# The Cultural is Political: Introduction

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In the last decade, culture and art have become arenas of forceful political controversy in Russia. The state's ongoing engagement with culture and art, which serves as the context for this book, coincided with the conservative shift that took place after the winter protests of 2011–2012 (Suslov & Uzlaner 2019). Provoked by the controversial results of the parliamentary elections and by Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency after an interim term as prime minister in 2008–2012, the winter protests demonstrated a new political engagement among liberal intellectuals and creative professionals (Beumers et al. 2017). In response to these events, including the performance and subsequent sentencing of the feminist punk group Pussy Riot, the Russian parliament passed a number of laws and policy documents geared toward regulating future cultural output, for example the "Framework for a State Policy of Culture" (2014) (Jonson 2019), the "falsification of history" law (2014) (Kolstø 2019) and amendments to the "Law on the Russian Language" (2014) (Gorham & Weiss 2016/17). This turn to conservative politics was accompanied by a new emphasis on "traditional values and morality" (Østbø 2017; Sharafutdinova 2014); regulations were imposed on obscene language in cinema, theatre, music, and books (Lunde 2017), as well as on public discussions and expressions of gender and sexuality through the "gay propaganda law," which made certain books and performances strictly 18+ (Mortensen 2016; Hill 2019). The state's renewed interest in culture increased even more after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and "culture" became a chief concern in the security doctrine (2015). The most recent expression of this cultural turn is the 2020 recruitment of prominent cultural

figures, among them prose writer Zakhar Prilepin and musician Sergei Shnurov, for tasks such as formulating constitutional amendments and leading a political party. The chapters by Jardar Østbø, Ulrich Schmid and Kåre Johan Mjør in this book shed new light on various aspects of the Russian state's involvement in the cultural field.

The Russian state mobilizes culture as one of its legitimation and security strategies (Østbø 2017; Bækken & Enstad 2020). The authorities' renewed attempts to influence culture are reminiscent of, yet in many aspects quite different from, the Soviet system, where culture played a central role in shaping state ideology. In the USSR artists were dependent on government institutions, and almost all works of art underwent a multilevel censorship process. The Russian government currently lacks the resources for this kind of large-scale, top-down micromanaging, while new information technologies have further complicated the state's attempts to control culture. Russian society, and especially representatives of the cultural field, are well versed in global art trends and rely on new media to connect with their audiences in Russia and abroad. As a result, today the Russian government has to make use of different economic and social incentives. Many of these benefits involve patron relationships between individual artists and state actors; the government hence resorts to overt repression only in rare cases. Moreover, while so-called traditional values serve as one of Putin's legitimation strategies, the regime relies on a hybrid ideology which must adapt to survive and is therefore constantly subject to change (Chen 2016, 68). Despite its stated conservatism, this chameleon ideology at times appeals to both the far right and the far left in its opposition to Western liberalism (Laruelle 2020, 123). This cultural condition becomes a rich field of ambiguity and contradictions, as illustrated in Jardar Østbø and Kåre Johan Mjør's contributions.

The growing political engagement on the part of writers, filmmakers, musicians or artists to some extent corresponds to an increased mobilization and pressure from the Russian state. At the same time, the emergent significance of artistic practices seems to reflect the gradual disappearance of participatory politics in contemporary Russia. Jacques Rancière argues that in such situations art can function as a substitute for the shrinking role of collective politics: art can "appear as a space of refuge for dissensual practice" (Rancière 2010, 153). Rancière highlights the role of cultural forms to challenge established truths and ideologies, scruti-

nizing the intersections between ethical, aesthetic and political commitment in art. Whereas established political ideologies are viewed as representing a form of consensus, art, Rancière argues, typically contributes to some questioning of this "consensus," representing "dissensual" forces in society. An essential premise for a productive understanding of the "dissensual" capacity of art is, however, art's inherent ambiguity, which renders any reductive reading inadequate. For Jacques Rancière, too, ambiguity is a significant artistic outcome, given that "artworks can produce effects of dissensus precisely because they neither give lessons nor have any destination" (Rancière 2010, 148), an idea also found in Kant's aesthetics, which calls for a "purposiveness without purpose." Art somehow functions, it disrupts, engages and disengages, but it has no teleological endpoint, conclusion or clear-cut purpose. While art's ambiguity is often taken to emphasize the autonomous status of the aesthetic (Adorno 1969, Lotman 1970), the political turn in contemporary Russian culture has reinforced art's societal commitment. At the same time, the very distance of art from social life (autonomy) is what makes its critical stance (politics) possible (Bürger 1974). The chapters by Stehn Aztlan Mortensen and Ingunn Lunde suggest how such different writers as Vladimir Sorokin and Sergei Lebedev position themselves in this landscape.

