

A topographic map of Russia, showing the country's vast landmass and surrounding waters. The map uses a color gradient from green (low elevation) to brown and purple (high elevation) to represent terrain. Major rivers and lakes are visible, and the country's administrative boundaries are outlined in white. The map is oriented with North at the top.

# **RUSSIA**

**STRATEGY, POLICY AND ADMINISTRATION**

**IRVIN STUDIN**





Irvin Studin  
Editor

# Russia

Strategy, Policy and Administration

palgrave  
macmillan

*Editor*

Irvin Studin  
*Global Brief Magazine*  
Institute for 21st Century Questions  
Toronto, Canada

ISBN 978-1-137-56670-6      ISBN 978-1-137-56671-3 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-56671-3>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017950522

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Cover illustration: Blueberg / Alamy Stock Photo

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature

The registered company is Macmillan Publishers Ltd.

The registered company address is: The Campus, 4 Crinan Street, London, N1 9XW, United Kingdom

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## Culture

*Vitaly Kurennoy and Rouslan Khestanov*

### BETWEEN PRAGMATISM AND NEOTRADITIONAL RHETORIC

Cultural policy has not generally been viewed as central to the activities and instruments of the modern Russian state. As such, Moscow's sudden interest, several years ago, in culture was perceived with ambivalence by many commentators. In April 2013, Vladimir Putin signed a decree on implementing Years of Culture in Russia, where 2014 was to be a Year of Culture.

Putin used the expression “cultural policy” for the first time on October 2, 2013, at the meeting of the Council for Culture and Art under the President of the Russian Federation. Within 2 months, in the Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, the values orientation of state cultural policy was articulated. It was described as a “conservative position”, aimed at the defence of “traditional values”—not inconsistent with some of the writings of the Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinsky, who has scandalised certain liberal quarters in Russia by arguing for a “patriotic orientation” in Russian cultural policy (see Chap. 3 on Russian Political Ideology).

If we were to summarise the speeches of Vladimir Putin on culture, the following key aspects of the “conservative position” could be distilled: first, culture and the Russian language are seen as integrating elements of

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the “multinational nation” of Russia; second, the cultural diversity of the world is understood to be one of the factors favouring the national sovereignty and self-sufficiency of Russia; third, “traditional” cultural values include, above all, support for multichild traditional (heterosexual) families (see Chap. 28 on Families) and a commitment to “Christian values, which are the basis of Western civilisation” (even if this Western orientation does not necessarily prevent clashes between Russia and Western countries); and fourth, the emphasis on “traditional values” is seen as an element of Russia’s foreign policy (see Chap. 12 on Foreign and Defence Policy). Consistent with this foreign policy positioning, in June 2014, Constantine Kosachev, head of the Russian Cooperation Agency, said that the agency planned a comprehensive strategy to expand the humanitarian influence of Russia in the world, and to open, by 2016, 11 international centres of science and culture, including 9 centres within the former Soviet space.

The “pivot to culture”, as it were, was consolidated with the approval by President Putin, at the end of 2014, of the “Foundations of State Cultural Policy” policy document, which stated that “state cultural policy is called on to provide priority cultural and humanitarian development as a basis of economic enlightenment, state sovereignty and the civilisational identity of the country”.<sup>1</sup> The designation of culture as a field of priority interest for the first time in post-Soviet history was interpreted by the Russian public as a logical continuation of the path to sovereignty and a rejection of strategic integration into the European community and several other supranational structures—intentions that had been widely declared by Vladimir Putin at the start of the 2000s. In that early Putin period, the dominance of central government organs of power over culture could have been described as neutral-technocratic. The state refrained from privileging any particular values or moral or ideological orientations, emphasising instead the primacy of socioeconomic development and the challenge of modernisation, including “doubling GDP” (see Chap. 2 on The Objectives and Principles of the Russian State in the Twenty-First Century). This posture was still apposite in the Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly in 2007, where Russia’s “search for a national idea”—an age-old Russian quest, even if the modern Russian state is young—was evoked in the context of the apparent need for the country to “stress the essential moral-ethical values developed by the Russian nation over its more than thousand-year history”.

