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Title: Urgent and consolidated actions are needed to stop the war in Ukraine

Year: 2022

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Romashko, T. (2022, 7.3.2022). Urgent and consolidated actions are needed to stop the war in Ukraine. At the Well Blog. <https://koneensaatio.fi/en/stories/urgent-and-consolidated-actions-needed-to-stop-the-war-in-ukraine/>

STORIES
AT THE WELL BLOG
07.03.2022

Urgent and consolidated actions needed to stop the war in Ukraine



Demonstration against the war in Ukraine in Jyväskylä, Finland. Agnieszka Erdt, Postdoctoral Researcher University of Jyväskylä; Anja Onali, Postdoctoral Researcher, Swedish School of Social Science, University of Helsinki; Tatiana Romashko, Doctoral Researcher University of Jyväskylä.

This exact week, the Russian propaganda machine is shutting down all alternative sources of information and public forms of expressing disagreements with the Russian government. There is no freedom of speech. By the newly introduced laws people might be imprisoned up to 15 years for naming the current situation in Ukraine as a war, writes Tatiana Romashko, Doctoral Researcher at University of Jyväskylä.

It is no surprise that many Russians still refer to the war in Ukraine as a “military operation” aimed at expelling neo-Nazis from Ukraine. In Russia, this war is portrayed as a mission to establish “peace” in Ukraine and “self-defence” from Western aggression. Everything is turned upside down. Unfortunately, this is the key story. It comes from the Kremlin as a kind of doctrine that is not questioned and cannot be challenged, because even the mention of such words as “war” and “attack on Ukraine” is punished by the state supervisory bodies.

A few days ago, anthropologist and folklorist Alexandra Arkhipova from the Moscow State University for the Humanities shared information about the impending propaganda campaign in Russian schools across the country. Guidelines are distributed among teachers and school administrations. The instructions are a stark imitation of Putin’s address to the people and his other speeches, where he portrays the war in Ukraine as a peaceful military operation ([Mediazona 2022](#)).

To counter such outright lies and misinformation, many public organizations, citizen associations, and professional communities are committing themselves to make a political statement on this crisis (f.e., [Stop the war petition 2022](#) or [Putin’s war against Ukraine must be stopped!](#)).

However, I believe that a more consolidated position of public organisations, professional communities, and official institutions around the world is needed on the issue of recognizing the actions of the Government of the Russian Federation as criminal in precise and clear terms. This is a war and there are no other interpretations of this crime.

First, it should be recognized that the military operations of the Russian army in the sovereign state of Ukraine are not legal and, in any way, justified. This is a war, and this is a crime of the Russian government, which unleashed genocide on the European continent.

Secondly, there should be a clear demand for a ceasefire and killing in Ukraine. The Kone Foundation as well as other Finnish Foundations and Universities can be the voice of its critically thinking community. These public institutions can be a force to carry democratic voices from the bottom up to the decision-making level and put pressure on public, educational and cultural counterparts in Russia.

Third, we must bring to the fore those research findings that counter and deconstruct the Russian government's essentialist claims about so-called "traditional values," "spiritual bonds," "Russian civilizationalism," and the doctrine of the "Russian world."

For instance, my doctoral study is concerned with the transformation of Russian cultural policy from its relatively liberal, progressive and outward character in the 1990s to its current conservative, reactionary and inward character since around 2012. I approach the explanation of the shift by developing a critical post-foundational framework, which draws on cultural studies, cultural policy studies and political science. Special attention is devoted to the complexity of relations between governmental rationalities and administrative techniques, as well as legislative proposals and institutions, which together, I affirm, constitute a specific governmental logic of cultural policy.

By locating cultural policy in the structure and organisation of the Russian state and government, my PhD explains that shift as a political transformation that aims to change the culture in Russia to support an 'authoritarian democratic' political regime through the production of a new 'common sense'. In doing so, I treat the conservative phase as a part of a broader political strategy aimed at establishing Russian national unity based on essentialist notions of Russian culture and traditional values condensed in the figure of 'The People'. Consequently, previous efforts to expand cultural rights and social equalities were rapidly replaced by conservative priorities to preserve the state sovereignty and social stability by the strengthening of 'spiritual bonds' and protection of the 'Russian genetic code'.

Hence, my thesis examines the recent cultural policy evolution with reference to the political, institutional and legislative context through which the policy is developed, and its political subjects are established. The hypothesis of my PhD is the claim that the formation of contemporary Russian cultural policy is framed by a conflict derived from the work of Michel Foucault (2008) between a logic of sovereignty which embodies 'the people' in the President as the source of 'power over' or rule, and a logic of governmentality as the source of 'power to which acts on a population in order to manage and transform it.

In the Russian case, these logics coexist with the sovereign becoming dominant after the empowerment of the presidential apparatus and reduction of civil rights. My argument is that Russian sovereignty relies on the apparatus of governmentality to change a population into a people. I attempt to demonstrate

the contribution of cultural policy to this process which has become increasingly organised around claims for Russian values against Western and European cultures.

