From the SelectedWorks of Diana Kontsevaia

Spring 2013

Symbolic Analysis of Authoritarian Control

Diana B Kontsevaia

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/diana_kontsevaia/5/
Symbolic Analysis of Authoritarian Control:

Assessing the pulse of the contemporary Russian state

By: Diana Kontsevaia
260360744
ANTH 480

Joint-Honors Thesis
Department of Anthropology
McGill University
Montreal, QC

November 30th 2012
Supervisor: Jérôme Rousseau
Abstract:

Societies are structured by everyday symbolic meanings created by (and for) the population. The state is most favorably positioned to deploy their version of symbolic content. Authoritarian states especially have access to many fields of influence, such as mass media. The control of mass media allows the state unparalleled control over the way citizens conceptualize their society and events that surround them. By applying these ideas, the paper analyzes the symbolic content of the contemporary Russian society. While the symbolic structures have changed drastically since the USSR disintegration, the state continues to create symbols that provide legitimacy to its power. From deploying new capitalist content, to limiting the political awareness of its citizens, the state is able to affect the way the population reacts to politically charged events. Analyzing current symbolic structures also allows for an explanation of recent controversies, such as the Pussy Riot trial, its outcome and reception.

Contents
Abstract: ........................................................................................................................................................ 2
Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 3
Symbolic Production and Symbolic Control .................................................................................................. 5
Symbolic Capital and the Creation of Symbols ............................................................................................... 5
Bourdieu’s Fields ....................................................................................................................................... 8
Authoritarian control in the journalistic field ............................................................................................... 9
Symbolic Development in Post-Soviet Russia ............................................................................................... 11
Overview of Russian Broadcast Media ......................................................................................................... 11
Symbolic Production after USSR Disintegration ......................................................................................... 14
A whole new system of meaning: Symbols from the state ........................................................................... 15
State-Maintained Symbols .......................................................................................................................... 18
Imposing limits on creation of unfavorable symbols .................................................................................... 23
Pussy Riot and Symbolic Production in Contemporary Russia ................................................................ 26
The Russian Population and the re-creation of Symbolic Capital ............................................................... 30
Conclusion ................................................................................................................................................... 31
References: ................................................................................................................................................. 33
“It is in the realm of symbolic production that the grip of the state is felt most powerfully.”


“By understanding the causal factors behind changes in symbolic politics, we can understand the processes and the likelihood of...regime change.”

– Eric McGlinchey (2011)

Introduction

Authoritarian countries are often portrayed as somehow backwards in western media. The question then arises, why are they backwards? Surely, it is not the people who live in these countries that make it backwards. The answer must be, then, that it is the institutions that are somehow different in liberal countries as opposed to the authoritarian ones. However, an institutional answer is still not enough to explain why the citizens of those countries do not simply create other, more democratic, institutions. There must be something that goes on that is much deeper, perhaps something less tangible that explains the degree of state control over its population. This project rose out of these musings, as well as out of the simple desire to, as Eric McGlinchey put it, “assess the pulse of authoritarianism” (McGlinchey 2011:134). To truly asses the “pulse” of an authoritarian state control, it is imperative to pay attention to much more than institutions and their function within society. State control, while being coercive, is also in constant search for legitimization from the population. As much as it seeks to control the population, it also aims to pacify it. To that extent it deploys many different control mechanisms. Specifically pertinent to the understanding of why people do not simply create the “ideal” institutions is paying attention to the symbolic structures of the society. The “pulse,” after all, consists of a continual string of tiny beats that combine together. Similarly, symbolic structures
can be seen as producing little pieces that eventually become big enough to construct other parts of society.

Societal structures, therefore, can be viewed as being created through combining several smaller symbols into bigger symbolic compounds that inform a person’s everyday existence. Although symbols can be produced by anyone, from individuals to families to schools, there is overarching symbolic material that creates the basis for how society operates. This material makes the world make sense. The state governments and state leaders are especially well poised for creating widespread symbolic material, since they have access to things like education and revenue. One of the most important tools a state can use to create and deploy its symbolic content is by using mass media (Chesebro & Bertelsen 1996:51). While symbolic content is spread through the mass media in liberal countries as well, an authoritarian country is much more likely to use media to spread very specific type of content.

Authoritarian governments operate not only through the systems of direct control, therefore, but they also strive for the monopoly on controlling symbols. These governments will deploy forms of symbolic control in order to legitimize their rule. They are the actors best positioned to deploy their own controlling conceptualization of the world. Furthermore, symbolic capital, once worked into the social fabric is much harder to dismantle and forget—suggesting an answer as to why people do not simply build their “ideal” institutions.* The purpose of this paper is thus to explicate the dynamics of symbolic control in authoritarian regimes. Specifically, the paper will investigate the symbolic structure of the contemporary Russian Federation. Since Russia is a fairly broad topic on its own, the concentration will be on the symbolic content produced by the media (mostly broadcast media), as one of the currently and most accessible

* I am not trying to imply that ideal institutions exist; the use of “ideal” in this Introduction only serves to illustrate that people are not free to do whatever they want and that they are, in fact, bound by their social surroundings.
forms of communication with the Russian population. Through attention to the Russian media discourse it is possible to understand the symbolic control of the Russian state by paying attention to the symbolic structures that constitute the daily reality of many Russians.

