksoo, 2009; Troebst, 2010; The Sofia Globe, 2019). In May 2020, along with some other Eastern European countries and the US, Bulgaria and Estonia issued a statement marking the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. They reminded the international community that the end of the war did not bring freedom to all of Europe but enabled the Soviet Union to establish Communist regimes in some parts of Europe that lasted for almost 50 years (United States Department of State, 2020).

Notes

1. On the Great Patriotic War discourse in the Soviet Union, see Tumarkin (1994), Scherrer (2004) and Markwick (2012).
2. Initially set up in 2012 in the Russian city of Tomsk as a grassroots movement, the idea of the Immortal Regiment has been hijacked by the Russian state authorities, who soon set up a 'duplicate' state-affiliated movement. Organised annually on Victory Day, the Immortal Regiment parade attracts people marching with placards featuring large, laminated photographs of their relatives who fought or fell in the Second World War. President Putin himself joined the procession in Moscow on 9 May 2015 holding a photograph of his father (Fedor et al., 2017; Kurilla, 2019). The Immortal Regiment has since morphed into a transnational movement that today holds a procession in many countries on 9 May.
3. With Putin's rise to power, the Night Wolves bikers went from being a counterculture grassroots initiative that emerged in the 1980s to passionate supporters of Putin's regime. The president himself rode with the Night Wolves several times, and in 2013 he even awarded their leader, Aleksander Zaldostanov, the Order of Honour. The group is known for their alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church and their denial of alternative lifestyles. They also advocated the return of Crimea to Russia (Galeotti, 2015; Laruelle, 2019).
4. For the histories of these monuments see Stangl (2003), Ehala (2009), Töpfer (2011), Gabowitsch, Gdaniec, and Makhotina (2017) and Zhurzhenko (2017).
5. The Eastern European countries are dotted with the monuments dedicated to the Red Army, which in Russia's view liberated Eastern Europe from Nazism. In December 2017, the Russian state news agency TASS provided an interesting overview of the Soviet war monuments in Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, the Czech Republic, Austria, Hungary, Serbia, Germany (the areas of the former

GDR), Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia and concluded that the governments and the general public of those countries have different memories of the Second World War and respectively different attitudes towards those monuments (TASS, 2017).

6. A new development in the Russian policy on Second World War monuments abroad is the construction of such monuments. For example, in January 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu unveiled the Memorial Candle monument in Jerusalem celebrating the heroism of the defenders of besieged Leningrad in the Second World War. See http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62642. In this context, especially active in constructing new monuments abroad has been the Russian Military Historical Society, a state-sponsored institution created by President Putin in 2012 with the aim of consolidating state and public efforts in studying Russian history. See https://rvio.histrf.ru/activities/monumentalnaya-propaganda.

7. The St. George ribbon originates in a ribbon of honour in the 18th-century Russian Empire. The ribbon was reactivated by Stalin in the Second World War as a ribbon attached to medals given to Soviet soldiers, and eventually re-introduced during Putin's presidency as the Great Patriotic War commemorative symbol (Orttung, 2015; Beshkinskaya and Miller, 2020).

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5 'Russian literature will fix everything'

The *Read Russia* project and cultural statecraft

Angelos Theocharis

Introduction

Literature has been the bulwark of Russian culture since the late 19th century, mainly represented by famous authors, such as Aleksandr Pushkin, Lev Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Anton Chekhov. The 19th-century writers with their major contributions to world literature, philosophy and theatre have been an essential part of the Russian and Soviet brand ever since (Senelick, 1997; Scanlan, 2002; Sandler, 2004; Frank, 2012; Foster, 2013; Holquist, 2016; Fusso, 2017). Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (published in 1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1878) are constantly listed among the most influential novels of all time, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1869) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) paved the way for philosophical and psychological fiction,[1] while Chekhov is considered one of the greatest short story writers and a seminal figure of modern theatre.[2] In contrast to other major literary figures of the 20th and 21st centuries who have received less attention outside Russia, the Russian classics are globally exported not only in the form of books in new or old translations but also through their adaptations into theatre plays and films. Nevertheless, literature was of peripheral importance for Soviet cultural diplomacy, as it was in the early post-Soviet times (Barghoorn, 1960; Gould-Davies, 2003; Raeva and Nagornaĭa, 2018). Yet, in the last decade, literature has been consistently employed as part of Russia's cultural statecraft strategies. Established in 2012, the *Read Russia* project is a Russian organisation responsible for the promotion of Russian literature in translation to global audiences, incorporating elements of the Soviet diplomatic practice, as well as looking for innovative ways to achieve its scope. Read Russia has been mainly oriented towards the publication of translations of classic and contemporary Russian literature, and the participation in international book fairs, where it presents new editions and planned literary activities.

The present chapter delves into the little researched topic of literature's role in the Russian cultural statecraft today focussing on the Read Russia project and its cultural activities in Britain and the US. More specifically, I first look at the resurfacing of literature as a soft power tool in Putin's era

after a long break since the Perestroika, as well as the promotion of Russian culture abroad through the *Russkiy Mir Foundation* and *Rossotrudnichestvo*. Furthermore, I explore the Read Russia project and its activities to date drawing material from my ethnographic fieldwork at the London Book Fairs 2018 and 2019 and from interviews with the directors of the organisations contributing to the project. In the end, I argue that Read Russia aims to improve Russia's world image and reputation through translations of Russian literature and literary events, as well as to mobilise the members of the Russophone diasporic communities around the world.

Russian literature as an instrument of cultural statecraft

Soviet cultural diplomacy showed interest in employing Russian literature as an instrument of soft power early in the post-World War II era, principally utilising the symbolic capital of acclaimed writers. Hence, previous studies have disregarded the field of literature in their analysis with two exceptions being Barghoorn's monograph *The Soviet cultural offensive* (1960) and the collective monograph *Soviet cultural diplomacy during the Cold War, 1945–1989* (Nagornaĭa, 2018a). Barghoorn observed the Soviet cultural exchanges with foreign countries and showed that the 'culture-conscious Soviet regime' made considerable efforts to promote its culture abroad. Literature had a significant place in these efforts and 'the international political struggle' in general that was expected to be enhanced as the '"international contacts of Soviet literature" were expanding, and would expand still farther' (1960, p. 22).[3] According to Raeva and Nagornaĭa (2018, p. 349), the Soviet Union invested in cultural diplomats who could help attract sympathisers to its political mission expanding its influence beyond the marginalised left-wing intellectuals. The public figures that were chosen to act as cultural diplomats included theatre and dancing ensembles, professional athletes, cosmonauts and writers. The two scholars focus on the example of the Soviet writer Konstantin Fedin (1892–1975), who joined the unofficial cultural diplomatic mission in 1949. Fedin had demonstrated his loyalty to the communist party and possessed the necessary 'symbolic capital – authority, fame, wide network of contacts abroad' that would 'ensure the successful performance of a "diplomatic performance"' (Raeva and Nagornaĭa, 2018, p. 350). Fedin's main diplomatic activity constituted frequent trips to participate in conferences and meetings with international organisations and foreign political actors, partake in cultural events and celebrations, and make presentations about world politics. The writer was regularly assigned exhausting, multiday trips to both socialist and Western countries without the option to refuse. Returning from the diplomatic expeditions, Fedin had to report on the events that he attended and to publish articles informing his audience about his travel experience abroad. Overall, each delegate writer bore the responsibility to strengthen the relations between USSR and the visited

countries. As a result, in many cases, the authors personally symbolised liaisons with particular countries (Raeva and Nagornaĭa, 2018, p. 352).

Another project of the Soviet cultural statecraft that gave prominence to writers and literature was the 'International Lenin Prize for Strengthening Peace Among Peoples', which was founded in 1949 as the International Stalin Prize but was renamed seven years later under the de-Stalinisation reforms. The international prize was awarded annually to multiple recipients that promoted world peace. Breaking with the general rules of Soviet cultural diplomacy, the award was also given to a number of activists and public figures with significant contributions to peace-making regardless of their political loyalties (Nagornaĭa, 2018b, p. 363). Offering an alternative to the Nobel Prize in Literature, among the recipients of the prize almost every year were writers and poets from various countries. Famous laureates included Pablo Neruda, Miguel Ángel Asturias, James Aldridge and Hervé Bazin.[4] Nagornaĭa argues that the Soviet state instrumentalised the international reputation of the recipients to support its 'foreign policy positions in a particular region of the world and to confirm the peaceful nature of socialist initiatives or the position of a particular leader' (Nagornaĭa, 2018b, p. 366). The USSR's image-making efforts through the awards were also visible within the country in the form of publications and photographs that proclaimed the existence of prominent supporters around the world.

On the other side of the Iron curtain, some Western countries also approached Russian literature on a cultural statecraft level by offering support to exiled writers and dissidents and assisting the publication of banned literary works. One famous example was the publication of *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak in Italy in 1957, for which he received the Nobel Prize in Literature the following year. Dissident literature offered an opportunity to damage USSR's world reputation since it revealed a different side to the promoted image regarding the living and political conditions within the country. If cultural statecraft is defined as a state's efforts 'to develop and exercise power based […] on persuasion and attraction and […] backed by means of information, values, framing, and image-building' (Forsberg and Smith, 2016, pp. 129–130), the promotion of dissident literature and the employment in later years of famous exiled writers can be utilised to counteract a country's cultural diplomacy strategies. Pasternak's novel wasn't the only case when the Swedish Academy awarded oppositional literature to criticise the Soviet regime. In fact, among the five Russian/Soviet Nobel laureates, only Mikhail Sholokhov (1965) was aligned with the communist party: Ivan Bunin (1933) was a renowned representative of Russian émigré culture; Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1970) was forced to exile in 1974 and Joseph Brodsky (1987) had been expelled from the Soviet Union in 1972. Even Svetlana Alexievich (2015), the most recent Russophone Nobel Laureate, has been critical of the USSR and post-communist Russia (Walker, 2017).

Coming into power in 2000, Putin aimed for the restoration of Russia's place in world affairs, highlighting the role of diplomacy and cultural

statecraft as responses to the remains of the Cold War Western rhetoric (Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016, p. 398; Jonson, 2019, p. 15). In 2012 during a meeting of Russian ambassadors, Putin stressed, 'Russia's image abroad is not formed by us, because it is often distorted and does not represent the real situation in our country. […] And we are guilty of having failed to explain our position' (President of Russia, 2012). Having identified that foreign leaders and audiences are well disposed to Russian culture,[5] Putin has been willingly instrumentalising it for image-making purposes. In the Foreign Policy Review of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russian culture is described as 'an effective instrument to ensure Russia's economic and foreign policy interests and positive image in the world' following the example of the 'Great powers' who have long invested in this field (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007, p. 30). Even scholars who are highly critical of Russian imperialism regard positively the classic Russian cultural production. Grigas (2016, p. 30) recognises the potential of Russian high culture, which 'with its classic authors, composers, and choreographers, remains well regarded in most parts of the world and could be a legitimate and effective component of the country's soft power'. At the same time, Sherr (2013, p. 90) argues that even though 'Russian high culture is […] Russia's purest soft power asset,' its actual efficiency as a political tool can be challenged.

Putin addressed the issue of Russia's reputation to the West by looking for ways to challenge the anti-Russian discourses. As early as in 2000, Putin successfully approached Solzhenitsyn and sought his support, 'firstly, to assure the West that Russia had broken with its communist past for good; and secondly, to assure the Russian citizenry that post-Soviet Russia possessed moral and cultural legitimacy' (Rollberg, 2018, p. 7). Even after Solzhenitsyn's death in 2008, the Russian government still regards the anti-communist writer as one of its patron saints and treats him as such. Nonetheless, Solzhenitsyn's political significance was reduced in the West already from the 1980s and gradually in Russia at the time of his return in 1994, significantly limiting the success of Putin's strategy.

A similar endeavour has been the instrumentalisation of Tolstoy's legacy and global reputation in various ways. First of all, Putin recruited as his adviser on cultural affairs Vladimir Tolstoy, a great-grandson of the famous writer and director of the State Tolstoy Museum-Estate at Yasnaya Polyana. Vladimir Tolstoy, who presents himself as a liaison between the government and the cultural sphere, 'guided […] a committee of leading cultural figures and state officials' (Donadio, 2015) in producing the 2014 Foundations of State Cultural Policy (FSCP). This document[6] summarises the conservative turn in the cultural policy of the country underlining its cultural distinctiveness. Russian culture is regarded as the bedrock for economic prosperity, state sovereignty and distinctive cultural identity (President of Russia, 2014, p. 1). The key elements of the state's binding force, i.e. the Russian culture, have been the geographical position of the country, the Russian language, Orthodox Christianity, and the arts with literature holding the primary

position. The policy instrumentalises culture for the formation of a national identity that will support the unification of the nation against the challenges of the modern world. In this way, the state assumes an active role in the cultural field and proclaims its involvement in the dissemination of the desired national discourses, as well as in the shaping of Russia's cultural memory (ibid., p. 3).

The recruitment of Solzhenitsyn and a Tolstoy's descendant[7] showcases Putin's effort to legitimise his nationalistic worldview and political choices. For example, in the case of Crimea's annexation in 2014, Solzhenitsyn was cited in support of Russia's position (Rollberg, 2018, p. 7). At the same time, Vladimir Tolstoy, in an interview to the New York Times, drew on his forebear's involvement in the Crimean War (1854–1855) and stated, 'Of course, as a descendant of the Russian officer Leo Tolstoy, I cannot have any other attitude toward that [than being supportive]' (Donadio, 2015).

Furthermore, Tolstoy's work was chosen as the representative of the 19th-century Russian culture for the global mega-event, the opening ceremony of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games. A scene from the world-famous novel 'War and Peace' was the subject of a ballet that was performed at the opening ceremony. According to Sarah Hudspith (2018, p. 51), 'the ceremony, following a typical paradigm for Olympic opening ceremonies, represents a showcase of how Russia selects and packages its cultural, historical and technological achievements, in order to create a certain image of Russia for international consumption.' In this account, *War and Peace*, one of the most famous Russian novels selectively retold through a ballet performance, was served as one of Russia's monumental contributions to the European and world cultures, as a proof of the country's longstanding greatness. Hudspith further argues that the choice and the presentation of the novel contributed to 'a geopolitical statement' about Russia's 'invincibility' (ibid., p. 61) given that the Sochi Olympics were quickly followed by the annexation of Crimea. In the closing ceremony, Tolstoy appeared working on his desk alongside other renowned writers and poets, such as Dostoyevsky, Akhmatova, Pushkin and Turgenev, all played by actors. The writers' desks were placed in a circle and surrounded by a changing photo montage with eleven more authors,[8] while in the centre an ensemble of 96 librarians danced. Both Olympic ceremonies endeavoured to remind international audiences of the Russian contributions to world culture, as well as to establish literature as part of the Russian brand.

Russian cultural diplomacy in the field of literature relies heavily on the appeal of its most famous writers and their connections to different historical eras creating a narrative of historical continuity and capitalising on their symbolic capital and their place in world culture. Next to Tolstoy and Solzhenitsyn who represent the connections of the present regime with the pre-revolutionary and Soviet periods respectively, other renowned writers appear Aleksandr Pushkin as the symbol of Russian literature, Ivan Turgenev and Fyodor Dostoyevsky as Putin's favourites.[9] In the following

section, I discuss the Russian institutions who act as cultural statecraft agents abroad aiming for the expansion of Russian influence.

Promoting Russian culture abroad: Foreign audiences and the compatriots

For the successful promotion of the Russian culture, Putin founded in 2007 the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) Foundation and a year later the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, and Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation, known as *Rossotrudnichestvo* (Sherr, 2013; Gorham, 2019). The *Russkiy Mir Foundation*, on the one hand, focusses on the promotion of Russian as both a native and a foreign language providing language classes (Gorham, 2011), as well as organising lectures about Russian literature and cultural events with invited Russophone writers and other prominent speakers. A network of *Russkiy Mir* cultural centres[10] was developed to support the local Russophone communities abroad, but in recent years a number of these centres have closed suggesting the possible decline of the foundation.

Rossotrudnichestvo, on the other hand, aims 'to form a large circle of friends and a friendly attitude towards Russia' (Khimshiashvili, 2018),[11] which includes the expansion of the 'Russian influence amongst the 25 million or so ethnic Russians and 100 million Russian speakers in the post-soviet space' (Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016, p. 405). The Agency can be considered a successor to the Russian Center for international scientific and cultural cooperation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2002–2008) and the Russian Center for international scientific and cultural cooperation under the government of Russia (Roszarubezhtsentr, 1994–2002). According to Eleonora Mitrofanova, the ex-director of *Rossotrudnichestvo*, the soft power institution continues the legacy of the Soviet system for humanitarian cooperation with foreign states established in 1925[12]: 'Our «soft power Institute» is older than both the Confucius Institute and the *British Council*, only the *Alliance Francaise* was created at the end of the nineteenth century' (Khimshiashvili, 2018). The 97 local representative offices of *Rossotrudnichestvo* promote the Russian culture through exhibitions, concerts and other events,[13] organise the celebrations of national holidays with the 'compatriots,' and since 2016, also hold languages classes (*Rossotrudnichestvo*, 2019; 2020).[14]

The focus of both *Russkiy Mir Foundation* and *Rossotrudnichestvo* on the diasporic Russophone communities represents Putin's effort to expand Russia's sphere of influence abroad by turning to the compatriots, '*sootechestvenniki*.' The 'Russian World' (*Russkyi mir)* concept was employed to capture 'a naturally existing civilisational community' (Feklyunina, 2016, p. 783) with identification markers the Russian language, the Soviet heritage and the Russian culture. The intentionally vague and abstract idea of *sootechestvenniki* covers ethnic Russians and Russian speakers who live in the 'near' and 'far abroad,' those born in the Soviet Union or their descendants.

Although there is no clear distinction in the policies towards the compatriots, the Russophone diaspora has been targeted differently based on its location, that is, between those residing in the neighbouring post-Soviet states and those dispersed around the world. The first group has been part of what Grigas calls 'the reimperialisation of the former Soviet space' (2016, p. 26), while the second has been approached in a softer yet clearly politicised way. In both cases, the diaspora is being instrumentalised for the implementation of the Russian political interests abroad (Sherr, 2013, pp. 109–110).

The strategies for the mobilisation of the compatriots have changed considerably over time. According to Suslov, 'there has been neither a consistent policy towards the Russian-speaking diaspora nor a consistent ideology legitimising Russia's special relationship with its "compatriots" abroad' (2018, p. 346). In the past 20-plus years, 'Russian world' has been conceptualised as a cultural archipelago (1996–2001) regarding the diasporic communities as 'islands,' or as 'a sovereign "great power" with its natural "tentacles" abroad' (2001–2009) (Suslov, 2018, pp. 346–347). More recently, in the period from 2009 to 2015, the doctrine of the 'Russian world' 'has been reterritorialised as an irredentist and isolationist project, aligned with the logic of representing Russia as an alternative, non-Western model of modernity' (ibid., p. 330). At the same time, there is a clear provision at the FSCP about the necessity to support the Russophone communities, along with the general promotion of the Russian language and culture to the world (President of Russia, 2014, p. 12).

The *Russkiy Mir* Foundation and *Rossotrudnichestvo* implement the Russian cultural statecraft policies that try to increase the number of the country's sympathisers and seek to attract the diasporic Russophone populations by giving prominence to the shared culture and heritage. In this way, Russian culture appears as a means to preserve the long-distance relationship of compatriots with Russia, as well as to consolidate the diasporic communities on the basis of a shared cultural identity. The present chapter discusses Read Russia, a cultural project that can be distinguished from the above foundations but often cooperates with them in the implementation of its programme.

The Read Russia project: An introduction

The analysis of the Read Russia project is based on my ethnographic fieldwork at the London Book Fair in 2018 and 2019, one of the main platforms for showcasing Russian literature and book culture abroad. Pink defines ethnography 'as a process of creating and representing knowledge or ways of knowing that are based on ethnographers' own experiences and the ways these intersect with the persons, places and things encountered during that process' (2013, p. 35). During my fieldwork, I observed the majority of the events organised by Read Russia taking notes, recording the discussions, and, where possible, taking photographs of the events. In

addition, I interviewed Peter B. Kaufman, the director of the American branch of the project, and Yevgeny Reznichenko, the Executive Director of the Institute of Translation.[15] In this section, I present Read Russia drawing from observations and interviews and in the following, I examine how the project approaches its two audiences, the English-speaking and the Russian-speaking.

The project 'Read Russia' was established in 2011 to promote contemporary and classic Russian literature and Russian book culture to foreign audiences. It is based in New York, London and Moscow and it is supported by the Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communications and coordinated jointly by the Institute for Literary Translation (Moscow) and the Presidential Center of Boris Yeltsin. The project's operations in New York are organised by Read Russia Inc., which is an American nongovernmental organisation established in 2012 (Read Russia, 2019) and represented by Peter Kaufman. According to Kaufman, Read Russia is 'a very virtual organisation' and does not have offices in any of the three cities allowing the project to be more flexible and adaptable. In an interview, Kaufman admitted that the project is an 'effort to make up for lost time,' an opportunity for international audiences 'to learn a little about Russia and to think about some of the things Russians think about when they think about literature' (Schillinger, 2015).[16] When I asked Kaufman and Reznichenko about the project's mission, both supported literature's special place in Russian culture and, therefore, its ability to represent what Russia stands for. Reznichenko cited the contemporary Russian writer Eugene Vodolazkin to explain his position: 'If you want to learn more about Russia, read its literature. A literary work is created by a writer primarily for their people, and this is the guarantee of the sincerity of this text. Literature is not written for export. [...] True literature quietly indicates the spiritual state of a particular society. But at their best, these testimonies take on a universal meaning.' In other words, literary works can act as mediators between different cultures improving understanding and establishing communication channels, as well as offering opportunities to influence how readers think and feel about a certain country.

For Vladimir Tolstoy, Putin's adviser on cultural affairs, the Read Russia project can increase Russia's attractiveness to possible sympathisers: 'Literature is the best bridge to understanding peoples, what they've lived through and what sort of values they have' (Roth, 2015). Hence, the Read Russia organisers denied the project's contribution to the instrumentalisation of Russian literature for political reasons. Reznichenko, on the one hand, initially admitted that 'Our politicians, like politicians in any other country in the world, try to use successful writers for their own purposes, but it does not work very well – unfortunately, literature doesn't have the influence it used to have on Russian/Soviet life, for example, in the 60s or in the '80s–'90s.' Kaufman, on the other, stressed that the 'American' Read Russia does not have a political agenda and plans its activities independently:

'There is no political fear or favour in anything that Read Russia does and there is no influence from Russia on whatever we put on.' His claim that the 'American' Read Russia is independent of its Russian partners contradicts the project's collaborative nature.[17] Kaufman maintained that people involved in the project cherish Russian literature and serve it in the same way as Bolshoi's ballet dancers, when they perform abroad, regardless of its possible positive effect on Russia's world image. In his opinion, a 'soulless, unemotional, instrumental view of literature' is highly unlikely 'because of the importance of literature to anyone who has ever grown up in Russia.'

Read Russia implements an annual program of events and actions that, for Yevgeny Reznichenko, aims at developing international humanitarian cooperation and establishing business and personal contacts between translators, publishers, and literary agents outside Russia. The project also builds and sustains a network with scholars in the fields of Russian literature and promotes Russian as a foreign language. In this framework, Read Russia focuses on publications, translation workshops and awards, book fairs, meet-the-author events, roundtables, and film productions that celebrate Russian literature and encourage readers to engage with it. Even though its scope is close to that of national cultural centres, such as Germany's 'Goethe-Institut,' France's 'Institut Français' and Spain's 'Instituto Cervantes,' the project is not associated with or supported financially by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Institute of Translation funds the project's initiatives by participating in competitions for state grants or seeking financial support from public and private various foundations, both domestic and international. For Reznichenko, the fact that the Institute is not funded directly from the state budget helps secure independence for itself and its projects.

Read Russia's international activities focus on book fairs, prizes and publications. The project participates in most major international book fairs[18] (London, Paris Frankfurt, Madrid, Tehran, New Delhi) as the official representation of the Russian Federation. Furthermore, a 'Read Russia Prize' is awarded every two years for the best new translation in a foreign language.[19] The winners receive a financial award of up to $10,000, which is divided between the winner and the publisher (Read Russia, 2018). The publisher receives their share of the financial award as a grant for the translation and publication of another work of Russian literature. There are also 'cluster' translation awards along with the main Read Russia Prize about the publication of a literary work in a particular language. Such prizes exist in France, in the United States and the UK, in Italy, Spain, and since 2019, in China. According to Reznichenko, there are plans to establish translations prizes for more countries and linguistic regions such as Germany and the Arab world. All shortlisted translators for these awards are automatically included on the long list of the Read Russia Prize. Finally, Read Russia with the support of the Institute of Translation offers two types of grants: the annual translation grants to foreign publishers covering the translation costs[20] and the grants related to the mega-project 'The 100-volume Russian

Library.' The Russian Library grants cover the full publication cost of a collection of pre-modern, modern and contemporary Russian literary works in the major world languages.

The project has been largely oriented towards the Western reading audiences, and particularly the US, the UK, France and Germany. Read Russia's investment in the English-speaking book market is underlined by the founding of the American NGO. The American branch coordinates the project's activities in the United States, which include the Russian Literature Week in New York, and the publication of the Anglophone 'The Russian Library' by Columbia University Press. The Russian Library followed the publication of *Read Russia!*: *An Anthology of New Voices* in 2012 with 30 short-stories/novellas of contemporary Russian writers. The 'American' Read Russia has produced a film called 'Russia's Open Book: Writing in the Age of Putin' (2013), directed by Paul Mitchell and Sarah Wallis. Hosted by the famous actor, Stephen Fry, the film addresses the question of who are the 'contemporary Russian authors carrying on one of the world's greatest literary traditions.'[21] The film aims not only to inform admirers of Russian literature but also to attract and intrigue new readers. The most recent addition to the project's activities in the US has been 'The Chatham Translation Symposium,' a three-day workshop in Chatham, Massachusetts, for translators of Russian literature in English. For Kaufman, in the post-COVID-19 era, the engagement with literature will take place mainly online, which will turn the internet into 'a very crowded place,' with national literatures competing for international audiences. As he puts it, 'So what we need to do is to figure out ways of marketing Russian literature and culture in an online public square that's going to be the opposite of social distancing.'

Read Russia is an adaptable and versatile project that invites global audiences to reacquaint themselves with Russian culture through translations of classic and contemporary Russian literature. The organisers invest in the project's digital presence, in expanding to new platforms and appealing to both online and offline audiences. The political side of the project has been denied by both Kaufman and Reznichenko who declare their full independence from the Russian authorities.

The London Book Fairs 2018 and 2019

The events that I attended during the London Book Fairs 2018 and 2019 will be divided into two different categories for analytical reasons – those arguably targeting the general English-speaking public and those reaching out to the Russophone community in London. An indication of the target group can be easily found in the official program from the mention of the language of each event. The strategies that the project follows vary for each audience, and for that reason, I will present them separately.

I start my analysis with a description of the Read Russia stand at the Olympia, Exhibition Centre London, where most events take place. The

design of the Russian national stand was simple: the overarching colour was white, the letters on the walls red and the carpet blue – the colours of the Russian flag. The main logo of the stand reads, 'Read Deep. Read Smart. Read Russia' making wordplay with the title of the project and suggesting that the reader of Russian literature is a profound, highly intelligent, and educated person. On the screen below the logo, scenes from Russian landscapes were discreetly displayed reminding one of touristic stands at international expos. The stand had been carefully built to play with connotations and symbols of Russian culture, yet to avoid any clear national emblems or flags, as it happens in other stands.

Another logo is found at the stand's free bookmarker-size stickers and it reads, 'Russian literature will fix everything.' This phrase catches one's attention particularly for its powerful statement, even ending unusually with a period. It arguably acts on two different levels: first, the phrase reads like reassuring, comforting advice from an elder or a sage, clearly referring to the 'Keep Calm and Carry On' catchphrase and memes. Russian literature will help you solve your problems; get you through a tough time. In this account, Russian literature appears as a font of knowledge and wisdom to draw from, a great companion for life's adversities. On a second level, it reminds one of the Russian revolution posters and their commands aimed at recruitment of soldiers.

The stand's careful design aims at attracting the varying audience of the book fair to stop by and attend its events. At the same time, the branding and especially the second logo of the project allows one to speculate what Russia is trying to fix through the promotion of its literature. I argue that Read Russia constitutes an inherently image-making project that endeavours to fix Russia's world reputation by presenting the country as democratic, diverse and respecting of gender equality.

The English-speaking events of Read Russia

The Read Russia events at the LBF targeting the English-speaking audience includes roundtables, seminars or panels, presentations of the awards (all of them taking place at the Olympia), as well as a few events in English or with English translation located at various places in London, usually connected to the Russian state or Russian culture. The Official Opening of the Stand was held in Russian with an English translation and was joined by the representatives of all the Russian organisations.

The parameters limiting the impact and the success of the Russian events were evident from the very beginning of the LBF. The first issue was language. The vast majority of all LBF events are held in English, which guarantees their accessibility to the audience of the fair. Nevertheless, a number of the invited Russian authors are not fluent in English and they can only participate in a panel or roundtable if an interpreter is present. For example, in 2018, Shamil Idiatullin, Yulia Yakovleva, and Galina Yuzefovich

represented Russia to the LBF, but only Yakovleva and Yuzefovich managed to participate in the English-speaking events. Instead of hiring one or more interpreters for the duration of the fair, the organisers choose to organise events in Russian for the non-fluent writers outside the Olympia, thus depriving the English-speaking audience of the opportunity to listen to their presentations and meet them. The sustained language barrier, in addition to the fact that LBF requires an expensive entrance fee, leads to the shrinkage of the possible audience for the Read Russia events. Most attendees are exhibitors, editors, literary agents, and translators representing a rather specialised audience, which explains why the organisers also plan events to take place outside the Olympia during the fair. Reznichenko, the director of the Institute of Translation, admitted that in order to guarantee that their events will be well-attended, they are often obliged to tailor them to every single foreign audience. In some cases, Read Russia's audience in a specific country or city consists largely of literary specialists, while sometimes it comprises the general reading audience, which translates to more reader-focussed events.[22]

Zooming onto the themes of the events, in both years, the panels and the roundtables dealt with the importance and difficulties of a good translation and the search for a Russian novel that could become an international best-seller. These recurring themes point out that the project organisers are particularly concerned about the attractiveness of contemporary Russian literature and that they recognise the significance of the translators' contribution to this effort. The main participants in the discussion were publishers, agents, critics, and translators, active in the English-speaking book market and therefore able to offer insight and propose strategies on how to improve Russia's position in it. In most cases, the audience actively participated in the discussion. My interviews with the organisers showed that they regard the book fairs as fora for new ideas and platforms to receive feedback on their current operations.

Furthermore, the Read Russia program for 2019 included a panel titled 'Women in Literature & Translation: Realities & Stereotypes' returning to an older topic from 2012. The all-female panel –excepting the moderator – explored the very current issue of female representation in literature in general and particularly in Russian literature. The panel took place in the Literary Translation Centre, one of the most spacious event areas at the Olympia. The room was full and the discussion between the participants followed a round with questions from the audience. The well-attended event showed that Read Russia joins the global discourse on gender equality discourse and actively supports Russian female writers and their equal representation. Even though the project appears to be ready to fight stereotypes in and about Russian literature and give prominence to under-represented writers, any reference to LGBT literature has been absent from the Read Russia programs. On the same note, the genre of ecofiction that discusses climate change and human intervention in the natural habitat has not

received any attention. In other words, although the organisers are making efforts to promote the project as being progressive, its LBF programs remain rather conservative and less appealing to the English-speaking audience at which it aims for.[23]

On the same note, the London Book Fair constitutes an incubator for new discourses and narratives that promote Read Russia's work. The main narrative that Read Russia tested during the London Book Fair in 2018 and 2019 and is now officially incorporated in its program is the promotion of Russophone literature from under-represented regions of Russia. The first region is Tatarstan with a significant Muslim population. Idiatullin, and Yakhina had been invited to the LBF in different years, but they were grouped together and branded for the first time as Tatars for the Moscow International Book Fair 2019. During the fair, they participated in the panel 'The city as a text. Literary reflections' about Kazan. The second region is the Urals, represented by the writers Aleksey Ivanov and Aleksey Salnikov, who participated in the LBF 2019. In contrast to Salnikov, for whom a typical meet-the-author event was organised, Ivanov's event at the Pushkin House did not focus on his books. Instead, the writer showed an excerpt from his famous film project 'The Ridge of Russia/Khrebet Rossii' (2010), which dealt with the Russianness of the region. After the LBF, the two writers attended the Frankfurt International Book Fair 2019 and were asked to give a talk in the 'The city as a text' panel, which was dedicated at that time to Yekaterinburg. The new narrative of the regional contribution to contemporary Russian literature and Russian identity supports an image of Russia as being inclusive by giving opportunities and prominence to writers of the periphery.

The Read Russia program for the London Book Fair is largely writer-centric and that applies for all Russian representations in the major international book fairs. The project selects a small number of writers (usually between two and five) that have already been translated to the official language of the country where the book fair takes place, or writers who have already appealed to an international audience. This selection process, which connects certain authors to specific countries and draws from their reputation to attract new audiences, resonates with the Soviet diplomatic tradition of the writers' tours described by Raeva and Nagornaĩa (2018). In Britain, the invited writers usually depart on a tour after the end of the LBF to visit the Russian departments of renowned universities around the country and give lectures. The tours attract readers, students, scholars and members of the local Russophone communities who are interested in meeting with the authors or staying in touch with the contemporary Russian literary production.

The London Book Fair 2019 offers a noteworthy case of Read Russia's approach to writer events. That year, Guzel Yakhina, one of the most commercially successful contemporary Russian writers, attended the fair for the second time. Her award-winning debut novel *Zuleikha opens her eyes*

(2015) has been translated in more than 30 languages, constituting an international publishing phenomenon for contemporary Russian literature. Yakhina was first invited to the London Book Fair in 2016 to participate in the Russophone events after receiving the prestigious Big Book award. Her return to the LBF three years later coincided with the publication of her famous novel in English and responded to Read Russia's call for a possible best-seller that could draw the attention of the British readers.

Yakhina participated in the opening ceremony of the stand and the 'Women in Literature and Translation' panel. However, the writer's main event was her book presentation in the Russian section of the Waterstones Piccadilly bookstore. The event was ticketed in support of a fundraising campaign and it was to take place in English. As expected and despite the pricy tickets, the book presentation was sold out, but only two attendees were English. For that reason, the organisers decided on the spot to hold the event in Russian, even though they hadn't previously arranged for an interpreter. One of the organisers approached me and asked me to sit next to the British and interpret for them, although we had never discussed it before. In my opinion, the book presentation was unsuccessful in terms of attendance by the target group (the British audience), and the pragmatic choice of switching to Russian endangered its accessibility by the only English-speaking attendees. The organisers experimented with organising an event in English that would take place outside the Olympia, but they did not prepare appropriately for the possibility of a mixed audience.