However, I argue that this is not an automatic process but a 'hegemonic' one. That is to say, it requires political leadership. This approach is derived from Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony and its development in the work of Stuart Hall (1985; 1986) and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001). These authors argue that the success or failure of hegemony is contingent and relies on the formation of a 'common sense' which organises relations of coercion and consent as part of the taken for granted experience of ordinary life. Culture is central to this process. Therefore, cultural policy acquires a strategic importance.

Most of my Ph.D. thesis is devoted to the events after 2012, when Russian cultural policy has been shaped by an increased State centralization and censorship and has been characterized by the discourses of bordering and separation. This development marks a shift from a previous focus on interaction and co-existence. It is usual to explain these changes as simply the effects of sovereign decision-making or Russia's path dependence in post-communist transformation.

On the one hand, such explanations do not account for the formation of the conditions in which such a decision can occur, or historical conjunction might come about, therefore, hence, they rule out any considerations of universally optimal policy interventions from the oppositional forces. On the other hand, such speculations coming from the academic and political community must be taken into account when considering a hegemonic aspect of Russian state cultural policy. These discourses demonstrate consent of political, intellectual and cultural elites with a state-centred approach in cultural policy formation that has been introduced by Putin's conservative government since 2012.

The most influential of them is a discourse of cultural uniqueness of Russia that is associated with its territorial location between the West and the East – the European liberal-individualistic and Asian conservative-collectivistic cultural paradigm. Within this perspective, Russia is seen as a successor of both European and Asian traditions that has chosen its own sovereign path towards a so-called 'Russian civilisation', which is based on spirituality, morality and conservative values.

This strand of discourse derives from the philosophical works of Nikolay Danilevsky (2011), Aleksandr Dugin (2004) and Georgy Shchedrovitsky (2000) and adopts such concepts as 'Eurasianism' and the 'Russian World'. Unlike the geo-spatial notion of Eurasianism, the concept of the Russian world is attributed to a 'network structure of large and small communities that think and speak Russian' (Shchedrovitsky 2000), this way the latter embraces not only post-Soviet territories but the whole world where people speak Russian.

In the mainstream academic discourse, these concepts often overlap, producing a naturalised and depoliticised ground for discussion of the 'Russian civilisational way' and its security strategies against the Western insult of the traditional values. For instance, a collective Resolution (2018) of the scientific conference at the State Duma proposed that 'the civilizational theory (primarily based on the Russian civilizational scientific school) should be used as a scientific basis for ensuring state policy in the fields of culture, education, national and youth policy, and international humanitarian cooperation'. These ideas were reinforced by Russian culturology, which as Laruelle (2004: 28) pointed out, in many respects advocates of 'cultural essentialism' and critics of Europe-driven liberalism and individualism.

The hegemony in my thesis accounts for the production of conservatism and a conservative-paternalistic take on cultural policy in Russian academia, zooming on the top-cited academic papers in culturology (Russian cultural studies), humanities and socio-economic studies published in 2014-2021. The prevalence of the conservative stance in Russian intellectual circles brings together compliant scholars, university teachers, managers of cultural institutions as well as officials of cultural and educational administrations.

Among the most seminal and highly cited papers are texts of former Cultural Minister Vladimir Medinsky, his Vice Deputy Vladimir Aristarkhov, economist Valentina Muzychuk, and philosopher Olga Astafieva. The key argument of this official or hegemonic discourse is that the current development of state cultural policy is positive due to the emphasis on the 'social mission of culture' and its security agenda towards the cultural sovereignty of Russia.

In my latest research paper (Romashko under review), I am investigating the case of constructing a 'social mission on culture' and its functioning as a focal point of Kremlin's take on cultural policy. In doing so, I explain the significance of the cultural mission, its genealogy, and implications for Russian cultural policy in respect to human rights and freedoms and cultural diversity. The specificity of Putin's project is to act on the Russian population in order to

constitute it as a people, to use governmentality to establish sovereignty by acting on and modifying the conduct and subjectivity of Russian citizens. In other words, to establish a people that can be subject to sovereignty.

The argument of my paper is that Russian cultural policy is formulated as a tool of that hegemonic project through the subordination of the democratic and legal institutions of the Russian Federation to the demands of the Kremlin. Putin replaces the constitutional rule of law with presidential rule through law in order to transform the individual personality of Russian citizens as a population into subjects of sovereignty as a people. For the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union, culture was established as a tool for creating the Russian citizen as a 'unitary subject' (Hall 1988).

The unitary subject 'Russian people' does already exist (f.i., see: [Levinson 2022](#)). This is a subject of Putin's imagination about Russia's peaceful military operation in Ukraine that aims at eliminating the threat from the Western countries (military threat from NATO and cultural threat from Western and European countries). Such a political subjectivity of the majority of Russians indeed provides a background for justification of the war in Ukraine.

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