The argument is presented in two parts, although themes of authoritarianism, Russia, and mass media permeate the entire paper. The first half of the paper relies heavily on Pierre Bourdieu’s theories as it explores symbolic production in relation to the state. In this section, the state creation of symbolic capital and differences between direct and symbolic forms of control are first explained. Then, the paper examines the role of symbolic capital in different fields, and specifically the role of symbols in an authoritarian setting. The second half of the paper analyzes the symbolic content of contemporary Russian media, looking at the dynamics between the media and the state and their impact on the Russian society as a whole. This section specifically examines mass media in the post-socialist period after the disintegration of the USSR in 1991. It focuses on the way the state used media to produce new symbols, recreate historical ones, and limit unfavorable symbols to ensure its continued legitimacy. Finally, using the current symbolic structures permeating throughout the Russian society (many of which were propagated by the Russian state); the controversy behind the sentencing of the members of the punk rock group Pussy Riot is analyzed. The recent changes and the pulse of the Russian society are thus observed through the production of symbolic content.

Symbolic Production and Symbolic Control

Symbolic Capital and the Creation of Symbols

Societies are structured in a specific way to prevent complete chaos. Structure implies an inherent hierarchy and some sort of system of control. This paper will distinguish between two types of control: direct and symbolic. Direct control can generally be traced through an obvious
political or economic relationship. For example, if a regime purchases a media station, it will directly control its internal affairs, pay its taxes, and profit from its revenues. Direct control comprises the spaces in society that are controlled by certain authorities. Symbolic control is less tangible. It does not concern itself with direct ownership of property or profits, though it can affect both. In contrast to direct control, symbolic control determines the way a society conceives of certain things. Relying on Pierre Bourdieu’s theories, symbolic control can influence what people are more likely to agree or approve of by structuring how people think (Bourdieu 1998:32-33). There is no one permanent “authority” or source of symbolic control, though certain actors are certainly better positioned to employ this source of power (Bourdieu 1998:38).

At the most basic level, societies become characterized by the symbols that are produced in everyday life. Certain symbols will have more impact depending on who (and with what resources) is propagating them. Symbols become the “structures of structures” of societies (Bourdieu 1990:52); they are the way people conceive of events, which then inform how these events should be interpreted. While symbols can be consciously chosen by the population, ultimately, the structures that are formed are comprised of several layers, as different agents create different symbols. The question then becomes who creates the symbols that are widely available and consequently entrenched in society? Whichever actor is able to successfully deploy their symbols, therefore, can potentially influence the way people conceive of things, and thus influence what is and is not socially acceptable. The symbolic systems that are consequently produced aggregate into “classification systems built upon the fundamental logic of inclusion and exclusion” (Swartz 1997:84).
Politics and the institutions of the state most skillfully take advantage of the inclusion and exclusion capabilities of symbols in order to further their own goals. Notably, Bourdieu argued that the state is one of the best actors equipped to manipulate symbols (Bourdieu 1998:38). Since it has control over a considerable amount of different kinds of capital and as a result can regulate multiple fields, the state can deploy a considerable amount of symbolic capital because of the volume of venues it controls as opposed to a regular individual. In a sense, the “state has the monopoly on the legitimate physical and symbolic violence” (Bourdieu 1998:33). As a result of this monopoly, the state becomes a holder of “metacapital”, able to delegate its wishes onto others and granting power to other kinds of actors as it pleases (Bourdieu 1998:41).

When the state does succeed in accumulating enough “metacapital,” however, it can then begin to use it. Ideally, the political capital, capital that political bodies possess, will be used in the political field, the journalistic capital in the journalistic fields and so on. Symbolic capital differs from others because it is based on the properties created by other kinds of capital. It is most adapted to operating within the other fields. Symbolic capital is thus created after a value has been consistently given to it by other social agents (Bourdieu 1998:47). This is a tension that the state itself has to resolve: while producing legitimizing symbolic structures, it has to produce content that is still acceptable to the population. This will become more evident in the second portion of the paper with the state having to deploy new symbols, but also maintain historical continuity with what it means to be “Russian”. Nevertheless, using symbolic forms can help legitimatize power as certain values become accepted and thereafter maintained (Swartz 1997:92).

It is pertinent to note that to Bourdieu, the symbolic control by the state immediately amounted to symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1998:33), since control by the state is not a natural
way to negotiate meaning among the population. While symbolic control happens in every society and can be deployed by different actors, this paper will refer to symbolic control and symbolic violence as cases where the state is consciously manipulating the perceptions of its population. This can be done through coercive methods, but also through controlling other fields and their capital, thereby limiting production of alternative symbolic meanings. Both concepts essentially imply that the state has a hold on the production of meaning by other fields.