The present study has shown that despite the efforts of the organisers to invite writers and choose topics of discussion that could attract the general public in Britain, the limited provisions regarding language accessibility (i.e. interpreters, subtitles, etc.) have resulted in lower engagement with non-Russian speaking and non-specialist audiences.

Read Russia's events for the Russophone diaspora

The Russian-speaking events that Read Russia organises for the LBF take place outside the Olympia and most of the time in collaboration with the project's partners in London. Taking into consideration that Read Russia's mission is to promote Russian literature in translation, the following question quickly arises: What is the scope of the project's events targeting the local Russophone community?

The Read Russia organisers clarified in their interviews that Russian speakers don't constitute their target audience. For Kaufman, director of the 'American' Read Russia, their presence is a positive phenomenon, especially for the writers: 'It is unmediated love that takes place, when a Russian speaker who has read the work in the original comes up at the end of the event and talks to an author about it, as the author is signing the book. And it also provides some comfort because many times these authors are not fluent English speakers, so it is often a friendly face.' He further stated that

Russian speakers who have read the author's works in Russian guarantee that there is a part of the audience who has properly understood them and their message. In this account, the Russophone audience unwittingly supports Read Russia's mission and the success of its events contributes to the book discussions and encourages the writers in their work. Reznichenko confirmed my observations that even the Anglophone events are mainly attended by Russians speakers: 'The writers sometimes complain that only former Muscovites and Petersburgers come to meet them in the United States, France, Great Britain, not to mention Israel – "so we didn't need to travel that far."' According to Kaufman, the Read Russia events are not planned according to a certain political strategy that, for example, intentionally tries to target and mobilise the Russophone audience: 'Wherever you see a sense of strategy, I would say chalk it up and ask questions instead about how much time people have to organise something, how important it is to have a photograph of a room that's full, how much money people have, who the partners are, who the speakers are and with what language they are comfortable.' By emphasising on the practical difficulties, Kaufman aims to devalue any observations coming from Read Russia's events that could reveal a contradiction between the project's proclaimed mission and its actual practice.

The Russophone literary events that I attended during the LBF 2018 and 2019 focused on the invited authors and their work. The different formats of the events (panels, book presentations, and meet-the-author events) offered variety to Read Russia's program and gave the opportunity to the audience to see their favourite writers on multiple occasions. The attendance numbers varied significantly, from low to high depending on the popularity of the presenting writers.[24] I argue that Read Russia is concerned about the attendance of its Russophone events and constantly adapts its strategy in order to attract the local community and guarantee their success.

In 2018, Read Russia organised a meet-the-author event in Russian with the writers Shamil Idiatullin and Yulia Yakovleva in the Russian section of the Waterstones Piccadilly. The event was not well-attended even though Idiatullin's most recent novel had won the Big Book Award and Yakovleva is a successful children's writer. I noticed that at least 6 of the 27 attendees were members of the Waterstones Russian Book Club (WRBC).[25] At the end of the event, the book club members accompanied by WRBC moderator met with Idiatullin, whose book they had already read and discussed, as well as with one of the Read Russia organisers. A book club member was holding Idiatullin's award-winning novel and asked him to sign it for her. Idiatullin had gifted the previous day two copies of his book to the WRBC as awards to the winners of the book club's quiz as a promotion of his book presentation. The WRBC members also took a picture with the writer, which was later posted on Read Russia's social media. The opportunity of a possible new audience in this Russophone diasporic community book club hardly went unnoticed by the Read Russia organisers.

The following year, the Russian program for the London Book Fair was reorganised and it incorporated more events that targeted the Russian speakers in London. Read Russia cooperated with the moderator of the Waterstones Russian Book Club in the organisation of two literary events specifically for the members of the club. The first one was a book club meeting with the writer Aleksey Salnikov. Salnikov's invitation to the LBF was a direct request by the book club members,[26] an unusual practice for Read Russia, that is, consulting a community initiative on the selection of the year's writers. In my opinion, the organisers decided to reach out to the WRBC as part of their strategy to not only improve the attendance of their events but also to increase their impact. By integrating a bottom-up request in the official program, the project shows its readiness to plan activities for the Russophone readers representing their actual interest, as well as its intention to build ties with the local diasporic community.

The second event organised in collaboration with the WRBC was the 'Breakfast with Guzel Yakhina.' In contrast to Yakhina's book presentation, which had taken place the previous evening, the 'Breakfast' was a free, informal, strictly female and invitation-only event. The 15 participants were core members of the WRBC, or community leaders who organised their own book clubs in London. The event lasted an hour and the participants discussed literature and the writing process over tea. Private events don't constitute the usual practice of a country's official representation abroad. In addition to that event, Yakhina had presented only the previous evening at Waterstones Piccadilly to an audience consisting almost exclusively of Russian speakers. Based on the interviews I conducted, I found out that the event was intended as a privilege for the members of the Russophone reading community. Nevertheless, the organisers deliberately included the event in the official program, disregarding its private and intimate character. This contradictory behaviour on behalf of the Read Russia organisers gives prominence to their willingness to instrumentalise the diasporic underpinnings of an event for publicity reasons and for declaring the impactfulness of their activities in the country. At the same time, the organisers recorded this meeting as they do with all their events, which allows them to revisit the discussions at a later point.

Read Russia also introduced in 2019 a thematic panel at *Rossotrudnichestvo* with the participation of all the invited authors. The writers' panel was called 'History and Individuality in Contemporary Writing: How to Talk about Our Past'[27] and it was held in Russian. The last event of the Russian program for the London Book Fair 2019 was its epitome, inviting writers and audiences to recall the Soviet experience and explore its influence on contemporary literature. In 2016, Read Russia had organised a roundtable on the same subject, but it was in English and at the Olympia with the participation of two authors. Although Reznichenko had stated in his interview that 'the task of uniting the Russian-speaking population abroad is rather a priority of the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation or

Rossotrudnichestvo,' the collaboration with the latter asserts the oppo-
site. The presence of the famous writers attracted to *Rossotrudnichestvo*
community members, who do not necessarily identify as compatriots and
might not visit its premises otherwise. The event was sold out, and the
discussion about the Soviet past and its ongoing influence lasted almost
two hours. The panel moderator and literary critic Aleksandr Chantchev
opened the discussion by mentioning that the event responded to the
Russian readers' deep interest in novels engaging with the Soviet past.
Each writer represented a different approach to the subject, which cre-
ated a much-desired polyphony. The democratic atmosphere contributed
to *Rossotrudnichestvo*'s image-building efforts to appear ready to deal
with trauma and disputed cultural memory, and thereby unite the divided
Russophone diasporic community.

The Russian-speaking events organised by Read Russia during
the LBF 2018 and 2019 confirm the collaboration of the project with
Rossotrudnichestvo, the primary Russian soft power organisation, and the
Waterstones Russian Book Club, a London-based diasporic cultural initia-
tive. Even though the Read Russia organisers claim that the participation of
Russian speakers is welcomed but not intended, the practice suggests that
they are investing in bringing together the Russophone diaspora and engag-
ing it in a cultural dialogue with Russia.

Conclusion

The Read Russia project, as part of Russia's cultural statecraft agenda,
promotes classic and contemporary Russian literature in translation.
Representing the centrepiece of Russian high culture, the project awards lit-
erary prizes, supports the publication of new translations, and participates
in international book festivals. During my fieldwork at the London Book
Fairs 2018 and 2019, I observed that Read Russia endeavours to reach out
not only to the local English-speaking public but also to the Russophone
diasporic community in London, thus straying from its official mission.
Distinguished by the language in which they were held, the events targeting
the English-speaking audience present an image of Russia as continuing in
its strong literary tradition, supporting diversity and gender equality, being
inclusive and acknowledging the contribution of ethnic minorities and the
Russian periphery to its culture. At the same time, this polished version of
Russianness is carefully disassociated with taboo topics, such as the LGBT
experience in the country. Even though the Anglophone events taking place
at the Olympia are well-attended, those happening in bookshops or other
locations have failed to attract the general public.

The connection of Read Russia with the Russian soft power apparatus is
apparent in the project's Russophone events during the London Book Fair.
These events are often organised in collaboration with Russian organisa-
tions in Britain, as well as with diasporic initiatives such as the Waterstones

Russian Book Club. The combination of top-down and bottom-up elements in the formation of Read Russia's official program represents a strategy aimed at the diasporic mobilisation of the Russian speakers in London. During the events, the members of the Russophone community get together to listen to visiting Russian writers and participate in literary discussions framed by Read Russia. By mobilising the diaspora, the project aspires to enhance the Russian presence abroad and thereby increase its political influence. Nonetheless, the Read Russia organisers defended the non-political character of the project and its ideological independence from the Russian authorities. In their words, the focus remains on (re)introducing Russian literature to foreign audiences, both offline and online.

To sum up, Read Russia employs Russian literature's symbolic value for world culture and promotes with its activities a new, more democratic image of the country as supporting pluralism in literature and society, an image intended to attract new sympathisers among global audiences. Nevertheless, the project appears to be more relevant at present for the Russophone diaspora than Western audiences, which are its main focus.

Notes

1. All works by Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky mentioned here are included among the 5,000 facts and concepts of the cultural literacy: What every American needs to know (Hirsch et al., 1988).
2. Although Pushkin is widely respected in Russia and is considered the founder of modern Russian literature, he is not particularly well known in the West.
3. Barghoorn cites here an article titled 'The International Horizon of the Writer' by the Soviet literary critic Motyleva published in *Literaternaya Gazeta* in April 28, 1959.
4. It is worth mentioning that only six recipients of the International Lenin Prize were Soviet citizens, of whom half were writers. The three recipients were: Ilya Ehrenburg (1952), Nikolai Tikhonov (1957) and Oleksandr Korniychuk (1960).
5. Various political leaders have listed classic Russian novels among their favourites including German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Kornelius, 2014, p. 18; Smale and Higgins, 2017), Hillary Clinton (Schennikov, 2020a), and Pope Francis (Druzhinin, 2019; Schennikov, 2020b). There are articles published in Foreign Policy and the Financial Times, who suggest that Russian literature is a way to understand contemporary Russia (Groskop, 2014; Stavridis, 2015).
6. An early draft of the document was heavily criticised by Russian academics and was modified accordingly. In his interview with Donadio, V. Tolstoy claimed that his moderate views had an essential role on the policy's changes. For more details, see, Jonson, (2019).
7. In May 2019 V. Tolstoy was also elected the President of the International Association of Teachers of Russian Language and Literature (MAPRYAL), which underlines his increasing influence on the cultural diplomacy of the country.
8. The appearing writers were: Lev Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Ivan Turgenev, Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol, Anna Akhmatova, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Anton Chekhov, Nikolai Gumilev, Marina Tsvetaeva, Osip Mandelstam, Mikhail Bulgakov, Sergey Yesenin, Alexander Blok and Joseph Brodsky.

9. Putin has mentioned in interviews that Turgenev's Sketches from a Hunter's Album and Dostoevsky's Brothers Karamazov and Crime and Punishment are among his favourite books.
10. Some Russkiy Mir centres were established in cooperation with renowned universities such as the Durham University and the University of Edinburgh.
11. The foundation's budget in 2017 was 3.8 million rubles, in 2018 – 3.6 million rubles and for the years 2020 to 2022 the financial support from the Russian state has been raised up to 5 million rubles annually (Khimshiashvili, 2018; Kuz′min, 2019).
12. *Rossotrudnichestvo*'s Soviet predecessors were: 'the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Contacts (SSOD, 1958–1992), the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries' (VOKS, 1925–1958) (Khimshiashvili, 2018).
13. The offices are equipped with Russophone libraries and *Rossotrudnichesto* supports the collection development (*Rossotrudnichestvo*, 2019, p. 9).
14. In many cases, *Rossotrudnichestvo*'s offices act in lieu of cultural centres of the Russian embassy (i.e. Greece, Malta, Spain).
15. Both respondents received my questions beforehand as well as the necessary consent forms. Reznichenko chose to write his answers to my questions, while Kaufman preferred an oral interview.
16. To the present day, 12 translations have been published as part of the series and with many more planned to come in the following years. The publisher and a committee of both Russian and American academics assumed the duty to select the literary works for translation.
17. At the same time, the American NGO is funded by the Institute of Translation and the Boris Yeltsin Foundation, which also choose the Russian writers who will participate in the project's events.
18. For Kaufman, the Russian focus on book fairs has been inherited from the Soviet Union and it represents an 'atavistic' approach to the promotion of literature.
19. The 'Read Russia Prize' has four different categories: 'Classical Russian literature of the 19th century,' 'Russian literature of the 20th century (works created before 1990),' 'Contemporary Russian literature (works created after 1990)' and 'Poetry' (Institute of Translation, 2019).
20. The Institute of Translation allocates 120–150 grants to foreign publishers in 40–45 countries (30–35 languages) annually.
21. The presented authors are Dmitry Bykov, Zakhar Prilepin, Mariam Petrosyan, Vladimir Sorokin, Anna Starobinets, Ludmila Ulitskaya.
22. In Reznichenko's opinion, particularly successful are the events that attract both specialist and non-specialist audiences, as it happened in 2018 during the Paris Book Fair. With Russia being the guest country of honour, Read Russia had built a particularly large stand that after all could not accommodate the numerous French readers and specialists interested in Russian literature.
23. At the same time, Kaufman supports the fact that Read Russia's activities have been received positively because they give prominence to new writers and new genres. The contemporary reading audience is interested in the Russian perspective on current issues, such as inequality, environmental disasters and war.
24. The 'Meet-the-Author Session with Shamil Idiatullin and Yulia Yakovleva' at the Waterstones Piccadilly was attended by 27 people even though it was free, when Yakhina's presentation the following year was sold out having over 120 attendees.

25. The Waterstones Russian Book Club (WRBC), the largest Russophone book club in the UK with over 1,000 members, meets at the Waterstones Piccadilly the first Monday of every month and discusses contemporary Russian literature in Russian.
26. Having discussed his award-winning novel at a previous meeting, the moderator proposed his name when was asked by the Read Russia organisers whom they would like to meet. Despite having received a literary award for one of his novels, Salnikov was relatively unknown at the time and was not one of the writers that Read Russia usually promotes.
27. Yakhina and Salnikov joined by writers Alexei Ivanov and Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaya who answered questions about their approach to the Soviet past and its role in their writing.

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6 The future state

Russian cinema and neoliberal cultural statecraft

Vlad Strukov

Introduction

Jeanne L. Wilson (2016) examines Russian and Chinese cultural statecraft as a component of domestic and foreign policy, the aim of which is to provide a defence against the penetration of neoliberal Western values. I argue that, in the Russian case, the aim of cultural statecraft is quite different: it is to introduce and maintain neoliberal policies, borrowed from the West, whilst naturalising the neoliberal ideological discourse. The outcome of this cultural statecraft is a form of neoliberal nationalism, that is, a political system which employs neoliberal policies for nationalistic reasons (see, e.g. Müller, 2011).[1] Of course, the complexity of the Russian case is that Russia is a federation of nations with no 'coherent sense of national identity' (Wilson, 2016, p. 135). Hence, its nationalism is different from that of its European and North American counterparts and, as I discuss below, combines narratives of exceptionalism with those of internationalism. Thus, a new reading of the Russian case contributes to theories of nationalism, on one level, and theories of cultural statecraft, on another (see also, Strukov and Hudspith, 2019). As for the latter, this chapter argues that, in terms of the film industry since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian statecraft has emerged from a top-down system into a competitive one with state-funded, corporate, and private stakeholders using the medium of film to their advantage. This has involved the development of brands, the promotion of foreign policy, and participation in the global debate about future challenges.

The competitive model is apparent at the level of funding, distribution (Hollywood productions dominate the market; Strukov, 2016), and audience participation (Hollywood-style blockbusters are the most profitable outputs).[2] The competition has both centrifugal and centripetal, and internal and external, dimensions: between different funders (for example, state versus private funding), different realms of circulation,[3] and different levels of participation. Hence, Russian statecraft emerges as a system of balancing these different factors, aiming to make and offset profits in terms of financial gain, economic and political advantage, and attention and symbolic capital. In the Russian context, neoliberal nationalism defines a discursive

position which accounts for the process of rhetorically balancing the books. For example, the anti-Western rhetoric of the former minister of culture, Vladimir Medinskii, concealed the increase in the share of Western films on the Russian market. Furthermore, the promises of the Ministry of Culture to regulate the film market were an ineffective response to the demands of Western distribution companies for the government to eradicate piracy. Indeed, any consideration of the Russian film industry and statecraft must be made against the background of widespread piracy and disregard for intellectual property. It is, therefore, imperative that an analysis of Russian statecraft and cinema focus on its filmic articulations and imaginings and less so on data from the box office, because the latter is inaccurate and often misleading.

Wilson (2016) identifies the following areas for the application of cultural statecraft: cultural statecraft as a means to construct a state identity, as a foreign policy strategy, and as a means of legitimation and cultural security. More specifically, she notes that 'an act of cultural statecraft involves a selective construction of cultural and civilisational themes that are seen as essential not only to the elaboration of a national identity but also to the maintenance of the security of the regime' (Wilson, 2016, p. 136). To support her argument, she looks at the speeches of the president of the Russian Federation (henceafter the RF), Vladimir Putin, and examines both the Kremlin's programme of instituting centres promoting Russian culture as well as recent national legislation restricting individual freedoms. When applying a top-down approach to the analysis of cultural statecraft, Wilson is effectively taking culture as a form of expression and meaning-making out of the equation and paying little attention to the economics of cultural production. This article compensates for these shortcomings by analysing how cultural statecraft is applied not in political speeches but in cultural practices and texts, and by engaging with the Russian culture industry – specifically, the film industry. In other words, I consider the elements of cultural statecraft – a means to construct a state identity, a foreign policy strategy, and a means of legitimation and cultural security – from aesthetic, cross-sectoral and institutional perspectives, and not exclusively from the perspective of the Russian government.

To achieve my objectives, I explore a particular case study, a film by one of the country's most successful contemporary filmmakers, Fedor Bondarchuk. He is both an ascribed and achieved celebrity (Rojek, 2004), thanks to his pedigree and own achievements. He is the son of the director Sergei Bondarchuk (1920–1994), whose 1957 film *The Cranes Are Flying* [*Letiat zhuravli*] gained international acclaim. The elder Bondarchuk's later adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* [*Voina i mir*], broke records in terms of production costs, ticket sales, and the use of extras. Fedor studied in the most celebrated Soviet film school, the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography ('VGIK') and, upon graduation, he set up a film production company, one of the first in the newly formed Russian Federation. Bondarchuk is known as a producer, actor, and director, having enjoyed

much prestige and visibility, including in popular media such as television, from the outset of his career. As a producer, he has participated in a number of successful commercial projects, including entertainment shows and PR campaigns. He has been an influential figure in the film industry, too, thanks to his patronage of the Kinotavr film festival and professional associations. Through his family and personal connections, and thanks to his career, Bondarchuk is linked to both Soviet and Russian elites, which makes him one of the architects of the current neoliberal regime in the RF.

In order to analyse and conceptualise Russian cultural statecraft, I focus on Bondarchuk's 2017 science fiction film *Attraction* [*Pritiazhenie*]. The film tells the story of Iulia (Irina Starshenbaum), who is a daughter of a general in the Russian security services, Valentin (Oleg Men'shikov). They live in the Moscow suburb of Chertanovo. A young man called Artem (Aleksandr Petrov) pursues Iulia romantically, but he is out of favour with Valentin, which puts Iulia at loggerheads with her father. One day, an alien spaceship crashes in the middle of Chertanovo, and Valentin becomes in charge of the rescue operation. In the meantime, Iulia meets Khekon (Rinal' Mukhametov), an alien who has arrived on the spaceship. Their encounter leads to instantaneous attraction; Artem's jealousy threatens to destroy not only Iulia and Khekon, but also the whole planet. The romance underpins the narrative, but, indeed, the main focus of the film is on the portrayal of the Russian army and its role in eliminating threats to global security. Through the framework of securitisation (Strukov and Apryshchenko, 2018), *Attraction* stages a spectacle of statecraft on both the national and international levels. Being one of the most expensive movies of the period, and directly funded by the Ministry of Culture, the film is an articulation of both the vision of a future state and of the role of the RF in world politics.

The film was conceived after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent war of sanctions between the RF and the West, making *Attraction* an ideal case study for the analysis of the post-Crimea world order. The popular appeal of the film – it has been shown in the RF and internationally[4] – makes it a powerful tool not only for advancing a specific message but also for formulating the very agenda of the future state. When discussing the film, I pay special attention to how it engages with issues of domestic and foreign policy, how it represents the state and its systems of law enforcement (such as the police and the army), and how it legitimises the state and its powers. I reveal how the film supplies a vision for the future state, thus capturing cultural statecraft in the making. I argue that, in this film, Russian cultural statecraft – which entails the construction of a state identity and the development of a foreign policy strategy, and is a means of legitimation and cultural security – is explored as a theme, ideology and aesthetic.

In this chapter, a discussion of the film industry and its role in Russian cultural statecraft is followed by an analysis of the film. In the concluding section, I provide a conceptualisation of Russian cultural statecraft in relation to the ideology of neoliberal nationalism. My analysis is informed by

theories and methodologies of popular geopolitics, an interdiscipline which examines the relationship between the popular and the political in the realm of popular culture. More specifically, I develop the notion of the 'transregional feedback loop', wherein Russian and 'Western' currents feed into and off each other (Saunders and Strukov, 2017). On one level, these flows sustain older geopolitical codes and frames, but on another, they develop new dimensions of exchange due to the vagaries of globalisation and new challenges.

The Russian film industry and cultural statecraft: The end of the government's dominance?

Cinema of the analogue era required much support from the state and private backers. In the Soviet Union, the state was the sole provider of funding to the film industry and exercised full control over all aspects of film production and distribution. In this regard, the film industry and cultural statecraft were fully aligned. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the late-socialist film industry went into a sharp decline (Beumers, 2009). Other causes of its demise were the radical reorientation of the public's taste towards Hollywood-style cinema, widespread piracy, and the rise of television and eventually the internet as the principal platforms for the distribution of audiovisual content. Just like elsewhere in the world (see, e.g. Kim, 2003), in the 1990s, there were major changes in terms of the funding and distribution structure of the film industry, including the localisation and commercialisation of cinema towards a global audience. As a result of these changes, the late-socialist bond between the state and the film industry was severed, leading to a new dimension and configuration of powers in terms of cultural statecraft.

The global success of Andrei Zviaginstev's *The Return* ([*Vozvrashchenie*], 2003) signalled the emergence of contemporary Russian cinema as a new aesthetic phenomenon (Strukov, 2016). It also promised a new contract between the state and the film industry, including regarding the role of cinema in cultural statecraft. Fast forward 20 years, and we are looking at a neoliberal system of the organisation of film production, which comes with a neoliberal system of cultural statecraft. According to this system, the state uses financial mechanisms to achieve its goals regarding nation-building, soft power, and symbolic economics. The system relies on competitive models of funding, namely, the coexistence of state and non-state actors on the market and the mixing of state and non-state funding even when the state supports a film production.[5] By compelling producers to seek additional funding on the open market, the state advances its agenda of general commercialisation and monetisation of all activities, including creative processes. For example, nowadays, there is an expectation that a film funded by the state will make a profit on the market (although that was certainly not an expectation when Sergei Bondarchuk's *War and Peace* was produced). In

addition, repressive mechanisms of the state are used to force studios and filmmakers to adhere to the rules. For example, the state can initiate a legal case against filmmakers who have failed to deliver on their promises.[6]

In recent years, an alternative system for financing the film industry has emerged, with two principal types of actors. The first encompasses privately owned studios that focus on the production of commercially successful projects. These studios are independent enterprises based in urban centres and relying on local talent and expertise. They produce their own content as well as participate in the US-led film production network, whereby production is outsourced to regions with cheap workforces. For example, a Voronezh-based studio called 'Wizart Animation', founded in 2007, is known internationally thanks to its feature-length animation films, such as *The Snow Queen* ([*Snezhnaia koroleva*], 2012) and *Sheep and Wolves* ([*Volki i ovtsy*], 2016). Competing with major US studios, Wizart Animation has carved out a niche by targeting non-English-speaking users or, in other terms, a world populated with different characters and filled with alternative geopolitical concerns. Wizart Animation has signed distribution agreements with major international companies and has participated in industry-wide competitions, including those in the United States and Japan. The studio has been impactful locally – it is a driving force for creative industries in Voronezh – and nationally, as it lobbies for Russian-made productions on global markets. The studio was founded by Vladimir Nikolaev, and from a local startup, it has evolved into a major player in the Russian film industry in the course of a decade.

These studios compete with the state in terms of revenues, and they have to seek alternative platforms, such as online streaming services, for the distribution of their content. For example, in 2020 Wizart was one of the first Russian animation studios to sign a contract with Netflix, thus participating in the US-led construction of a single cinematic realm for the world. In terms of cultural statehood, the state is in a response mode to projects such as *Masha and the Bear* ([*Masha i medved'*], 2009–). Created by Oleg Kuzovkov and co-produced by Soyuzmultfilm and Animaccord Animation Studio from Moscow, the animated series is loosely based on the oral children's folk story of the same name. At one point, *Masha and the Bear* was the fourth most-viewed video on YouTube, igniting a global interest in Russian culture. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Strukov, 2021a), these studios advance Russian soft power independently from the state, straddling national borders and the boundaries between online and offline worlds. The studios rely on the 'instantaneity of communication, multiple vectors of communication (many-to-many, not one-to-many), and non-linear forms of production and dissemination of content', which is characteristic of cinema in the digital era.

The second type of actor encompasses initiatives which have a charitable dimension. Self-funding, crowdfunding and in-kind support have been used by filmmakers to release independent productions. For example, Seva

Galkin used crowdfunding to finance his short film about criminal gangs operating in Russia. Based on real events, his *Fans* ([*Fanaty*], 2020) is a story about two young men who, whilst being in a sexual relationship with one another, lure and murder homosexual men. Selected for screenings by international film festivals and nominated for a few awards, the film examines a social concern which cannot be funded by Russia's Ministry of Culture, which adheres to the ban on positive representations of LGBT issues among minors that was introduced in 2013. Galkin's film is one of many recent productions that engage critically with state policy and cultural statecraft. In comparison with the Hollywood blockbusters that dominate Russian cinemas (Strukov, 2016), these productions may seem to be too small and insignificant. However, such productions have been instrumental in developing and sustaining alternatives modes of creativity and production, exploring themes that have been overlooked, and working with communities that have been marginalised. In fact, the response to the release of Galkin's film was immense, igniting debates in media about LGBT in the RF, criminality and the responsibility of the state to protect its citizens.

Most recently, in addition to the first and second types, another, new, and extremely influential actor has emerged. The Kinoprime foundation was set up in 2018 by Roman Abramovich, a billionaire who supports cultural initiatives in Israel, the RF, and the UK. Directed by Anton Malyshev, the foundation operates as an endowment, bringing together private investors and relying on independent expert opinions when making decisions about future projects. The foundation was created with the explicit objective of providing an alternative to the state system of support for the film industry. In its first 18 months of operation, the foundation invested 1.5 billion roubles into 27 projects, focussing on art house and mainstream cinema. Abramovich is known for supporting productions that explore sensitive topics, most recently *The Man Who Surprised Everyone* ([*Chelovek, kotoryi udivil vsekh*], 2018, directed by Aleksei Chupov and Natasha Merkulova). The film is set in a remote village where a man battles with cancer. A realisation of the possibility of imminent death compels him to embrace his true identity. After he comes out to his family, he is ostracised by the villagers. The film is about homophobia and transphobia, and about the role of state institutions in sustaining the patriarchal order. Abramovich has also provided financial support on a charitable basis to the Kinotavr film festival, which is the main platform for showcasing Russian art house and (non-)commercial cinema. With no other major Russian film festival existing, Kinotavr is an important element in the Russian film industry, as the private sector dominates in it. It is premature to draw conclusions about the role of Abramovich and the Kinoprime foundation, but it is already clear that the state is by no means the sole actor in the Russian film market.[7] This underlines how Russian cultural statecraft, at least as far as cinema is concerned, is a complex and evolving phenomenon whereby top-down, government-focussed approaches to its analysis are simply inappropriate.

In a situation in which Russian films are in competition with Hollywood blockbusters, on the one hand, and with online streaming services such as Netflix, on the other, the Russian state has focussed on productions that explicitly engage with the question of statehood and sovereignty. These are films that portray significant historical events, such as World War II, or which celebrate the achievements of Russian people on the world stage. In the former category, we find *Tanks* ([*Tanki*], 2018, directed by Kim Druzhinin) and many other films that explore the legacy of World War II from a nationalistic angle – that is, a perspective which emphasises that the Soviet Union was the main victor in the war. The latter category consists of biopics depicting athletes and other celebrities, such as *Legend 17* ([*Legenda 17*], 2013, directed by Nikolai Lebedev). These biopics tap into the feelings of nostalgia for the socialist period when the Soviet Union was a global leader in the arts and sports. They also tap into a feeling of entitlement which is particular to the period of Putin's neoliberalism, in which glamour and celebrity have become part of the Russian official ideology and visual style (Goscilo and Strukov, 2010).

Movies in these two categories benefit from the style of Hollywood blockbusters, something that has been described in literature as the 'patriotic blockbuster' (Norris, 2012). Stephen M. Norris asserts that, at the start of the century, the connections between cinema, politics, economics, history and patriotism have led to the creation of '"blockbuster history" – the adaptation of an American cinematic style to Russian historical epics' (Norris, 2012, p. 1). He identifies a range of strategies, including the depiction of tsarist Russia, which was viewed as a benighted world of political reactionism during the Soviet period; the exploration of issues of faith and organised religion, including the Russian Orthodox Church, that were also largely absent from the screens in the Soviet Union; and the retelling of historical fantasies, including animated films based on fairy tales and fantasy reworkings of historical events (such as the Time of Troubles being portrayed in the film *1612* ([*1612*], 2007, directed by Vladimir Khotinenko)). In my discussion, I develop Norris' idea of the patriotic blockbuster by looking at the ways in which neoliberal nationalism has penetrated cultural statecraft. I also add to his conceptualisation by exploring a movie of science fiction, a genre which is overlooked in Norris's research. I argue that science fiction is an important genre for the assessment of Russian cultural statecraft because, in addition to the examination of present-day concerns, it speculates about, or is even a model for, the future development of society. That makes it a cinematic roadmap for cultural statecraft. Also, Norris considers the Russian case exclusively from the Western perspective. His juxtaposition of Hollywood and Russian cinema creates a binary system of meaning, which is similar to the Cold War-era competitive model. A polycentric approach to world cinema dictates that *Attraction* should be considered in relation to multiple flows of meaning, not only the Hollywood one.

Extraction economics

Attraction directly engages with current social and political concerns, such as ongoing de-/re-Sovietisation and the 'conservative turn', including issues of gender and sexuality. For example, Iulia's father, Valentin, is played by a star of late-socialist cinema, Oleg Men'shikov. The choice of actor is meant to emphasise the links and ruptures in Russian recent history. In recent film and television productions, for example, the critically acclaimed series *Olga* ([*Ol'ga*], 2016–2020), a family with a single male parent is a trope which has replaced that of the missing or returning father, as seen in films such as Zviagintsev's *The Return* and Aleksei Balabanov's *Brother* ([*Brat*], 1998) (see, e.g. Goscilo and Hashamova, 2010). The inversion of the trope is an attempt to queer the traditional family, presenting the male parent in the role of both provider and carer (Strukov, 2021b).[8]

On the one hand, in its representation of family and masculinity, *Attraction* subscribes to the imperatives of 'the traditional values' articulated in the law, which bans positive representations of LGBT persons to minors.[9] On the other hand, the film challenges these imperatives by presenting an image of a family which is traditional thanks to its queerness: single-parent households have been a permanent feature of post-war and post-Soviet Russia, after the lives of many men had been lost. In a similar way, Iulia's queerness is expressed through her wearing of men's clothes and by her acting as a leader of an all-male gang of friends. Indeed, Iulia seems to be attracted to men, but in actual terms, her only romantic relationship is with an alien, which raises questions about post-humanism, gender, and non-heteronormative sexuality. Similarly, *Attraction* is oriented towards both the domestic market (with its emphasis on binary constructions of gender and sexuality) and the international market (through its engagement with queerness). To be more precise, Russian statecraft attempts to speak simultaneously to both conservative and liberal entities in the world, producing a somewhat ambivalent, or bi-focal message, thus problematizing existing assumptions about the RF and its cultural statecraft. This transpires in the film's science fiction context and its geopolitical concerns.

The alien, named Khekon, is a young man whose spaceship has crashed in the middle of the Moscow suburb of Chertanovo. At first, the viewer anticipates that he would attempt to destroy the neighbourhood – a common motif in Hollywood blockbusters – only to realise that he is on a different mission. Whilst Khekon is out exploring Chertanovo and making new friends, the spaceship begins to extract a valuable source – water – from the area around it. Apparently, water is needed to repair the spaceship: at the end of the film, when the spaceship lifts off, it blasts the water back onto the surface, creating one of the most striking visual moments in the film. However, the viewer is led to believe that the spaceship is to remove all the water from the planet. The inhabitants of Chertanovo are struck with two crises: one has to do with the destruction of infrastructure, including

apartment blocks, and the other with the loss of the most precious resource on Earth. The army is called in to supply citizens with water and to protect them from the threat of destruction. It cordons off whole areas and imposes a curfew, bringing life in Chertanovo to a standstill. Only essential services are allowed to operate.[10] However, with their knowledge of the local spaces, Iulia's gang is able to transgress these borders and access different facilities, evoking guerrilla tactics in warfare which we often see in Hollywood productions about Latin American countries and also sci-fi movies.

The focus on Chertanovo suggests a 'suburbanisation' of statecraft: the locus of conflict is no longer in the centre – the Kremlin – but on the margins, which implies that the central power is a permanent feature capable of withstanding all kinds of attacks. The suburbs are also Russia's new zones of social energy: with the centre of Moscow taken over by luxury shops and restaurants, 'real' people and their activities have been shifted to the suburbs, creating new socioeconomic clusters. In this regard, the film reveals recent changes in the organisation of the economy and society and an associated imagining of Russian statecraft: the emphasis is on the role of the 'ordinary' person, not a statesman, which signals the process of domestication and democratisation of statecraft generally. Indeed, one of the major figures of authority is a general of the Russian army, who is portrayed operating both from the headquarters of the Russian army as well as his own apartment. The apparent 'softening' of Russian statecraft is conveyed with the help of geopolitical metaphors, including the symbolism of water that I will discuss below. This softening is also evident at the conceptual level as a shift from defence strategies to risk management.