The current system of cultural administration in Russia often turns on direct decisions from the President to use large or mega-events like the 2014 Sochi Olympics and the 2018 World Cup as an instrument for the development of different regions of the country. The (2014) Year of Culture in Russia was part of this logic. However, the policy pivot to culture, while significant, has not to date been bolstered by any notable changes in the budget of the state cultural sector. “The state cultural sphere is significantly and chronically underfinanced: state support of culture in Russia, in per capita terms, is on average 3.5 times lower than in the developed countries of the world”.<sup>2</sup>

Is this “pivot to culture” (perhaps so-called) a return to Soviet-style cultural policy? And was the neutral-technocratic approach to cultural policy of the early post-Soviet years but a temporary deviation from the historical norm in Soviet and Russian statecraft?

#### SOVIET CULTURAL POLICY

Cultural construction in Soviet Russia was considered the most important part of the development of the state immediately following the establishment of Soviet power. The term “culture” occupied a conspicuous place in the slang of the Bolsheviks, starting from 1919, when the Eighth Congress of the Russian Communist Party approved the Party Programme.

The Bolsheviks believed that after the resolution of the central political question—that is, the conquest of power in Russia—political work must generally cede pride of place to cultural work. On this logic, the regulatory functions provided in a “bourgeois society” by law and bureaucratic administration would in the new communist society envisioned by the Bolsheviks be played by culture. In other words, culture would substitute for repressive state bureaucracy.<sup>3</sup> This Leninist doctrine of cultural revolution was reflected at the 15th Congress of the Communist Party, which stressed that “simplification of the functions of administration by raising the cultural level [and motivations] of the working people leads to the destruction of state power”.<sup>4</sup>

For the Party, the *problématique* of culture was always closely affiliated with administration and leadership. Party functions in the earliest years of Soviet power could not precisely differentiate between the organisation of cultural work and party propaganda and agitation. In the Stalin period, such a distinction was on offer: the organisational and theoretical work, and also the development of cultural meanings, belonged to the Party, while the cultural-enlightenment work that could be “mechanised” and



widely replicated was delegated to the state, which administered the large network of Soviet cultural institutions (clubs, cinematography, societies, etc.).

As for the utopian vision of the Soviet project and the practical measures undertaken to implement a focused cultural policy, including the national-cultural construction of a "family of nations" in the USSR, the Soviet pivot to culture and Lenin's New Economic Policy should be seen as 2 interconnected steps in the context of Soviet "strategic retreat"—forced concessions to the existing non-socialist economic order and the actual state of culture in society—which in time should have given way to a strictly "communist republic". This understanding of "cultural revolution" was represented in the language of Lenin in his 1923 essay "On Cooperation", where the challenges of cultural construction were given primary importance. But if the *dénouement* of the New Economic Policy had already begun by the end of the 1920s, then the end of "cultural revolution" was announced by Stalin in his summary report for the 17th Congress of the Communist Party in 1939.

The Leninist understanding of cultural revolution envisioned not only the "moulding" of a new person but also the destruction of the remnants of the prior bourgeois culture, including among the older Bolsheviks raised in a still-bourgeois context. The Great Terror of 1937–38 should therefore be seen as a constituent part of the Leninist project of "cultural revolution", advanced by Stalin through collectivisation and industrialisation, and requiring the liquidation of what remained of the market economy permitted in the period of the New Economic Policy.

If it is in the Stalin period that the foundations of the cultural institutions and the operational algorithms of mass Soviet culture were created, then an important break in the understanding of the place of culture in state policy occurred in the Khrushchev period. First, in 1953, 2 months after the death of Stalin, the Soviet Ministry of Culture was created and the entire design of party-state cultural administration was changed. Second, at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party, at the start of the report from Khrushchev, there was a notable rhetorical shift: cultural work was distinguished, in strictly positive terms, from the darker arts of propaganda, and cultural policy was to be emancipated, the new Ministry of Culture obliged, from ideology. Politico-ideological language in the cultural sphere was replaced by administrative-bureaucratic language. And where political rhetoric once dominated, foreign policy and resistance to the capitalist bloc took over. Indeed, until Gorbachev's *perestroika*, a

large variety of the social and international contradictions presented by the USSR were interpreted by the policy elite through the prisms of management, administration and culture.