**Bourdieu’s Fields**

Specific forms of capital may be accumulated or used to influence different fields of activity (Bourdieu 1998:41). The fields are protected by a certain amount of capital that is needed prior entering or manipulating the field. For example, one cannot be a journalist without first understanding how a journalist behaves any more than one can immediately become a politician; the required social and cultural capitals must be possessed first (Bourdieu 2005 [1995]:30). Therefore, accumulating capital allows entry into different fields, which in turn allows manipulation (or development) of that field. Since the state has access to the most forms of capital, it would follow that it also has the most power of manipulation of various fields (Bourdieu 1998:34). In some instances, this includes not only the political or economic fields, but also the journalistic field. If the state co-opts the journalists, it gains control over the journalistic field. The journalistic field can have *political* or *economic* characteristics but it does not mean that it enters the political field. The fields are quite separate, yet in reality they must interact.

Bourdieu does not thoroughly explain the interaction between the political and journalistic fields (Benson 2005:93), though he does state that all are susceptible to the state and the distribution of symbolic capital. Rodney Benson (2005) notes the gap in interaction between
the journalistic and political fields left by Bourdieu. He resolves this dilemma by suggesting that while the state does have greater access to the fields, it exercises those powers in two distinct ways: either by being “restrictive” or by being “enabling”. An “enabling” political-journalistic relationship entails that the state actively tries to expand the discourses available to the public, through financial or technical support. “Restrictive” power, on the other hand, “limits access to or certain publication of information or opinion” (Benson 2005:93). In his discussion, Benson concentrates on two fairly democratic countries: France and the United States. France’s media may be enabling, as the state provides some funding for small but specialized newspapers. Yet it can also be restrictive in that certain practices are not tolerated, such as the violation of personal privacy laws (Benson 2005:94). Therefore, the state exerts its power onto the journalistic field by deploying either direct (economic) or more symbolic forms of control (appealing to the First Amendment of free speech, for example). The question then becomes, does the relationship between journalistic and political fields change, depending on the type of regime?

**Authoritarian control in the journalistic field**

Specifically in the case of authoritarian regimes, what is the difference in the use of symbolic power, given that the state (by definition) has more direct control over the other fields? Would a democratic government differ from an authoritarian government in its use of symbolic control?

According to Bourdieu, the mechanism of the state’s symbolic control is the same regardless of the nature of the state. Bourdieu would decidedly answer no to the above questions, since “for Bourdieu, the mechanisms of power delegation operate the same way in the totalitarian Soviet Union as in democratic France” (Kauppi 2004:328). Though power delegation
may operate the same way, is there a difference in the specific use of symbols to produce
different effects on the population?

Bourdieu’s discussion lacks such a differentiation. Bourdieu’s political fields operate
according to a binary logic. There are challengers and there are incumbents (Kauppi 2004:328).
The “political games” of the society then play out within this political field, between these two
groups. It is within this political field that political agents “attempt to monopolize the legitimate
means of manipulating the social world. They compete with journalists and social scientists in
the struggle for the “monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence” (Kauppi 2004:321). Imagining
the political field as binary, however, is problematic because it assumes that the incumbents do
have challengers in the first place. In authoritarian states, however, the challengers are exactly
what the political field is lacking.

Bourdieu would likely reply that the political incumbents exist in opposition to the rest of
the society. This would contradict his idea, however, that the political mechanism is such that the
“profane” are completely subjugated to the delegate (Kauppi 2004:328). In other words, the
people are assumed to willingly submit to the “state” power, while simultaneously being “the
opposition.” This contradiction is important to note, since it leaves room in Bourdieu’s theory of
symbolic violence for differentiation of regime type. Different types of states will have different
amounts of control over the population, depending on how strong or weak the “challengers” are
in the political field. If the challengers are weak, the government will possess much more
symbolic control over the population.

The symbolic control over mass media in a strong state can then be understood along the
relationship between its “restrictive” and “enabling” policy qualities. In an authoritarian state,
what is restricted is at the same time enabled by the government (and it is the only thing
enabled). This suggests that there can be “degrees” of state coercion. The journalistic field, then, interacts with other fields depending on the relationship between restrictive and enabling.

Examining the degree of state coercion in the journalistic fields (or the state’s media policy), clarifies the relationship between the journalistic and the political fields. Since media is the most effective way to reach the population, establishing this relationship is crucial to understanding how symbolic material is transmitted and what impressions the society is left with. To understand how state media can produce the “structure of structure” of the society, let us examine a case where the state has recently had to produce an altogether new set of symbols for the society to follow.

**Symbolic Development in Post-Soviet Russia**

“— What is the difference between Pravda (Truth) and Izvestiya (News)?
— There’s no news in Pravda and no truth in Izvestiya.”*

**Overview of Russian Broadcast Media**

The state’s capacity to produce symbols is witnessed most dramatically in the transformation of the Russian state. The disintegration of the USSR was not just the end of a communist state that created a need for the transition to a new form of government. The disintegration meant that the entrenched Soviet symbolic structures had to be discarded. Therefore, alongside the creation of the new government and a new economy, a whole set of new symbolic structures were produced, while old Soviet symbols either disappeared or changed.