An alien invasion threatening humanity with annihilation, with a small group of individuals making contact and saving the world from destruction, is a common motif in Hollywood blockbusters. It has been used to articulate the concerns of American society tasked with safeguarding global peace and prosperity. For example, *Independence Day* (1996, dir. by Roland Emmerich) focusses on disparate groups of people who converge in the Nevada desert in the aftermath of a worldwide attack by an extraterrestrial race of unknown origin. The American team leads a counterattack on 4 July, which is Independence Day in the United States. The film celebrates American nationalism, including the promise of an inexhaustible abundance of resources, and reaffirms the supremacy of the United States as a guarantor of peace and civil liberties (see, e.g. Mehring, 2010). *Attraction* borrows the agenda of *Independence Day* and reinterprets it for the present-day reality, such as with environmental catastrophes and the realisation that resources on Earth are not inexhaustible.[11] Russian statecraft oscillates between US politics and Hollywood aesthetics, and national concerns and traditions. References to the US canon allow for Russian concerns to be 'understood' by a global viewership, which is a standard tactic for all non-Western, 'world cinemas' (Nagib, 2011). On one level, *Attraction* responds to the global challenge of climate change; on another, it advances

Russia's supremacy as a guarantor of peace and prosperity, thus recreating a spectacle of nationalism, not universalism. More specifically, Russian supremacy is connected to natural resources, in particular water, and the extraction economy.

In *Fifth Element* (1997, directed by Luc Besson) and in Hollywood blockbusters, water is used as a symbol of life and fertility. Water has a similar function in *Attraction*: on their first encounter, Khekon puts a bracelet on Iulia's hand, and it begins to collect water, too. The bracelet symbolises the union between Iulia and Khekon and between earthlings and extraterrestrial life. In addition, water is assigned a geopolitical meaning: it is a resource over which different civilisational actors compete to gain control. The film is infused with the imagery of water, which enables a connection between water and geopolitics. For example, the realisation that the spaceship is pumping water comes at the moment when Valentin is in a military facility and he notices that water is moving upwards inside a water cooler, which is due to the proximity of a part of the spaceship to that facility. The water bottle is labelled with the insignia of the Russian army, suggesting that water is both a resource and a weapon under the control of the state (see, Figure 6.1). In this way, water is securitised in the film and in the public discourse. Indeed, in recent years tourism to the Russian region of Lake Baikal, the largest reserve of fresh water in the world, has increased exponentially. Meanwhile, the north-western region of Russia, which is rich in lakes and various waterways, is now known as a destination for glamping. So water is a part of both Russian military and leisure industries, and hard and soft power.

Sharing some qualities with oil, water in *Attraction* is used to speak about Russia's role in the global economy as a provider of energy (in the present) and a provider of water (in the future). Fresh water features at the top of the Russian government's geopolitical agenda. In February 2012, *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, an official media outlet of the Kremlin, published a statement by President Putin in which he laid out his vision for the future foreign policy of the RF.[12] He spoke about future challenges, including environmental, economic and political ones. When articulating strategic goals, Putin made a reference to the geopolitical advantages of the RF, such as the size of the country and its position on the planet. He also listed resources which, in his view, would secure the leadership of the RF in the world, naming oil, gas, wood, agricultural land and fresh water. He noted that 'fresh water is a scarce resource and, in the near future, there will be geopolitical conflicts over access to water. Water gives us a geopolitical advantage. The state is conscious of the need to use this advantage carefully and strategically' (Putin 2012). Of course, customary international law provides a regulatory framework for riparian uses of water, but there are many examples when the law has not been observed, for example, in Europe and India (Bhogal and Kaszubska, 2017). In recent years, Ukraine has used water as a weapon against the RF, cutting supplies to the annexed territory of Crimea and, conversely, the RF has discontinued supplies of gas to Ukraine. Hence,

water is no longer seen in terms of a human rights agenda (the universalist system) but as a national privilege (the neoliberal agenda).

The Russian government is less concerned about the ecological turn in world politics, focussing instead on the economics of resource extraction. For example, in 2020, Russia's geopolitical strategy was revised to focus on the Arctic. The Arctic provides the RF with tools to challenge the Western military and economic supremacy. The Arctic is a particular visual world (Strukov, 2021c) characterised by the imagery of water in all its states: liquid, solid and gas. Indeed, whilst the action in *Attraction* is set in the Russian capital, references to geopolitical concerns in the Arctic are made through the imagery of water. This is seen, for example, when Khekon enters a military facility and makes water take the form of crystal, liquid and vapour, all seen in the natural environment of the Arctic. Even the shape of his spaceship is similar to that of an icebreaker moving across ice sheets. In this regard, *Attraction* reflects on the old (the Lake Baikal) and the new (the Arctic) range of water-based geopolitical facilities, affirming the notion of current Russian modernity as 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000). Shifting from hard to light modernity – from ice to water, and from oil to water – the RF emerges as a state of attraction, not repulsion, which is involved in the production of meaning in the global arena.

Indeed, in addition to Russian geopolitical concerns (a nationalist stance), *Attraction* articulates global environmental concerns (an internationalist stance). Similarly, Russian statecraft contains elements of both universalist and nationalist agendas. Indeed, the film speaks of the overuse of natural resources, such as water, and associated threats. These concerns are expressed literally through the imagery of warfare and metaphorically through the character of Iulia. Maria Engstrom (2018) has argued that, in recent years, the image of the daughter has replaced that of the mother as an emblem of Russian nationhood and nationalism (*Rodina-doch'* versus *Rodina-mat'*). This is valid in the domestic arena; however, on the international front, the situation is quite different.

I argue that, in the global context, the image of the daughter speaks of the universal values and new ethics symbolised, of course, by the figure of the Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg. Iulia challenges her father and other authority figures in their dealings with the aliens, calling for an immediate ceasefire and adoption of new policies both towards the aliens and people on Earth. As a matter of fact, *Attraction* was released internationally in 2018, the year when Thunberg challenged world leaders to take immediate action against climate change in a speech at the United Nations General Assembly. Though, of course, a coincidence, the Thunberg analogy is meant to reveal the RF's participation in world politics and international affairs at the level of state diplomacy and popular culture, suggesting that Russian cultural statecraft is rolled out synchronously at all levels of discourse. Indeed, the RF has inherited its special status at the UN, following the dissolution of the USSR, which it uses for different

purposes including climate change agreements, which the US, on the other hand, had withdrawn from. Finally, there is simultaneously an overlap and a divergence between the policies and visions articulated by the government and by cultural producers. This means that cultural statecraft is a broad field of interactions, supplying a nuanced, flexible strategy, not a top-down, command-style policy.

Stability politics

Attraction features all the principal elements of Russian (cultural) statecraft: the military, the Duma, the media and cultural institutions, such as the Bolshoi Theatre. In all of them, 'Russia' emerges as both an originator of ideas and a keeper of traditions. For example, as Iulia and her gang move around Moscow, the camera shows the Bolshoi Theatre in the background. The building of the Bolshoi is an internationally recognised landmark, and the theatre itself is an institution synonymous with ballet, a cultural tradition of global importance. The theatre has survived several changes in political systems, and, like The Hermitage Museum, it continues to be one of the RF's leading cultural exports. The inclusion of the Bolshoi and its associated cultural capital means that the state is willing to exploit culture as a resource alongside natural resources – the culture-water analogy – thus complicating the debate about the relationship between the state and extraction economics. In fact, *Attractions* clearly signposts the movement away from extraction economics towards symbolic economics. For example, when Khekon arrives at Iulia's apartment, he changes into new clothes, with his t-shirt having an image of Gagarin on it, reminding viewers about Soviet achievements in the space race. These and other examples suggest that Russian cultural statecraft has more than one dimension: it is oriented both internally and internationally and makes use of different kinds of economics, including information economics supported by the media structure.[13]

When the news of the alien invasion breaks out, it is reported by Russia Today (RT), the Russian state-funded international broadcaster responsible for promoting the Putin government's agenda around the world. In the following shot, the same news is conveyed by the Cable News Network (CNN) and other international broadcasters, which places RT and Moscow, and by extension the RF, at the centre of global media flows. From the angle of cultural statecraft, this is an attempt to de-Westernise global political discourse and its representations in the media, which is in line with policies articulated by the Russian leadership (see, President of Russia, 2020). In fact, the Russian government has been investing openly in the construction of a media system alternative to the one in the West. For example, it has built its own social media and streaming platforms that are in competition with their Western analogues, which are also available on the Russian market, hence purporting a competitive, not a top-down, agenda. Ironically,

this system relies on Western technologies and symbolic economics, this achieving a difference at the level of discourse exclusively, and thus supporting my argument in favour of Russian neoliberal nationalism.

RT secured prominence after being a media outlet that disseminated the Russian narrative about the terrorist attacks and threats in the RF; however, later, it became apparent that RT was a tool aimed at challenging dominant Western media discourses globally. Internationally, RT is known as a proponent of neoliberal nationalism, including 'loyalty to the state and its geopolitical concerns' (Strukov, 2016, p. 185). It has been argued that 'the government delegates the production and development of patriotism, understood as the state brand "Russia", to media companies which, albeit being (partially and indirectly) sponsored by the government, operate as commercial enterprises, relying on income from advertising and competing with other outlets' (Strukov 2016, p. 187). On one level, by referencing RT, *Attraction* mimics Hollywood blockbusters, always placing the US media, such as CNN, at the front. On another level, the film also feeds into a broader media framework, building a transmedia narrative (Jenkins, 2007) that eventually creates a whole world sustained by intermedial and transmedial interactions, with the RF at its centre, thus realising neoliberal nationalism as an actual infrastructure.

In the West, the Russian practice of constructing own systems – of media, communication and policy – is perceived as a threat with security and economic implications. In the RF, this practice is part of the government's effort to de-centre the Western discourse and to shift the balance of power away from the West to other players. Since Putin's speech in Munich in 2007, the RF has assumed the role of a power balancing out the West in world politics. This balance discourse – or stability politics – characterised Russian politics and cultural statecraft in the 2010s. The strategic deployment of Russian interests globally includes, among other things, the objectives of conservation, consensus and participation in non-Western organisations and campaigns. This has been particularly notable in the case of the war in Syria. It included efforts to stabilise the economy by using special financial reserve funds and building infrastructures, enabling alternative systems of supply, such as oil pipelines going via Turkey and across the Baltic Sea. At home, the Russian government has aimed at maintaining balance in economics, politics and security (Korolev, 2017). It also involved moves to offset the liberal gender turn in the West by introducing conservative legislation at home, such as the law against the promotion of LGBT issues among minors.

Attraction supplies a visual representation of this balancing politics and a strategic formulation of future concerns for cultural statecraft. For example, after the spaceship crashes in the middle of Moscow, the Russian army assumes the role of protector of the planet and human race from the alien invasion. It does so by building a wall around the crash site, thus isolating the aliens and any humans who happened to be in the zone.

This politics of isolation has become mainstream in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, at the time when the film was released, it looked radical in its rejection of other potentialities, including the narratives of exploration, siege and destruction that we find in Hollywood blockbusters. What *Attraction* shows is that life will go on even in isolation. This is, indeed, a narrative pursued by the Kremlin since the introduction of sanctions against the RF ater the annexation of Crimea. Indeed, the government has used the context of isolation to restructure the economy and advance security.

In terms of cultural statecraft, *Attraction* articulates two messages. The first is that the RF is capable of retaliation – economic and military – and that it will retaliate on its own without seeking the support of international institutions. The second is that, given a choice, the RF will opt for non-aggressive means of conflict resolution, but that it will do so on its own terms, thus affirming its sovereignty at home and its influence internationally. Indeed, the turning point in the film narrative is the realisation that Khekon's spaceship crashed because it had been attacked by the Russian military. *Attention* postulates that the RF is capable of a counterattack but that it would not launch an attack unless it had first been attacked itself. This Soviet-era mantra of non-aggressive withholding is familiar to political observers, and it is a central motif of the film, as revealed through the conflict between Artem and Khekon. They epitomise two forms of power (hard and soft, respectively) and diverging means of communication (aggression and persuasion). As their conflict is centred on the question of who controls both Iulia (daughter-motherland) and Chertanovo (a local context, or 'home' which would translate into Russian as 'malen'kaia Rodina'), it reveals opposing forms of Russian cultural statecraft, namely, that its powers are simultaneously those of threat and attraction.

The film starts with Artem trying to seduce Iulia, but his plans are thwarted after the spaceship smashes into their building. Soon after Iulia meets Khekon, she falls in love with him, although she is angry with the alien for killing – inadvertently – her best friend. The first part of the film is about juxtaposing Artem and Khekon as individuals. The former is outgoing, plain, and violent; the latter is reserved, sophisticated and persistently non-aggressive. The film presents a binary structure of discourse, giving Iulia – and, through her, the country– a set of hard choices. Iulia chooses Khekon, but only upon realising that he has greater powers, including the power to maintain eternal life. Khekon represents the romantic type, a traditional gentleman, whereas Artem stands for the revolutionary type, a man who always transgresses boundaries. Of course, the viewer is first infatuated with Artem whilst Khekon appears helpless making exploratory steps on Earth; however, eventually, the balance shifts in favour of the alien. Artem's jealousy is shown as a destructive force: to win back Iulia's attention, he initiates a resistance movement. A canny politician, he appeals to the Muscovites' fear and sense of despair, and he builds an army of supporters

who follow his lead to destroy the spaceship. Artem's stance is character-ised by nationalist politics: his slogan is that they should take back their land ('*Eto nasha zemlia!*'), which, of course, references US President Donald Trump's presidential election slogan and thus affirms neoliberal nationalism as the foundation of Russian cultural statecraft.

The central scene of the film is a confrontation between three forces: the protesters, the aliens and the army. Artem's supporters – who are framed as members of a grassroots protest movement – launch an attack on the space-ship. According to their protocol, the aliens are to defend the spaceship and thwart its destruction in order to prevent the imminent annihilation of all life on the planet. Iulia, her father, and the army generals take on the roles of negotiators and peacekeepers, aiming to keep the protesters under control and secure the safety of the spaceship; yet, they continue to consider the spaceship as a foreign entity. In the final battle, the aliens and the army work in tandem to restrain the protesters and contain the attack in order to avoid the threat of annihilation. In this regard, they act in the interests of the local people (the nationalist stance) and all humanity (the interna-tionalist stance). The army and the aliens are to achieve a compromise and maintain balance, but sacrifices must be made: in an attack orchestrated by Artem, both Khekon and Iulia are dangerously wounded. Khekon makes an additional sacrifice by giving Iulia his power to regenerate so that she fully recovers. The sacrifice, which is in line with the Russian patriotic narra-tive,[14] is needed to achieve stability at the intergalactic level. The unification of the family – Iulia and Valentin rebuild their relationship after Khekon's departure – symbolises the union of the state and the nation, respectively. Complete stability is thus established, and the purpose of Russian cultural statecraft is achieved.

Artem's character is central to our understanding of Russian politics and cultural statecraft. In the beginning, he is presented as a young rebel will-ing to stand up against Valentin's authority both as Iulia's father and as a colonel of the Russian army. Artem takes on the role of the chief protector of the young woman and the nation that she symbolises. However, in the second part, *Attraction* diverges from Hollywood conventions, with Artem's role changing to that of an aggressor and challenger of the world order and a betrayer of the woman whom he loves. This is due to the populist politics that Artem embraces: he and his gang plan a revolt against the dominance of the aliens and, possibly, of the government. The film shows all stages in the preparations of the revolt – from the gang's initial meeting, to the posting of messages on social media and the organisation of a meeting with supporters (see, Figure 6.2). This way, it documents the Kremlin's narrative about the political opposition in the RF which is often seen as something alien, 'imported' and thus inauthentic, which -as a narrative – works–as a means to securitise any form of dissent.

The narrative includes the notion of non-systemic with opposition, the purpose of which is the destruction of Russian statehood with no

alternative vision for the future (Ross, 2015). Indeed, Artem is shown to be completely overwhelmed by feelings of jealousy and hatred as he plots his revenge on Khekon. The film emphasises Artem's political shortsightedness: he is not capable of thinking of long-term political objectives, thus threatening stability on Earth. He steals weapons from the spaceship, including a protective suit; when he puts that on, he appears as an evil alien, not like the good alien Khekon, who is dressed in civilian clothes. The Manichean separation of politics characterises the ideological structure of the film, with the threat emanating from the 'uncontrollable' forces of the political opposition. *Attraction* reflects on Russian internal politics and speculates about international politics. One should read the film as an attempt to reframe the Russian official narrative of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine as well as the emancipatory movements in the West. As I mentioned above, the threat lies in the movements' external/alien origins, thus implying that the role of cultural statecraft is to naturalise all processes, including those of protest.

This notion of stability politics is symbolised by the imagery of water. As a substance, water can take on any shape, thus achieving balance. Cultural statecraft is compared to water and its properties: its purpose is to mould discourse – to give water a shape – in order to achieve stability. *Attraction* offers a vision of the future when stability is fully realised: in a nightclub during a rave party, Khekon shows Iulia his planet. For a few seconds, Iulia is transported to another universe, where she learns that, in the future, all technology will be water-based, securing a balance between the conservation and exploitation of resources. The modernist vision of the future – with complex architecture and an infrastructure that seems to have fully conquered nature[15] – is presented as a visual spectacle aimed at seducing Iulia and the viewer. The most appealing aspect is that humans will achieve eternal life. According to the thinkers of early space exploration, such as Nikolai Fedorov, in the future, people will indeed reach other planets and live forever. This philosophy undergirds Russian nationalist narratives of the 20th and the 21st centuries (Groys, 1992; Goscilo and Strukov, 2010). However, the film is not a propagandistic tool, as it offers a critique of this vision, too. Indeed, Khekon has eternal life, but it transpires that he is the only person inhabiting his world. There are no other living creatures either on his planet or spaceship, so his eternal world is a solitary one, raising concerns about the kind of future he shows to Iulia and other humans. In this sense, the film carries a warning message about future crises including climate change and shortages of vital resources. Also, though firmly rooted in the ideology of neoliberal nationalism, *Attraction* speaks critically about privilege and entitlement promulgated by neoliberal nationalism and realized in the vision of individualism, which in the film, appears as absolute loneliness. Therefore, I have sufficient evidence to suggest that Russian cultural statecraft is concerned with political, economic, and also ontological issues.

Figures 6.1 & 6.2 Stills from Bondarchuk's *Attraction*.

Conclusions: The state of intergalactic proportions

The genre of science fiction allows the director to express political and social concerns relating to both the domestic and international arenas. Unlike Soviet science fiction, contemporary Russian science fiction is grounded in the spectacle as a principal means to communicate ideological messages. In this regard, *Attraction* displays features of both classical and post-classical film narratives. Retaining the features that have secured success in the past, 'the post-classical is also the excessively classical cinema, a sort of "classical-plus"' (Elsaesser and Buckland, 2002, p. 63). To be precise, *Attraction* encompasses the Hollywood canon as a classical narrative and diverges from the Hollywood canon as a post-classical narrative. Thus, *Attraction* – and the cultural statecraft that it represents – is aligned with both Western and non-Western political and social concerns, including climate change, the post-colonial condition, and the exploitation of resources.

In *Attraction*, science fiction tropes are rehearsed to make the story accessible to the global viewership (the foreign dimension of cultural statecraft) and reinterpreted in order to naturalise the neoliberal ideology (the domestic dimension). For instance, *Attraction* is not concerned with the reinstalment

of the traditional family – like films in which separated partners are brought together after they resolve all challenges, such as *Jurassic Park* (the USA, 1993, dir. by Colin Trevorrow and others) – but instead focusses on the parent-child relationship. In the Russian context, this is about privileging historical rather than contemporary connections: the objective is to restore historical lineage and to fill in the ideological void left after the introduction of neoliberalism as a state ideology. An alien intervention is needed to reassemble the elements of the state. Hence, the invasion is to be read as a strategic articulation of cultural statecraft, whereby the future is imagined in the now by agents who, one way or another, are linked to the state elites.

Thus, *Attraction* offers a robust programme of cultural statecraft, including domestic and foreign policy components, elements of soft and hard power and different visions of how the RF as a state should maintain a leadership role in the world. Its cultural statecraft is based on neoliberal values and policies, such as free markets and individualism, and it has both universalist and nationalist takes, making the RF a case of neoliberal nationalism. The film makes use of a range of tropes and changes in the plot in order to naturalise neoliberalism, giving the Russian state an advantage both domestically and internationally. Its narratives of exceptionalism are linked to the country's geographic position and natural resources, less so to its history and 'fight for freedom' which we find in Hollywood blockbusters and also productions from Brazil, China, South Korea, and other countries. *Attraction* methodically explores cultural and civilisational themes, adding emphasis to topics such as climate change and migration. The scope, role and direction of the state are vast and diverse – the state of intergalactic proportions. This means that, in the geopolitical system of *Attraction*, there is no other power but the state, which can withstand an alien attack and the threat of annihilation. An analysis of the film has also revealed the state's anxiety about grassroots movements, including protest movements aligned to the liberal West but also to the conservative West, such as Trump's nationalist supporters. The discussion has shown that Russian cultural statecraft should be comprehended at the level of aesthetic, cross-sectoral and institutional perspectives, not exclusively official speeches. The polycentric approach to Russian cultural statecraft allows to evaluate the multi-dimensional realms of the Russian state, state-funded and private actors, and Russian symbolic economics.

Notes

1. The equation of neoliberalism with internationalism has been challenged in literature. See, for example, Harmes (2012).
2. This assumption is based on data published by https://www.kinopoisk.ru/box/, showing Russian box office distribution per film and country.
3. Unlike France or China, Russia does not have a quota system regulating the number of imported films or the ratio of domestic and international productions in circulation.

4. The film was shown in forty-three countries, including Germany, Japan, Malaysia, and the UK.
5. Through Kino Fond, the state can provide up to seventy per cent of total funding, but in practice such assistance is normally around fifty per cent.
6. For example, in 2013, crowdfunding was used to collect money to pay off the fine imposed by the Ministry of Culture on a film director (BBC News, 2013). It is noteworthy that fines have been given out to film directors who are known for their public support of Putin, such as Nikita Mikhalkov.
7. At the time when final version of the chapter was being confirmed with the publisher, it was announced that two films supported by Kinoprime were included in the official programme of two leading European film festivals. *Unclenching the Fists* (*Razzhimaia kulaki*, 2021) by Kira Kovalenko won the Un Certain Regard Prize of the Cannes Film Festival, and *I'm home, mother* (*Mama, ia doma*, 2021) by Vladimir Bitokov was included in the Orizzonti Extra programme of the Venice Film Festival. On one level, these facts signify the increasing importance of Russian independent cinema, especially films created by early career filmmakers. On another, they reveal a postcolonial turn in Russian film industry whereby films supported by Kinoprime focus on contemporary issues in North Caucasus, a region longing for global visibility. The last relies on both the transnational nature of Russian capital and Russian visual culture: both Kovalenko and Bitokov are graduates of a film lab led by Aleksandr Sokurov, a world leading director.
8. A similar concern can be seen in the television series *Olga*, see, Strukov (2021b) for an analysis.
9. The law is dubbed the 'Russian Section 28' in reference to the Section 28 law adopted in the UK in 1988 under the government of prime minister Margaret Thatcher, which also banned positive representations of LGBT to minors. That law was ultimately repealed in 2003.
10. Working on the revisions of this chapter during the global lockdown, I became particularly aware of the global resonance of the film, including the impositions of draconian policies restricting individual freedoms.
11. A comparative analysis of *Attraction* and Hollywood blockbusters, as well as productions from other countries that explore similar issues, such as *District 9*, a 2009 science fiction film directed by Neill Blomkamp, is a task for another publication.
12. A translation into English is published on the site of the Russian World Foundation.
13. Just like with the issue of climate change, the reference to Gagarin and the Soviet lead in the space race contains nationalistic and universalist ideas, with the figure of Gagarin – the modern-day Icarus – being destined to save humanity through his own demise. See, Strukov and Goscilo (2017).
14. See, for example, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace.*
15. The rhetoric of conquering nature is particular to Soviet modernist projects.

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7 Soviet legacies and global contexts

Classical music and Russia's cultural statecraft

Elina Viljanen

A YouTube video of Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, went viral in May 2017: while waiting to meet his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping at the 'One Belt, One Road' forum, Putin performed two Soviet popular songs on a shiny grand piano. 'It's shameful that Putin could not play better', commented a Russian master's student after seeing the video in my class in the Finnish Summer School for Russian Studies. 'He is, after all, the president of Russia'. Indeed, I too wondered: why did the president of Russia choose to play the piano (and poorly!), just before an important summit and in the obvious presence of the international media?

My Russian student's comment suggested that the Soviet concept of *kul′turnost′* (cultured, civilised) has been recycled for contemporary Russia, as the president was expected to offer a more sophisticated performance. Yet, Putin's piano show epitomised how Russian music is part of the soft power politics of the Russian government, a politics that can be understood through the complex societal and political history of Russia's cultural statecraft. Putin's performance offered a mix of something that is popular and folkish and at the same time highly cultured and elitist. The Soviet popular songs 'Gorod nad vol′noĭ Nevoĭ' (also known as 'Vecherniaia pesnia' (The Evening Song, composed in 1963) and 'Moskovskie okna' (Moscow Windows, from 1962) that were played in a salon of the high-profile international summit could be widely recognised, including by a Western audience. However, it is not so well known that these popular songs were composed by two high-ranking Soviet classical composers, Tikhon Khrennikov and Vasili Solvyov-Sedov. It is perhaps even less known that such a clever conjunction of 'high' and 'low' – or, better put, 'popular' – cultural ingredients was one of the central recipes of the Leninist *kul′turnaia revoliutsiia* (Cultural Revolution) in the 1920s. The goal of that revolution was not only to 'civilise' the citizenry but also to reunify it after the Russian Civil War that took place from 1917 to 1922. Albeit a poor performance, the Putin-grand piano-phenomenon was a product of what I have called the 'Soviet cultural theory of music' (Viljanen, 2020). Yet, the act also had a symbolic meaning in Putin's contemporary ideology of 'state-civilisation', according to which Russia forms its own system of special cultural values (cf. Tsygankov, 2016, p. 146).

In this chapter, I examine cultural statecraft as an interaction and entanglement of these two spheres, the culture of music and the governmental politics of the state in Russia. I argue that classical music as cultural statecraft is embedded in the identity politics of the Russian state. I view classical music as a form of art in general and as a cultural, civilisationalist discourse in particular, a genre through which the Russian state identifies itself as a civilised and sovereign power and promotes its political interests in opposition to the neo-liberal values of the West. Cultural statecraft can thus be perceived as a coordination and organisation of the skills of political agency, in the form of a state organ and its actors seeking to direct national cultural resources and the general theoretical and practical knowhow of culture into political usage.

How, then, has classical music gained a symbolic status in Russia's contemporary civilisational politics, and what does tell us about Russian soft power and cultural statecraft in general? Russian classical music culture can be characterised by a conservative atmosphere and a continuation of the political conformity of the former Soviet classical music elite in the post-Soviet space (cf. Viljanen, 2017). If we analyse cultural statecraft as a negotiation between state politics and Russian classical music practitioners as an 'interest group', how should we interpret the perceived political conformity of the Russian elite performers? And to what extent is the Russian government a cultural actor itself? By pointing out in the beginning that Putin's performance was itself a product of a popular cultural theory of music, I argue that cultural statecraft is not only based on the state *pretending* to be a cultural actor by its conscious utilisation of (in this case) Russian music as a soft power instrument. As the leading representative of the state, Putin *is* a cultural actor who possesses the ability to utilise cultural knowledge as social capital while pursuing the state's political interests. Russian governmental power identifies itself as a cultural actor, and this identification resonates in the field of classical music.

Likewise, classical music has renegotiated its existence in post-Soviet Russia by parading its important international social and cultural power: the classical music elite makes classical music a politically relevant agency to be promoted. Putin's state-civilisationism is a good example of cultural statecraft, which applies a contemporary transnational intellectual current that also has an extensive cultural history in Russia as a discursive practice. It is important to note how the Soviet cultural theory of classical music became entangled with concepts of Russian civilisationism, not only intellectually as a cultural discourse but also politically, as its espousers were an interest group seeking cultural power in the 1920s. With the cultural theory of music, I do not just refer to the main thesis of the intonation theory (*Intonatsiia,* 1948, developed between 1916 and 1948) of the Soviet musicologist Boris Asafiev, who maintained that music is a cultural discourse. I also refer to his theory as a highly popular one in Soviet musicology, which constituted various schools of thought, laying down the basis for a Soviet

cultural conception of music and its position in society. The theoretical basis of Soviet music was laid down well before the Stalinist political doctrine of socialist realism emerged in the mid-1930s. Thus, socialist realism mainly explains the political context in which Soviet theories of art and music developed in those years. Classical music gradually became a constituent of a broad and heterogenic discourse of Russian civilisationism during the Stalin era and beyond. As the classic foundation of contemporary Russian musicology, the theory still explains the Russian popular conception of classical music as a symbol of high culturedness (Viljanen, 2017; 2020).

The first section of this chapter looks at soft power and cultural statecraft as theoretical concepts from the point of view of culture and Russian classical music as cultural diplomacy. In the second section, I lay out the theoretical and historical basis for my explanation of why classical music has become an essential soft power tool for Putin's conservative cultural politics. The third section presents a case study on the political meaning of classical music in the context of a Russian performance in Palmyra, Syria. I argue that the conductor of the performance, Valeri Gergiev, continued a Soviet political tradition of music, representing the autonomy of art on the one hand and ethical and educational national responsibilities on the other. Finally, I analyse Russian soft power politics in Palmyra from the point of view of different audiences: the domestic and foreign, in the West as well as in the East.

From Soviet cultural diplomacy to Russia's cultural statecraft

In recent years, the post-Soviet scholarship of Soviet music history has approached cultural diplomacy through Joseph Nye's (e.g. 2004, p. 256) concept of 'soft power' with various explanations. High culture in general and classical music in particular played an important role in Russian cultural diplomacy from the beginning of the Soviet era, with the aims of reducing international tensions, showcasing communist cultural achievements, and promoting national interests in international politics (see, David-Fox, 2012; Ezrahi, 2012; Fairclough, 2013; Mikkonen, 2013; 2019; McDaniel, 2015; Tomoff, 2015; Herrala, 2016; Mikkonen and Suutari, 2016). However, although Nye's concept has its theoretical strengths, its application in relation to Soviet cultural diplomacy or Russian soft power politics also has its problems and weaknesses.

Since the start of Putin's presidency in the 2000s, Russia has reinvigorated its cultural and public diplomacy to re-establish the country's presence in the global arena and improve its international image (Feklyunina, 2008, pp. 605–606). The Kremlin has also come up with its own definition of cultural diplomacy (Klyueva and Mikhaylova, 2017, p. 127). This occurred almost hand in hand with Russia formally introducing its own conception of soft power in 2013 (Sergunin and Karabeshkin, 2015, p. 347). Conceived as tools to counteract the 'propagandistic' efforts of the West, and those

of the United States, in particular, Russian policymakers have viewed cultural diplomacy efforts as an instrument of Russian soft power, capable of advancing their state's influence in the international arena (Klyueva and Mikhaylova, 2017, p. 129). Instead of generating a positive projection of cultural and political attractiveness, Russia has been perceived to be fighting the spread of Western soft power by directly challenging it, by exposing the Western political ethos as being self-contradictory and destructive of traditional values (Slobodchikoff and Davis, 2017, pp. 28, 33). Related to this soft power strategy, it has become customary to talk about a 'conservative turn' in Russian politics since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012.

The crucial problem of Nye's perspective on soft power is the ethnocentricity of his analysis (cf. Fan, 2008). Moreover, defining culture vaguely as 'a set of practices that create meaning for a society', Nye (2008, p. 96) mainly draws from a rather outmoded distinction between high culture (such as literature, art and education, which, according to him, appeals to the elites) and popular culture (which focuses on mass entertainment). However, Stuart Hall's way of understanding culture offers a fundamental challenge to Nye's conception, as Hall views culture as an active participatory agency in relation to politics – something that shapes human experiences, everyday life, social relations, and power.[1] An approach to culture through communication is particularly relevant when we address classical music, since communication has been one of the essential perspectives on music in the modern era. The way music appeared in Russia as a cultural, aesthetic, political, and social discourse, as musicians sought to communicate their existence and interact with culture and society, formed the politics of music.

Post-Soviet scholarship on Soviet soft power politics tends to reduce artists to supporters of power, powerless victims, autonomists, or those actively rewarded for engaging in political activity (Ezrahi, 2012; Tomoff, 2015; Herrala, 2016; Mikkonen, 2019). While these are relevant dimensions of artistic culture and political power, I consider the relationship between music, culture, and politics to be a more complex issue. Direct political motives were often in the background in Soviet times, and the function of cultural exchange benefitted artists and audiences instead of states and political parties, as Simo Mikkonen (2019, p. 10) points out. However, the politics of art (such as national aesthetics and styles of performance) and of the artistic community matter in cultural exchange, even when there is no direct involvement of state politics. As a social activity, music is embedded in a specific socio-political context and loaded with symbolic meanings, which are subsequently interpreted from the point of view of the receiving society, as Emilija Pundziūtė-Gallois (2018, p. 236) underlines. As such, music can also become a means of miscommunication (ibid., p. 238).

Putin's launch of the Russian state as a civilisation, or 'state-civilisation', from 2012, forms the title of the current cultural and historical identification by the state, which has come to stand for openly supporting traditional patriotic cultural values (President of Russia, 2019a). In 2013, Putin

announced that 'culture is essentially the collected moral and ethical values that form the foundation of national identity, one of the key symbols of Russian statehood and historical continuity, and what unites us with other countries and peoples' (President of Russia, 2013). The ethical, moral, and international tasks of culture were also emphasised in a presidential decree in April 2014, which stated that 'the main goals of the state programme are, in particular, realising the potential of Russian culture as a spiritual and moral basis of human and social development, as well as the development of tourism' (Government of Russia, 2014). An aim of the governmental policy for arts and culture launched in April 2014 was to bring the goals of artistic and cultural institutions closer to the state policies that were promoting the cultural unity and heritage of Russia. In a public conversation with Putin, Vladimir Tolstoy, the president's advisor on cultural policy, emphasised the role of classical music:

> As far as foreign policy goes, you have probably heard from Valery Gergiev, Vladimir Spivakov and many of our other cultural figures about how many provocations take place before their concerts in the West, but how when the concerts are over, audiences of thousands of people give them standing ovations. This is exactly the kind of soft power that should be one of the state's biggest priorities today, and this is the role that our national culture can play. This will send an important signal to our country and the world that Russia is a nation famed for its great culture and will continue to look for and encourage new talent, especially creative talent
>
> *(President of Russia, 2014)*

Cultural statecraft can therefore be viewed as a top-down process to the extent that high politics seeks to use culture for the purposes of statecraft. In practice, however, culture brings to political situations its own life as a complex social and historical process, with phenomena that can be approached as political cultures themselves.[2] To understand the civilising role, meaning, and consequences of the political culture of classical music in Russian culture and politics, we must go back to the arguments that established the basis for Soviet music as a culture, an art form, and an institutionalised scientific discipline.