### RUSSIA'S CULTURAL POLICY PROBLÉMATIQUE

In the post-Soviet period, the cultural sphere, as distinct from other sub-systems of Russian society, was the least affected by reform processes. The operations of public institutions of culture, and also the large network of artistic and cultural associations (artists' unions, composers and others), underwent partial spontaneous transformation with the breakup of the USSR, losing much of their previous influence and social prestige. Houses of culture and stadiums adapted to the new national reality of chronic underfunding and the sudden disappearance of rigid state control. Paradoxically, for better or worse, many of these cultural spaces were used as retail space. Institutions of culture created to address specific cultural-anthropological and ideological challenges of Soviet civilisation, now devoid of mission and liquidity, became disoriented. For a decade and a half, they fell off the radars of central and regional authorities, which did not always know what to do with such legacy infrastructure.

In our view, the development of a serious and proper cultural strategy for contemporary Russia must consist primarily in a policy push to return culture to its historically central and fundamental role in shaping the political order. After all, modern Russia continues to undergo processes that polarise its society: first, intense urbanisation, resulting in inequality among the country's many regions; second, religious renaissance in all the fundamental confessions of the country—Orthodox, Islam, Buddhism and also Hinduism; third, decentralisation of education and culture, side by side with the strengthened pursuit of cultural autonomy in the national republics; and fourth, market reforms, which have intensified the growth of income inequality among the citizens and residents of the country. All these processes have created a demand for cultural policy as an instrument that can provide increased homogeneity, unity and coherence to the country, where culture, as stated in the "Foundations of State Cultural Policy" document, is the "guarantor of the preservation of the single cultural space and the territorial integrity of Russia".

At first blush, the return of culture to priority status in Russian state policy and the revitalisation of Russian cultural diplomacy internationally seem to amount to the resuscitation of the Soviet model of cultural



administration. Indeed, the institutions inherited from the USSR are pre-disposed, path dependence oblige, to reproduce their prior functions—in particular, their ideological and propagandistic functions. It would appear, at least among the cultural intelligentsias of Russia's different regions, based on interviews we have conducted over the past 10 years, that there is an expectation of a return to a system in which demand for culture is principally state-driven, in the Soviet idiom.<sup>5</sup> Having said this, a return to total control over culture through censors, a monolithic bureaucracy and a well-trained army of cultural workers is not at play, at the time of this writing, in contemporary Russia. First, there is no formal political intention or will in the country to revive anything that is merely nominally different from the Soviet apparatus of absolute control over culture. Second, even if such an intention existed, its realisation would bump up against an entire series of objective obstacles in terms of resources and due to the irreversible changes in the structure of Russian society since the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The economic bloc in the Russian government is represented by professional economists promoting liberal market reforms. They have worked to date, and continue to work, to rid the Russia state of the global socialist mission that was practiced by the Soviet state. Even in the major social policy spheres—education and health care—market reforms are being conducted, copying and reproducing Western models. Culture is no exception. Despite the fact that representatives of the Ministry of Culture regularly shock the public with sharp “conservative” statements, the substantive organisational transformations in the cultural sphere are aimed primarily at the simulation of market behaviour among the cultural organisations. And of course, market reformatting of the social sector requires that the administrative model itself be reformatted—to wit, through the decentralisation and delegation of numerous erstwhile state responsibilities (powers) and the endowment of commercial functions to new quasi-state agencies and autonomous enterprises.