The Russian government has always used the media as a tool to distribute its expectations to the rest of the population. While the state control of the media qualifies as a form of direct control, they also used their resources to distribute symbolic content to the population. The

* A Russian joke. Pravda and Izvestiya are two of the most read newspapers in Russia.
extreme of controlling media and transferring symbolic content was demonstrated during the Soviet Union, when the state media was used specifically as a means to deliver communist propaganda to the population. Culture was often designated to play an ideological role (Beumers 2005:10-11). Even after the disintegration of the USSR, however, the Russian Federation has persistently had trouble with independent media (Dunn 2008:42).

Following the disintegration of the USSR and Gorbachev’s glasnost’ policies, it is sometimes assumed that the media became free and liberal and continued to be so until Putin’s presidency. While the media did experience liberation compared to the previous regime’s policies, it did not remain independent for long. The Russian media can really only be considered the fourth estate during the period between 1990 and 1995 (Arutunyan 2009:42-43). By 1993, politicians realized that the ownership of the media played such a crucial role that they began competing over its control. In September 1993, during the parliamentary elections, popularly elected president Boris Yeltsin disbanded the elected parliament and shut down one of the primary broadcast towers in Ostankino during the deliberations. This was the first instance that the limited public understanding of what was actually happening and in turn triggered demands from the side of the elected parliament to limit presidential control (Arutunyan 2009:70). Ultimately, the parliament lost and presidential power strengthened. By December 1993, the first multiparty elections took place, during which the media played the central role. For the first time in seventy years, people could actually choose their political leaders. However in order to choose among candidates, the population turned to their televisions. As a result, creating a media persona became critical for politicians (Beumers 2005:16).

The fact that people had greater access to diversified information, however, was not yet proof that they had access to objective information. By 1996, the Russian media hit financial
problems and Russian oligarchs came to the rescue; the two biggest media owners became Boris Berezovky (who gained control of the channel ORT) and Vladimir Gusinsky (who bought NTV). The third largest channel, RTR, remained under the ownership of the state. ORT, NTV, and RTR are the most watched and accessible broadcast channels in Russia (Arutunyan 2009:18). These acquisitions, however, did not indicate that the information disseminated through the channels would be objective (not in the true “journalistic” sense anyway). The diversity of political opinions soon began to reflect the opinions of the channel owners themselves. As a result, between 1997 and 2000, “information wars” began between the two oligarchs as well as the government (Dunn 2008:46). Each controlled the flow of information as they saw fit and according to their own political views. When both oligarchs saw it as beneficial to support President Yeltsin in 1996, the puppets from NTV’s popular satirical show Kukly paid a visit to the most watched game show on ORT Pole Chudes (Wheel of Fortune) to endorse the President. The wars primarily resulted in Russian television becoming “hyper-politicized”, so that political coverage became akin to football games in Western Europe:

Whereas the outcome of a competition for ownership of television rights to football means merely that those who want to watch certain football matches have to pay money to a particular provider, monopoly ownership of political rights has serious consequences for the survival of functioning democracy (Dunn 2008:47).

The oligarchs were playing political football by sponsoring their own political opinions, not really facilitating the development of a truly free fourth estate. Eventually, the state realized that it had lost control over much of the media. Once Putin came to power in 2000, he slowly co-opted the Russian mass media back under the state’s influence, first by proclaiming that the oligarchs were “clever people” who learned how to manipulate people’s opinions through the mass media (Dunn 2008:52). Although the media was indeed previously under the influence of
the opinions of the oligarchs, there was still more plurality and freedom of expression than after the state acquired the channels.

The new limits to freedom of expression are best represented in what happened to NTV’s satirical humorous show *Kukly* (“puppets”). The show, based on a similar British concept, existed to directly criticize politicians and their decisions. After its episode called “Birth of Putin”, however, the creator Vladimir Shenderovich, faced increasing pressure to tone down his critical political messages (Shenderovich 2002:26-27). As Shenderovich, along with other journalists working for NTV, ignored the regime’s request, the state decided to take over the channel altogether (Shenderovich 2002:57). NTV was suddenly facing economic losses and was unable to pay back its governmental loan when the state requested it back in 2001 (Burrett 2008:80). As a result, the state took over the channel (using purely economic methods) and then quietly fired certain journalists and ended certain programs on the channel—including Shenderovich and his program *Kukly* (Dunn 2008:45). This became the end of any plurality on the Russian television, as most public channels were now owned by the Russian government.

**Symbolic Production after USSR Disintegration**

The Russian state’s increased control over the public broadcast media venues is indicative of its capacity to leave the political field and enter the journalistic field, while deploying specific symbolic capital. There are two ways to explore the change of symbolic structure in Russian society following the fall of the Soviet Union. The first is to pay attention to the new symbols transmitted through the media in the early 1990s as a result of the transition to capitalism and to the market economy. These symbols are what the state “enabled” the media to broadcast. The new attitudes towards capitalism allowed Russians to conceptualize their society
and identity differently than previously allowed by the Soviet state. The “enabled” symbols also comprise of historical symbols that were re-made by the Russian state to fit the contemporary society. These symbols, such as adhesion to the Orthodox Church and continued independence from the West, serve the purpose of creating a continuation between the state and the historical Russianness to provide more legitimacy and continuation of the regime.