Civilisationism, the Soviet cultural theory of music and Soviet cultural diplomacy

The origins of the idea of 'Russian civilisation' can be found in the eighteenth and 19th-century civilisationism of Francois Guizot, in the Slavophiles' reaction to Petr Chaadaev's judgement of Russia lacking an enlightenment, and in Nikolai Danilevski's scientific model of civilisational development. These were all inspired by European intellectual trends

from the Enlightenment to German Romantic thought (Mjør and Turoma, 2020, pp. 8–11). One of the more modern European sources was Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918), which gained popularity among Soviet intellectuals and Russian emigrant theoreticians, not least because of its Nietzschean romantic pessimism. Spengler's idea of culture (1991, p. 24) as a state of *becoming* into a civilisation – in the sense of a progressive historical narrative – became rooted in the general discourse of the Soviet Cultural Revolution in various ways. Soviet intellectuals working in different fields developed popular variations of it in the 1920s and 1930s, variations which both resembled and served the practical realities of the young state that was building its national identity as a socialist empire. One of the policies for becoming a civilisation was the emergence of campaigns of *kul'turnost'* in the 1920s, based on Lenin's idea of the 'cultivation of civilised behaviour', a method of *Novyĭ Byt* (new everyday life), and as part of the Cultural Revolution (David-Fox, 2015, p. 105). The concept of *kul'turnost'* gained both Marxist and non-Marxist philosophical formulations in different fields. Musical elites participated in the Cultural Revolution in the 1920s, with its general patriotic mission of educating the new cultural elite and its particular ethical mission of unifying the Russian people after the Civil War. The Cultural Revolution also sought to advance music's own inner goals as a national discourse and secure the continuation of Russian traditions in dialogue with the 'modern' West.

One of the greatest paradoxes of Soviet musical culture during the Stalin era came to be its elitist understanding of culture and 'good' music. Stalin favoured high professionalism in music, which institutionalisation made it also more controllable. Virtuosic classical music displayed the very standards for all music (Frolova-Walker, 2016, p. 201). Along with many representatives of the Soviet professional cultural elite, Asafiev, the father of Soviet musicology, emphasised throughout the 1920s that high art was not to be lowered for its intellectual standards but that people had to be educated to participate in its creation and reception. During the Stalin era, *kul'turnost'* – also musical *kul'turnost'* with specific measures – served not only as a symbol of sophistication but also as a means of promoting the specific cultural values of the government in Russia (cf. Dunham, 1976, p. 22). Although denounced as a fascist by Stalin's regime, Spengler's legacies flourished. For him, high culture was the 'consciousness of one single, colossal organism', which made not only 'the customs, myth, technics, and art, but also the peoples and classes it incorporates, the bearers of one coherent form language with a unified history' (Spengler cited in Farrenkopf, 2000, pp. 24, 29, 35). The politics of *kul'turnost'* in the Stalinist anti-formalist campaigns (1936–1938, 1947–1948) became part of the Soviet politics of internal control. Using Western avant-garde techniques and popular music (as opposed to Soviet popular music) as a symbol of anti-Soviet and vulgar behaviour, world classics, including Russian 19th-century music with politically updated content and messages, were harnessed as examples

for creating socialist-realist music. In addition, the most general idea of civilisation – that it is composed of constituent elements, or 'cultures', which are interwoven with one another – was well-suited to the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Soviet territory (cf. Wei, 2011, p. 2).

A father of multi-culturalism, Spengler was also an imperialist, painting a portrait of Western civilisation as superior in producing modernity (Farrenkopf, 2000, p. 24). Accordingly, the Soviet cultural theory of music was openly rooted in modern Western methodologies of music, while it also aimed to reveal the potential and specificities of Russian culture. Soviet musicologists reinterpreted the ideals of the Enlightenment for their own political needs. The historical narrative of intonation theory was anchored in the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, while Ludwig van Beethoven became the symbol of higher-level intellectual and ethical thought, whose legacy was cultivated further in Soviet music in a 'democratic' spirit (Asafiev, [1947] 1977, pp. 804–805). Asafiev claimed that, before the Soviet era, Beethoven had not been fully understood. His continuous praise of Beethoven's 'symphonism' (*simfonizm*) was based on an idea of the 'higher social appointment of music as an art form, which organises the consciousness and gives a particular aspect of knowledge of life' (Glebov [Asafiev], 1927, pp. 17–32). Soviet music was declared as the vanguard of the deeply humane civilisational discourse of Beethoven, which had apparently gone astray in the West.

Along with its external political life, the Soviet cultural theory of music also affirmed artistic autonomy. Asafiev's theory brought a double essence of music to Soviet thought. He approached music as an autonomous cultural discourse. The essential part of Asafiev's philosophy was based on the Western neo-formalism of German musicologist Hermann Kretzschmar, a position according to which music is absolute, but with referential powers. As an emotional form of art symbolising a highly private intellectual sphere of thinking, classical music became seen as a domain in which the style of the performance and the emotional intellect of tone (intonation) were able to awake the subjective imagination of the public, and this act could not be controlled by the authorities. It is interesting how rarely the famous opponent of the Soviet system, cellist Mstislav Rostropovich made political statements. He, like most of the Soviet elite musicians, considered music more powerful than words (Rostropovich, 2005). Displaying his autonomy through music, Rostropovich was nevertheless not forced to emigrate because of his music, but because he supported a writer – Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. That underlines how entangled classical music and politics were.

Whereas *kul'turnost'* became a means of control in domestic politics, the proper *kul'turnost'* produced by Soviet cultural politics was also used as a cultural export. The historian Katerina Clark argues that, since the 1930s, culture – especially literature – became the Soviet secular surrogate for religion and central to the Soviet Union's claim of international dominance. Soviet literature aimed to create an art, which would form the

builders of socialism and turn them into the true heirs of all of world culture. The Soviet Union built up its imperial culture not in isolation but by appropriating the great tradition of Western Europe (Clark, 2011, pp. 8–10). Clark, though, forgets about Western art music, which had been appropriated for the Soviet audience throughout the 1920s by Soviet musicologists and musicians themselves (Fairclough, 2016, p. 103). Kiril Tomoff (2015, p. 11) argues that a 'cultural empire' arose from these bases and that it very much directed the post-Second World War Soviet idea of cultural diplomacy that involved classical music. Classical music became part of the soft power that featured as the *sordino* of Soviet power politics from the 1940s, projecting an image of the Soviet Union as a sophisticated promoter of cultural and artistic excellence. Thus, cultural production was at the heart of the Soviet Union's imperial ambitions from the start, and the Soviets used both hard and soft power together in this endeavour (Tomoff, 2015). Meri Herrala (2016, p. 88) talks about classical music as a 'weapon of soft power': Soviet elite performers 'could be used to softly *invade* a country through the back door of diplomacy by influencing foreign policy through friendly and receptive audiences before the artistic *occupation* was even noticed'. Having gained a notable social position in the Soviet Union, the traditional classical artistic culture was one of the greatest cultural losers during the immediate post-Soviet years. In the context of the chaos of the market economy, it is understandable that, for many former Soviet artists, the sudden freedom and rapid spread of the new Western popular cultural forms appeared not only as a change for the better but also as a lost secured place in the cultural hierarchy.

Along with civilisationist arguments, the political tradition of *kul'turnost'* has been re-established in contemporary Russia (Viljanen, 2017). The view of classical music as a symbol of *kul'turnost'* forms one of the components of Russian contemporary cultural statecraft that can be viewed as a shared interest for both classical musicians and state politicians. For the musicians, it equates to an achieved social position that was lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union and is now being re-established with the help of state policies. For the politicians, it serves as a vehicle through which the contemporary Russian state gains control over culture and identifies itself in foreign political arenas as a civilisation. Along with the influence of Russia's own civilisational theoreticians, the post-Soviet political discourse has been influenced by Western concepts and theories. Among them, Samuel Huntington (1996) offered in his *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* a radical anti-universalist view of Western civilisation and a controversial reading of post-Cold War world politics. According to him, the West is a declining civilisation, but still able to regroup and redeem its power, if not necessarily its dominance of world politics (Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 1999; O'Hagan, 2002, pp. 157, 182; Mjør and Turoma, 2020). Huntington (1993, p. 23) argued that the principal conflict of global politics would occur between nations and groups of different civilisations. Henry Hale and

Marlène Laruelle (2020, p. 591) demonstrate that the Russian state's invocations of 'civilisation' are vague and inconsistent, and the notion is strategically deployed in a highly situational manner. The 'state-civilisation' is among the several notions of civilisation used by state officials when referring to the country's identity: 'Russian authorities use "civilization" as a discursive repertoire to foster feelings of consensus, with the substantive contents emptied or filled in according to circumstance' (ibid.). A central theme of Putin's presidency has been his concern to restore Russia's standing in the world and, for this, he recognises the symbolic value of classical music in forming an image of Russia as a high civilisation (Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016, p. 397).

Russian classical musicians in Syria in 2016

On 5 May 2016, conductor Gergiev stood up on the stage of an ancient Roman theatre in Palmyra, which had recently been recaptured by the Syrian army from the fanatical jihadis of ISIL with the help of Russian forces. Gergiev conducted a concert by the Mariinsky Orchestra from St. Petersburg, which performed pieces by Johann Sebastian Bach and two Russian composers from the Soviet era, Sergei Prokofiev and Rodion Shchedrin. The solo in Shchedrin's Quadrille from his opera *Not Love Alone* was played by the cellist Sergei Roldugin, a former rector of the St. Petersburg Conservatory and the artistic director of the St. Petersburg Music House, a federal institution. Not long ago, Roldugin, who is Putin's long-time close friend and his daughter's godfather, was also revealed by the so-called 'Panama Papers' to be a multi-billionaire businessman (see, Harding, 2016a). The concert was accompanied by a live video speech by Putin to celebrate 'the triumph of civilisation over barbarism', and the event was framed as a voluntary initiative of Russia's cultural elite (Plets, 2017, p. 18).

The Syrian Civil War had begun in March 2011 as a civilian unrest largely due to the socioeconomic equalities in the country, but it quickly escalated into an international war. Russia's direct military intervention on behalf of President Bashar Al-Assad's regime began in September 2015. By collaborating with Assad's regime, Russia was not only setting up a military base in the Middle East but also supporting a long-standing military ally and political client, with an implied message to Western leaders that Russia also has friends who cannot be ousted at will by Western powers. Russia used the Syrian crisis 'as a vehicle for challenging the assumed US monopoly in the Middle East and achieving Russian diplomatic parity with the United States' (Pierini, 2016, pp. 1, 6–8).

On the same evening that Gergiev's concert took place (see, Figure 7.1), dozens of people were killed in the Kamuna refugee camp established by Turkish non-governmental organisations near Sarmada in northern Syria. It is still a contested matter as to whose bombers were behind the airstrike, but many commentators assumed at the time that the airstrike was committed

Figure 7.1 Russian conductor Gergiev leads a concert in the ancient Roman theatre
in Palmyra (Reuters, 2016).

by the Syrian air force backed by Russian forces. Applying the logic of Nye, Russian soft power was seen as a failure by some Western commentators, who criticised Gergiev as a puppet of the Kremlin (Harding, 2016b). In his press release on 5 May 2016, British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond condemned the bombing of the refugee camp. According to him, the attack took place against the backdrop of a concert in Palmyra, which was a

> tasteless attempt to *distract* attention from the continued suffering of millions of Syrians. It shows that there are no depths to which the regime will not sink. It is time for those with influence over Assad to say enough is enough.
>
> *(GOV.UK, 2016)*

However, commenting on the Palmyra case, *The Washington Post's* classical music critic Anne Midgette (2017) acknowledged other reactions to Gergiev's concert: 'The message that Russia was not only bringing peace, but high art, was meant to send a clear international signal and it was violently controversial: some saw it as a sign that the Russians had their priorities right'. *The Financial Times'* John Thornhill (2016) noted that 'the maestro Gergiev honoured as a People's Artist of Russia has also become one of the most prominent faces of Kremlin soft power'. When asked about the criticism of his political activism, Gergiev highlighted that his statements had often been misinterpreted in the Western media. While considering Putin to be

one of the few world leaders he has met who understands history and is prepared for the responsibilities of the job, Gergiev dismissed the talk about the relationship between his musical performances and Russian state politics with the comment: 'It's easier to find truth in the musical world than in the political world' (Thornhill, 2016). As the music critic of *The New Yorker* Alex Ross notes (2013): 'Gergiev wants to have it both ways: he dabbles in politics, yet insists that politics stops at the doors of art.'

If we follow Nye's theory (2008), according to which non-governmental organisations can function as soft power tools without the direct interference of the state, then already before the strategic conservative turn in Russian politics, classical music functioned as a soft power tool that was promoting a positive image of Russian culture (Slobodchikoff and Davis, 2017, p. 24). As the various cultural organisations lost their governmental support after the collapse of the Soviet Union, institutions like the Mariinsky Theatre and individuals like Gergiev not only profited from agreements with Western theatres but also helped to spread Russian soft power. In 2003, Gergiev was appointed a UNESCO Artist for Peace 'promoting dialogue between cultures and civilisations' (UNESCO, Goodwill Ambassadors).[3] However, the long history of a world-renowned Russian high culture, including its classical music, has also served direct political goals (Slobodchikoff and Davis, 2017, p. 28). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Gergiev and other Russian classical music artists proved to be effective soft power tools to polish Russia's image and drive national interests. Classical music became part of Russia's cultural statecraft. This has undermined Gergiev's image in the West as a promoter of peace and instead posited him as a tool of Putin's foreign politics, which have not always been favoured by the West.[4]

Beyond the historical timeline outlining the re-embrace of classical music as a part of Russian cultural statecraft, Russia's own theory of soft power and public diplomacy should be viewed from the perspectives of different audiences. Cultural statecraft forms a larger prism than soft power does to view the connection between foreign and domestic politics. In the context of scholarly political analyses of Putin's state-civilisationism, it seems unlikely that classical music – perceived as 'high culture' – is being used to 'attract' the Western world, which is in this case not the primary target of Russian public diplomacy. Instead, Russian officials have aimed to appeal to Russia's allies and to show the West that the state appears as a notable civilisation.[5] We can apply the argument of Alexander Sergunin and Leonid Karabeshkin (2015, pp. 348–350) and conclude that the Kremlin's statecraft does not exclude the use of hard power tools, but that these are actually quite often combined with soft power ones. However, it still seems very unlikely that a classical music concert was designed by Russian political authorities as a *sordino* for the bombing of a refugee camp and was thus an example of Russia's failed soft power politics, as was the verdict of the British foreign secretary.

In the field of foreign politics, classical music can be read as a soft power tool in the context of the Kremlin's soft power doctrine that has been developing since 2012. At that time, Putin announced that Russia had not been able to gain a respected position in the international community because it had neglected soft power instruments (Sergunin and Karabeshkin, 2015, p. 350). Regarding soft power, he announced:

> The promotion of one's own interests and approaches through persuasion and the attraction of empathy (*simpatii*) towards one's own country, based on its achievements not only in the material sphere but also in the spheres of intellect and culture
> *(Putin 2012, cited in Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016, p. 398)*

As Anna Velikaya (2018, p. 59) notes, Russian public diplomacy and humanitarian cooperation are focused on the Eurasian region and 'the countries disillusioned with the West, searching for a new joint international agenda, countering Western hegemony on setting universal values (mainly liberal ones)'.

Russian classical music was an apt choice as a soft power tool in Palmyra, if we interpret it in the context of Russian civilisational politics and the Soviet cultural history of Russian music. Gertjan Plets (2017, p. 22) argues that, by strategically mobilising its diplomatic networks through UNESCO in Palmyra, Russia helped Assad's regime out of international isolation, making Moscow a stakeholder in the international restoration of the cultural heritage of Syria and providing it with political capital to reaffirm itself on the international stage. Next to using military power, Russia challenged the global hierarchy of political power through an argument in which classical music serves as a symbol of the high cultural level of Russian civilisation. Classical music is suitable for this aim, since it came to Russia originally from Western Europe and is thus part of a global shared culture; the genre's symbolic status as 'high culture' is also recognised not only in the West but by the most important superpowers, including China. Although the American audience was not the main target, the Russian soft power in Palmyra continued the aims of Soviet cultural diplomacy from the Cold War era, which also sought to prove that Russia is more civilised than other countries in the world.

The choices for Gergiev's music underlined that Russia's 'civilisedness' was a legacy of Soviet culture. Shchedrin and Prokofiev were Soviet composers, whom Gergiev posited next to Bach – one of the most respected composers of the Western world. As the American historian David Schoenbaum (2016) wrote in an article in *Foreign Affairs*, '[Bach]'s chaconne is a pillar of Western civilisation'. The Russian pieces symbolised a civilisation that was challenging the direction of the West by the latter's own 'forgotten logic' of what civilisation is. And, as was the case in Soviet times, the Russian state has also rewarded artists who participate in Russian public diplomacy:

the Russian National Award for outstanding achievements in humanitarian work was given to the still-active composer Shchedrin in 2018 (President of Russia, 2019b).

Furthermore, because of the strong and complex cultural history of classical music in Russia, which is less known among the Western audience, we find another story for Russian soft power politics in the Russian domestic context. As pointed out, during the Soviet era, classical music had a civilisationary mission, and it appeared as a symbol of *kul'turnost'*. In domestic politics, Putin recycles the idea of *kul'turnost'* by positioning classical music artists as cultural authorities – as leaders of the Russian civilisation and bearers of Russian traditions. At the Sochi Olympic Games in 2014, Gergiev was a bearer of the Olympic flag and the conductor of the Russian national anthem. Along with his role in the Mariinsky Theatre, he is also involved with various educational programmes in Russia.

Russia had also adopted Gergiev as its own 'peace dove' even before the concert in Palmyra. His orchestra landed amidst the South-Ossetian War in 2008. When he expressed then in a speech in Tshingvali that music is a symbol of peace, he took a stance for Russian military intervention. Right after the Olympic Games in March 2014, Gergiev, along with many prominent Russian artists, such as pianist Dennis Matsuev, signed a declaration that supported Putin's policies towards Ukraine and the Russian separatists in its eastern regions. In December 2014, opera singer Anna Netrebko donated a cheque of a million roubles to the opera house in Donetsk in the disputed Ukrainian region of the same name, and the world saw a photograph in which she posed with the separatist politician Oleg Tsarov with a flag of *Novorossiia* (BBC News, 2014). The Kremlin's cultural statecraft thus not only highlights patriotic and civilisational values in art but also selects artists who share these values. By separating music and politics, Gergiev also recycled the Soviet cultural theory of music's concept of the artistic autonomy of music with a patriotic mission.

How should the conservative turn in contemporary Russian cultural statecraft be interpreted? While various commentators in the international media have described Russia as an 'international conservative power', the scholarship of international politics has critically analysed what this phrase means and whether it actually applies to Russian politics (Robinson, 2020). Both Mark Galeotti (2019) and Paul Robinson (2020) find Russian power more pragmatic than idealistic. Culture, which appears in the form of traditional or conservative ideology, is thus seen by both scholars to be merely playing the role of the rhetoric of Russia soft power politics. Kåre Mjør and Sanna Turoma (2020, p. 6) take a slightly critical view of this approach by arguing that (cultural) ideas should be taken seriously. Specific ideas that are produced by state actors, policymakers and others alike, the authors state, 'may be instrumentalised, but that does not mean that they are haphazardly and randomly chosen and reproduced'. Both perspectives make an important point that can be brought together under the common

denominator of cultural statecraft. What appears as rhetorical conservativism and populism in foreign policy looks like something else from the point of view of Russian domestic politics. In cultural and educational politics, the emerging conservatism – a strong emphasis on patriotic education and a rebuilding of national and state identity in an Orthodox religious framework – represents a not so moderate shift from soft to hard authoritarianism that is reflected in the state's cultural policy (see, Turoma and Aitamurto, 2016; Turoma, Ratilainen, and Trubina, 2018).

The very task of Putin's domestic soft power is to utilise culture to produce common values, through patriarchal, authoritarian cultural policies. Various fora have been created to this end in support of the state and its cultural politics. One such forum is the Tavrida National Youth Educational Forum in Crimea. When asked by Alexander Shkolenko, a Tyumen representative of the international Zero Plus International Film Festival,[6] about the creation of a possible mechanism that would filter mass or pop culture for its negative 'counter force' to 'human values', Putin replied:

> Speaking about censorship, which is what you were talking about, actually, yes, we do have a painful heritage in many areas, and censorship is one of them. On the other hand, the information chaos you have mentioned is a concern for millions of people. Let us do this together, let us think about creating such mechanisms together, and when I say "together" I mean both you and people of other creative professions and the managers of media outlets.
>
> *(President of Russia, 2017)*

Russian cultural statecraft recognises culture as an active agency, which cannot be wholly controlled. Instead, contemporary Russian cultural statecraft is based on recognition, selection, and negotiation with representatives of culture who seek economic and social support for their cultural visions and values via the state's policies – and who are likely to become the soft power tools of Russian politics themselves. Gergiev is one example of this; others include the current *National Project of Culture* (2019–2024) under the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation and the criteria and reasoning presented by the National Awards Committee (President of Russia, 2019b). From the point of view of classical music, two important strategies of contemporary Russian cultural statecraft can be pointed out. First, economic incentives (such as state awards and an increase of public funds) are used in domestic cultural politics to attract classical music non-governmental actors to work together with the government to establish common public policies and an ideological narrative that also benefits Russian foreign policy. Russian cultural economist Valentina Muzychuk (2013), who has spoken on behalf of the state's larger role in funding culture, argues that despite the contradictions of the Soviet period in relation to the state's support of culture, it is quite

legitimate to speak about path-dependence in a positive way in Russia (Muzychuk, 2013, p. 39; Muzychuk, 2017). The path dependency theory, which emerged in relation to technological development in the 1980s, has reached definitions in different fields and it is popular in Russia. However, Russian political scientist Vladimir Gelman's (2019, p. 185) analysis on Russian politico-economic order takes a critical stance showing that the path-dependence argument appears yet another useful device for the legitimation of the continuity of status quo used in politics to legitimate the continuity of status quo of what he calls as 'bad governance'.

In Russian political discourse, the idea of path dependence goes hand in hand with the arguments about Russia as a 'conservative power', which includes openly leaning on certain traditional cultural values. The path dependency argument goes together with the second important strategy of contemporary Russian cultural statecraft: cultural soft power identifies classical music as part of Russian *kul'turnost'* and grants it a respectable status in the cultural hierarchy. This status attracts musicians and music organisations to become soft power tools themselves. The National Project of Culture is motivated by a patriotic and conservative national identity politics that aspires to 'create conditions for strengthening civic identity based on the spiritual, moral and cultural values of the peoples of the Russian Federation' (Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2020). Thus, while Russian cultural statecraft has Western origins and Soviet legacies, it appropriates concepts and traditions from the point of view of Russia's current political interests.

Conclusions

The Western criticism of contemporary Russian soft power politics reproduces the Cold War discourse of whether Russia is a legitimate carrier of the traditions of Western civilisation. Seeking for recognition as a sovereign power in world politics, Russian cultural statecraft aims to upgrade Russia's image but also to challenge the West, claiming that its culture is truer to the Western traditions. However, the display of Russian classical music civilisationism in Palmyra was not directed just to a Western audience but also to Moscow's allies in the Eurasian space. The notion of Russian civilisation at the intersection of the Western, Islamic, and Asian worlds, as Andrei Tsygankov (2016, p. 55) points out, is designed to appeal to those in Russia who favour the preservation of special ties with various parts of the globe and to those beyond Russia who gravitate towards it due to common historical experiences (and rather than just ethnic bonds). As a tool of domestic politics, Russian state-civilisationism has had a domestic appeal after the trauma of the Soviet collapse, but the civilisational soft power at home follows a different logic and has different results than abroad, testifying to the rise of political paternalism and authoritarianism on the domestic front.

The Soviet cultural theory of music provides a key to view music as an active political agency. Contextualising Asafiev's theory, this chapter has explained how and why classical music became a symbol of the civilised human being during the early Soviet era. The politics of music and state politics became entangled. The Soviet cultural theory of music emerged based on a two-fold identity of Russian music: its artistic autonomy and symbolic value, which originally stemmed from the patriotic ethical and educational national mission of music and a search for its societal recognition. During the Stalin era, classical music was strongly politicised. The political conservativism of classical music can be contextualised in the two-fold identity that produced societal engagement and political entanglement. Finally, by contextualising the current relationship between the classical music elite and the Kremlin in the lost societal position of classical music in the cultural hierarchy and economic catastrophe after the collapse of the Soviet Union, we can understand why notable figures of the genre revived their close relationship with the political elite. However, considering cultural statecraft as a negotiation between political power and culture does not mean that the whole field of classical music has supported Muzychuk's view about the state-supported cultural economy (see, Nemzer, 2005). The elite performers close to the Kremlin have their own political interests in being used as soft power tools for high politics. Another answer to their political cooperation lies in the age-old patriotic mission imprinted on the concept of Russian art itself. The patriotism of art should not necessarily be perceived solely as a sign of converging ideals with the politics of the Kremlin but also as an individual's principled loyalty to the country.

To conclude, classical music culture in Russia has never been just a mere passive victim that political authorities have taken advantage of. The strong emphasis on the autonomy of music present in the Russian cultural theory of music is combined with the national ethical mission of art. Thus, the autonomist position explains the views of artists who participate in politics. Russian classical music culture continues to balance between its own goals to preserve and develop a variety of cultural and aesthetic philosophies that partly grow from intellectual traditions. Russian classical music culture continues to balance between its own goals to preserve and develop a variety of traditional and new cultural and aesthetic philosophies (in dialogue with the modern global music markets) and Russia's contemporary *cultural statecraft*, which secures its economically important social position in the cultural hierarchy. Thus, cultural statecraft is a top-down process as a political aim, as Forsberg and Smith (2016, pp. 129–130) point out. However, a better dialogue between the study of international politics and the intellectual history of Russian culture and art can bring new dimensions to the interpretation of examples of Russia's soft power and cultural statecraft. These dimensions reveal the complex relationship between politics and the Russian intellectual thought of art that draws in many ways on a Soviet legacy – and which has hitherto not at all been understood in the West.

Notes

1. For the relevant perspectives of cultural studies on culture in this chapter, see, Douglas Kellner (2003, p. 2) and David Oswell (2006, p. 4). For Hall's view on active culture, see, James Procter (2004, p. 16).
2. Jan-Erik Lane and Uwe Wagschal (2012, pp. 3–4) use 'political culture' to refer to the 'political consequences' of various cultural phenomena, ranging from ethnicity and religion to secular values and traditions.
3. One of the partners of UNESCO, the Academy for Cultural Diplomacy, has a music program that identifies music as 'a powerful medium through which individuals, communities, and nations can express themselves': The academy maintains that, while music as a 'force for social cohesion can be seen to have emerged together with the earliest musical forms, the use of music to promote political, diplomatic, or societal objectives can be seen to have come to prominence during the Cold War' (Academy for Cultural Diplomacy, 2020).
4. For a standard American perspective on the 'politicisation' of Gergiev's activity, see, Alex Ross (2013).
5. Anna Velikaya, for example, claims that, unlike the public diplomacy of Western states, Russian public diplomacy is not focussed on exporting democracy. Instead, it is aimed at promoting international dialogue and strategic stability among various international players and used mainly for attracting allies and building dialogue with difficult partners. Through its public diplomacy and humanitarian cooperation, Russia promotes the message that the nation-state is the only reliable guarantor of international peace and a stable world order (Velikaya, 2018, p. 39).
6. The festival is focussed on fostering 'a positive, creative and formative worldview in children and young people', strengthening 'traditional common human values', and 'the integration of cinema and education through the formation of a collection of value-oriented films and the carrying out of educational screenings in schools and cultural and social institutions of the Russian Federation' (FESTAGENT, 2020).

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8 Stagecraft in the service of statecraft? Russia in the Eurovision Song Contest

Mari Pajala and Dean Vuletic

In 2020, Netflix released *Eurovision Song Contest: The Story of Fire Saga*, a comedy about the long-running European television entertainment spectacle. The film's story centres on the Icelandic amateur musicians Lars Erickssong and Sigrit Ericksdóttir, who get to represent their country in the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC). There, they meet the Russian contestant, Alexander Lemtov. A favourite to win the competition, he is the consummate professional – successful, extremely rich and self-confident. Dressed flamboyantly in gold and black, he performs his song 'Lion of Love' to a homoerotic dance routine with bare-chested male backing dancers. While he also decorates his mansion with nude male statues, Lemtov denies he is gay, claiming there are no gay people in Russia. As Lars and Sigrit declare their love on stage at the ESC final, Lemtov looks on teary eyed from the backstage area. 'You deserve to be happy, too', says his friend, the Greek contestant Mita Xenakis. 'Mother Russia does not agree', sighs Lemtov, but he promises to go to Greece with Xenakis: 'I do like the statues'.

Eurovision Song Contest: The Story of Fire Saga draws on ESC conventions and stereotypes as a source of humour. Accordingly, the film – written by Will Ferrell and Andrew Steele and co-produced by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), the organiser of the ESC – also comments on Russia's international image in the contest. In this fictionalised account, the Russian representative is a star with great performance ability and seemingly unlimited financial resources. He is also obviously gay, although closeted to comply with his country's expectations. *Eurovision Song Contest: The Story of Fire Saga* thus references two major themes around Russia's participation in the ESC in the 2000s. First, Russian television has invested generously in the country's representation in the ESC, making Russia one of the most successful entrants. At the same time, the ESC has become a site for critical discourse about LGBTIQ rights in Russia. In the film, this theme takes a rather patronising tone, as Lemtov needs help from more 'Western' Europeans to admit – perhaps even to understand – that he is gay.

What role, then, has participation in the ESC played in Russian cultural statecraft? We argue that the ESC has provided a platform for Russia to gain some visibility in European popular culture – a field in which, with the

exception of sports, Russia has not traditionally held a prominent place. Winning and staging the ESC was also useful for Russia as a springboard to host other mega events. Russian television has invested in producing impressive ESC performances that display Russian stagecraft and seek to place high in the contest. Although relations between Russia and West Europe have been tense over issues such as LGBTIQ rights and the conflict in Ukraine, Russian television has not turned away from the contest but has continued to invest in producing effective ESC entries. This underlines that the ESC continues to have value as a stage for Russian cultural statecraft.

Methodologically, this chapter draws on history and media studies. The primary research materials consist of: recordings of Russian ESC performances and the 2009 ESC in Moscow; data about the ESC, such as viewing figures and voting results; a selection of international press coverage; and expert interviews. Previous research on Russia's participation in the ESC (Jordan, 2009; Miazhevich, 2010; Meerzon and Priven, 2013; Hansen et al., 2019; Kazakov and Hutchings, 2019) has typically focussed on a more limited timeframe or theme. This chapter offers a historical overview of Russian engagement with the ESC, starting with radio broadcasting and popular music in interwar Europe. The EBU was established in 1950 for the national public service broadcasting organisations from Europe and the Mediterranean rim. Since 1956, it has held the ESC annually (except for 2020) for its members. During the Cold War, the ESC was primarily a Western European affair (Vuletic, 2018, pp. 19–30). National broadcasting organisations from the former Eastern Bloc only joined the EBU in 1993, which consequently led to an eastward expansion of the ESC. Russian entries were rather unsuccessful in the contest in the 1990s. However, in the 2000s, Russian participation became more strategic as the state worked to reassert itself on the international stage during a period of economic growth under the leadership of president-cum-prime minister Vladimir Putin. Russia won its first and so far only ESC in 2008 with Dima Bilan singing 'Believe'. Moscow consequently hosted the 2009 ESC, which was one of the most expensive editions of the contest ever.

Although ESC participants formally represent television stations instead of states, they are framed as national representatives – they appear under the names of countries and, in the voting, points are awarded to countries rather than songs or performers. Russian participation in the ESC has been organised alternately by two channels that are members of the EBU, Russia 1 (Rossiĩa 1) and Channel One (Pervyĭ kanal), the former being owned entirely by the state, and the latter jointly by the state and private investors (Vartanova and Zassoursky, 2003, pp. 97–99). According to the EBU's mission statement, public service media should be free from political and economic influence (EBU, 2012, p. 4). Thus, it is questionable whether state-owned Russian television channels comply with the EBU's declared ideals, as the Putin era has brought a 'decline in media freedom and the increase in government control over the content and style of television programmes'

(Hutchings and Rulyova, 2009, p. 3). Jonathan Becker argues that, in the Russian media system, controlling television has been particularly important for the state, as television is seen as the most important medium for communicating with the public (Becker, 2004, p. 150). However, while Russia 1 and Channel One are both state-controlled, it would be simplistic to interpret Russian ESC entries as directly reflecting government policy, as there are also artistic and commercial interests involved.

The USSR and televised international song contests

To understand the role that the ESC has played in Russia's cultural statecraft, we need to go back to the first half of the twentieth century, when popular music developed globally into a tool of cultural diplomacy and political propaganda. The political control of Western popular music was not so apparent in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) during the 1920s, when jazz was not censored for its Western associations (Starr, 1985, pp. 37–78) despite Moscow being diplomatically isolated by other European states because of its communist-party led government. That diplomatic isolation also meant that the USSR did not join the International Broadcasting Union (IBU), the predecessor of the EBU, which was established in 1925 for the radio broadcasting organisations of territories from Europe and the Mediterranean rim. The USSR was accordingly initially excluded from the European Broadcasting Area (EBA), the technical region that the IBU defined for its organisational remit. However, in the late 1920s, the government of Soviet leader Josef Stalin sought a rapprochement with European states and also began to cooperate with the IBU. This resulted in the IBU expanding the border of the EBA eastwards to just beyond Moscow (Lommers, 2012, pp. 145–147). The EBA was maintained as an organisational and technical concept in the post-war era as it became the basis for defining the EBU's membership, which is why Russia and other states from the former Eastern Bloc qualified to join the EBU, and thereafter the ESC, in 1993.