The ongoing liberalisation of the social sector makes the past Soviet mechanisms of bureaucratic control impossible because the Russian state refuses increasingly to fund them. Of course, one of the consequences of such liberal reforms has been the formation of a large, parallel “shadow” sector not only in Russian economic relations and social practices but also in the cultural space more broadly. To be sure, some of the development of this “grey sphere” has roots in specific Russian experiences of societal alienation from a state that has been seen as

repressive during many periods of Russian and Soviet history. And a significant portion of the activity in this sphere is evidently not subject to any formal assessment in the official national cultural statistics and accounting and is not, therefore, part of any serious public discussion or academic research. The absence of reliable indicators to assess the size and efficacy of this “grey sector” in Russian culture clearly and significantly restricts the possibilities of state control over the ideological and cultural practices of the population, which means that the federal centre is often forced to behave pragmatically, with ideological rhetoric playing a subordinate, instrumental role.

Which arguments most often resonate in justifying the prohibition on homosexual propaganda or the defence of traditional marriage by the Russian state? Here traditional Russian values are emphasised. However, the ultimate policy argument is demographic in nature. Families and familial foundations are stressed in order to overcome the country's demographic failure—that is, to normalise the reproduction of the population (see Chap. 28 on Families). As such, contemporary cultural policy in Russia is rhetorically conservative, but this conservatism—or more readily, in our view, neotraditionalism—has a primarily compensatory character: the federal government uses the rhetoric to try to compensate for the growing speed of changes in the cultural and demographic spheres and, to some extent, soften the protest potential inevitably aroused by liberal reforms in Russian society and in the national economy.

Of course, such cultural policy is possible in Russia, as in most other countries, only insofar as it is able to form a moral majority based on cultural stereotypes dominant in the society, or otherwise confirming the self-identity of the society. Against the moral majority stands the interested “minority”—not just political opponents but also professional communities of culture (and journalists). As a rule, the oppositional cultural “minority” is concentrated in large cities (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Novosibirsk, Ekaterinburg and Nizhny Novgorod), which are able to produce innovation and concentrate financial resources, human capital and opportunities for cultural diversity. A total imposition of the neotraditionalistic position is not only impossible in such urban centres but indeed counterproductive to the very process of liberal reform. As such, the federal government does not pursue universalisation of its ideological message. Instead, it considers it sufficient to form a generally supportive or corresponding public opinion.



The main instrument for forming public opinion in modern Russia is information campaigns through mass media, and particularly television (see Chap. 9 on Russian Media). These mass media campaigns lead to incessant cultural wars—quite atypical in the Soviet period—between the neotraditionalist moral majority and the country's big-city liberal minorities. The substantive debates of these culture wars concern artistic freedom (from the strictures of the moral majority), homosexual rights, abortion and gender equality. Moreover, these debates have, over the years, acquired a growing religious colouring, consonant with the powerful processes of desecularisation in Russian society in the post-Soviet period.

However pragmatic the motivations behind many of the rhetorical neotraditionalist positions, they have on occasion had anti-modernisation effects in practice. Here we speak not only about the grievances expressed in some of the Russian press about a growing atmosphere of intolerance and clericalism in the country, but also about official excesses, as with the conviction of the members of the Pussy Riots musical group and analogous cases. Article 87 of the 2012 law on education, concerning the particularities of the study of the spiritual-moral culture of the peoples of the Russian Federation, as well as the particularities of theological and religious education in Russia, also ushered in deep institutional transformation in national education, opening the door to religious education—for all intents and purposes, a dramatic departure from the secular general and university education that dominated the Soviet period and the first 2 post-Soviet decades.

Among the many consequences of this law, those observed in the Muslim-majority North Caucasus, and especially in the republic of Dagestan, are arguably most noteworthy (see Chap. 6 on The North Caucasus). In all of Russia, a total of 7 Muslim educational organisations of higher education were opened after 2010, all funded indirectly by the state budget. In Dagestan, according to some sources (reliable statistics on this do not exist), there are between 114 and 199 registered institutions of learning: among them are 8 universities and between 39 and 60 madrasas. There are some 14,000 people officially studying Islam today in Dagestan: about 2500 in the universities, more than 700 in different branches of the universities, more than 300 in madrasas, and more than 6000 in primary schools. According to our research, approximately 30 per cent of these graduates go on to work as imams or assistants to imams in mosques, or as instructors in the Muslim universities, madrasas and mak-tabs of the republic.