The second set of symbols can be observed through understanding the current goals of the state. This will rely on observing what is “restricted” in the contemporary Russian media discourse, specifically which programs are not allowed and what information is “right” to have. Though the two mechanisms of symbolic production are somewhat chronologically related, some of the symbols created in the early 1990s still permeate Russian society today. Ultimately, both sets of symbols serve the same motivations, which are exactly what differentiates the contemporary Russia from a liberal state: the journalistic field is not independent but merely a tool of the political field. The symbols deployed using mass media are intended to legitimize the Russian regime, by limiting the population’s grasp on the political field, while also creating a new sense of what it means to be Russian. This discussion will end with an analysis of the recent trial of a punk rock group, with a focus on symbolic structures that the Russian state created to explain the trial and its outcome.

A whole new system of meaning: Symbols from the state

As mentioned above, after the disintegration of USSR, the symbolic structure of the communist ideological state had to be discarded. Instead, new symbolic capital was deployed in order to shift to a more commercialized culture. In short, “the new consumer culture leveled Russian culture with Western culture” (Beumers 2005:12). To this end, the Russian state, for the sake of transitioning to the new market economy, had to create a new consumer culture. As it
created new “capitalist subjects”, however, it also created a new conception of what it meant to be a Russian man and woman. As new conception of the new Russia was created, however, only certain symbols from the Soviet era were kept, while others, like the Stalin Myth, were completely disregarded.

As a result of breaking with the Soviet era, the post-communist elites used the mass media as a way of preparing people for the new market system. The most popular show in Russian media history is also the one that was designed to aid this transition: ORT’s *Pole Chudes* (literally: “Field of Miracles”). *Pole Chudes* is essentially a modified version of the Western “Wheel of Fortune” game show. It is based on a fairly simple scenario that has not been changed since the conception of the show over twenty years ago. Three contestants spin a large wheel and guess the letters of a phrase for prizes. Depending on which slot the wheel lands on, the contestants can take all of their prizes immediately, continue playing, or risk guessing the entire phrase. Since there are at least three ways to win a prize, this show offers a greater opportunity to win than its Western counterparts (Vassilieva & Bennett 2012:791). In this sense, it helps demonstrate the positive values of capitalism and legitimize consumerism: people should want things and should go out and buy them (Vassilieva & Bennett 2012:789). The real entertainment factor of the show, however, is not only the prizes won, but the gifts that the contestants bring with them to give to the beloved host Leonid Yakubovich, who has been the host of the show also since its conception. Today, the gifts have accumulated to the extent that an entire museum was opened to store them. The museum is now located in an exhibition hall that was used to showcase the “Achievements of the National Economy” during the Soviet years, ironically comparing the gifts with the achievements of the new economy (Vassilieva & Bennett
After twenty years of popularity and uninterrupted air time, the show succeeded in instilling the concern for money in the Russian population.

The promotion of certain symbols, such as the concern for money, then began to be internalized by the population. The way people conceived of the “Russian identity” began to change. As opposed to the previously “Soviet Man” and “Soviet Woman”, the increasing concern for money created the “New Russian Man” and “New Russian Woman” (Oushakine 2001:71). A survey conducted in April 1997 given to upper high school students researched the students’ perception of the society and their memories of the Soviet experience. The students’ responses repeatedly referred to money, acquisition of money, and consumption. “Consumption was seen as one of the most—if not the very most – important among the indicators of personal and social success” (Oushakine 2001:71). The New Russian man was successful, had a lot of money and could buy a lot of things. The New Russian Woman, on the other hand, did not have to work and had to only depend on the husband’s money. In this sense, the capitalist symbols deployed after the disintegration of the USSR (through TV shows like Pole Chudes), created an ideology of excess and formed the conception of the “New Russian”, where the ability to buy commodities was the prime indicator of success. Despite the obvious affinity to buy commodities, however, the survey also indicated that the “New Russians” were judged based on the quantity of the things they could buy, rather than the quality (Oushakine 2001:88). The emphasis on quantity is interpreted as a remnant of Soviet thrift: buy as many things as possible while you are able to.

While certain Soviet tendencies persist, however, other old communist symbols are beginning to weaken. Analyzing the “Stalin myth”, Boris Dubin (2010) argues that the population is becoming more apathetic towards its Soviet past. The “Stalin Myth” creates an idea
of Joseph Stalin as the savior of the country and the victor of the Great Patriotic War. Whereas before he was seen as the great national leader and inspired a large following, nowadays the myth is dying. Stalin is not only increasingly judged for his horrors, but there is also a fair amount of apathy towards him especially from the younger generation. Dubin sees a decline of desire to even know Soviet history within the current third generation post-Stalin population. This change suggests a symbolic shift in the population’s perceptions of what history to learn. Indeed, the current generation is not even curious about Stalin; people are completely disinterested (Dubin 2010:52-53). This may be because the state has abandoned the promotion of that myth in any shape whatsoever, as it began to deploy new symbolic structures to aid in the transition of the country.