After a period of suppression from 1936 to 1941, Western popular music, especially the American, was tolerated by the Soviet authorities during World War II in the context of Moscow's wartime alliance with Western states. However, as Cold War tensions increased in the late 1940s, Western popular music was again censored in the USSR, as well as in the other communist party-led states in Eastern Europe (Ryback, 1990, pp. 8–14). Yugoslavia, though, reopened to Western cultural influences after its communist party-led government refused to submit to Soviet domination, ending its alliance with Moscow in 1948. Western popular music was not censored in Yugoslavia from the early 1950s and even became appropriated in Yugoslav cultural diplomacy towards the end of the decade (Vuletic, 2012, pp. 115–131). Yugoslavia's defection from the Eastern Bloc also meant that it joined the EBU when the organisation was founded in 1950. During

the Cold War, Yugoslavia remained the only communist party-led state that was represented in the EBU and, accordingly, the ESC.

The formation of the EBU was itself the result of a Soviet-led battle to gain control over a European international broadcasting organisation. During World War II, the headquarters of the IBU in Brussels had been taken over by German forces. As this had discredited the operations of the IBU, the USSR – which had still never become a member of that organisation – proposed the establishment of a new European broadcasting organisation. However, East-West tensions in the late 1940s, which were also played out in radio broadcasts for political propaganda, thwarted the formation of a new pan-European body. In addition, Westerns states were opposed to the Soviet proposal that such an organisation should include the different Soviet republics with separate seats and hence votes, which would have given the USSR the power to outvote Western members in collusion with its Eastern European allies (Eugster, 1983, pp. 39–40). As such, two separate European broadcasting organisations ended up being formed in 1950: the EBU, which was comprised mostly of Western European states, and the International Broadcasting Organisation – which was renamed the International Radio and Television Organisation (OIRT, as per the abbreviation of its French-language name) in 1960 – for Eastern Bloc states and their allies outside of Europe.

The OIRT had its headquarters in Prague, indicating that the USSR did not always play a predominant role in the organisation, as is often intuitively expected in analyses of power relations within the Eastern Bloc. Indeed, when it came to establishing the OIRT's Intervision Network for programme exchange – the equivalent of the EBU's Eurovision Network, through which the ESC was formed – it was the national broadcasting organisations of Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary and Poland that were the original members of this in 1960. The USSR only joined in 1961, and then initially through just its western-most republics. While the USSR did contribute the highest number of programmes that were exchanged through the Intervision Network (Eugster, 1983, pp. 167–169), it was not a hegemonic player in it. The USSR often lagged technologically relative to those four more prosperous Eastern Bloc states of Central Europe. That region had historically belonged to the Western cultural sphere, and an openness towards Western cultural influences usually marked periods of cultural and political liberalisation under communist party rule in these Central European states.

It was also such reasons that motivated the establishment of the Intervision Song Contest (ISC) as the Eastern Bloc alternative to the ESC, which had been established in 1956. With the advent of de-Stalinisation and the Thaw from the mid-1950s, the Eastern Bloc states became more open to Western cultural influences. In Poland, for example, a jazz festival was established in the town of Sopot in 1956, while in the USSR, jazz also featured in the World Festival of Youth and Students that was staged in Moscow in 1957

(Koivunen, 2010, p. 181). Across Eastern Europe, economic policies diversified, from those which emphasised the development of heavy industry to ones that placed more focus on the production of consumer goods. The amount of radio and television programming based on popular music consequently increased, as did the production of the genre by local record companies. With the improvement in relations between East and West, the EBU and the OIRT began to institutionalise their cooperation in the late 1950s (Pajala, 2013, pp. 219–221). In 1960, it was agreed that the Intervision and Eurovision networks would exchange programmes, although with the understanding that these would not be politically aggressive towards the other side.

In the context of this cooperation between the EBU and the OIRT, the latter began to pursue the idea of establishing its own equivalent of the ESC. The OIRT started staging its own Festival for Light and Dance Music in Prague at the end of the 1950s and then in Leipzig in the early 1960s. It initially featured performers from Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary and Poland without ones from the USSR. The Czechoslovak Communist Party had been a relative latecomer to de-Stalinisation reforms – the world's largest statue of Stalin in Prague was only destroyed in 1962, and the first Czechoslovak jazz festival was only established in 1964. However, as the Czechoslovak media became more open to Western cultural influences, the state's officials also began to reconceive their strategies in cultural diplomacy. An early example of this was the proposal by Czechoslovak Television, in 1964, that the EBU and the OIRT stage a joint song contest. This was, however, rejected by the EBU, which instead suggested that the two organisations broadcast each other's contests (Vuletic, 2018, p. 103). From 1965, the ESC was indeed broadcast through the Intervision Network, including to the USSR, which meant that the ESC became familiar to Russian viewers already during the Cold War.

Also in 1965, the first series of the ISC began in Czechoslovakia, being staged first in Prague, then in Bratislava in 1966 and 1967, and in Karlovy Vary in 1968. The ISC was modelled on the ESC: the former's rules were even taken directly from its Western counterpart. The ISC's Czechoslovak organisers also did not conceive it primarily as a tool to motivate cultural cooperation within the Eastern Bloc or with the USSR particularly, but more to promote the Czechoslovak popular music industry to Western markets. No Soviet entry even won the ISC in the 1960s. With the ending of media censorship in Czechoslovakia during the reforms of the Prague Spring in 1968, the ISC expanded to include members of the EBU. That made the 1968 ISC the first pan-European televised international song contest, as the EBU never included entries from the Eastern Bloc. The first series of the ISC was ended following the invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 by an alliance of Soviet-led Warsaw Pact forces that suppressed the Prague Spring. However, the ISC was revived from 1977 to 1980 by Polish Television as part of the Sopot International Song Festival that had been established in

1961. There, the emphasis was again on forging ties with Western markets: Western artists featured in the interval acts, and there was also a parallel competition for entries from record companies alongside the usual one for national broadcasting organisations (Vuletic, 2018, pp. 104–111). However, the USSR did win one edition of this second series of the ISC, after the Russian superstar Alla Pugacheva was victorious with the song 'Vsë mogut koroli' (Kings Can Do Everything).

That Soviet television never took the lead in organising the ISC, or even came up with another alternative to the ESC, begs the question of why the concept of the televised international song contest never featured in Soviet cultural statecraft during the Cold War. One reason is the fact that the USSR never succeeded in becoming a popular music superpower like the United States or the United Kingdom. Even in the Eastern Bloc, it was always Western trends that were more influential in shaping local popular music cultures, as could be heard in the frequent Anglicisms that were used in locally produced songs in comparison to the absent Russianisms. The other reason was that Soviet broadcasting organisations and record companies were not as needy of the commercial opportunities in Western markets as much as those of other, smaller Eastern Bloc states were. At its dissolution, the USSR was a market of almost 300 million people, with its own nationally televised song contest – 'The Song of the Year' (Evans, 2016, pp. 98–114) – to boot. While there were Soviet artists who were successful in the Eastern Bloc and Eastern European ones who made it in the USSR, a conclusion from the Cold War era is that these artists often considered their biggest opportunities to lie domestically or in the West – and not in the East. After Russia entered the EBU in 1993 following the dissolution of the OIRT, the ESC provided a new opportunity for Russian artists to access Western markets with the support of the cultural diplomatic efforts of state institutions.

Russian strategies in the ESC

Russian television's first ESC entry in 1994 could be characterised as a strong start: Youddiph gave a confident performance of the song 'Vechnyĭ strannik' (Eternal Wanderer), reaching a top-ten finish. The following two entries, by Philipp Kirkorov in 1995 and Pugacheva in 1997, were equally confident but perhaps stylistically less in line with the West European tastes then dominating the ESC and failed to reach the top ten. This choice of artists – especially that of Pugacheva, who was an internationally known star with a long career, including a victory in the ISC – suggests that Russian television wanted to make a strong showing in the contest. However, as only the highest-scoring countries were able to participate in every ESC in the 1990s due to a system of relegation, Russian television ended up missing a few years, namely in 1996, 1998 and 1999.

Since 2000, Russia has participated in the ESC regularly and with a high profile as part of official efforts to mobilise 'cultural instruments' to improve the state's international image. At the same time, Russia's rising profile in the ESC has been enabled by and reflected wider changes in the contest. The ESC gained new significance as an arena for nation branding in the 2000s, as more post-communist states entered the contest and started to find success. Changes made to the ESC's rules – such as adding semi-finals to allow for more participants and modernising the show musically by giving up the traditional live orchestra accompaniment – raised the profile of the contest. As Göran Bolin (2006, p. 195) has argued, many post-communist countries took a strategic approach to the mega event. As the ESC developed into an increasingly complicated technological spectacle, organising the contest was a source of prestige, a chance to show that the national broadcaster was capable of such a demanding task (ibid., pp. 196–197). In countries like Estonia and Ukraine, the ESC was an opportunity to introduce the country to an international audience, build a positive national image (ibid., pp. 197–199) and emphasise the host country's 'return to Europe' or Europeanist orientation (Pajala, 2006, pp. 154–157; Jordan, 2015, pp. 123–127). Russian television has also used the ESC to build the international image of the country, but with a more ambivalent relationship to the concept of 'Europe'.

The turn of the millennium saw a turn towards a more youthful and Western-oriented style in the Russian ESC acts. The 2000 Russian entry, 'Solo', performed by teenage singer Alsou, was written by American songwriters; it reached second place in the contest. Other youthful acts followed: these included a rock band, Mumiy Troll (Mummy Troll), in 2001; an American-style boy band, Prime Minister, in 2002; and a girl band, Serebro (Silver), in 2007. The rules of the ESC had been changed in 1999 to allow performers to sing in whichever language they chose; consequently, most Russian ESC entries have since been performed in English (with a few notable exceptions), thereby strategically engaging with an international audience. The recruitment of American R'n'B producer Timbaland to co-produce 27-year-old Bilan's winning entry 'Believe' further testifies to a Russian willingness to invest in ESC success by employing international expertise.

In light of the subsequent growth of anti-gay prejudice in Russian nation-building (Makarychev and Medvedev, 2015; Sleptcov, 2017), it is notable that Russian ESC acts in the 2000s played with camp aesthetics and signifiers of homosexuality. While the ESC has a long history as a cult favourite for gay viewers, the association between the contest and queer culture became more publicly visible after the victory of the Israeli trans woman Dana International in 1998 (Singleton, Fricker, and Moreo, 2007). Following this, several ESC performances in the early 2000s played with gender and sexuality expression. Russia participated in this trend in the 2003 ESC with t.A.T.u, a faux-lesbian duo then enjoying success in Europe (Heller, 2007; Miazhevich, 2010). While t.A.T.u.'s music drew on global pop, its ESC entry was unusually performed in Russian and its title, 'Ne

ver′, ne boĭsi͡a' (Don't Believe, Don't Fear), referenced a Russian prison saying recognisable from Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* (Miazhevich, 2010, pp. 257–258). Subsequently, in 2006, Bilan's first ESC entry, 'Never Let You Go', made use of a camp aesthetic: he appeared on stage with two ballet dancers and, towards the end of the song, climbed onto a white grand piano, out of which a third ballet dancer emerged and scattered rose petals on the floor. For 'Believe', Bilan was joined on stage by violinist Edvin Marton and figure skater Evgeni Plushenko. Bilan's ESC performances made references to cultural fields for which Russia has historically been well known – ballet, classical music and figure skating. As Galina Miazhevich (2010, p. 260) notes, both acts also drew on the *Estrada* tradition of popular music performance deriving from the Soviet era, with its eclectic style of mixing signifiers of high and popular art – a genre which Pugacheva also personified. With lyrics like '[e]ven when the world tries to pull me down/tell me that I can't, try to turn me around/I won't let them put my fire out', 'Believe' is open to interpretation as an expression of gay experience in an oppressive environment. The performances by t.A.T.u. and Bilan combined Russian cultural references with a camp style that made sense in the context of the ESC, and this strategy proved to be highly successful: not only did Bilan win in 2008, but he had come second in 2006, while t.A.T.u had placed third.

As the winning country earns the right to host the ESC the following year, the 2009 ESC was staged in Moscow by Channel One. The 2009 ESC was designed to showcase Russian wealth and grandeur: it reportedly cost over 30 million euros, making it the most expensive ESC ever staged (Jordan, 2009, p. 49), until that record was subsequently broken by the 2012 ESC in Baku. The stage for the 2009 ESC was huge in comparison to the preceding contests, giving an impression of prosperity, even ostentatiousness, of the world's largest country in the middle of a global financial crisis. Culturally, the contest's image of Russia was a mixture of signifiers of Russianness and global culture. The contest's logo consisted of a firebird, derived from a Russian fairy tale that also opened the first semi-final show. The postcard films introducing each song featured Ksenia Sukhinova, the Russian winner of the 2008 Miss World pageant, and introduced viewers to Russian words presented in the Roman alphabet. Other than that, the postcard films showed views of each participating country. Unlike many other ESC organisers, then, Channel One did not use the opportunity to produce touristic videos presenting different regions of Russia to the international audience, but rather emphasised the international character of the ESC. In the final, the organisers also relied on international performers, with an opening performance by Cirque du Soleil, which led up to Bilan's rendition of his winning song, and an interval act by the Argentinian theatre group Fuerza Bruta. The first semi-final showcased iconic Russian cultural traditions with performances by the choir and dance group of the Russian army, which was joined by t.A.T.u. Thus, the organisers relegated

the traditional signifiers of Russian culture to the less conspicuous semi-finals and, by selecting international performers for the final, the organisers aligned Russia with global – rather than just European – culture.

Just after hosting the ESC, Russia was subsequently represented in the contest by some less commercial entries – which is not an uncommon strategy used by national broadcasting organisations that have recently staged the contest, so as to avoid winning it too soon again and having to once more bear the expense of hosting it. However, over the course of the 2010s, Russian television increasingly invested in its ESC acts with what appeared to be the intention of again winning the contest. Since 2013, Russian ESC entries have been selected internally by Russia 1 or Channel One alternatingly, without a public national final or audience vote, which allows the television companies to entirely determine how Russia is represented. During this time, all Russian entries apart from one have placed in the top ten of each ESC edition. Unlike in the 2000s, Russian entries have not engaged with overtly camp aesthetics, but rather embraced more traditional gender iconography, as in the performances by the Buranovskie Babushki (Buranovo Grannies) in 2012 (see, Figure 8.1) or the teenage Tolmachevy Sisters, former winners of the Junior Eurovision Song Contest, in 2014 (Kazakov and Hutchings, 2019, p. 139). At the same time, Russian entries have continued to engage with the over-the-top performance tradition of the ESC with striking performances that demonstrate Russian

Figure 8.1 The performance by the Buranovskie Babushki in 2012 (Reuters, 2012).

stagecraft. In 2016, Sergey Lazarev gave a physically demanding and technically innovative performance which involved him climbing up a video wall; Lazarev was a favourite to win but ended in third place. In 2019, Russia 1 sent Lazarev again with a technically complicated performance featuring numerous video screens; again, he placed third. Lazarev's performances were well-made, spectacular, and expensive: the 2019 stage show was rumoured to have cost 2.5 million US dollars (Ek, 2019). While this figure may not be accurate, it reflects a perception among international journalists in the ESC: that much effort and resources go into ensuring high-profile Russian participation in this mega event.

Together with the economic reassertion of Russia on the global stage, tensions between Russia and other ex-Soviet countries have also marked Russian ESC participation. The 2005 ESC was staged in Kyiv in the wake of Ukraine's Orange Revolution, which resulted in a pro-Russian government being replaced with a pro-Western one. Several symbolic references to the revolution were made in the 2005 ESC, but none were deemed offensive enough to thwart Russian participation in the event. In the 2007 ESC, Ukraine was represented by Verka Serduchka, who sang 'Dancing Lusha Tumbai', with the last two words of the title being interpreted in the international media as a swipe against Moscow as they sounded like 'Russia, goodbye' when Serduchka sang them onstage. Following the Russo-Georgian War in August 2008, Georgia withdrew from the 2009 ESC after the EBU required it to change the lyrics of its entry 'We Don't Wanna Put In', widely interpreted as a political statement against then prime minister Putin (Johnson, 2014, pp. 37–38). Since 2014, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine over the regions of Crimea and Donbass has been at the forefront of the international media coverage of the ESC, as both states have sought to utilise the contest for the promotion of their political agendas. Following the annexation of Crimea, the Tolmachevy Sisters ESC entry – with lyrics such as 'closer to the crime/cross the line' – could have been interpreted as flaunting the Russian presence on the peninsula. The song and points awarded to Russia were booed loudly at the 2014 ESC, suggesting the live audience's disapproval of both Moscow's annexation of Crimea and anti-gay policies. Ukraine abstained from the 2015 ESC in Vienna, where Russia was represented by Polina Gagarina with 'A Million Voices': a power ballad calling for unity and peace, it had lyrics such as '[w]e are the world's people/different yet we're the same … Praying for peace and healing/I hope we can start again'. Gagarina and her backing artists were all dressed in white, connoting innocence and purity. The booing by the live audience paradoxically may have helped her performance, as she was visibly emotional during the song. 'A Million Voices' was popular with juries and televoters, finishing second in the contest. The following year, Ukraine won the ESC with Jamala's song '1944', which described the deportation of Crimean Tatars under Stalin. The victory was widely read as politicised: in an interview with *The Guardian*, Jamala conceded that her song was about

2014 as well as 1944 and hoped that its win would show that 'modern European people are not indifferent' (Walker, 2016). The conflict between Ukraine and Russia exposes the fundamental impossibility of the EBU's insistence that the contest is non-political and that political lyrics, speeches or gestures are not allowed in the contest. While explicitly political lyrics may be banned, keeping politics out of an international contest in which participants are framed as national representatives is hardly possible, as public reactions to both Russian and Ukrainian entries demonstrate.

Russia withdrew from the 2017 ESC in Kyiv after the singer selected to represent it, Yuliya Samoylova, was barred from entering Ukraine because she had crossed the border from Russia to Crimea after the annexation (The Guardian, 2017). As Vitaly Kazakov and Stephen Hutchings argue, the selection of Samoylova was a calculated move: as a wheelchair user, Samoylova offered an alternative interpretation of the 2017 ESC slogan 'Celebrate Diversity', which could be interpreted as a critique of Russia's anti-gay policies. Moreover, after Ukraine refused to grant Samoylova a visa, Russian politicians and media personalities could accuse Ukraine of unfair treatment of a disabled person and failure to follow the ESC rules (Kazakov and Hutchings, 2019, pp. 141–144). The EBU seemed to support the Russian position, expressing disappointment in Ukraine and accusing it of undermining 'the integrity and non-political nature of the ESC and its mission to bring all nations together in friendly competition' (The Guardian, 2017). After declining the EBU's offer to allow Samoylova to perform in the contest via satellite in 2017, Channel One entered her in the following year's contest. However, as Samoylova seemed to have been selected for tactical reasons, her performance lacked the strength of other recent Russian entries and she failed to qualify for the final.

High-profile participation in the ESC has been important for Russian television. Popular Russian singers have participated in the ESC, and successful acts have given the domestic audience a chance to see Russia shine on the international stage. At the same time, the ESC has offered Russia a way of gaining visibility in the field of popular culture. The investment in ESC performances – particularly Bilan's and Lazarev's entries – shows that Russian television has wanted to succeed in the contest. Since 2014, the conflict with Ukraine has motivated a more overtly political employment of the ESC, as Russia has used the ESC stage to present an innocent, feminine face in the conflict. In this context, the pursuit of success has sometimes been sacrificed in the interests of making a political point, as the case of Samoylova underlines. However, while Russian entries in the 2010s have offered rather traditional gender imagery, there is also some ambivalence in Russia's ESC image. It appears that, for Russian television, it is more important to maintain a high-profile presence in the ESC than to in every respect maintain an ideologically hegemonic image of Russia.

The international reception of Russia's ESC participation

One way of assessing the international reception of Russian ESC entries is to examine where Russia has gained its points from in the voting. Research on ESC voting patterns shows that the participating countries have often formed voting blocs based on cultural and political affinities and diasporic communities (Yair, 2019, pp. 1020–1022). Unsurprisingly, then, Russia has belonged to an ex-Soviet group in the ESC voting, meaning that it gets a higher-than-average share of its votes from other ex-Soviet countries (Charron, 2013). Detailed breakdowns of the public televote and expert jury results that have since 2009 in equal parts made up the final scores have been publicly released by the EBU since 2014. These show that Russian entries have tended to score high with the audiences in former Soviet republics, such as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova and the Baltic countries, but also in Israel, which has a significant population of Russian origin. Moreover, recent Russian entries have been somewhat more popular with audiences in the former Eastern Bloc and South European countries than in West European and Nordic countries. For instance, both of Lazarev's entries scored highly with Greek and Cypriot televoters, perhaps because his songs were co-written by a Greek composer. Such entries have also consistently scored higher with televoters than juries. This suggests that, by focussing on impressive staging, Russian acts have aimed at audience rather than jury appeal, as the jury is composed of music industry professionals who focus more on the musical qualities of acts. Lazarev's 2016 entry was left entirely without points by 21 out of 41 juries, although it received points from the public in all countries, beating the Ukrainian winning song in the televote. Yet, the most popular Russian acts have been the Buranovskie Babushki and Gagarina, who both gained points from almost every single country.

Despite these image-making successes, negative stereotypes of Russia and other parts of the 'East' have still, decades after the end of the Cold War, appeared uncritically in Western media reporting on the ESC. We need only recall how such jibes infamously appeared in the popular ESC commentary of the British Broadcasting Corporation's Terry Wogan, who resigned from his post in 2008 because he claimed that the voting had been taken over by East European alliances (Fricker, 2013, pp. 64–71, 76). An extensive survey of international impressions of Russian ESC entries is beyond the scope of this article, but a few expert views from Nordic countries provide further examples of how Russian entries have been viewed by international media professionals. Journalist Tobbe Ek writes a blog (*Schlagerbloggen*) for the major Swedish tabloid *Aftonbladet*, for which he reports from the ESC onsite. As Sweden is home to a globally successful pop music industry, Ek addresses a readership that expects Sweden to regularly be at the top in the ESC results. Hence, Ek often describes Russian entries as 'dangerous', meaning that they are serious competitors for the Swedish contestants. He

also approvingly notes the Swedish connections of Russian entries – such as the several Swedish songwriters and backing singers who have participated in these in the 2010s – thereby bringing the Russian entries closer to Swedish readers and emphasising their professional quality. Typically, Ek describes Russian contestants as highly competent: for example, he characterises Lazarev as a Russian superstar, a great singer who is in the ESC to win it. However, Ek also sometimes suggests that Russian entries seem too calculated. For example, in 2015, Ek asked if Gagarina was 'Putin's new soft weapon' (Ek, 2015a) but conceded that she seemed genuine on stage: 'I really didn't want to like Russia. But I can't dislike Polina' (Ek, 2015b). In comparison, a Russian entry that seemed both 'cunning' and 'genuine' was the Buranovskie Babushki, whose joy on stage Ek described as 'irresistible' (Ek, 2012).

As examples of expert opinions from a smaller country, we interviewed Eva Frantz (2020) and Johan Lindroos (2020), who have for several years hosted the ESC preview programme on the Finnish public service television station, the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE). Both Frantz and Lindroos see Russia as a very strong ESC participant that has increasingly invested into its entries over the past decade; Lindroos estimates that the quality of songs, artists and show elements has grown since the success of the Buranovskie Babushki in 2012. As Frantz observes, Russian ESC entries seem to want to show that they do know how to make pop culture. However, Frantz also notes that Russian performances are sometimes so perfect that they become a little robot-like and lack charm. For her, Russian entries work best when they have a little 'sparkle in the eye'; she highlights the Buranovskie Babushki and Little Big, who were selected to represent Russia in the cancelled 2020 ESC with a humorous song that went viral on the internet (the video has over 200 million views on YouTube, an exceptional figure for an ESC song). Lindroos mentions the same two songs as particularly good Russian entries, saying that the performance of the Buranovskie Babushki was surprising and fun – and something that one did not expect from Russia. Thus, in the opinion of all three Nordic experts, Russia's ESC 'brand' is associated with professional quality, and the most appealing image of Russia is the smiling faces of the Buranovskie Babushki.

Despite the success of Russia's ESC entries, the state's ESC participation has since 2009 provoked a critical discussion of Russian policies regarding LGBTIQ rights. While the 2009 ESC was designed as a spectacle that flaunted Russia's wealth and affinities with global culture, much Western media interest in the contest was directed towards the discrimination faced by LGBTIQ people in the country. LGBTIQ activists used the ESC in Moscow as an opportunity to draw West European media attention to the situation in Russia, such as by scheduling a gay pride march to coincide with the ESC final. Held since 2006, Moscow Pride had met with protests from Orthodox Christian and far-right nationalist groups, with the police arresting LGBTIQ activists but allowing equally unsanctioned

anti-gay demonstrations to proceed. Moscow's mayor Yuri Luzhkov used nationalist rhetoric to portray pride events as expressions of corrupting Western influence threatening traditional Russian values (Stella, 2013, pp. 469–473). Francesca Stella (2013, p. 476) notes that GayRussia, the organiser of Moscow Pride, based their strategy on '[a]ddressing an international audience rather than the local LGBTIQ community and ensuring maximum media exposure'. International news media accordingly reported on Mayor Luzhkov's refusal to allow gay events and his description of gay pride marches as 'satanic'. Considering the violence directed at participants in previous pride marches in Moscow and the prevalence of homophobic attitudes in Russian society, there were also concerns about the safety of gay ESC fans travelling to Moscow for the contest (Forsén, Ek, and Ekelund, 2009; Harding, 2009; Walker, 2011). Unquestionably, the Moscow authorities' actions against the pride march generated a lot of negative publicity for Russia in West Europe. In a letter published in *The Guardian* titled 'Thank You Mayor Luzhkov', Peter Tatchell, a British gay activist who participated in the pride event for the 2009 ESC, argued that, by trying to suppress the march, Luzhkov drew huge media attention to the case and ended up doing a service to gay rights. 'All in all', Tatchell (2009) wrote, 'it was a PR disaster for the Russian and Moscow authorities, ensuring that Eurovision 2009 will be forever associated with police brutality, government homophobia and the suppression of peaceful protest'.

Following the introduction of federal anti-gay propaganda legislation in Russia in 2013 (Sleptcov, 2017), homophobic attitudes in Russia have continued to receive attention in the international media coverage of the ESC. After the Austrian gay drag queen Conchita Wurst's ESC victory in 2014, Western media revelled in headlines about general Russian outrage: 'Russians really hate that a bearded drag queen won Eurovision', as the *Washington Post* phrased it (McCoy, 2014). A typical journalistic strategy was to cite comments by a few Russian politicians and frame them as representative of a general mood in Russia. Thus, Vladimir Zhirinovsky's comments about Wurst's win representing the 'end of Europe' were widely reported, as was Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozyn's tweet saying that the results 'showed supporters of European integration their European future: a bearded girl' (Hodgson, 2014; McCoy, 2014; MTV Uutiset [MTV News], 2014, p. 3; Reuters, 2014). These kinds of comments were attractive to Western news media as they fit an existing narrative pitting a liberal West against a homophobic East (Ulbricht, Sircar, and Slootmaeckers, 2015, pp. 163–165). What the news stories about 'Russian outrage' did not always consider was that Wurst was, in fact, popular with Russian television viewers, coming third in the Russian televote and seventh overall all in the final Russian voting results.

Yet, even as Russia's acts and the points awarded to them have been booed by fans at the ESC, and as Western media coverage of the contest has highlighted Russian discrimination of sexual minorities and the

Russo-Ukrainian conflict, many Russian entries have been popular among ESC audiences. Although media commentators sometimes discuss the contest as an event totally determined by politics, viewers are more likely to see the contest as entertainment, enjoying their favourite performances and the excitement of the voting process (Kazakov and Hutchings, 2019, p. 147). The visually spectacular quality of Russian ESC acts makes them well-suited for the current media environment, in which content circulates in the form of gifs and memes on social media platforms. So, for example, the interval act of ESC 2016 in Stockholm, 'Love Love Peace Peace', which made affectionate fun of successful Eurovision entries, included several visual references to Russian performances – the grandmothers from Buranovo baking bread, Plushenko skating and Bilan's white outfit with the shirt ripped open. Furthermore, Kirkorov has, since his 1995 performance in the contest, become one of the most prominent songwriters in the ESC. With Greek composer Dimitris Kontopoulos and stage director Fokas Evagelinos, he has produced many spectacularly staged and successful ESC entries. These have included ones for Azerbaijan in 2013, Belarus in 2006 and Ukraine in 2007, as well as both of Lazarev's entries, all of which finished in the top ten. Kirkorov personifies the transnational nature of the ESC, whereby songwriters and stage directors work with different national broadcasters to create ESC performances. While he has participated in the ESC as an independent music professional, he has also enjoyed official recognition from the state: in 2017, Kirkorov received the Order of Honour from President Putin (Gallagher, 2017). Thus, considering the impact that Russian artists have made on the ESC, the contest has enabled Russia to gain visibility in popular culture, a cultural arena which, Europe-wide, has not been traditionally associated with Russia.

The ESC's significance for Russia

Together with the reception of Russian entries by the international audience, another reason why the ESC has been taken so seriously by Russian cultural and political elites – and why Russian participation in the event is important for the EBU – is that it has been popular among local viewers in the state that has the largest population of any other represented in the contest. While the EBU does not release complete viewing figures from each of the national audiences, it can be gauged from the total viewing figures that around 10 per cent of the total international audience for the contest has in recent years come from Russia. For example, while in 2016 there were 204 million viewers for the contest, in 2017 there were 182 million – with the drop generally being attributed to the fact that the Russian entry withdrew from the contest in Kyiv and that the ESC was consequently not broadcast on Russian television. Based on these statistics, we can roughly estimate that around 15 per cent of the Russian population watches the contest, and that Russian viewers comprise the biggest single national audience for it. Fifteen

per cent is, however, a relatively small proportion of the national audience when compared to the results for some Nordic states, such as Iceland – the star of *Eurovision Song Contest: The Story of Fire Saga* – and Sweden, one of the world's leading producers of popular music and the land of ABBA, the most popular ESC entrant ever. In Iceland and Sweden, the ESC attracted 95 per cent and 85 per cent, respectively, of the national viewing audience in 2016 (Eurovision.tv, 2016; 2017).

Still, the ESC's popularity in Russia is partly explained by the fact that, even despite the political criticism that the country has faced through the contest, Russian television has invested significant resources – sometimes even the most of any participant – into the mega event. Furthermore, unlike other national broadcasting organisations that have completely desisted from the contest for financial or political reasons, Russia has only once withdrawn from the ESC, and that was in 2017 because of the political tensions with Ukraine. There are precedents for national broadcasting organisations withdrawing from the ESC entirely, but these have usually been ones from smaller states that have struggled to finance participation in the contest, such as Andorra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Luxembourg, Monaco and Slovakia. The best comparison with Russia that can be made in this regard is that of Turkey, which has not been represented in the ESC since 2012 as its national broadcasting organisation opposed changes to the contest's voting rules. The Turkish criticisms were directed against the fact that ESC voting since 2009 has not been based fully on the public televote – which was in Turkey's favour because of its large diaspora across Europe. Furthermore, the 'Big Five' leading financiers of the contest, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom, had been given direct entry into the grand final without having to go through a semi-final. Turkey, though, has a population greater than each of the Big Five, except for Germany; its population size and corresponding voting weight have also been stumbling blocks for Turkey's accession to the EU (Vuletic, 2018, pp. 193–194). The Turkish reaction is particularly intriguing when we consider that Russia, which also benefits from diaspora voting and has a population almost double that of Germany or Turkey, has made no threat to leave the contest based on the changes to the voting rules. Indeed, these changes were even first instituted in the 2009 ESC in Moscow. However, the major difference between Russia and Turkey is that the latter's (non-)participation in the ESC has had a symbolically Europeanist-then-Eurosceptic function as Ankara's attempts to enter the EU have become frustrated (Christensen and Christensen, 2008). As Russia has never applied to enter the EU, its participation in the ESC has thus been unburdened by the political baggage of European integration.

Rather than satisfying public desires or being a stage for waging political battles, perhaps the biggest motivation for Russian commercial and political elites to have their state participate in the ESC is that the contest has acted as a springboard for their country to host other mega events. The Russian attempts to win the ESC in the 2000s must also be interpreted in

the context of the state's aim to host the Olympic Games, which was realised when the city of Sochi was in 2007 awarded the right to host the 2014 Winter Olympic Games. The decision for Sochi to be the host city was made in July 2007, the year before Russia won the ESC that was staged in Belgrade. Russia's victory in the 2008 ESC was also politically symbolic as it came at a time of increased tensions between Serbia and the West following the widespread international recognition in February 2008 of Kosovo's independence, which Moscow opposed as it took the side of Belgrade (Mitrović, 2010, pp. 175–177). The 2009 ESC in Moscow was the biggest international event that Russia had hosted since the dissolution of the USSR, and the record expense that was invested into the contest reflected how it was seen by the Russian government as an opportunity to portray Russia's revived economic and political prowess on the international stage – Putin even paid a visit to the site of the contest to view the preparations for it. That the 2009 ESC in Moscow was the most expensive to date also foreshadowed the outlay for the 2014 Winter Olympic Games, which was the costliest Olympic Games ever staged. Russia also went on to host the 2018 World Cup in football – again, the most expensive World Cup to date. The model of using the ESC as a springboard to host bigger and costlier mega events was also followed by Azerbaijan, which has since its hosting of the 2012 ESC in Baku – the only ESC that cost more than the Moscow edition – also hosted the Formula One Grand Prix and the European Games. An Azerbaijani bid to host the 2020 Summer Olympic Games was, however, ultimately not adopted by the International Olympic Committee, which made this decision during the very week that the 2012 ESC was staged (Vuletic, 2018, pp. 180–182).

Despite Russian television's persistence with the ESC, there have been calls by some Russian politicians – including by Putin in 2009 when he was prime minister – for the ISC to be recreated as a Russian-controlled alternative to the ESC. The first attempt to revive the ISC occurred in 2008, when a namesake contest was staged in Sochi and attracted participants from states of the former USSR. Yet, to consider that a revival of the Cold War-era ISC is misguided, for the latter attracted participants from all over Eastern Europe and was a Czechoslovak- and Polish-led affair, not a Russian- or Soviet-led one. Still, Putin made a statement in 2009 for the ISC to be revived and to include members of the Eurasian Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Since then, there have been calls by some Russian politicians – such as Valery Rashkin, the deputy leader of the Communist Party – for their country to withdraw from the ESC because of the contest's allegedly pro-gay, pro-Ukrainian and therefore anti-Russian politics, and for Russia to instead stage a Eurasian version of the ISC (Adams, 2014). That the ISC has never really taken off again reflects the fact that regional versions of the ESC have historically been less sustainable than the original. For example, Turkey only managed to stage the Turkvision Song Contest for Turkic-heritage diasporas, regions and states from 2013 to 2015, although it was revived in 2020, albeit online due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Vautrey, 2020). The

EBU's attempts since 2016 to create a Eurovision Asia Song Contest, meanwhile, has not yet achieved fruition. It is unlikely that a new ISC would be popular in Europe considering that it would be tainted by being organised by a state-controlled Russian broadcasting organisation. For political reasons, it would also unlikely attract participants from the states of Central and East Europe that were formerly part of the Eastern Bloc and are now part of the EU. In the end, it is the relatively stable international audience across Europe of some 200 million viewers annually, watching one of the world's longest running and most popular television shows, which continues to make the ESC such an attractive mega event to the commercial, cultural and political establishments of Russia and other countries in Europe.