Following the developments in Russian cultural policies of the last decade, recent scholarship has scrutinized the conservative cultural shift initiated by the Russian state and explored cases of cultural protest decrying recent political repressions (Jonson 2015; Beumers et al. 2017; Erofeev & Jonson 2018; Turoma et al. 2018; Bernsand & Törnquist-Plewa 2019; Wijermars 2019). The present volume expands this line of inquiry by including a variety of artistic and communicative practices, belonging neither to conservative nor protest culture per se. Even seemingly apolitical works of art may challenge social norms and ideological stances, thus contributing to the ongoing negotiation between the state's cultural policies and a variety of practices within the cultural field.

The volume pays substantial attention to new forms of online communication and practice. Since the early 2010s the Internet has become a new frontier for cultural and political contestation (Zvereva 2020). Both the state and independent cultural actors use digital technologies in innovative and creative ways. New media allow for both active state participation and the creation of an independent cultural sphere that is

more open to political debate and prone to challenging state-promoted conservative gender and sexuality norms. Social media platforms do not exist in isolation but become more and more incorporated and connected to the traditional media. Especially notable is the new media's ability to create viral campaigns and public outrage, as demonstrated in the chapters by Dinara Yangeldina and Irina Anisimova. Various forms of online participation, often characterized by anonymity and trolling, can result in a high degree of ambiguity, which requires nuanced readings and interpretations, as shown in the chapter by Johanne Kalsaas.

The book as a whole brings together assessments of Russian cultural policies, political ideologies and intellectual trends with case studies on Russian literature, film, rap and memory culture.

Jardar Østbø's contribution scrutinizes Russia's paradoxical "transgressive conservatism"—a preoccupation with state sovereignty and order, on the one hand, and a willingness and ability to transgress norms and regulations, on the other. By combining theoretical approaches from cultural theory and political science, Østbø argues that the phenomenon of transgressive conservatism is rooted in Russia's experience of neoliberal reforms in the anarchic 1990s and the subsequent restoration of order, which draws on criminal culture and methods. In this process the notion of cultural sovereignty has become increasingly important, leading to growing tensions between nonconformist artists and the establishment.

Ulrich Schmid's chapter delves deeper into the cultural politics of today's Russia, analysing how cultural and historical narratives serve as legitimation strategies for the current political order in its endeavours to stabilize the Russian state. He examines the recent debates on constitutional amendments (2020), arguing that the interrelationship between state and society is moving from a legal project to a cultural one. Applying sociologist Piterim Sorokin's notion of an "ideational truth system" to the current Russian state of affairs, Schmid analyses three examples of state-sponsored film projects and shows how they reproduce this system.

The Russian state's cultural policy has a pronounced geopolitical dimension, expressed, for example, in the concept of "Russian civilization." Kåre Johan Mjør's chapter examines the interrelationship between the Russian state and social institutions. Drawing on Samuel Greene and Graeme Robertson's conceptualization of this relationship as the *co-construction of power*, Mjør studies the topical idea of Russia as a (separate)

civilization as articulated in one particular segment of society: academia. He analyses the activities of two major academic institutions, tracing how the multiple meanings and trajectories of current Russian civilizationism are reflected in academic discourses. While the examined cases largely pass themselves off as affirmative, reproductive responses to official ideology, Mjør identifies ambiguities in the material that have the potential to create tensions or even destabilize official hegemonic ideas of Russian civilizationalism.