**State-Maintained Symbols**

A complete break from Russia’s historical symbols was, of course, impossible. The change in the symbolic structure was bound to have an uncertain effect on the population. Whereas previously the Soviet population was defined by anti-capitalism and the importance of the communist spirit, the Russian identity now contained elements of capitalism. The New Russian Men and Women replaced the Soviet Women and Men. Thus, while searching for the new factors of the “Russian identity”, some old symbols were revitalized. Notably, the Orthodox Church was re-introduced as the “Russian” faith. The Russian identity also could not be completely conflated with the West, as is evident in the continued emphasis on Russia’s independence (or difference) from the West.

The Russian Orthodox Church has always been an inherent part of the Russian identity. Even Dostoevsky said that “to be Russian is to be Orthodox” (Simons 2004:8). It is no wonder, then, that after the disintegration of the USSR, the state once again relied on the Orthodox
Church for some symbolic capital. The fact that the Church possesses a small following, and therefore a fairly small amount of political capital, only further suggests that the Russian state is using the Orthodox Church in a more symbolic way rather than as a means to directly control the population (Mitrokhin 2004:235). While between 50-75% of the population identifies themselves as Russian Orthodox (Simons 2004:19), only approximately 10% of the population actively practices the religion (Tarusin 2006:354). Since people identify themselves as Russian Orthodox, but do not actually practice the religion suggests that the Orthodox identity may be merely cultural rather than a religious one. With a small following, the Church itself, as an institution, still has limited influence over the population. Nevertheless, the state’s relationship with the Orthodox Church has been strengthening since the 1990s (Simons 2004:32). Starting with the return of some of the church’s confiscated property and ending with Putin designating the church as the chief moral authority, the Church’s importance has been rising. Although, the full importance of the Church as a form of symbolic capital is best illustrated in the Pussy Riot trial examined in a later part of this paper, it is first beneficial to examine the relationship between the church and state, and specifically how the Church is yet another instrument of the state’s symbolic control.

The need to strengthen the Russian identity after the collapse of the Soviet identity was one of the motivators for returning to the “roots” of the Russian identity. Choosing to rely on the Orthodox Church was a way of maintaining the distinctly Russian elements in the new symbols created (Warhola 2007:94). The Russian state’s choice of the Orthodox Church as the remaining Russian element is evident not only by designating it as the moral authority of the country, but also returning some of the Church’s confiscated property. It is the only Church in Russia whose property has been returned since the end of the USSR (Simons 2004:19), with expensive displays
of support, such as the state-funded reconstruction of the seat of the Orthodox patriarchate, the Cathedral of the Christ the Savior.* The project was first headed by President Yeltsin (Simons 2004:19). The Cathedral was rebuilt to look exactly like the one destroyed in the 1930s under Stalin’s rule. The manner in which the project was conducted suggests a way of showing the population that the Soviet disregard for religion ended, and that the Orthodox Church should continue to play a key role in the Russian identity (Simons 2004:60). Just how much meaning the Cathedral has gained since it was rebuilt is evident from the way the authorities reacted to the Pussy Riot protest.

While the state chose to associate itself with the Orthodox Church in order to create a continuation with a historical Russian identity, it had no intention of sharing its political power. This is evident in that as much “goodwill” as the state showed by giving back some confiscated property, it also kept a fair amount of property under its own supervision, despite the Church demanding it back (Warhola 2007:80). This rather shows the capability on the part of the Russian state to control the Orthodox Church economically. This in turn reveals that the state can control the symbols that the population publicly receives: only certain Churches will be rebuilt (presumably the most visible ones) to communicate which religion is sanctioned by the state. The government itself, however, was in no way interested in sharing its political or economic power.

Moreover, the state did not end its support of the Orthodox Church after rebuilding its destroyed properties (there was the Kazan’ Cathedral located on the Red Square alongside the Cathedral of the Christ the Savior). After Yeltsin, President Putin continued to create a close

---

*The Cathedral was destroyed under Stalin’s rule in the 1930s to make room for the “Palace of the Soviets” under Stalin’s rule. The construction was never completed, and the massive foundation that was dug up was turned into the biggest public swimming pool under Nikita Khrushchev until its eventual close and the reconstruction of the original Cathedral.
relationship between the Church and the state. This relationship, however, is not being created because of mutual spiritual belief. The Orthodoxy’s role is conceived of as purely cultural in Putin’s administration and the close collaboration between church and state is yet another tool of control for the Russian government (Papkova 2007:119). This should come as no surprise, especially since Putin has a preference for organizations that, at their very heart, value a strong state and carry nationalistic and traditional Russian values (Evans 2005:149). On many occasions since coming to power, Putin has designated the Orthodox Church as the sole “moral” authority for the new Russian population (Evans 2005:150). In 2006, the extension of the “moral authority” and the emphasis of the Orthodox identity went as far as to introduce the “Basics of Orthodox Religion” as a required course in every public school in Russia (Warhola 2007:83). While Putin supports the Orthodox Church and the “Russianness” that it creates, he still demands financial dependence of the institutions on the state.