Conclusion

For Russia, then, the ESC has been an important tool in its cultural statecraft – and its biggest success story in popular music as cultural diplomacy, considering that the USSR had never as effectively appropriated a televised international song contest in its diplomatic manoeuvres. In comparison to other states in the ESC, Russia has been a standout participant in the past two decades, considering the amount of financial resources that it has invested into its entries and the hosting of the 2009 ESC. It has also fielded very prominent – from a local or regional perspective – artists on the ESC stage, whose acts have played with concepts of gender and sexuality as well as Western stereotypes of Russia. The calibre of Russian artists in the ESC has been especially high in comparison to the string of relatively less famous artists who have often represented West European states such as France, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom since 2000. Political tensions between Russia and Western states have risen over issues such as the conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine, the recognition of Kosovan independence and LGBTIQ rights in Russia. While such tensions have coloured Russia's ESC participation, the success of its entries has proven to be a cultural diplomatic victory for Russia as the country has traditionally not been a prominent player in the popular music and television programmes of pan-European popular culture. What is striking, though, is that Russia's efforts in the ESC have not been matched by an attempt to increase its influence in the EBU, which remains an organisation largely influenced by the West European national broadcasting organisations that are the Big Five in the ESC. And there has not been an attempt by the EBU to expel any of its Russian members for not adhering to the liberal democratic principles of the organisation's statutes. In some ways, Russia's status as the ESC's bogeyman – as insinuated by the jibes made against it in *Eurovision Song Contest: The Story of Fire Saga* – suggest that Russia has not only appropriated the ESC for its image-making, but that an idea of Russia has also been appropriated in the image-making of the ESC. Although the EBU presents the ESC as an apolitical event, political scandals have always

made the ESC captivating and, in the last two decades, most of the ones in the contest have had some connection with Russia. As much as the ESC has served the statecraft of Russia, Russia has also served the stagecraft of the ESC.

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9 International events in the service of cultural statecraft

The Sochi Olympics and the World Festival of Youth and Students

Pia Koivunen

Introduction

In the 21st century, Russia has hosted more international events than ever before during its history. In addition to the most well-known spectacles, the Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014 and the FIFA World Cup in 2018, a number of Russian cities have welcomed foreign athletes, performers, fans, delegates and visitors to numerous smaller events in the fields of culture, sports, science, education and politics (Trubina, 2014; Makarychev, 2013a; 2013b). Recent scholarship in a variety of fields has paid growing attention to the organization of so-called 'mega-events' in Russia, focusing on urban regeneration, national identity, image building, economy, security and civic activity. Much of this research has addressed the largest and the most well-known events and focused on the preparatory period before the events have taken place, while little has looked at the possible long-term impact that the record number of hosted international events have and will have on the state and society (see, Kazakov, 2019).

International events, mega-events in particular, are often utilized for multiple, entangled goals, from boosting the economy to consolidating national identity. This chapter is limited to looking at the hosting of international events as instruments of Russia's cultural statecraft – here understood as an art of employing cultural resources and cultural institutions for supporting and proceeding with her foreign policy aims. In cultural statecraft, a state may try to utilize public diplomacy, one of the dimensions of which is trying to manage international communication and disseminating information and ideas about a country to foreign (and domestic) publics in an attempt to influence the ways in which this country is viewed and understood (Melissen, 2005; Cull, 2008; Velikaya and Simons, 2019). Mega-events can be used in public diplomacy for the purpose of forming temporary global communicative spaces. First, the bidding process, then the preparatory period, and finally the event itself provide the host with a medium to reach out to various foreign audiences and disseminate selected views about the host city and the country.

This chapter focuses on two international events held in Sochi: the well-known and studied Sochi Winter 2014 Olympic Games, and the much less

explored event, the World Festival of Youth and Students in Sochi [*XIX Vsemirnyĭ festival′ molodëzhi i studentov*] in 2017. Both events were organized during Putin's third presidency, however, in a different political climate: the Winter Olympics before the annexation of Crimea and the Youth Festival three years after. I have chosen these events because they represent different kinds of international gatherings: they differ in size, nature, audience and media coverage. Despite the differences, however, they both utilized the same city and partly the same infrastructure, and they have been employed for similar purposes: to communicate about Russia to foreign publics. Furthermore, they demonstrate interconnectedness between larger and smaller events and the scope of event hosting. Through these two Sochi-based case studies, this chapter discusses *what* the Russian political establishment has sought to gain by staging international events in the country and *why* has the hosting of international events become so important under Putin's rule.

In Russia's case, the need for an image improvement derives from the great power ambitions, and also from the perception that the country is misconceived abroad. Unlike many small states, who aim at becoming known to the world public, Russia already is globally well known, but the problem is that, according to opinion polls conducted during the past ten years, her image(s) among foreign populations have been rather unfavorable, which has not pleased Russian political establishment (Tsygankov, 2009; Rutland and Kazantsev, 2016, pp. 398–399).

Mega-event is a fairly recent concept to cover research on international games, festivals, fairs and gatherings: it was first used in tourism studies in 1987 (Müller, 2015b). The phenomenon, however, dates back to the early 19th century when Western industrial countries started to showcase their technological and military strength in international exhibitions. The World's fairs (World expos or expos) and the Olympic Games are usually considered the iconic mega-events, but toward the end of the 20th century, the number of international events dramatically grew, and the emphasis moved from technology and arts to sports (Roche, 2000, pp. 1–9, 218, 227). Today, the field is larger than ever before and therefore, the question of what kind of events can actually be considered as mega-events continues to be debated. While some scholars focus solely on sports events (e.g. the Olympic Games, FIFA World Cup, Asian Games, Commonwealth Games, and Super Bowl), others include expos, political summits (e.g. G8, APEC) and festivals such as the Eurovision (Müller, 2015b).

A quite commonly employed definition of mega-event, especially in studies focusing on the 19th and 20th centuries, is one by sociologist Maurice Roche (2000), who has examined the World's fairs and the Olympic Games as vehicles of modernity, nationalism and competition between Western industrial states from the mid-19th century through to the early 21st century. According to Roche (2000, p. 1), 'mega-events are large-scale cultural events which have a dramatic character, mass appeal and international

significance.' Moreover, they are usually organized with governmental support and 'can be said to be important elements in "official" versions of public culture'. Political geographer Martin Müller has offered an updated definition based on a profound and systematic analysis of the existing definitions and key numerical indicators of the sizes of recent large sporting, political and cultural events, both global and regional. According to Müller's (2015b, pp. 628, 634–638) definition, mega-events consist of four key dimensions: visitor attractiveness, mediated reach, costs and transformative impact. Depending on the size of each of the four parameters, Müller divides events into three categories: major, mega- and giga-events.

By Müller's categorization, most of the recent international sports and cultural events hosted by Russia fall into the category of major events, except for the 2018 FIFA World Cup and the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, which qualify as mega-events. It is understandable that most of the research is focused on the largest and most prestigious events. In the Russian context, with the recent significant growth in organizing not only mega-events but also a variety of major international events, it is important to expand the focus beyond mega-events. In order to illuminate the use of international events for state's goals, we need to go beyond the largest and most celebrated gatherings and also explore the less sizable aspects of the trend. These events, such as the World Youth Festival, are important when discussing Russia's involvement in global public culture. As part of Russian history and public memory, these events are part of the process of forming an understanding of what an international event is or can be in the Russian context.

The analysis here draws on the Kremlin's published press releases, media sources and materials on social media platforms such as YouTube, as well as interviews with the organizers and participants of the World Youth Festival in Sochi, which have been analyzed with qualitative content analysis. For the Sochi Olympics, newspaper articles and Kremlin's press realizes dealing with the aspects of motives and uses of the Sochi Games from the period of 2007 and 2014 are examined. In the case of the youth festival, the key data includes media sources and two interviews, one with an organizer, the other with a participant. In addition, this chapter employs the abundance of research published on Russia's involvement with mega-event hosting in political geography, and in international relations.

In the following sections, I will first place the recent trend of hosting international events in the historical context to show how radically the use of mega-events and international events in general has changed over a relatively short period. Secondly, I discuss the use of the Sochi Winter Olympics for image improvement, a risky and costly plan that was expected to improve Russia's status among the world's leading powers, but which began to crumble immediately when the games closed. The third part of the article introduces the case of the World Festival of Youth and Students, a fairly unknown event that can nonetheless be understood as part of the broader scheme of utilizing international events as a means of influencing

international audiences' views of Russia. The case study on the Youth Festival demonstrates how Russian organizers captured the event from its official organizer and adopted it for their own needs, dismissing the youth festival's history and traditional political agenda. This section argues that in terms of image improvement, getting the chances of hosting and organizing international events has been more important than disseminating a specific and clear image of the country. Furthermore, the Russian political establishment has created a new culture of organizing international events and has hosted a network of mutually beneficial events that support each other and their host cities. Thereby it has built – and continues to build – an infrastructure and a model for communicating with various audiences, both domestic and international.

Background: Russia and international events from imperial to Putin's Russia

Russia (imperial, Soviet, and contemporary) has been part of the history of mega-events from their inception in the mid-19th century. Since then, the central goal has been to manage and improve its image abroad and claim its position among the world nations. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Russian empire sent businessmen and scientists to promote technological, industrial and agricultural products at the World's fairs held in France, Great Britain and the United States, aiming to transform the views of Russia as a backward and uncivilized country on the edge of Europe, then prevailing among Western elites (Fisher, 2016, pp. 123–146). The USSR continued to participate in World's fairs in the 1930s and did so famously in the Paris 1937 fair, where the pavilions of two dictatorships, Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany, were located against each other (Udovički-Selb, 2012, pp. 13–47). In New York in 1939, the Soviet pavilion turned out to be one of the most popular (Swift, 1998, pp. 364–379). In the 1958 Brussels expo, the USSR demonstrated its technological achievements and the capability of the socialist system with the first artificial satellite, Sputnik (Siegelbaum, 2012, pp. 120–136).

The world of sports, however, was a different story. During the interwar period, the USSR sought to form a workers' sports movement to bring counterbalance to the competitive bourgeois sporting world, which it regarded as too elitist and individualist. A socialist equivalent to the International Olympic Committee, the Red Sport International, created the *Spartakiads*, international multisport games for working-class athletes. Summer *Spartakiads* were held in Moscow in 1928, Berlin in 1931 and Antwerp in 1937, and a winter version in Oslo in 1928 (Borrero, 2017, p. 320). Creating a system to compete against Western sport – the Olympic Games in particular – did not succeed in the end, and the USSR began to integrate into international sports organizations gradually from the mid-1930s (Parks, 2017, passim.). It took still more than a decade before the Soviet

Union entered the Olympics arena in Helsinki in 1952. During the Cold War period, the USSR built a remarkably successful state sports system that produced top athletes in almost every sport and brought fame and medals to the USSR in record numbers.

The Soviet Union is rightly remembered for its spectacular sporting success in the Olympic Games, but when it comes to hosting the Olympics or other Western type of mega-events, the record is more modest. Apart from the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics (which was compromised in terms of scale, due to the US-led boycott), there are only two – and much smaller-scale events – the Universiade, World Students Games, held in Moscow in 1973, and the Goodwill Games in Moscow in 1986, which could be added to the list. That said, the USSR was very close to hosting the World Expo in 1967. The expo had been awarded to the USSR, then ruled by Nikita Khrushchev, in 1960, but it decided to withdraw from the organization, and the expo finally ended up to Canada's Montreal, which had come second in the bid (Siegelbaum, 2012, pp. 134–135).

Outside the field of Western-designed mega-events and other major international events, Russia and the USSR have organized a variety of spectacles, celebrations and gatherings within the socialist world. One of the few Soviet-designed sporting events, *Spartakiads*, was held until the end of the socialist system, but they were confined to the communist orbit (Edelman, 1993, pp. 37–41, 150). Another Soviet-designed event, the World Festival of Youth and Students, established in the aftermath of World War II, was more successful in fashioning itself as a globally known event. First held in Prague in 1947, the Youth Festival traveled around the capitals of the East European socialist countries and was held twice on the Western side of the Cold War divide; in Vienna in 1959 and in Helsinki in 1962. The youth festivals managed to also gather large groups of young people from the capitalist countries; however, as an event, it did not succeed in overcoming the Cold War division, thus becoming a globally recognized institution (Koivunen, 2013).

Against this backdrop, the change in the use of mega-events, and international events in general, from Soviet times to 21st-century Russia, is tremendous. The Russian political establishment has gone through a huge shift in its thinking about mega-events in cultural statecraft for the purposes of foreign policy, as a result of which bidding for, and hosting, a variety of international events has multiplied since the early 2000s. Another decisive factor has been the economic growth, which has guaranteed resources and enabled a compilation of credible bids for the hosting rights. While the Soviet leaders were hesitant to import Western, capitalist franchise events into their socialist country, Putin's Russia has not had the same constraints: during Putin's years in power, Russia has hosted more major international events than in the previous 150 years (for the recent bids and international events hosted by Russia, see, Table 9.1).

Table 9.1 Bids and hosted events in Russia 2009–2025

Bid for the right to host mega-event	Host city	Year	Hosted/forthcoming
Summer Olympic Games	St. Petersburg	1997	No
G8 Summit	St. Petersburg	2006	Yes
UEFA European Cup	St. Petersburg	2008	No
Eurovision Song Contest	Moscow	2009	Yes
SCO Summit	Ekaterinburg	2009	Yes
BRICS Summit	Ekaterinburg	2009	Yes
Youth Olympic Games	Moscow	2010	No
Expo	Moscow	2010	No
Summer Universiade	Kazan	2011	No
APEC summit	Vladivostok	2012	Yes
Summer Olympic Games	Moscow	2012	No
Summer Universiade	Kazan	2013	Yes
Winter Olympic Games	Sochi	2014	Yes
Paralympics	Sochi	2014	Yes
SCO Summit	Ufa	2015	Yes
BRICS Summit	Ufa	2015	Yes
World Festival of Youth and Students	Sochi	2017	Yes
FIFA World Cup	various cities	2018	Yes
Winter Universiade	Krasnoyarsk	2019	Yes
UEFA European Cup	St. Petersburg	2020	No
Expo	Moscow	2020	No
Summer Universiade	Ekaterinburg	2023	Yes
Expo	Ekaterinburg	2025	No

Besides the largest and the most debated sports events, the Winter Olympics and the FIFA World Cup, Russia has served as a venue for numerous other international sports events over the past decade. These include Summer and Winter Universiades in Kazan in 2013 and Krasnoyarsk 2019, World Championships in athletics (2013), swimming (2015), figure skating (2005 and 2011), speed skating (2009 and 2013), ice hockey (2000, 2007 and 2016), rhythmic gymnastics (2010) and biathlon (2003, 2005, 2010 and 2011). In addition to sports, several Russian cities have served as venues for political summits, G8, APEC, Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS. The ninth G8 summit was to be held in Moscow in 2014, but Russia was suspended from the G8 group because of the annexation of Crimea the same year (Trubina, 2014; 2015). If we include the bids and events beyond sport, the aim of bringing home as many international events as possible becomes ever more visible. In the 21st century, Russia has bid for the right to host the Olympic Games twice,[1] the UEFA European Cups and UEFA Champions League finals twice, a FIFA World Cup once, the Universiade four times, and a Youth Olympic Games once (Kazakov, 2019, p. 18).

The interest in hosting not only sports, but all types of significant international events can be seen in three consecutive bids for the Expos, namely Moscow 2010, Ekaterinburg 2020, and Ekaterinburg 2025, an event that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries attracted more global attention that the Olympic Games, but which is today a much less celebrated and followed event. Russia has also invested vast resources in the Eurovision Song Contest, aiming at winning and thereby getting to host the competition (see, the chapter on Eurovision Song Contest in this volume).

In addition to the growth in hosting international events, another major change compared to Soviet times is the geographical breadth of host cities. Earlier, the majority of international gatherings were centered strictly in Moscow, whereas contemporary Russia has placed events in cities previously little known to the international public and has thus widened the understanding of the country. Regional development and spatial politics have been a central trend in the event business, Sochi having been the most prominent case, where mega-events have been used to boost urban regeneration and economic growth (Golubchikov, 2017).

Regional development is selective, though, and has been related to the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, in which the organizing of a mega-event requires both 'a set of neoliberal, post-politically consensual and consumption-driven policies' and 'cleansing […] spaces of mega events from potentially conflictual meanings and interpretations for the sake of safety and marketization' (Makarychev and Yatsyk, 2016). The inclusion/exclusion strategy has been evident, for instance, in regional development, where cities have been able to show their loyalties toward the federal government and have received financial and other resources in turn. The use of neoliberal rhetoric of growth and development in relation to the implementation of mega-events has been used as a way to legitimize the uneven distribution of resources (Trubina, 2014).

One of the most frequently employed frameworks to analyze Russian mega-events has been to view them as an example of Russia's 'return as a great power', boosting national identity and patriotism, as well as strengthening the legitimacy of President Putin (Vamling and Petersson, 2013; Alekseyeva, 2014; Gorokhov, 2015). The Russian political elites view the hosting of Western types of mega-events as a vehicle to show that Russia has re-emerged as a great power, as a capitalist state capable of organizing and investing resources in massive-scale global spectacles. Unlike during the Cold War, when the USSR attempted to demonstrate the strength of the socialist *system*, contemporary Russia seeks to show that it is as strong and as capable as the other great powers, and therefore, it should have its say in world politics.

Some scholars have emphasized the contradictory nature of these mega-projects, which lean heavily on Western models, ideas and franchises, but which simultaneously attempt to project an image of Russia as a strong, sovereign power; but also as an *alternative* to Western liberal democracies.

This applies to the power balance between the host state and the transnational organizations that own the mega-event brands. For example, when a country organizes the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup, it agrees to numerous requests set by the International Olympic Committee and FIFA. The rules and regulations listed in the so-called 'bid book' define the frame in which an event is going to be held already at the stage of bidding, and it considerably narrows down the control of the respective state over urban spaces, business activities and venues needed for the event (Trubina, 2014, pp. 610–623; Makarychev and Yatsyk, 2015, pp. 1–10).

Martin Müller (2015a, p. 1113) has introduced the term 'event seizure' to explain the mechanisms that enable political and business elites to take advantage of a variety of demands that mega-event franchisers require from the host states and cities. Müller distinguishes three types of event seizure: infrastructural (the state prioritizes event-related venues, over the infrastructure that would benefit wider needs of the society), financial (elites benefit from the event, but taxpayers underwrite cost overruns) and legal (exceptional legislation introduced by the event narrows down citizen rights).

As Elena Trubina has pointed out, mega-events demand vast investments; they cost a lot of state money, but, in the end, they benefit very few people, mostly the political and economic elites (Trubina, 2015). One of the key themes in Russia's mega-event projects has been the gigantic costs and overspending. According to Martin Müller (2014), the Sochi Games were the most expensive Olympic Games ever, with an estimated 55 billion dollars in costs. Because of the authoritarian leadership and rich energy resources, Putin has been able to direct money to mega-event projects without having to worry much about public opinion (Orttung and Zhemukhov, 2017, p. 4). As Robert Orttung and Sufian Zhemukhov (2017) have pointed out, Russian mega-events have epitomized the way in which the political system functions. The Sochi Olympic Games 'became symbolic of a system that excludes the public from decision-making and hands the most benefits to a select few' (ibid., p. 4). Instead of offering a glossy picture of the country, mega-projects like Sochi have highlighted the problems of Russia's political system, such as corruption, limited space for civil society and centralized decision-making.

Finally, mega-events are often used as platforms for political and civic activity by a variety of domestic and foreign groups that attempt to utilize the global media spotlight to voice messages to global audience. In the context of Russian civil society, activists and minorities had limited space for voicing their opinions and engaging with the urban reconstruction during the preparations for international events (Ermolaeva, 2014, pp. 66–71). Before the Sochi Olympics, global media raised human right violations, especially LGBT rights and the Circassian minority in the Sochi area, and the working conditions of migrant workers and corruption within the FIFA was widely discussed prior to the World Cup (Boycoff, 2015, pp. 131–143).

Image improvement in the making? The Sochi Winter Olympics

The Sochi Winter Olympics is by far the most discussed and studied mega-event held in Putin's Russia. Since Sochi won the bid in Guatemala in 2007, the Winter games have hit the headlines globally, and a number of research articles and monographs have analyzed how 'the Putin's Olympics' influenced the Russian state and society (see, e.g. Petersson and Vamling, 2013; Orttung and Zhemukhov, 2017).

From the perspective of public diplomacy, the central goal of hosting the Olympics was to demonstrate how the country had developed under Putin's rule, emphasizing Russia's return as a great power. The Olympics were to show that Russia had changed from the economically weak and politically unstable country that it was in the 1990s to a modern capitalist economy and politically important power, which needed to be taken seriously in world politics (Vamling and Petersson, 2013; Alekseyeva, 2014; Myers, 2015). Being able to host the first Olympic Games in Russia after the Soviet period was also symbolically important for Putin, for whom the Olympic project had been a longtime personal endeavor (Myers, 2015, p. 324). Putin's Winter Olympic dream was also a risky business from the start, given that the Olympics are not a guaranteed tool for face lifting, and they more often tend to fail than succeed in making profit.

The changed image was communicated via the conception of a 'new' Russia, which was utilized throughout the whole lifecycle of the event: in the bid book, through the preparatory period in national media, and finally at the opening ceremony of the games (Alekseyeva, 2014; Kazakov, 2019). In addition to highlighting the economic change and the great power status, the rhetoric of new Russia, as Anna Alekseyeva has pointed out, followed the discourse of Olympism, drawing on accessibility, volunteer movement, sustainability and adoption of Olympic values (Alekseyeva, 2014). One may ask whether the real reason for articulating this kind of image or brand was truly to promote a new image of Russia, or was this concept produced primarily for the needs of the bidding process, and thereafter promoting the Sochi Games to sponsors and stakeholders? According to Vitaly Kazakov (2019), the rhetoric of new Russia largely reflected the genre of the Olympic bid materials, and it aged quite quickly, as the political discourse took a new turn under Putin's third presidency, which was when the Sochi Games finally took place.

Another goal, which exemplified the country's economic modernization, was to promote Sochi as Russia's new, world-class tourist destination. In Putin's words, the initial idea of placing the games in Sochi was to build a year-round tourist resort to the area with modern alpine sports facilities that Russia was missing. Prior to the Olympics, Putin envisaged that Sochi might become a regular tourist resort for North Americans, Europeans and Asians. 'Those who love mountain sports, they love to get acquainted with different places, they happily go to Canada, the US, then to Switzerland or to France, Italy, and Sochi, I wish' (Rossiĭskaia Gazeta, 2014).

The aim of employing the Sochi Olympics for image improvement proved to be troublesome long before 2014 (Alekseyeva, 2014, p. 167). One of the key topics of the critiques was the massive scale of construction carried out and the huge costs required by such staging of the Olympics. Due to the centralized and hierarchical decision-making, Putin could practically spend as much as he wanted to stage extravagant games in order to showcase Russia's worth as a modern capitalist state (Orttung and Zhemukhov, 2017, pp. 4–7, 21–33). Pouring taxpayers' money into the Olympic spectacle, however, translated into excessive spending and negatively influenced the preparations. When asked by foreign journalists about the rising costs a few weeks prior to the games, President Putin explained that large building projects often overrun budgets elsewhere, whether in Europe, North America, or Asia. 'It is a normal struggle between the commissioner… and the executor' (Rossiĭskaia Gazeta, 2014).

Comparing Russia to Western liberal democracies in order to show that Russia does *not* fundamentally diverge from them seems to have been Putin's strategy; that is, to dispel the narrative of exceptionalism and normalize Russia. In the context of mega-event hosting, Russia has still been treated as an authoritarian, re-emerging country, similar to Brazil, China, Qatar, and South Africa. The Sochi Games have also been compared to Hitler's Olympic Games in Berlin 1936 (Reitschuster, 2014). An authoritarian leader seeking the world's recognition by staging a massive sporting spectacle might be an incisive analogy. However, if we look at the broader trend of bringing international events to Russia, a more appropriate parallel might be western industrial nations modernizing their cities by holding numerous World's fairs in a rather short period during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Roche, 2000, pp. 33–64). Or one might look at the Tokyo Olympic Games in 1964, which Japan used as a way to re-emerge as an accepted state after its defeat in World War II (Orttung and Zhemukhov, 2017, p. 8).

Paradoxically, after years of criticism on the costs, corruption, human rights issues and spendthrift construction of the Olympic venues, the immediate reception on the eve of the closing ceremony of the games was unexpectedly positive, both at home and abroad. The Western press offered rather favorable evaluation at the games' closure. For example, *The New York Times* reporter Juliet Macur (2014) commented that the closing ceremony had shown 'Russia's many success stories and like it or not, hosting an Olympics is now among them'. Furthermore, the Russian organizers felt revealed after the grandiose project had come to its conclusion. In his speech at the closing ceremony, the head of the Russian organizing committee Dmitry Chernyshenko, with a smiling and seemingly relieved and face, maintained that 'this is the new face of Russia', referring to the successfully accomplished Olympic project (Olympic, 2015). In a similar fashion, the words of Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak echoed the desires and expectations that the political leadership had invested in Sochi. 'The Games have turned our country, its culture and the people into something

that is a lot closer and more appealing and understandable for the rest of the world,' Kozak said at the Sochi press conference at the end of the games (Nechepurenko and Kravtsova, 2014).

For a brief moment, it seemed as if the Sochi Olympics had managed to paint a new face for Russia. Opinions soon shifted, however, as the political conflict in Ukraine expanded, and as part of which Russia annexed Crimea. News about the well-organized games was replaced by political demands for economic sanctions to be placed on Russia. Two years later, the revelation of the systematic doping program cast a shadow over the image of Russia as a fair and honest Olympic host. While the conflict in Ukraine had not directly related to the Sochi Games, the doping scandal hit right at the heart of Russia's Olympic dream: winning the medal table at home games (Orttung and Zhemukhov, 2017, pp. 118–123).

Studies on the impact of Sochi on Russia's image abroad quite unanimously argue that the Olympics failed to polish the picture of Russia. Interpretations on the influence at home vary, however. Andrei Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk (2014, pp. 62–75) maintain that both the Olympics and the annexation facilitated the Kremlin narrative of Russia's return as a great power. Robert Orttung and Sulfian Zhemukhov (2017, pp. 117–119) argue that the annexation of Crimea was even more important in consolidating national identity and patriotic feelings than the Olympic project. Jonathan Grix and Nina Kramareva (2017, p. 462) have concluded that both the Olympics and Crimea enhanced the narrative of Russia as a strong power. Moreover, they state that the main goal of hosting mega-events has been to support the formation of national identity and patriotism among domestic audiences and is in no way intended to image-build abroad.

Vitaly Kazakov (2019) has pointed out that it is still too early to assess the legacy of the Sochi Games, as its meaning-making process is still ongoing. He also notes that many of the earlier analyses have focused too much on the elites and on Western receptions, while popular views in Russia and abroad have not been fully examined. Moreover, he makes a point that Russia at the time of the bidding process was under Dmitry Medvedev's rule, which was different from Russia at the time when Putin's third presidency started and the Sochi Games took place. While it is clear that the Sochi – or any other international event hosted by Russia – did not immediately change the way people think about Russia, we cannot yet tell what kind of an imprint the Winter Olympics left and what kind of a role it will play in forming Russian national identity and its image in the future.

One of the long-term aims that explained the need for vast investments in the Sochi area was the expected growth in foreign tourism. The latest statistics by World Bank indicate that incoming tourism to Russia has declined severely after 2015. Even though the FIFA World Cup brought thousands of fans to watch the games, the decrease from the peak year 2015 to 2018 is significant. Tourist arrivals to Russia dropped from 33 million to 24 million and the expenditure of tourists from 59 billion dollars (2013) to 27.6 billion

dollars (2016), but it has increased to 38.7 billion dollars in 2018 (World Bank, 2020a; 2020b). After the Olympics, Sochi has hosted the Russian formula one Grand Prix yearly from 2014, and has welcomed some smaller-scale events, like the World Festival of Youth and Students in 2017, but has not been able to live up to the expectations of Russia as a new international tourist magnet.

Reappropriating Soviet infrastructure to contemporary needs: the World Festival of Youth and Students in Sochi in 2017

While in 2014 – and for years prior to that – the global media was full of news and commentaries about the Sochi Winter Olympics, only very few people knew about another international event that utilized some of the venues built for the Olympics. The 19th World Festival of Youth and Students took place in Sochi (and partly in Moscow) on 14–22 October 2017 (see, Figure 9.1).[2]

The Sochi Youth Festival was the Russian political leadership's endeavor to target foreign and domestic youth as 'the future leaders', promote Russia as a hospitable, modern and generous state, educate volunteers for future international events, as well as find a use for the costly Olympic infrastructure. The festival was a top-down state event for which the government allocated 4.5 billion roubles, and it was organized by a state body, the National Youth Council of Russia (TASS, 2017). According to the World Federation

Figure 9.1 The 19th World Festival of Youth and Students in Sochi on 14–22 October 2017 (Reuters, 2017).

of Democratic Youth (WFDY), the official organizer and the owner of the event, negotiations about the festival began in 2015, when Rosmolodezh, the Federal Agency of Youth, expressed the interest in hosting the festival in Russia (WFDY Bulletin, 2017) The plan of organizing a youth event in Russia in 2017 has longer roots, however. Arranging an international youth festival was mentioned as part of the regime's plan to improve the country's image with soft power methods as early as January 2013 (Chernenko, 2013).

Choosing an old friend from the Soviet times was a peculiar decision. The World Festival of Youth and Students, whose roots and golden age date back to the Cold War battle for the hearts and minds of the young, is politically ultra-leftist, anti-imperialist, and hyper-critical toward capitalism (Koivunen, 2013, passim). Moreover, after 1989, the festival has had no official connection to the Russian state, and it has taken place mostly in the Global South: in Algeria (2001), Venezuela (2005), South Africa (2010), and Ecuador (2013). The question arises, why did neo-capitalist Russia want to host such an event that is ideologically and politically so far from its own agenda?

One of the critical voices in Russia has been journalist Oleg Kashin (2017), who commented on the Sochi Youth Festival in the context of recent uses of the Soviet past by political leaders. Kashin calls the utilization of nostalgia for Soviet achievements like the space heroes, the victory in WWII, or the World Youth Festival exploitation of Soviet symbols, to which contemporary Russia has no right.

If the domestic audience was the primary target of the event, one of the reasons why the Russian political establishment decided to host the festival might indeed have been the fact that this is one of the few still existing cultural products created during Soviet times and within the socialist system. The youth festival is an event that Russians collectively remember and that previously proved to be successful in promoting a refashioned image of the country. Especially, the 1957 Youth Festival became a milestone in Soviet relations with the outside world in the early post-Stalin period. The 1957 festival was the first large international event that the USSR hosted before the Moscow Olympics in 1980, and it still occupies a special place in Russian collective memory. Due to the demise of the socialist system, the WFDY lost its main financer, and the festival became marginalized. Despite the financial problems, the WFDY has continued to organize youth festivals with considerably large participation.

History indeed played a role in the process of bringing the festival to Russia, but apparently, it was not utilized the way the WFDY and its members had envisioned. The year 2017 coincided with three important anniversaries; it was the 70th anniversary of the event (the first festival was held in Prague in 1947), it was the 60th anniversary of the beloved 1957 Moscow festival, and most importantly, it marked the centenary of the October Revolution, a moment in history that occupies a special place in the hearts of communists around the world. Most of the people who have been involved with

the WFDY and the World Youth Festivals after 1991 belong to communist, socialist and anti-imperialist youth associations. These people had hoped to see their festival celebrating the centenary of the October Revolution, and the suggestion of holding the celebration in Russia, the birthplace of the revolution, added extra value (Ball, 2017). According to a participant in the festival, Tom Ball, Russian representatives used the history card in the meeting that confirmed Russia as the host, but the actual event was far from what had been expected (Ball, 2017).

At the festival in Sochi and in the promotional materials, references to the history of the festival or the revolution were quite thin. Prior to the festival, the Moscow City Museum organized a small exhibition, *Tri festivalĩa* [*Three festivals*], displaying a variety of artifacts and memorabilia from the 1957 and 1985 festivals collected from former participants. In Sochi, a panel discussion on the October revolution was organized by Russian communists, including a speech by Gennadi Zuganov, the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. Otherwise, the connection to the history and the traditions of the World Festival of Youth and Students, or to the ideological agenda, were scarce. This supports the argument made by Peter Rutland and Andrei Kazantsev (2016, p. 400) about the contradictory nature of the Putin regime's relation to the Soviet past. 'It cannot reject the Soviet legacy entirely' but selectively uses some parts of Soviet history and Soviet nostalgia among leftist and anti-colonialist groups around the world.

Instead of bringing the traditional World Youth Festival, the Russian organizers reappropriated the event for their current needs. Therefore, central in the festival program was not anti-imperialism or the fight against capitalist exploitation, but the celebration of Russian popular culture, commercial activities and Russian business. The Sochi Youth Festival can be seen as a supporting event, which at the same time benefited and was interlinked to other international events, and that also sought to increase interest in Russia among selected and tailored target groups. Placing the festival in Sochi enabled Russian authorities to redeem their promises that the Olympic venues would be used after the winter games, and the festival served as a platform to launch a volunteer campaign for the FIFA World Cup (Bondarenko, 2017).

According to Grigory Petushkov, the chair of the Russian Youth Council and the head of the festival organization, the reason behind holding the festival was its potential to boost exchange and cooperation within domestic and with foreign youth associations, as well as to increase knowledge about Russia among foreign youth. In his opinion, the world knows little about Russia, and what little is known is untruthful (Petushkov, 2017). According to Petushkov, most of the budget came from the government, but some of the resources were provided by private investors. He also noted that the youth festival organizers met with Putin several times and that he had suggested de-politicizing the festival (ibid.).