In recent years, rap has become one of the most diverse, dynamic, and popular music genres in Russia. Due to its appeal, the government has tried to co-opt rap artists to bolster their youth support and, as a result, scholars tend to view Russian rap through the pro-Putin/anti-Putin lens (see, for example, Ewell 2017; Denisova & Herasimenka 2019). In contrast to this approach, Dinara Yangeldina's contribution illustrates the ideological and cultural complexity of the Russian rap scene. The chapter discusses a recent conflict between famous US rapper Talib Kweli and Russian hip hop artists that unfolded across different social media platforms and even received some coverage on Russian television channels. The conflict began when a Russian rapper responded to Kweli's discussion of white privilege on Twitter. Yangeldina contextualizes this explosive conflict within broader geopolitical and theoretical questions, such as the cultural mistranslation of "race," the recovery of Cold War rhetoric in Russia and the US, and new forms of potentially subversive online actions which can both contest and reinforce power hierarchies.

The Russian government sees television and cinema as an important tool to control public opinion (Wijermars 2019, 3) and invests significant financial resources in the production of high-budget series and films. However, as Irina Anisimova demonstrates in her chapter, even these supposedly safe productions have the potential to result in public controversy. The study shows that, in the absence of broad public debates of sensitive topics surrounding the Soviet past and ethnic tensions, even popular culture such as the recent miniseries *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* can become the cause of intense debate across different media. While the multiple controversies surrounding the TV series illustrate diverse views on history and identity, the combative style of these debates is indicative of the style of outrage in Russian public discourses. At the same time, Anisimova argues, the discussion of the series allowed the opportunity

to express opinions that seldom appear in print and social media. This is especially true of Tatar historical accounts.

Johanne Kalsaas' contribution continues the topic of online debates, zooming in on the relationship between ongoing political conflict and cultural memory in digital spaces. World War II has a particular significance for Russian national identity and is instrumentalized by the Russian state. Examining the debates on the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Northern Norway by the Red Army that took place on a selection of online platforms, Kalsaas shows the fruitfulness of conceptualizing Russian digital cultural production along the lines of consensual and dissensual forces in society, highlighting in particular how notions of peripherality, border identities and regional belonging provide insight into how culture and politics interact on the Russian-language Internet.

In imperial Russia and the USSR, literature became a sphere of state intervention and ideological debates. Even today, in a time of dwindling readerships, Russian literature still holds great social and cultural prestige. Stehn Aztlan Mortensen's contribution focuses on Vladimir Sorokin, a writer who has done much to deconstruct and revitalize the canonical roles of "Russian literature" and "Russian writer," thereby challenging traditional cultural discourses. Contesting media and genre boundaries between performance, painting, film, television and writing, Mortensen's chapter examines these trends in Sorokin's recent short story, "White Square," which underscores the tension between the political and aesthetic significance of art. Using Derrida, Mortensen reads Sorokin's story as a meditation on Kazimir Malevich's famous *Belyi kvadrat* (1919), as a violent reframing of avant-garde aesthetics in a fictionalized hyperreality. Simultaneously, the story can be understood as a deranged allegory of Russian television and its nationalist propaganda presented as empty entertainment. Mortensen notes how the story at once begs to be read politically, while at the same time it resists such satirical and referential treatment.

Because of the lack of broad, public processes of discussing the totalitarian past, the various forms of art, not least literature, have become important tools of memory practice in post-socialist Russia (Etkind 2013). Ingunn Lunde's chapter examines Sergei Lebedev's novel *Oblivion* (*Predel zabveniia*, 2015) against the background of contemporary Russian history politics and memory culture. *Oblivion* investigates the meaning of the

Gulag legacy in contemporary Russia. Lunde shows how Lebedev's poetic strategies amount to an incarnation and transformation of the past in the protagonist's body and mind, where, in particular, elements of the grotesque help convey the nature and dimension of this past, and overcome the abyss between the past and the present, between the "undead" and the living. Lebedev's poetics of memory, Lunde argues, is solidly grounded in the perspective of today, exploring any individual's obligation towards society's collective efforts to come to terms with its past.

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*Note on transliteration*
We use the Library of Congress system of transliteration for Russian words and names. This goes even for proper names that are more widely known in alternative spellings, such as Ulitskaia (Ulitskaya) and El'tsin (Yeltsin), with the exception of names of people who use alternative spellings themselves.

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