Putin also specifically dislikes any organizations that acquire foreign funding (Evans 2005:149). This may be due to the second set of symbols that the state is striving to maintain: its independence from the West. Emphasizing the independent Russian identity was historically very important to Russia, which was an identity that was always torn between the West and the East. The feeling that Russia needs to be independent from the West was present in Russia throughout its history and is present in contemporary Russia as well. The end of the USSR created a need for new symbols, and though some were inspired by the West (like creation of money-concerned subjects); there still was a desire to do things the “Russian” way. After the initial shock of the end of the USSR in 1991, 49% of the Russian population thought that they should be more “Western”, a year later 70% thought Russia needs to find its own unique way (Vorontsova & Filatov 1997:17). In fact, the rise of the “New Russian” as described above was
partly due to the ambiguous space between creating a capitalist “Western” society and creating something distinctly Russian.

Furthermore, Putin came into office “promising to restore Russia’s domestic stability, national pride and international standing” (Burrett 2008:73). He has not failed the population, as his administration is constantly trying to limit the amount of “foreign” help and influence the Russian population is exposed to. Putin himself has become a symbol of resistance to the West. Although Russia is currently viewed as a decaying power whose authoritarian president would be disregarded in any other context, Putin’s image has managed to transcend not only his own person but also Russia’s real international power (Lukyanov 2009:120). Thus Putin has succeeded, in a way, in restoring Russia’s “international standing”, albeit only through his own image by becoming the man who can stand up to the adversaries of the Russian nation.

While trying to actively “stand up” to the West, however, the Russian state also employs Western symbols as part of its new identity and goals for development. This presents a tension: on the one hand the state is encouraging the spread of capitalist symbols. On the other hand, they are maintaining other historical symbols in order to make the transition in a distinctly “Russian” way – or, specifically, in a “non-Western” way. While using Western ideas, the state is simultaneously trying to downplay its western properties (presumably to secure legitimacy for the administration and “deliver” its electoral promises). This tension is curiously illustrated by the re-adopted national symbol of the double-headed eagle. The symbol was used prior to the 1917 Revolution, and was thereafter brought back by President Yeltsin as the national symbol in 1991. Although the new national symbol draws on the historical past and attempts to create continuity for the truly Russian state, the double-headed eagle has changed in meaning (Khrushcheva 2010:37). The symbol was conceived during the Roman Empire to symbolize
control over the West and the East. In contemporary Russia, however, the symbol is a source of confusion as to where Russia belongs. While the Russian state attempts to achieve its economic independence from the West ironically by deploying capitalist symbols, becoming a mirror of the West is not something most Russians want. Russia is stuck between looking west and looking east, just like their new state symbol.

**Imposing limits on creation of unfavorable symbols**

As the state produced certain symbols that complied with the transition, it also began to limit other symbols in order to legitimize and consolidate its own power. This is most obvious in limiting the political involvement of the population, specifically by occupying the journalistic field and cancelling politically-oriented programs such as *Kukly*. In spheres where it is a lot harder to control the political involvement of the citizens directly, such as the Internet, the state is finding other ways of distributing its influence. There is a new emphasis on production of the “right” kind of information on the Internet, either through state-distributed information, or through encouraging writers to produce a certain kind of content.

The best and most wide-known example of such a “limit” would be the banning of *Kukly*, the satirical puppet show on NTV. The story of *Kukly* has already been briefly discussed above; however, the example serves as a fruitful way to examine how Russia’s politicians began affecting the journalistic field (as conceptualized by Bourdieu) in order to produce biased information. In the case of *Kukly*, the state intentionally banned the production of satirical information. In other words, *Kukly* was not disseminating the sort of information that the state wished its population to see. Information that would criticize the state was no longer to be broadcasted – the media was to only produce non-political information and concentrate on entertainment rather than commentary. The Russian state has, of course, been intervening in the
media for so long that many Russian journalists often find it hopeless to oppose its control. Many have become accustomed to the widespread corruption that is part of the profession. In an interview, one of the prominent reporters in 2000, Irina Petrovskaya expresses a lot of pessimism towards fixing the problem of corruption due to the journalists’ constant tendency to “sell out” (Volkov 2000:414). Meanwhile, new students of journalism often associate mere journalistic “professionalism” with corruption; political control is inevitable among journalists (Pasti 2008:113). Therefore, the current Russian society actually lacks an independent “journalistic field” altogether. It is constantly permeated by the state’s interests, as it not only seeks to exert its economic capital, but to control the kind of content that is communicated to the Russian people. Moreover, it has become normal to the Russian journalists that this is how the journalistic field operates in Russia.