Even though the myth of new Russia, as an easily understandable nation-branding concept, was buried with the Winter Olympic failure, a number of events in Sochi strove to paint a favorable picture of Russia. A good example of the way in which Russia was discussed and promoted for the selected attendees of the festival was a roundtable discussion, hosted by President Putin, who also spoke at the opening ceremony (President of Russia, 2017b). Together with representatives from Malaysia, Indonesia, France, the United States, Jamaica, India, Zimbabwe and Russia, Putin talked about global cooperation, environmental challenges, and international aid. Each of the participants got a chance to talk about their profession and work, which was followed by President Putin's response, including a commentary on Russia's role and achievements in the respective field of global cooperation (President of Russia, 2017a). The day before the closing event of the festival, Putin came to say farewell to the festival participants, reminding them whose hospitality they had been enjoying: 'I am sure that as you depart from Russia, you will leave behind a piece of your heart, while Russia will stay in your heart forever. We believe in you' (President of Russia, 2017b).

Who, then, were these 'future leaders' who Russia wanted to believe in and influence? The initial invitation to the festival was extended to young leaders aged 18–35, including journalists, scientists, leaders of political youth associations, sportspeople, engineers, entrepreneurs, IT specialists, compatriots and foreigners learning Russian. Prospective attendees sent an application and went through a selection process. The organizers covered accommodation, travels within Russia and the festival program and gave a brand-new mobile phone to those selected to participate (Russkiy mir, 2017). Available statistics on the amounts of participation vary between sources, and they are not fully reliable. According to the Russian organizers' website, there were altogether 20,000 attendees from 180 countries, including 5,000 volunteers and 200 civil ambassadors (*obshchestvennyĭ posol*) (Vsemirnyĭ festival′ molodezhi i studentov, 2017). Other sources estimate that there were 10–12,000 foreigners and that around 10,000 people (including both Russians and foreigners) represented the traditional crowd of the festival, coming from various WFDY-affiliated youth associations, mainly communists (Ball, 2017; Silvan, 2017).

Participant feedback was two-fold. In particular, those foreign and Russian youths who had not previously taken part in this festival and did not know the concept, enjoyed the warm atmosphere, meeting with peers from around the world, plus the generous hospitality of the hosts. They were fascinated by the panel discussions featuring major figures like Sberbank's Herman Gref and several ministers, lectures about how to start a business successfully, and hearing about future investment opportunities in Russia (HSE University, 2017). On the other hand, ignoring potentially difficult political topics such as environmental issues, LGBT rights, and the conflict in Ukraine, appeared odd for people who are used to engaging in political debates (Silvan, 2017).

For customary World Youth Festival goers, that is, communist youth activists and the WFDY, the way in which the Sochi festival was organized and framed turned out to be a disappointment (Andersen, 2018). They felt that the festival, which had served as a platform for anti-imperialism for the past 70 years, was transformed into an apolitical celebration promoting Russian popular culture and companies such as Sberbank and Megafone. The most symbolic signal of this twist was that the WFDY, the owner of the event, had no chance to demonstrate its activity as part of the opening program of the festival, which made a number of WFDY affiliates boycott the opening ceremony (Arbejderen, 2017; Ball, 2017).

The lure of international events and mega-events comes from the fact that they guarantee global media attention, including television and internet coverage, which allows a large audience without participation on the spot. The World Festival of Youth and Students is today far removed from those times when Western media reported on the youth gathering and when Western governments boycotted the festival and built barriers to prevent youth from attending this 'Soviet propaganda spectacle'. In 2017, only a few people even knew that the festival still exists. The Sochi Youth Festival did not make it to the global news at any stage of the event's lifecycle, which plainly indicates how marginal the event has become after the Cold War, and how limited is its potential for larger image management.

From the point of view of efficient public diplomacy, this marginalization might be viewed as a weakness, but it actually may have helped the organizers to control the media space around the event. Unlike with the Sochi Olympics, in the run-up to the Sochi festival, there were no human rights organizations criticizing violations against ethnic or sexual minorities; neither were there heads of states accusing of boycotting the festival. The only criticism was voiced by the WFDY, and its voice was very mild because it could not bite the hand that was feeding it. Therefore, Russia could temporarily hijack the event (its name, its audience and its program) from its owner, the WFDY, adopt it for its own use and practically squeeze the original ideological and political content of the festival to the margins while marketing Russian business, political culture and a positive image of the country for a selected audience of educated, young foreigners.

Conclusions

Not many other fields in Russian cultural statecraft have been so tightly linked to the top political elite, namely President Putin himself, as international events. The Sochi Olympics has often been viewed as his personal project, and he has served as an integral part of the bidding processes not only of the Sochi Games but also the FIFA World Cup and the Ekaterinburg Expo 2020. Moreover, Putin has paid a visit to numerous gatherings beyond the largest spectacles, like the Kazan Universiade in 2013, and the World Festival of Youth and Students in 2017.

How has Russia then succeeded in hosting international events? The short-term influences of mega-events have been contradictory. In terms of image improvement, mega-events have *not* been able to generate a huge transformation process as to how Russia is viewed abroad. Overspending, corruption, human rights issues and many other critical topics discussed before the events already made it difficult for Russia to upgrade its image. Far more devastating have been, however, hard power measures – Crimea and Ukraine – the doping scandal and the harsh way of handling the domestic political opposition. As they cannot be detached from the country's foreign policy and the surrounding world, mega-events are always vulnerable and risky, but in Russia's case, the missed opportunity and the investment in image improvement appear historically unique.

The long-term legacy and long-term influences of recent mega-events are still in process, and it is too early to evaluate what the ultimate impact will be. Where Russia has succeeded is in creating *credibility* as an organizer of large international events, which several accepted bids and numerous international events demonstrate. Massive investments in infrastructure, hotels and congress and sporting venues give the impression that several Russian cities are ready and able to take the responsibilities as event organizers. In the long run, the most durable achievement of hosting mega-events might be that Russia has climbed up to the league of potential hosts in mega-event business. In other words, it is now among the 'great powers' in organizing international events. However, it can also be argued that Russia's cultural statecraft is *not* at its best in the given field, if the goal of image improvement cannot be met, and thus it cannot help in reaching the objectives of foreign policy.

As argued in the introduction of this chapter, one of the main functions of public diplomacy is to establish a connection with and interact with foreign audiences. Mega- and smaller-scale international events seem to fit this pattern. Organizing international events in the fields of sports, culture and politics enables communication with various foreign and domestic audiences and the promotion of the country on its own terms. The lifecycle of the world-class mega-events but also of many smaller competitions may last for years from the accepted bid, through the preparatory period, the actual event and its aftermath. This means that the host city and the country get media coverage for a considerable time, and even if the content is not always positive, the context of mega-events is more favorable than with military conflicts and economic sanctions.

Hosting mega-events is not only a matter of promoting one's country before a global audience. It is also a question of prestige and power. Only a few countries in the world can afford to host such events more than once, making for a special league of mega-event hosts in global history. Russia, imperial, Soviet and post-Soviet, was, for a long time, missing from the tables of hosts of the Winter Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup, Expos, and the Eurovision Song Contest, only having hosted the boycotted Moscow

Games in 1980. During the 2000s, this flaw has been fixed as Russia has written itself into the history of global mega-events and into the stories of the Olympic and FIFA brands. What kind of place Russia will eventually occupy in these narratives will be assessed by future scholars. We do not know yet, but it is fully possible that the recent mega-events held in Russia might become important components of the image and identity of Russia in the future.

Whether Russia will continue to bid for mega-events and major events remains an open question. Based on the commentaries made by the political elites a few years back, there still appeared to be interest – at least in their rhetoric – in carrying on with the practice of bringing international events to Russia. For example, when Russia lost the bid for the Expo 2025 to Osaka in December 2018, Alexander Chernov, the general director of the Ekaterinburg Expo 2025 Committee, maintained that 'Russia definitely deserves to hold EXPO. Another team will come. Be it Ekaterinburg or another city—Russia has a lot of cities deserving to represent us at this event […] Russia should always bid. I am confident such a decision will be made in the near future and we will get EXPO' (TASS, 2018). Furthermore, while meeting with volunteers after the FIFA World Cup in Kaliningrad, President Putin hinted at the possibility of placing a bid for the Summer Olympic Games. He was confident that at least smaller international sports competitions will certainly be held in Russia in the future (President of Russia, 2018).

Hosting mega-events is never merely a matter of will but also adequate resources and propitious timing. The current economic situation in Russia curtails the zeal to plan more costly events; furthermore, other recent circumstances have created barriers to the continuation of Putin's plans to hold more mega-events or host major sports games. At the moment, one of the biggest obstacles is that the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) has banned Russia from the Olympic Games and world championships, as well as barred it from hosting such events up until 2023 due to the failure to meet WADA's requirements in handling the 2015 doping scandal (Panja, 2019). Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic has complicated arranging mega-size events, including the Tokyo Olympics 2020. Time will tell if Russia's next large international sporting event, the Summer Universiade, which is scheduled to take place in Yekaterinburg in 2023, will ever materialize.

Notes

1. In 1997, St. Petersburg participated in the bid for the 2004 Olympics, but was not shortlisted.
2. The official cite of the Sochi festival, which contained lots of materials of the programme, plans and participants' comments, at www.russia2017.ru ceased to exist in 2018. The author has read and printed out a part of these materials in October 2017.

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10 Sport as cultural statecraft

Russia and the Kontinental Hockey League

Tuomas Forsberg

Introduction

The Kontinental Hockey League (*Kontinental'naya hokkeinaya liga*, KHL) was established in 2008 as an international professional ice hockey league emulating the paragon of the North American National Hockey League (NHL). While there were both athletic and potentially also economic aims for the League, it was from the outset clearly a political project. The political dimension of the KHL is underlined by the fact that it was initiated by Vladimir Putin himself, who is renowned for being an ice hockey enthusiast. For him, the objective was to boost Russia's self-image and international standing as the leading hub in Eurasia in the field of major team sports.

This article looks at the political background of the KHL, tying it to the attempts to systematically back up Russia's great-power identity by various means and create positive associations internationally. It analyses the KHL in the framework of 'cultural statecraft', which can be seen as covering many of the same issues as 'soft power', but examines it from more of a top-down perspective than the original formulations of 'soft power' intended (Forsberg and Smith, 2016; on soft power and Russia, see, e.g. Kiseleva, 2015). Moreover, since soft power has become a highly loaded concept, one way of circumventing the conceptual disputes is by using an alternative term.

Despite increasing scholarly attention being paid to Russia's great-power identity and its symbols, as well as the various influencing attempts that Russia has carried out in the West, often under the label of 'hybrid power' along with soft power, surprisingly little has been written on sports in this context. To date, the topic that has been most extensively discussed by Western scholars focussing on Russia has been the Sochi Winter Olympics (see, e.g. Grix and Kramareva, 2017), and to a somewhat lesser degree, Formula 1 races and the Football World Cup. Ice hockey is a northern sport. It has been immensely popular in Russia since Soviet times and is at the heart of national identity, being particularly loved by the elite. Hence, the political role of the KHL cannot be underestimated: indeed, 'the story and ambition of the KHL might very well belong to a textbook of case studies in international politics and Russia's relations with the world' (Kudzko, 2017).

Thus far, the role of the KHL as a part of Russian soft power has been discussed in newspaper articles and blog posts (Budnitskiy, 2013; Kloke, 2014; Braw, 2016; Kudzko, 2017). This debate shows that conflicting perspectives exist with regard to the significance and impact of the KHL. For example, Michael Romancov, a political scientist at Charles University in Prague, argued in a Bloomberg interview (Winfrey and Ponikelska, 2014) that 'the KHL is one of the most successful Russian attempts at spreading their soft power beyond their borders', and particularly in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, the KHL 'may be a way for Russia and its political and financial elite to increase their wealth and influence through "soft power"'. Arkady Moshes, of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, on the other hand, opined that 'the KHL is not an effective instrument of soft power'. He was rather sceptical of 'whether Russia's hockey diplomacy has improved its standing in countries still simmering with resentment over Kremlin-backed Communist rule' (Winfrey and Ponikelska, 2014).

This chapter starts by reviewing the general political background of the KHL in Russia. It then turns to the impact of and views about the KHL in two European Union countries where the League is played. Focussing on the case of Jokerit Helsinki in Finland and Dinamo Riga in Latvia, the chapter examines opinions among the political elite, the general public and sports enthusiasts. It concludes that the KHL has only been marginally discussed and perceived as a political project in Latvia and Finland despite the media often representing the League as a part of Russia's 'hybrid threat'. However, the low political profile of the League may convey the greatest political impact by creating an image of Russia as a normal country with which fans in the West can share a common culture of enthusiasm for sports.

Theories and methods

Overall, the role of sport in international relations has remained a relatively under-theorised area of research despite increasing interest towards sport diplomacy (Black and Peacock, 2013; Johns, 2014; Murray and Pigman, 2014; Murray, 2018; Rofe, 2018; Harris and Dowling, 2020; Kobierecki, 2020). Sport is typically seen as being closely related to nationalism and is therefore a vital area for proving national success. It is arguably an important aspect of a nation's image as millions of people follow it, and it captures the rapt attention of sports enthusiasts, albeit men more often than women, around the world irrespective of state borders (Jackson, 2013). Hosting the Olympic Games and other major tournaments (particularly megaevents), as well as winning medals and titles, has been paramount in nation-branding strategies (Rein and Shields, 2007; Abdi et al., 2019; Dubinsky, 2019). Sport, particularly joint leagues, can also be regarded as a vehicle for cultural integration nationally as well as internationally (Halling, 2013).

This chapter does not rely on any particular theory directly but follows the idea of cultural statecraft in mapping the connections between politics and sport. The underlying research design is tripartite. Firstly, the political framework leading to the establishment and further development of the League is discussed. Secondly, the article examines Russian self-assessments of the purpose and success of the League. Finally, the reception of the League in Latvia and Finland is studied by looking at the fans, the surrounding public discussion, and possible political incidents.

When it comes to empirical evidence, this research relies on open sources and interviews. Comments and assessments are drawn from public statements, strategy papers, and interviews with the media. The chapter is agnostic as to the ultimate motive of the Kremlin and is not aimed at uncovering activities behind the scenes. The reception of the League is studied through media responses and the fan association website, as well as other public websites where the KHL is discussed. The assessment of the impact of the League draws on public statements coupled with interviews held on the spot.

Sport as cultural statecraft in Russia

As Russia started to boost its soft power strategies in the mid-2000s, it was natural that sport would also become part of this effort (Arnold, 2018). Indeed, Putin had already stressed the importance of sport from the perspective of national success from the beginning of his presidency. The flagship of the sports projects strengthening Russia's great-power identity was bidding for and then hosting the Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014. Russia also obtained the right to organise the Formula 1 Grand Prix in Sochi and was selected to host the FIFA World Cup in 2018. It is within this larger framework of creating a more visible profile in the field of sport in which the establishment of the KHL can also be situated. Ice hockey has been the most popular team sport in Russia measured by followers (in some surveys). The predecessor of the Russian ice hockey federation was founded after World War II in 1947: the Soviet ice hockey team, the 'Red Machine', became world famous with seven Olympic gold medals and acquired much symbolic significance for the Soviet regime during the Cold War (Jokisipilä, 2006; Borrero, 2017).

The story behind the establishment of the KHL in 2008 is not recounted in any detail (see, however, Altukhov, Mason, and Osokin, 2020), but the press have provided accounts of key events. For example, Vladimir Shalaev, later the KHL's vice president, has reported that the decisive meeting about founding the League was held in May 2007 in Yaroslavl, where key figures of the Russian sports ministry and Ice Hockey Federation, including former Soviet-era legends Vyacheslav Fetisov and Vladislav Tretiak, were invited (Sports.ru, 2012). Fetisov, who was head of the Federal Sports Agency, had already pushed plans for a Euro-Asian Hockey League earlier, while

Tretiak, who headed the Russian Ice Hockey Federation, had been sceptical of such plans. Putin, who was prime minister at the time, has claimed that the KHL was his brainchild, but in effect he brokered a solution between Fetisov and Tretiak. Putin had allegedly been dissatisfied with Russia's performance in the World Championships (with the team not having won gold since 1993 and having received bronze in 2007). He bought Fetisov's idea that the Russian Superleague was not producing the best players but wanted a strong, international league instead. Putin then mobilised the necessary financial resources for the League from a group of loyal oligarchs, and particularly from key corporate sponsors such as Gazprom (Jokisipilä, 2011; on Gazprom and sports, see, Tynkkynen, 2017). The League promptly got underway the following year with 24 teams, three of which were from Latvia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, and which had a fair number of international players overall from all major ice hockey nations.

Clearly, the model for the League was adopted from the North American NHL, with which Fetisov was very familiar. The teams were organised into two conferences and four divisions (despite being an international league, the divisions were named after former Soviet ice hockey stars, however). There was a play-off series to determine the champion, the winner of the Gagarin Cup. There was also an All-Star Game and a junior draft event. Each KHL game also started with national anthems as in the NHL (unlike the UEFA Champions League, for example). The KHL games often display many patriotic elements and performances as part of the game programme, but so do NHL games.

The political purpose along with the athletic reasons was present from the very inception of the League. Putin (2008) himself justified the League by saying that 'the KHL will help to restore the united humanitarian space in the post-Soviet territory' and 'benefit our relationships with neighbours and partners'. The very next year, he envisioned that the KHL could become a Pan-European league 'without any Russian political-administrative domination' (Putin, 2009). Putin (2011) later asserted that the KHL would improve the situation in world hockey and reiterated his hope that there would be a strong hockey league in Europe that would expand to include any European club.

Indeed, the representatives of the KHL put forward plans for a pan-European championship of 64 club teams divided into Scandinavian and Central European sub-conferences. This and other similar aims turned out to be too ambitious, however. Up to now, the KHL has had five teams from EU member states which, apart from Dinamo Riga and Jokerit Helsinki, included Lev Prague from Czechia (2012–2015), Slovan Bratislava from Slovakia (2012–2019), and Medveščak Zagreb from Croatia (2015–2017). Negotiations with Swedish, German, Swiss, Austrian and other European teams that were conducted most intensively in the early 2010s did not materialise. The strained relations with the West after the annexation of Crimea created an additional layer of difficulty for the expansion plans, but even

London and Paris were talked about as late as 2018. There were many other less political obstacles in the way, with the Swedish Hockey Federation banning its teams from joining the KHL for reasons of protecting the domestic league, for example, but speculation about a new Swedish team – the Crowns – entering the League continued nevertheless (Lindström, 2016; Ros, 2017). When Putin met with Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven in April 2019, ice hockey and the possible entry of a Swedish club into the KHL cropped up in the discussions. The war in Ukraine also led the Ukrainian team Donbass Donetsk, headed by an Eastern Ukrainian oligarch and former Minister of Infrastructure Borys Kolesnikov and a deputy of the Party of Regions, to leave the League after two seasons in 2014, with the team moving from Donbass to the nearby city of Druzhkivka on the Ukrainian side of the frontline and joining the Ukrainian league.

It seems that the establishment of the KHL was not driven by commercial motives in the first instance. On the contrary, financial difficulties plagued the League from the beginning and only worsened after the downturn in the Russian economy after 2014. The number of spectators has remained at a rather low level on average and the sale of fan merchandise has been moderate. Commercial revenue accounts for no more than 10 per cent of the clubs' turnover. Economic woes have been palpable: teams have not been able to pay salaries on time and several of the smaller teams have left the League for financial reasons (CBC, 2017). However, the problems are at the level of the clubs, rather than the League itself, which is making a profit ($50 million in 2017) and returning a share of its revenue to the clubs as well as to the Russian Ice Hockey Federation (TASS, 2018). One source of revenue for the League is the TV broadcasting rights that was owned by Gazprom Media, headed by Dmitry Chernyshenko, who was also the president of the KHL (Afanaseva, 2018). The KHL has a channel of its own in Russia and games have been broadcast abroad via well-known sports channels and streaming services. The broadcasting agreements have been relatively cheap, which is one aspect that speaks for cultural statecraft rather than commercial interests.

The KHL's first president was Alexander Medvedev, the director-general of Gazprom Export from 2006 to 2014, who also secured Gazprom's funding for the League. One of his key objectives was the Western expansion of the League. His successor was Chernyshenko, who had been the director of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. Chernyshenko's key task was to solidify the economic basis of the League. Although the expansion to Western Europe was not ruled out, the direction of the expansion changed. The League obtained its first Chinese team when HC Red Star Kunlun Beijing joined it from the beginning of the 2016–2017 season. Although the Western expansion failed, KHL games have been played in arenas in European countries whose clubs do not participate in the League, for example in Vienna, Tallinn, Zurich and Davos. After Chernysenko was appointed deputy prime minister in 2020, signifying the close relations between the KHL and the

power elite, Alexei Morozov, a former professional ice hockey player, who had been in charge of the Russian junior hockey, was elected as the new chairman. For him, the biggest challenge was the coronavirus pandemic, but with regard to the situation in Minsk, he also had to assure people that politics had no place in hockey and everything related to KHL games 'was running smoothly' (Morozov, 2020).

Overall, Russian politicians and sports authorities have been rather satisfied with the KHL, although it has suffered from financial difficulties and has not developed into a major pan-European league. Putin's (2011) assessment that 'the KHL is still a weak rival of the NHL, but it will be stronger one day' is perhaps rather honest. 'The future is shaped by optimism despite the sanctions and confrontation with the West', Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko (2014) stated in 2014, adding that 'the KHL is becoming ever-more prestigious'. In 2016, Putin (2016) contended that 'the KHL today is the strongest Eurasian league, although it is still weaker at some moments than the NHL, especially in image'. When leaving the KHL for the NHL in 2018, Russian SKA hockey star Ilya Kovalchuk declared: 'Now we've made huge progress … and in only ten years' (KHL.ru, 2018).

The KHL in Latvia: Dinamo Riga

Dinamo Riga joined the KHL from the outset in 2008. Ice hockey has a long historical tradition in Latvia, extending back to the interwar years of independence. Dinamo Riga was actually re-founded as a successor to a former hockey club with the same name. The old Dinamo Riga was founded after the war in 1946, comprising a team of the All-Union sports society connected to the police organisation, but it was still the most popular sporting club in Latvia and reflected national pride during the Soviet times. When Latvia regained its independence, the team soon ceased to exist in 1995. Its brand was nonetheless so strong that when a Latvian team was formed for the KHL, the old club was re-established. There was, however, no longer any connection to the police, as the new owners were Latvian businesspeople, politicians and other prominent people around the Latvian ice hockey federation. The key funder of the club was Itera, a Russian oil and gas company with close ties to Gazprom. Itera's Latvian branch CEO, Juris Savickis, an alleged former KGB officer, became the powerholder and president of the club. One of the founders and president of the board since 2015 was the former President of Latvia in the 1990s, Guntis Ulmanis. Another important figure in the initial phase was Helmut Balderis, the legendary Soviet-era Latvian ice hockey star.

The old supporters welcomed the new club enthusiastically and club loyalty was established rather easily among hockey fans. Yet many observers and commentators regarded Dinamo Riga as a Moscow-steered political project, 'part of the big plan to strengthen Russian presence and influence in Latvia' (Meluškāns, 2016). The Latvian NHL star, iconic goalkeeper

Arturs Irbe, who started his career in the old Dinamo Riga and completed it playing for rival local club SK Riga 20 before the new Dinamo Riga was founded, was one of those who saw the new club as a Russian PR effort (Muižnieks, 2011, p. 62). Representatives of the club have responded to such claims, which they see as a campaign undermining the prestige of Latvian ice hockey, by saying that sport and politics are two different things: 'do not mix something delicious like cottage cheese with something that doesn't taste well in the same bowl – to not mix politics with sports' (Zariņš, 2008). The club has stressed that 'hockey is the only ideology of Dinamo Riga' (cited in Muižnieks, 2011, p. 62).

From the beginning, the goal was to make the club profitable. Dinamo Riga's home arena, also owned by Savickis since 2011, is *Arēna Rīga* with a capacity of 10,300 spectators, and an average ticket price relatively high by Latvian standards. Dinamo fan merchandise was also fairly popular and the club even expanded its brand to a food production line, including non-alcoholic beer, lemonade, ice cream, cheese and porridge. Yet from the business point of view, the club had many difficult years with a deficit of over a million euros and it would not have been able to continue without major sponsors, in addition to Itera, such as Aldaris, a brewery, LDZ Cargo, a state-owned railway company and Skonto Būve, a construction company. Still, the annual budget of the club was one of the lowest in the League, totalling a little over €10 million depending on the year. Although the team representatives and some politicians had requested more state sponsorship for the team, it was not deemed possible due to the way in which the financing of sports is regulated in Latvia.

Dinamo Riga had a very successful start in the KHL, which evoked much excitement in the Latvian hockey community. Audiences were fairly large at the Dinamo Riga games, both at Arena Riga, as well as in terms of TV viewers, particularly during the early years. Indeed, the team soon became a new national symbol as almost half of the players also used to play for the Latvian national team. Particularly in the circumstances of the economic recession that hit Latvia very hard after 2008, it seemed that the success of Dinamo Riga represented a source of pride for many distressed Latvians (Fuks, 2013). Moreover, it was seen as a possible vehicle for uniting both Latvian and Russian speakers in Latvia, and in that sense contributed to societal integration. The KHL also played a role in foreign policy. In 2010, when there was a period of political rapprochement between Latvia and Russia, Latvia's President Valdis Zatlers went to Russia on an official visit, and gave Putin a 'Dinamo' jersey as a gift. There seemed to be an aspect of hockey diplomacy at play since Zatlers explained that when they had previously met in Helsinki at a Baltic Sea summit, they had spoken about hockey and the KHL. Zatlers regarded the talks as an important turning point in the relationship between Latvia and Russia as Putin had demonstrated a 'kind-hearted approach to our state', he hoped Putin to be 'your man on our team' (Government of the Russian Federation, 2010).

The Ukraine crisis in 2014 had little effect on Dinamo Riga's participation in the KHL (Auers, 2015, p. 225). There was some speculation that Dinamo Riga might leave the KHL, should the political situation not improve, but nothing really happened and nor did there seem to be any lucrative alternatives. At the same time, warnings and allegations about Dinamo Riga's political role as a Russian Trojan horse proliferated in the media. For example, Agnia Grigas (2016) regarded the KHL as a means of increasing Russia's soft power influence in Latvia. The heated public discussions led to some incidents: for example in 2017, sports commentator for Latvian MTG TV, Armands Puče, was sacked from this role after criticising Dinamo Riga's president Savickis and the club's participation in the KHL, allegedly due to a notification by the KHL office (The Baltic Times, 2017). Puče also pointed out that the KHL was not creating understanding between the Latvian and Russian hockey fans, but rather that Dinamo Riga, nicknamed 'Sprats', were often derided as fascists when playing in Russia. Other critical voices included journalist Egīls Līcītis (2020), who in a scornfully titled article 'Dinamo Riga belongs in the garbage of history' (*"Rīgas Dinamo" ir novedams uz vēstures mēslaini*) argued that 'Dinamo', and especially Savickis, its owner, had fallen out of political favour with Latvia's politicians, and that hockey diplomacy had also had its day. Major political incidents related to Latvian–Russian relations were nevertheless avoided, but in October 2020 a fan with a red-and-white Belarusian flag (the flag of the Belarusian People's Republic of 1918 that has symbolised the opposition) was ejected from Arena Riga where Dinamo Riga were playing against Dynamo Minsk.

The club's popularity started to wane somewhat after the initial years also because of its lack of success. Dinamo Riga seldom made it to the play-off rounds in the 2010s. The average number of spectators was decreasing, with arena occupancy hovering just above 50 per cent. The coronavirus pandemic in 2020–2021 further affected both the team's performance as well as its economic profitability. The 2020–2021 season was seen as its 'worst yet' in the KHL: it was bottom of the league and due to the pandemic several players were suffering from COVID-19 and were unable to play.

The overall impact of Dinamo Riga and the KHL on the image of Russia in Latvia has remained secondary. Despite the widespread allegations that the KHL is a vehicle for Russia's soft power and Dinamo Riga a fifth column, the participation of the team in the KHL is also seen as a neutral if not a positive thing (Simons, 2015, p. 8). Even though sports and ice hockey have not played a major role either inside the country or in Latvian–Russian relations, they are an everyday factor that shapes the worldview of sports enthusiasts. After the first KHL season, critical sports journalist and commentator Puče (2009) warned that the danger lay in the subtle linkages between sport and politics:

> by supporting your beloved team [Dinamo], you are becoming dependent on the Russian information space […] We are looking at this example

of the Slavic mentality; we smile, in joy or horror, we read the headlines, absorb the photographs, fast-forward the prank videos, we read some more and … we return to hockey. Where is the politics in this, you ask? It is everywhere. They don't need you to love Russia; they just want you to be aware of the daily life in the country, about their ambitions, world-view, heroes and convictions.

The KHL in Finland: Jokerit Helsinki

The Helsinki team Jokerit joined the KHL at the beginning of the 2014–2015 season (see, Backman and Carlsson, 2020). This was a noticeable step in the development of the League since Jokerit left a major European national elite league and was the first from a country that was not part of the Eastern bloc during the Cold War. Jokerit had been one of the most successful teams in the Finnish Hockey League and winner of the European cup in 1995–1996. The team had had one prominent Russian player in the early 1980s, Nikolay Makarov, who was selected the best defenceman of the year in 1983. Moreover, the former Soviet star Boris Mayorov was Head Coach in the team's heyday in the early 1990s, but otherwise the team was not particularly known for its connections to the east.

From 1991 to 2019 the club was owned by Harry Harkimo, who became a celebrity in the 1980s as a solo round-the-world yachtsman, subsequently becoming a businessman and media figure, sometimes labelled Finland's Mr. Trump (see, Lempinen, 2019). He was elected to the Finnish Parliament in 2015, representing the liberal-conservative National Coalition Party, but left the party in 2018. He then established his own political movement *Liike nyt!* (imitating French President Emmanuel Macron's *En Marche!*) and was re-elected to parliament in 2019 as the movement's sole representative. Harkimo has often been suspected of being a pro-Russian politician, but he has remained rather silent in public about foreign policy issues and has refused to comment when asked directly about the sanctions against Russia. *Liike nyt!* defines itself as pro-European, but it resists federalisation and does not support Finland's membership of NATO at the present time. Nor does it say a word about Russia in its programme.

Harkimo's reasons for Jokerit joining the KHL were mainly financial. The 1990s were highly successful for Jokerit and a big new home venue – Hartwall Arena – was built in 1997. Yet in the 2000s, the athletic as well as the financial success of the team soured, particularly when the overall economic situation in Finland stagnated. Despite a relatively large budget, Jokerit underperformed in the domestic league. Harkimo was active in trying to establish a competitive European Hockey League, but these efforts failed to bear fruit.

That was the situation when the connections to Russia started to matter. In June 2013, Harkimo sold the Hartwall Arena to Gennady Timchenko and Arkady Rotenberg, two oligarchs in Putin's close circles, who both held

dual Russian–Finnish citizenship and were already in the KHL business as president of HC SKA Saint Petersburg and chairman of HC Dynamo Moscow, respectively. They also became owners of Jokerit with a 49 per cent share. Arkady Rotenberg's nephew, Roman Rotenberg, later the vice president of the Russian ice hockey federation as well as SKA St. Petersburg, became the chairman of the company, owning the venue and part of the team. In March 2017, Jokerit agreed to play in the KHL at least until 2023.

In spring 2019, Jari Kurri, a former NHL star, became the new owner of Jokerit for a price of €4 million. There had been rumours that Harkimo was looking for a suitable buyer. It came as no surprise that the new owner was Kurri, who had played for the team before leaving for the NHL and had been part of Harkimo's management group. Timchenko sold his Jokerit shares but remained 'a godfather' of the team, retaining his ownership in the ice rink company. The new oligarch sponsoring Jokerit was Vladimir Potaninin, one of the owners of Nornickel. Nornickel's Finnish subsidiary Harjavalta became the main sponsor of the team. This arrangement had the advantage that the company, being registered in Finland, was not affected by the Western sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea (Lempinen and Paananen, 2019).

The team has had an annual budget of €30 million, which is three times higher compared to its time in the Finnish league, but has run a deficit of €10 million each year. Attendance at home games has been rather high, close to 10,000 on average, but this is partly because of cheap tickets and other campaigns. The size of the core fan group has diminished somewhat during the team's time in the KHL, and the sale of merchandise has not risen either. Moreover, the revenues for the broadcasting rights ostensibly diminished compared to the Finnish domestic league. However, Jokerit is still rated second among the KHL clubs after SKA, based on indicators such as sporting achievements, management of the club, and attractiveness.

Public reactions to Jokerit's move to KHL were mixed, but more positive than negative overall. According to a survey conducted in 2018, 70 per cent of spectators regarded it either as a good or as a very good thing (Laine and Hemmi, 2019; see also, Braw, 2016). By and large, fans and the press were excited about the new international and more professional league. Any criticism was often related to the potentially weakening attractiveness of the Finnish league. As one of the Jokerit supporters commented on the fan association's website: 'When the president of the Finnish ice hockey league thinks that Jokerit has received too much publicity for free when it is starting its first season in the KHL, it is just jealousy and bitterness as Jokerit was the first team to play in an international league' (Jokerifanit.net, 2014). Fans also felt that the first KHL season left a very good taste because 'the level of the game has been on a much better level than in the domestic league' (Jokerifanit.net, 2015). Nevertheless, even in 2018 one quarter of Jokerit fans wanted the team to return to the domestic league and half of them wanted the team to play in a Nordic league if such a league were to be established

Figure 10.1 Jokerit playing their 50th anniversary game against Dynamo Minsk in October 2017 (Zachary Paikin).

(Laine and Hemmi, 2019). One reason why the supporter association suffers from Jokerit playing in the KHL is that one of its key functions has been to organise tours to the away games: when only a few of them are now played within a reasonable distance from Helsinki, the attractiveness of being a member of the supporters' association has diminished.

In Finland, the KHL was marketed as an international rather than a Russian league. For example, the language used in promoting it was English rather than Russian. In the public debate, the KHL was, however, soon nick-named the 'Rouble League', and sometimes labelled as Putin's league with negative connotations. Some ice hockey enthusiasts refused to attend the games because of the political flavour, but others were curious and interested in the new circumstances. Nevertheless, although not necessarily representative, a very telling anecdote is that right after having stepped down from the post of Minister for Culture and Sport, the party leader of the Left

Alliance, Paavo Arhinmäki (2014), a longtime supporter of Jokerit who even had a tattoo of the club logo, wrote in his blog that he would always support Jokerit but that the KHL Jokerit was no longer the same team for him: 'If the saviour of the team [Boris Mayorov] came on the Moscow train, Jokerit was taken away on the same train'.

