Can Cultural Studies Help Us Understand Russia’s Political Regime?

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In my presentation, I addressed the place of cultural studies in the study of contemporary Russia. Cultural studies emerged in the 1960s in Birmingham, where Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and Edward Thompson were studying the English working class. From the cultural studies perspective, “culture” should be understood less as an elite-level construction than as an object of consumption and re-creation by ordinary citizens. While political science and cultural studies have entered into a dialogue in order to renew our approach to “politics” in Europe and the United States, research done on Russia’s “politics” remains largely divided into disciplines. Political science works on Russia typically focus on typologizing the “nature” of the regime—a discussion that centers on how to adjectivize the Putin regime: authoritarian, illiberal, patronal, etc.—electoral politics at the federal and regional level, articulation with the business/oligarchic world, and the repression/manipulation/cooptation of different forms of opposition. Yet without integrating cultural studies, our analysis of the Putin regime and the roots of its legitimacy remains fragmented and biased.

We are still missing comprehensive studies on popular culture, cultural practices, and consumption in Putin’s Russia, as well as how these interact to legitimize—or delegitimize—the regime. Even more visibly, we lack (with some noteworthy exceptions) works on underground, provincial, criminal, youth, and working-class subcultures and their everyday cultural realities. Such studies would likely offer us unique insights in several areas: the regime’s ability to generate cultural consensus, the fact that the younger generation is the most pro-Putin age cohort ever, and the massive depoliticization and indifference of average citizens—who nevertheless remain supportive of the status quo in many respects.

In this short paper, I explored several components of Russia’s popular culture that provide us with some grids of interpretation for capturing the Putin regime’s “resonance” with society, such as pop music and commercial branding. Cultural studies allow us to avoid a Kremlin-centric, Putin-centric analysis and instead to understand that the core of the consensus is cultural, not political—a trend that the traditional tools of political science cannot capture. Cultural studies also help us go beyond the surface to see that Russia may be “stagnating” politically, but society and cultural life are alive, dynamic, and innovative.

The Putin consensus is based on deeply rooted popular culture that validates the main ideologemes of the regime:

1/a nostalgia for the symbols of the Soviet Union, which have often been emptied of their contents and become a “brand” for a Russian society now adept at consumerism;

2/the violent and grotesque encounter of the 1990s between Westernized decadent elites, their gushing wealth and poor-taste glamour, on the one hand, and an impoverished provincial, blue-collar working class unable to access the long-awaited West, abandoned by the state, and shaped by multiple social traumas—alcoholism, drugs, prostitution, single mothers, and unemployment—in a deindustrializing world, on the other;

3/the refusal, by both the generation that lived through the 1990s and their children, Millennials, to dream about the West that came to them, to see in it a model to reach out to, engaging instead in a
quest for a new Russianness that is more genuine and more rooted, but at the same intimately global in its medium and its postmodernity.

These ideologemes may be diffused by state narratives and Kremlin-backed media, yet what makes them relevant to a large part of Russian society is that they are produced not by top-down pressure, but by a grassroots culture that is mainstream—and therefore commercial, market-oriented, entrepreneurial. This Russian popular culture does not follow “the Kremlin's orders” in deciding what is meaningful for it. On the contrary, it is the Presidential Administration that tries to capture this Zeitgeist and co-opt it in its favor.