Sociological surveys undertaken in the North Caucasus note that the level of religiosity among youth today is higher than among their parents, all of whom were educated in Soviet schools. Young people aged 15–18 believe that religious education is more valuable than secular education, and “[t]he proportion of youth choosing sharia as a core life regulator is significantly higher than the proportion in older generations”.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the dominant policy presumption was that the established network of Islamic universities, controlled by the state, would strengthen the position of moderate Islam in Russia through the training of national cadres of Muslim spiritual leaders. And yet not every graduate of these established Islamic universities can work in the mosques or as an instructor in religious institutions; indeed, most graduates cannot. In order to employ these graduates, then, the state must create new work places. For local and regional authorities under pressure from the spiritual community, it is far easier to create such work places in the traditionally secular educational sector—to wit, in general education state schools. This penetration of Islamic clergy into secular educational institutions has helped to strengthen the positions of Sharia law, establish a pluri-judicial legal system (for all practical intents and purposes) and legitimise gender inequality and polygamy. In this context, in Dagestan and certain other parts of the North Caucasus, the “traditional family” is increasingly understood in terms of Islamic tradition, the representation of which is distilled increasingly from Islamic civilisation (in the global sense) rather than from local traditions.

During the yearly “Direct Line” broadcast of April 14, 2016, President Putin said, in respect of the statements of the Chechen head Ramzan Kadyrov about Russian opposition members constituting “enemies of the people”, that “extreme actions or radical statements regarding opponents do not lead to greater stability in the country”. The President also said that he holds partial responsibility for such public statements—something interpreted by many commentators as recognition of the negative consequences of culturally intolerant rhetoric (and intensification thereof). Indeed, such neotraditionalist rhetoric directly contradicts the recognition by the Russian state of the important role of culture as an integrating factor for a diverse, multinational and multiconfessional Russian society—a contradiction that gives rise to a split in the public consciousness and in certain institutional processes. *Bref*, not only does the rhetoric not correspond to the complexity of contemporary Russian society, which cannot be reduced to a handful of common “traditional values”, but it also serves



to disorient society and government elites, while doing little to help solve the cultural policy challenges articulated by the state.

### WHAT'S TO BE DONE?

First, the values orientation of cultural policy, as articulated by President Putin in several speeches, including in his 2013 Valdai Club speech and his 2013 Address to the Federal Assembly, is not only controversial for a diverse and multinational Russian society but indeed runs contrary to article 13.1 of the Constitution, which recognises the “ideological diversity” of the country. This values-driven posture should be reversed. Having said this, a purely technocratic-neutral cultural policy and posture can also be very disorienting to workers of the cultural sector, creating a values vacuum. It is therefore appropriate to emphasise values that are actually common to all citizens—for instance, values related to, or rooted in, the Russian Constitution. And if the present course towards the “sovereignisation” of Russia must endure over the long term, then the recasting of the values orientation of cultural policy could more appropriately be called “constitutional patriotism”.

Second, the state’s interest in culture as one of its strategic priorities should be affirmed through genuine legal and institutional changes (including legislation to open the Russian cultural sphere to charitable activity), as well as through significant increases in funding aimed at the modernisation of state cultural policy and cultural life in the country in general.

Third, there is a need for institutional reorganisation of the cultural sector in order to make the infrastructure of the institutions of culture commensurate in form and content with the demand implicit in the massive cultural life of the country. If, as mentioned, the libraries, museums, houses of culture, theatres and other cultural institutions inherited from the USSR are predisposed to the reproduction of erstwhile (ideological and propagandistic) functions, then what is required is a fundamental reorganisation of the internal structure and administrative methods of these institutions and affiliated networks, including a review of the statistical representation of the Russian cultural sector and a general renewal of personnel and talent in the sphere.

Fourth, a qualitative renewal of expertise and research in respect of Russian culture and cultural policy more generally is required. This should include strong knowledge and appreciation of the considerable “grey area” processes and practices in the national cultural sphere.

Fifth and finally, the constitutional obligation to preserve the country’s historical and cultural heritage should be met through institutional and legal measures that help to stimulate or incentivise public-private partnerships and volunteerism in Russian civil society.

### NOTES

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