In other respects, the political elite in Finland have been virtually silent about the political role of the KHL. Perhaps the only comment by a government member concerning the KHL was when Minister for Foreign Trade Alexander Stubb, a former junior ice hockey player himself, visited Moscow in October 2011 and attended a KHL game. In that conjunction, he asserted that 'the ice hockey players are in their own way acting as missionaries, making their home country better known and creating easy-going and positive relations between people' (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2011). In the political debate dealing with Russian influence in Finland, the KHL has not been seen as a threat apart from a few public statements warning that Finns are too blue-eyed as to the Russian presence (Suihkonen, 2018). Mika Aaltola, Director of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, mentioned in his book on the turbulent international environment that Jokerit could serve as a likely money laundering instrument that could have potential links to corruption and electoral meddling (Aaltola, 2019, p. 81). However, in many reports that deal with the Russian 'hybrid threat' in Finland, sports in general and the KHL in particular are not brought up. On the other hand, the KHL has not been elevated as a major element of cooperation and bridge-building between Russia and Finland either. Yet many Finnish KHL players who have been interviewed in the Finnish media have displayed a positive attitude and have explained that playing in the KHL has helped them to shed many stereotypes about Russians.

The political aspect of the KHL became more palpable in the wake of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 when Timchenko and Rotenberg were put on the US list of targeted sanctions. Although they were not on the European sanctions list, Nordea Bank decided to stop all money transfers to their companies. This led to questions on the future of Jokerit and their home venue, but Harkimo and the team leadership effectively refused to discuss the issue in public. The problem was solved when Timchenko and Rotenberg sold their Jokerit shares and the Hartwall Arena to Boris Rotenberg's son, Roman Rotenberg. In fact, Jokerit and the KHL continued in Finland as if nothing had happened. As Harkimo himself put it in a column: 'The Ukraine crisis has overshadowed Jokerit's preparations for the new season, but at the same time we have to live our life here because as individuals we cannot influence global geopolitics very much' (Harkimo, 2014).

Although Harkimo held the majority of Jokerit shares, there were a couple of public protests and some criticism about the KHL management and the Russian owners of the team. During the first season in 2014, fans protested against the prohibition of the use of megaphones during the games. Two

years later, there was a more serious demonstration when fans protested against Roman Rotenberg himself. He was criticised mainly because of his double-hatted role as the owner of both Jokerit and SKA Saint Petersburg, in that Jokerit fans felt that he was favouring the latter. The most contentious issue was more symbolic than real: the DJ, Harry Harkimo's niece, had played SKA goal music during a Jokerit home game. As one supporter stated, 'Ideally, we'd have wholly Finnish ownership and nobody would have a double role' (YLE, 2016). In protest, fans had prepared a tifo and T-shirts bearing the text 'RRAT PROBLEM', which was an obvious reference to Roman Rotenberg. As the tifo and T-shirts with the text were prohibited in the arena, the fans decided to walk out during the game. In later games, the T-shirts – which had become very popular – were nonetheless allowed. The fan protests against Rotenberg continued until the end of the season on social media, but then waned.

The KHL did not emerge as a major topic in the wider societal debate in Finland. In Finland's largest internet-based community media, *Suomi24*, with 1.4 million weekly users, the KHL topic received less than 200 hits from 2008 to 2015. Most of the discussion centred on the teams and athletes, and their performance. Only five messages were political, contending that the KHL was the Kremlin's political project, but there were at least an equal number of messages praising the KHL as a high-quality league.

At the start of the season in September 2018, the monthly supplement of the largest Finnish newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, published a long reportage on Jokerit with Putin's face inserted into the team logo on the cover (Sillanpää, 2018). The story discussed the team's ownership issues, its finances and overall situation in a critical light without actually revealing anything new. Jokerit Hockey Club reacted to these allegations angrily, however, labelled the story as derogatory, and threatened the newspaper with a lawsuit because it had used the team's logo without permission. At the same time, some other sports journalists reported on the drop in the number of spectators and the lame start to the season. Jokerit's management responded that one key reason for this was the negative tone of the *Helsingin Sanomat* article.

The coronavirus pandemic as well as the political situation in Belarus in 2020 added new twists to Jokerit's image and its relationship to the KHL. Jokerit was the first team that decided to withdraw from the play-offs in early March due to the risks posed by the pandemic. Some representatives of other KHL teams regarded this as a cowardly and disloyal move, while others understood the decision and tried to find some solutions. However, the whole League soon decided to first postpone and then cancel the rest of the season. Jokerit would have wanted to postpone the start of the following season until late autumn 2020, but the KHL decided to play despite the pandemic. Different national safety guidelines caused controversy when Jokerit were placed in self-isolation twice during the autumn, in line with the Finnish coronavirus guidelines, after several infections were detected

either among players of the visiting Russian team or among the team's own players after an away tour in Russia. As a result, Jokerit had to reschedule several games, which some Russian ice hockey analysts held as sabotaging the League, and suggested that the whole team should be ruled out. The COVID restrictions finally led Jokerit to adopt a practical solution and play all the play-off games at the opponent's arena in spring 2021.

The political instability in Belarus after the presidential elections in August 2020 also put Jokerit in an awkward position. First, the team's representatives who were interviewed in the domestic media did not think the situation in Belarus would in any way prevent them from opening the season with an away game in Minsk. They played down the demonstrations and police violence in Minsk, and argued that politics and sport should not be mixed (Huttunen, 2020). Kurri issued a statement, saying 'we hope that Belarus will find peaceful solutions to its political situation' (YLE, 2020). Jokerit tried to postpone the game but Dynamo Minsk did not agree to the request. The club then decided to travel on the same day and return as quickly after the game as possible, duly adhering to the scheduled fixture. Finally, on the day of the match, the team announced that the game had been postponed, but the KHL did not agree that this was the case and awarded Jokerit a technical defeat for failing to show up in Minsk. There were several alleged reasons for the decision not to travel to Minsk and a number of rumours surrounding the whole episode. The team's leadership cited safety reasons, as players had received numerous death threats about travelling to Minsk. None of this was confirmed, however. A number of sports columnists criticised Jokerit for their political blindness in supporting a dictator that lacked domestic legitimacy. Minister of Sports, Annika Saarikko of the Centre Party, had appealed to the management of the team to consider what kind of signal they were sending as sports associations should also assume ethical responsibility. Moreover, the Finnish Ice Hockey Players Association had voiced criticism against organising sporting events in Belarus because of the unstable and worrisome situation in the country. An additional reason for reversing the decision was that the fan association strongly protested against the plan to play in Minsk and threatened the team with boycotts. The fan association had been encouraged to protest against playing in Minsk by the supporters of Dynamo Minsk. Some of the former players of Dynamo Minsk also voiced their wish that the game would not take place. The controversy likewise sparked criticism against Jokerit from Russian ice hockey commentators.

Such incidents aside, in terms of Russia's image in Finland, the KHL has undoubtedly been a positive factor. Through Jokerit, the League is relatively actively followed in Finland among sport enthusiasts, although both the domestic league as well as the NHL are still more popular. The KHL may not have generated a growing number of core fans, but the professional level of the League is widely recognised. The League – and Jokerit's entry into it – has probably had little effect on Russia's overall image, which, on

balance, was not that negative in Finland to begin with, but it has had a normalising effect and may have had a particular impact on the younger cohorts following ice hockey. When following the League, they are exposed to Russian geography and culture, and identify with Russian hockey stars, which may have an effect on the level of general awareness. However, the KHL has not fostered much civic society interaction or tourism, although away games, particularly in St. Petersburg (in addition to Riga) regularly (before COVID-19) attracted a fair number of Jokerit supporters. Yet visa regulations and long distances make it practically impossible even for the committed supporters to travel to the away games. The Russianness of the KHL had some negative effects on some segments of traditional Jokerit supporters and ice hockey fans in Finland, but part of the success of the KHL is – paradoxically – that it is not seen as all that Russian.

Conclusions

Research on Russian soft power has expanded in recent years but, to date, sport and ice hockey in particular have been neglected in this otherwise broad debate. Ice hockey is, however, a major sport that has historically had strong ties to politics and a lot of symbolic significance for the Russians. Although the KHL can and should be studied from this perspective of 'cultural statecraft', it does not mean that it should be interpreted as a purely political project, thereby discounting its athletic, economic and entertainment dimensions and exaggerating its significance as a potential tool of influence. Rather, when putting sports into the larger political frame, the purpose of research is to analytically and critically discuss various political aspects and dimensions.

   This article has discussed the political implications of the KHL and its presence in two European Union countries, focussing on the Latvian ice hockey team Dinamo Riga and the Finnish team Jokerit Helsinki. The political dimension that the KHL has clearly acquired as Putin's brainchild, and the involvement of powerful oligarchs, has been reflected in critical views of both countries in the media, and in both countries the local management of the teams has taken on negative undercurrents. Those who already have a negative view of Russia are not likely to be persuaded by sports soft power, but in terms of nation branding the KHL is an everyday factor that brings Russia closer to ice hockey fans. The message of the KHL is that politics and sports should be kept separate and – to all intents and purposes – that is precisely the technique of cultural statecraft. Undoubtedly, a certain bridge-building function can be detected. The majority of the general public, as well as supporters, regard the KHL in terms of sport, and the Russianness of the League is not a key theme, but young ice hockey fans in particular still get acquainted with Russia, not only in terms of the star players but also in terms of geography and even Russian orthography. In Latvia, Dinamo Riga represented new Latvian sporting nationalism and

the KHL was seen as an acceptable venue for it. In Finland, the KHL has become an established part of the sports scene. The KHL can, however, not avoid politics: both the Ukraine crisis and the Russian annexation of Crimea as well as the political situation in Belarus created political twists. Moreover, even the coronavirus pandemic served as a reminder that sports are regulated by national authorities and different national policies may provoke political controversies.

Acknowledgements

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11 In search of past glory

Russia's cultural statecraft in the age of decline

Sergei Medvedev

Introduction

On 6 January 1985, Czech writer Milan Kundera (1985) published an essay 'Introduction to a Variation' in *the New York Times Book Review*. In this short controversial piece, Kundera recalled the time when the Soviet Union occupied his small country in 1968, his books were banned, and he could not earn a living. A theatre director once approached Kundera and suggested that he should write a stage adaptation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. So Kundera reread *The Idiot* but declined the offer, feeling a sudden aversion to Dostoevsky's 'universe of overblown gestures, murky depths and aggressive sentimentality'. Indeed, in his essay, he had established a link between the world of Dostoevsky and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, seeing Dostoevsky as a manifestation of all things anti-Western that are present in Russian culture (Kundera, 1985).

Kundera's accusations were later rebuffed, also in *the New York Times Book Review*, by none other than Joseph Brodsky, who defended Dostoevsky's Russia as a part of Western civilisation. He denied responsibility for Soviet (in effect Russian) imperialism and observed that 'soldiers never represent culture, let alone a literature – they carry guns, not books' (Brodsky, 1985).

This dispute, which occurred over 35 years ago, brings into focus the intricate relationship between cultural heritage and the current politics of a nation, begging the question of whether classical Russian culture should take responsibility for Russian imperialism. In the 21st century, popular Russian writer Victor Pelevin jokingly suggested that the new Russian aircraft carrier should be named *The Idiot*, after Dostoyevsky's novel. This was a parody, of course, but the interesting thing is that Dostoyevsky's great-grandson, a certain Dmitry Dostoyevsky, has become a public figure, making patriotic statements in the name of his great-grandfather, in meetings with Vladimir Putin (Gurkin, 2013), while another famous descendant, Vladimir Tolstoy, the great-grandson of Leo Tolstoy, is an outspoken Putin loyalist and the president's advisor on cultural affairs.

Indeed, Russian culture and history have been very much in demand on the Russian political scene in the past decade. They form a significant

symbolic resource for a regime that has consolidated its ideological base around the ideas of conservatism, past glory and traditional values – the so-called *skrepy* (bonds). On the one hand, the state is starting to form a single narrative for history and culture, much like the one in the USSR, by enforcing ever stricter censorship, repressing selected cultural figures, and engaging the Orthodox Church and conservative speakers in its policy of *Gleichschaltung*, to draw a historical analogy. On the other hand, culture, history, language, perceptions and other humanitarian assets are increasingly incorporated into foreign policy, forming the perimeter of cultural statecraft analysed in this volume.

As traditional instruments of state power – economic performance, military capacity (apart from nuclear weapons), allies and alliances, influence in international institutions (apart from the UN Security Council) – are failing Russia in the 21st century, the state strategy is becoming more flexible, hybrid, networked and virtual. It is increasingly based on intangible instruments of power, such as propaganda, espionage and psychological operations, cyberwarfare and infiltration into social networks, PR and GR (also buying politicians and political parties in target countries) and, generally speaking, on promoting Russia's image and a specific set of perceptions that it evokes, working at both conscious and subconscious levels, supporting certain mythologies about Russia and fears of Russia among the wider global public. This chapter will take a look at these instruments and perceptions, which form the core of Russia's hybrid power (or soft power) in the age of Putin.

Soft power in decline

Russia's place in 21st-century world politics has been broadly contested. On the one hand, there is a broad range of commentators that see Russia's secular decline as a global power. These include Stephen Kotkin (2016) of Princeton University, Harvard Professors Joseph S. Nye Jr. (2016) and Stephen M. Walt (2015). A special project by the Washington-based Jamestown Foundation produced a 200-page book in 2017 titled *Russia in Decline*, which claims that 'the tempo of Russia's decay is accelerating across virtually every fragment of its politics, economy, society and military, which renders Russia a poor candidate to survive globalisation, let alone claim the mantle of a Great Power' (Wimbush and Portale, 2017).

On the other hand, there is a number of authors such as Julia Gurganus and Eugene Rumer (2019) of Carnegie Endowment who observe a growing Russian global ambition under Putin and relative successes along these lines. The 2017 US National Security Strategy claimed that Russia 'challenges American power' (The White House, 2017), while the Nuclear Posture Review sees that Russia has returned to 'Great Power competition' (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018). Meanwhile, at Georgetown

University, Andrew Kuchins (2015) has written that Russia is rising and falling simultaneously.

The latter suggestion may be closer to depicting the complex situation. While the physical parameters of Russian power have certainly declined, the country still manages to put its stamp on key political issues, from the war in Syria to US elections, from the Skripal poisoning in the UK to developing the *Sputnik* vaccine against COVID-19. Moreover, Vladimir Putin is certainly one of the most recognisable global leaders, gracing the covers and front pages of the mass media, whether in a positive or a negative context. In a sense, Russia punches far above its physical (economic, military, human) weight, possessing a significant symbolic and psychological resource and media presence.

This paradox can be explained by the fact that during the past decade, Russia has been able to convert its historical role, past greatness, image and mythology, as well as the fears, prejudices and expectations of external audiences into geopolitical influence. And it is precisely at this point that the Russian culture and cultural statecraft analysed in this book come into play. Using various media outlets and public instruments (*Russia Today* TV and the *Sputnik* media agency, the Valdai Forum and *Russki Mir* Foundation, the infamous 'troll factories' spamming social networks, and support groups on Facebook or Twitter), the Russian state is building a perimeter of cultural and media presence that exerts a cumulative influential effect, compensating for and disguising the objective decline of a superpower.

This raises the issue of the nature of 'soft power' and 'cultural statecraft', as discussed in the introductory chapter of this volume. (In the author's view, these are two different things – cultural statecraft is a policy, while soft power is the outcome.) Indeed, 'soft power' is largely reminiscent of Gramscian moral, intellectual, ethical and cultural *hegemony* – as distinct from domination – which was the only guarantee of prevailing over the enemy (Jayatilleka, 2019), and it is precisely the cultural hegemony of the United States that President Putin (2007) complained about in his Munich speech in 2007.

However, there is a different understanding of culture as far as Russian cultural statecraft is concerned. The broad definition of culture by Edward Burnett Tylor used in this volume ('that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by [a human] as a member of society') allows space for a wider interpretation – these are not just cultural products that are involved, but culture as a capacity, a tool, and a platform for state interventions. Answering the question posed in Elina Viljanen's chapter on whether in the process of cultural statecraft culture acquires agency and becomes a political actor, I would suggest that in the Russian case, culture is primarily a *resource*. In a 'resource state' like Russia (a concept developed by Simon Kordonsky), the state power converts everything into state-controlled and

administratively managed resources: oil and gas, territory and people, threats and violence (2007a, see also, Kordonsky, 2007b). According to this logic, culture is also one of the resources that the state seeks to administer and employ in order to maximise and project its power.

The traditional Russian cultural export that dates back to the 19th–20th centuries, including the Soviet triad of arts, sports and sciences, has been significantly compromised in recent decades. While evergreen titles like Tolstoy's novels and Tchaikovsky symphonies fill the bookshelves and play-lists, contemporary Russian culture is rather poorly represented on the global stage. If one looks at the key figures of Russian culture recognised globally, like film director Andrey Zvyagintsev, writer Vladimir Sorokin, theatre director Vladimir Chernyakov or conductor Vladimir Yurovsky, they all reside outside Russia – and outside the perimeter of cultural state-craft. Indeed, many of them, like Zvyagintsev or Sorokin, are staunch critics of Putin's regime.

One of the few major figures that fits into the cultural statecraft paradigm is conductor Valery Gergiev, who is an outstanding Putin supporter and a power broker in the Russian political elite (still, his stand on Crimea and the war in Ukraine caused him some problems when he was being appointed Chief Conductor of the Munich Philharmonic). A parody image of Russian cultural power was a surprise classical music concert in the ancient Roman theatre in Syrian Palmira, liberated from ISIS in May 2016, with Gergiev conducting, and cellist Sergei Roldugin (believed to be Putin's close friend and one of his secret purses [Dzyadko et al., 2016]) playing solo cello. (This episode is examined in the chapter on classical music and Russia's cultural statecraft by Elina Viljanen.) One year later, Palmira was re-taken by the jihadists, and the theatre destroyed.

Another traditional Soviet/Russian soft power attribute, sports victories, was also lost in the 21st century. A series of doping scandals following disclosure of the gigantic state-sponsored doping scheme at the 2014 Sochi Olympics, as revealed in the McLaren Report and Rodchenkov files, was followed by the IOC ban on the entire Russian Olympic Team at the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro in 2016, in PyeongChang in 2018, and in Tokyo in 2020 (postponed until July–August 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic). Moreover, after it was found that data provided by the Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA) had been manipulated by the Russian authorities with the aim of protecting athletes involved in the doping scheme, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) banned Russia from all international sports for another four years in December 2019, which also means that Russia cannot host major international sports events. Thus the attempt by the Kremlin – and there is no doubt that the plan was endorsed at the highest level – to maximise its soft power by showcasing the triumph of the Russian sports machine in Sochi failed spectacularly, sidelining Russia in international sports and casting doubt over earlier victories of Russian athletes.

Likewise, the major successes in science and technology, another asset of Soviet soft power, with its world-leading space programme, physics and mathematics, have largely remained in the 20th century; in the years after the collapse of the USSR, Russia lost the greater part of its scientific potential, and currently ranks only 47th in the Global Innovation Index (WIPO, 2020). In the past 30 years, only 3 Russian nationals have received a Nobel Prize, and of these, 2 were awarded for discoveries made in Soviet times. No Nobel laureate currently lives in Russia. A case in point is the Russian space programme, which is still running on technologies from the 1960s to the 1980s. While still reliable, they are increasingly becoming outdated and inefficient, losing the competition to private business: Elon Musk's SpaceX, employing eight thousand people, clearly outperforms *Roskosmos* state corporation with its 240,000 employees. As the International Space Station (ISS) is going to be decommissioned in 2024 (originally planned to happen in 2015, but extended twice), and no replacement for it is currently envisaged, Russia will be left without any permanent presence in space, losing its legacy of almost six decades.

It is symbolic that the new Russian vaccine against COVID-19 was named *Sputnik V*, after the most famous element of Russian soft power, the first Soviet *Sputnik*, which sent shock waves around the globe in October 1957 as the most visible proof of the technical achievements of the Socialist system. The hasty registration of the vaccine in Russia, testing it on only a limited number of volunteers, and failing the third stage of tests, along with a broad political campaign to promote the vaccine in foreign markets (e.g. in Brazil), clearly mark it as a soft power instrument, and part of Russia's 'medical statecraft'. However, in the absence of a consolidated state strategy to fight the pandemic in Russia, and given the failures of the state medical system during the second wave of the pandemic in autumn 2020 and the third wave in the summer of 2021, the rapid development and international marketing of the *Sputnik V* vaccine looks like an isolated PR effort.

Traditional Russian soft power goods, from cultural and sportive to scientific and technological exports, have thus been largely compromised in past decades, and Russian cultural statecraft does not prioritise those. Instead, as Dmitry Akhtyrsky (2018) has observed of the Russian authorities, 'rather than stressing the basic aspects, they emphasise the instrumental and information aspects of soft power'. Instrumental soft power is first of all represented by the external Russian media empire, like the *Russia Today* TV channel broadcasting in English, Arabic, Spanish, French and German. The characteristic of this sort of cultural export, as noted by Akhtyrsky, is 'that it not so much seeks to support the positive image of Russia, but rather to discredit the political forces in the West that the Kremlin regards as hostile'. In other words, it is not classical soft power but rather information warfare.

This puts Russian cultural statecraft in a different light: it deals not with cultural products per se, but rather with policies and strategies that the state employs using various cultural platforms; it instrumentalises not the

artifacts of culture (art, literature, language, sport, religion), but specific ideas, perceptions, ideologies and mythologies used in the information and psychological warfare against the West. Russian cultural statecraft projects values, images and beliefs aimed at transforming Russia's external environment. In this sense, it is not always a 'positive soft power', a force of attraction and persuasion, as it can also be a 'negative soft power', a force of dissuasion, unpredictability and fear that is also projected in order to position Russia in the global world and to deter the potential or imagined adversaries.

The past as a resource

One of the key assets of Russia, as perceived by outsiders, is the image of **otherness**. On the one hand, Russia, like Turkey, has for centuries been the traditional constitutive Other of the West. But there is much more to Russia's otherness – the Soviet Union in the 20th century has also presented an alternative path to Modernity. The Soviet project drew substantial attention and praise from the progressive-minded segment of the Western elite in the 1920s and 1930s – Soviet sympathisers ranged from H.G. Wells to Albert Einstein, and from Romain Rolland to Theodore Dreiser (David-Fox, 2017); for Western utopians, Russia seemed to be a promised land of modernisation, and many embarked on a pilgrimage to Russia in the interwar period – carefully guided by the interior ministry of the Soviet Union, NKVD and gainfully promoted by Soviet propaganda.

By the start of the Cold War, Khrushchev's exposure of Stalinism at the XXth Party Congress in 1956, and especially after the Soviet invasion of Hungary later that same year, and of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Soviet image had faded somewhat in the West (although it remained quite strong among the left elite). However, after the decolonisation in the 1960s, the myth of Soviet modernisation moved on to developing countries. From India to Mexico, the image of alternative, non-Western Modernity persisted until the end of the 20th century, supported by Soviet credits, technologies, specialists and educational experts.

It is this legacy that has been exploited by Russian propaganda during the past 20 years. Although Russia can no longer export the same amenities, technologies and knowledge, it capitalises on the idea of providing a much sought-after alternative to Western-style liberal globalisation. For instance, *Russia Today* is branding itself as an 'alternative news source' antithetical to the mainstream Western media. Its slogan is 'Question more', and it goes out of its way to present marginal views, conspiracy theories and controversial voices; it has hosted WikiLeaks' Julian Assange, Holocaust denier Ryan Dawson, and Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage (Elswah and Howard, 2020). Likewise, Russia is all too happy to grant asylum to irredentists of the West like Edward Snowden, who is currently applying for Russian citizenship. Thus, while presenting itself as modern and advanced (see the

message from the Sochi Olympics opening ceremony, which culminated in images of Soviet avant-garde, or the marketing of the Soviet/Russian space programme), Russia sees its soft power as representing an **alternative** to the West.

One facet of this otherness is Russia's patented **irrationality**, in which it takes special pride ('Russia cannot be understood by mind', as the oft-cited line by 19th-century poet Fyodor Tyutchev goes). It is also positioned as part of Russia's mission, an alternative to the dull rationality of Western civilisation, and a key to the 'mysterious Russian soul', as epitomised by Fyodor Dostoyevsky and despised by Milan Kundera, who longed instead for the naïve rationalism of Denis Diderot. In the logic of exercising soft power, Russia's irrationality turns into a foreign policy tool, complete with unpredictability, risk-taking and insolence. In a policy statement titled 'Global Storm and Russian Boldness', foreign policy strategist Sergei Karaganov asserted that Russia should lead a psychological offensive (2010). In effect, Russia sees itself as well positioned for a world of increasing chaos and contingency.

At the same time, Russia has discovered a very advantageous niche in the global ideological marketplace, that of **conservatism**, **anti-globalism** and so-called '**traditional values**', trying to present itself as an 'international conservative power' (Robinson, 2020). As observed by Glenn Diesen, 'Russia has emerged as an international conservative leader that stands up for traditional European culture, Christianity, traditional values, and the family. Russia has returned to its pre-communist role as the go-to country for Western classical conservatives' (Blinova, 2018). As in the early-19th century when the father of political conservatism, Joseph de Maistre, was looking to promote his ideas in Russia (to no great effect), 200 years later, the father of American neo-conservatism Pat Buchanan is asking the question: 'Is Putin one of us?' (2013). There is a well-documented affinity and financial links between Russian conservative thinkers, the US alt-right movement, and European ultra-right parties, like Marine Le Pen's *Le Front National* or Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland*.

Indeed, Russia's newly discovered traditionalism in the 21st century appeals to a wide array of global audiences that are not content with globalisation, Westernisation, liberalism, and especially with the new Liberal culture of tolerance, diversity, sensitivity to racial and gender privileges, and repentance for past misdeeds. Russia seeks to offer an alternative to the post-patriarchal and post-colonial world by appealing to the 'traditional values' of family, established gender roles (complete with male privileges), hierarchies of age and respect for the authorities.

There are three main issues on which Russia rejects the Western left-liberal consensus: environmental awareness (the mainstream Russian public was intensely annoyed by Greta Thunberg's message, especially since it was delivered by an underage schoolgirl), gender equality (likewise, there was much criticism in Russia of the #MeToo movement, and the sexual

harassment revelations of recent years), and racial justice (in particular, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that became so vocal, and sometimes riotous, in 2020) (Latynina, 2020).

There are two Russian lines of attack against the West in this field. On the one hand, the conservatives see this as a sign of the moral decay of Europe, which they have pejoratively nicknamed *Gayropa*. For them, the Old Continent has lost its moral nerve, and white Christian heritage, and will soon be overwhelmed by waves of new 'barbarians' (the migrants). On the other hand, the Liberal critics of Europe amplify the dangers of tolerance and political correctness, which they see as a new 'left totalitarianism' that threatens key Western values – individual liberty, freedom of speech and sexual behaviour. This view has been expressed in a 2021 manifesto by theatre director Konstantin Bogomolov (2021) entitled 'The Abduction of Europe 2.0', in which he castigates 'the new ethical Reich'.

As a form of relief from these new ethics, Bogomolov offers a project of moral salvation for the West that will help re-discover a '**true Europe**': 'We have to re-build our good old Europe, a Europe of which we dreamed, a Europe which they have lost, a healthy Europe'. Or, as summarised by Iver Neumann (2017, p. 78), 'the official Russian stance is now that Russia itself is True Europe, a conservative great power that guards Europe's true Christian heritage against the False Europe of decadence and depravity to its west'. In fact, this is a recurrent model in Russia's relations to Europe – much in the same way, in the 1830s and 1840s, that the conservative Russia of Tsar Nikolai I not only saw itself as a 'European gendarme' and a bulwark against the revolutions of 1830–31 and 1848 but also tried to position its ideology of 'Orthodoxy, autocracy and nationalism' as the preservation of European heritage.

The 'preservation of Europe' theme, so important for Russia's self-image, highlights another important aspect of Russia's soft power – an aggressive **memory politics**, seeking to monopolise the discourse of World War II remembrance and to portray Russia as the sole keeper and protector of war memory from forces of 'revanchism' and 'falsification'. The chapter by Lina Klymenko shows how war memory has been heavily securitised in Russia during the presidency of Vladimir Putin – indeed, it has become the core of Russian identity in the 21st century, with Victory Day, the 9th of May, becoming the key foundational narrative of the nation, obscuring other national holidays and mythologies. Memory politics is used as an authoritarian policy tool inside Russia, aimed at streamlining the discussion on national history, to build a unified historical narrative, to discipline society and to punish dissidents. A case in point was the trial of oppositionist Alexei Navalny in February 2021 for 'insulting' a WWII veteran and the ensuing bill in the State Duma that makes the 'insult of veterans' a criminal offence, punishable with a sentence of up to five years in prison. Earlier, the 'rehabilitation of Nazism' had also been criminalised in Russia. Indeed, the amendment on the obligation 'to defend historical truth' was added to

the Russian Constitution on the Referendum in July 2020, along with the extension of Vladimir Putin's presidential term.

At the same time, memory politics is increasingly used in Russia as a foreign policy instrument, wielded in a war of narratives about World War II that has divided Europe in recent years. Largely influenced by East European grievances, Russia is seen as one of those responsible for the start of the war, by signing the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, and as an occupier of the post-1945 Eastern Europe. This was underlined by a European Parliament resolution from 19 September 2019 entitled 'Importance of European Remembrance for the future of Europe', which placed equal blame on Germany and the USSR for the outbreak of WWII and reproached modern Russia for rewriting history (European Parliament, 2019). This resolution aroused much anger among the Russian political elite, and it took no less than President Putin himself to come up with a reply on several occasions: in November 2019, he engaged in a bitter war of words with Poland on its role in the outbreak of the war and in the Holocaust; in January 2020, in light of not being invited to the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, he outlined his vision at an 'alternative' memorial event at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem; and finally, in June 2020, he published an article in *The National Interest* with his thoughts about the roots and causes of World War II, highlighting the Munich Betrayal and laying the blame on the West, and on Poland, and highlighting the Soviet Union's unique role in the liberation of Europe (Putin, 2020). This reinstatement of the Soviet role in winning the war and shaping the political order in Eastern Europe is seen by the Russian leadership as an essential element of Russian soft power and as a claim for a special role in defining the future of the region (Kurilla, 2015).

Finally, there is yet another element of Russia's intangible soft power, closely related to its cultural and historical assets, and with a unique place in the collective memory of the West. That element is **fear**. Serving as the arch-rival of the West for centuries – symbolised by the bivouacs of the Cossacks on the Champs-Élysées in 1814 and tank armies in Central Europe from 1945 to the 1990s – Russia has become an existential threat, deeply embedded in the collective memory of the West. Applying a psychoanalytical paradigm to the intricate relationship between the West and Russia, Russian-German philosopher Boris Groys has famously suggested that Russia occupies the place of the subconsciousness of the West, the amorphous irrational Id, complete with suppressed feelings of threat, anxiety and fear (1993, see also, Medvedev 1999).

Contemporary Russia has very little of the military prowess and presence of the Soviet Union, yet it can still capitalise on the collective memories of Europe. Likewise, the American mass consciousness has remote memories of the Soviet/Communist threat of the Cold War era. Building on this legacy, Putin's Russia skillfully feeds into this sentiment by making limited disruptive interventions abroad – the poisoning of ex-spies Alexander Litvinenko, Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Great Britain; the poisoning

of prominent opposition leader Alexey Navalny in August 2020, and two earlier attempts to poison another Kremlin critic, Vladimir Kara-Murza; allegedly intervening in the 2016 US elections, inundating social networks with comments by Russia's infamous 'troll factories' and, most importantly, never trying too hard to deny these acts. To this end, Russia has managed to create a toxic image of an omnipresent and unnoticeable danger that can hit anytime, anywhere, and yet remain undetected and unpunished. This sort of toxicity is a new version of the classical '**Russian threat**' that works remarkably well in a world of hybridity, uncertainty and risks, and which constitutes an element of Russia's intangible 'soft power', which no longer resides in winning friends but rather in deterring adversaries – a strategy long employed by pariah states like North Korea and Iran.

It is indicative that in recent years, one of the key archetypal images of Russia that is successfully used at home and exported abroad has become the famed *Kalashnikov* machine gun. It has a cult following in Russia, with films and history classes devoted to the weapon, is displayed on car bumper stickers and on avatars in social networks, and is often branded as a Russian contribution to world civilisation – an unsophisticated weapon symbolising Russian wit and the ability to find simple solutions to complex problems. In 2017, a cyclopean monument to the designer of the weapon, Mikhail Kalashnikov, was unveiled in the middle of Moscow's Garden Ring; the then minister of culture, Vladimir Medinsky, hailed the machine gun as 'a truly Russian cultural trade mark' (Goncharenko, 2017). More than 70 million *Kalashnikovs* have been sold worldwide, a fact symbolised on the monument by an image of the globe with a machine gun superimposed upon it. As aptly observed by author Victor Yerofeev (2017), 'it is as if the French would suddenly declare the guillotine an instrument for the emotional education of the nation'.

In lieu of a conclusion

To sum up, Russia's 'soft power' and cultural statecraft are definitely past-oriented, building on historical patterns and achievements from the past, be they Christianity and 'traditional values' such as family and heterosexuality, patriotism and a strong state, or the memory of imperial glory and military dominance. Russia, suffering from a global decline, has managed to capitalise on its cultural assets, history and mythology, and on its psychological influence. Unlike the USSR, which for much of the 20th century projected an image of the future, Russia is exporting images of the past in a peculiar kind of retro-politics that finds eager audiences across the globe in the shape of those who are discontented with globalisation and seekers of all sorts of alternatives to a neoliberal world order.

This is a reflection of the ideological regime established in Russia for the past decade. Being structurally unable to ensure economic growth, investment and modernisation at home, the authorities, state propaganda and

mass culture have constructed a powerful nostalgic narrative, employing Soviet and imperial nostalgia as a tool for legitimising the regime and consolidating society. Having lost any image of the future, or direction and purpose for the country, and giving up on any talk of 'modernisation' (the last attempt at such talk was during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency in 2008–2011), Putinism has become a celebration of the past, a permanent liturgy of victory and memory. Rather than being promised future prosperity as a way to mitigate current uncertainty, the population is being offered the shadows of past glory. Putinism is thus a form of retro-politics that the late Zygmunt Bauman (2017) called 'Retrotopia', which emerges from the ruins of Utopia, endorsing and displaying the imaginary goods delivered by Utopia. Likewise, Svetlana Boym, in her book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2002), warns of 'epidemics of nostalgia' that happen after revolutions: not only does the *ancien régime* lead to revolution, but also the revolution itself ends up constructing the *ancien régime* as a nostalgic memory.

Now Russia is trying to project this politicised and securitised nostalgia to the wider world, either in the form of the textbook 'Russian threat', complete with nuclear weapons, *Kalashnikov* machine guns and pervasive FSB agents with *Novichok* bottles, or as an idealised image of a white Christian world, where fathers of families, police officers in the streets and presidents in stately palaces are all custodians of social order. Whether relevant or realistic, these images sell well in a world tired of unpredictability, migration, and social displacement. It remains to be seen whether a long-term cultural strategy, diplomacy and foreign policy can be built on illusory images – but then, Russia has always been good at decorating façades and building Potemkin villages.

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