The control of content is not limited to broadcast media. In recent years, there has been an increase in the attempts at controlling other media venues, such as the Internet. The widespread availability of state-controlled media, coupled with the limits placed on external media outlets and the limited availability of Internet in the peripheries of the country has resulted in a “two-tier information society,” where only 80% of the population has access to state-controlled content (Dunn 2008:52). The Russian state is now becoming aware of the influence and freedom that the Internet provides. Similar to its control of state media outlets, the government seeks to deploy its symbolic capital through Internet outlets as well. While the Internet provides users with significantly greater freedom to choose content, there are still ways a user can be exposed to, state messages without actively searching for it (Rimskii 2010:26-27). Despite the obvious obstacles, the Russian government began to influence Internet content as well. The Russian president has his own promotional website, and uses it to strengthen his image
(however, this is true for the leaders of many countries.) This is part of the new Russian government strategy. Instead of trying to control the Internet directly (which is impossible due to infrastructure costs and speed of information transfer), the regime has decided to “enhance its own Internet presence so that the amount of the ‘right information’ outweighs the amount of the ‘wrong information.’” (Strukov 2008:218). To that end, since 2007, President Putin has been meeting with young writers, poets and script writers, to suggest and explain what kind of information and content are desirable. Although official announcements assert that these meetings exist to ensure that literature has “taste, creativity and teaches people how to think” (Strukov 2008:220), the productions will only receive funding and recognition from the government if the “right” information is communicated.* Moreover, the “right” information should, of course, be apolitical. The state prefers to expose citizens to non-political content, and inform them of political decisions only after the decisions have been made, thus limiting civil involvement in decision making (Rimskii 2010:28). This approach is similar to the policies the state employed on the broadcast media: the ban of *Kukly* and promotion of *Pole Chudes*.

Symbolic capital in the media is thus controlled by the state by both enabling completely new or re-created historical information and restricting other forms of expression. The content produced, however, structures how people perceive their daily world. On the one hand, the content perpetuates certain old communist tendencies (purchasing in bulk). But, it is also influenced by the careful planning of what information the New Russians should receive. While attempting to transition to a new economy and a new political system, the state encouraged the production of programs that aid in this endeavor, such as *Pole Chudes*. Meanwhile, they limited

* It would only be fair to note, that the promotion of “taste and creativity” in literature is not a strictly authoritarian trait. What this example does demonstrate however, that even content on the internet can become symbolically structured from the top.
critical information communicated through programs such as *Kukly*. Specifically, different trajectories of the television programs such as *Kukly* and *Pole Chudes* outline the symbols that the state tried to preserve. The shows were broadcasted on stations owned by oligarchs, and both were (to some extent) used to express the political views of their respective owners. Both shows also aimed to entertain, though one did so rather satirically. The cancellation of *Kukly*, and the impressive longevity of *Pole Chudes* thus indicates which symbolic structures the state wanted to preserve: the creation of Russian consumers as capitalist participants, instead of subjects that are openly critical of the government and its leaders. The state has achieved this by narrowing the gap between the political and journalistic fields, and is most recently aiming to do the same through online literary channels.

**Pussy Riot and Symbolic Production in Contemporary Russia**

The symbolic patterns outlined above can also be seen in contemporary Russian news. The Russian 2012 elections were at first considered to be a straightforward affair. Vladimir Putin was running for president and he was going to win. In December 2011, things became more interesting when a newcomer, the independent Russian billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, entered the presidential race. Although it was still obvious that Putin was going to win, Prokhorov at least tried to challenge the existing political system. By February 2012, Prokhorov was no longer the one making headlines, however. In fact, attention shifted from the politicians to a young, feminist punk group “Pussy Riot” after their performance at the Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow in protest of Putin’s third term.

Out of their entire repertoire of six songs, it was their fifth, the “prayer” to the “Holy Mary to Drive Putin Away” (Mirovalev 2012) that caused the authorities to arrest three members
of the punk rock group for hooliganism. They were later charged for “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred.” The song was performed in protest of the Russian Orthodox Church and their support of Putin’s re-election (Elder 2012). At first, the charged members were threatened with seven years of prison – causing a wide spread reaction worldwide as many in the international community saw this as a disproportionate punishment by an increasingly authoritative state. The opinions in Russia, on the contrary, were lukewarm as many supported the government’s decision to punish the members of the punk group (Heuvel 2012:5). After almost seven months in detention, the final verdict seems to be set at two years in prison – still seen by international spectators as disproportionate (BBCNews 2012).

While details of the case are certainly fascinating, it is imperative to point out the particular elements that are most relevant to the present argument. Specifically, an examination of the place and the time of the incident are crucial to understanding how this case relates to the formation of symbolic control. The punk group was not charged for hooliganism (which, alone, may have been enough considering the content of their music). They were specifically charged for hooliganism motivated by religious hatred. Essentially, it can be argued that the members of the group picked the wrong enemy. There was nothing explicitly hateful about their ‘punk prayer’ to the Holy Mary. In fact, the song itself only contained political content directed expressly at Putin (Parfitt 2012). The location had a greater impact, rather than the content of the song. The use of the main Russian Orthodox Cathedral – the center of the Orthodox faith and the seat of Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church – was the primary cause for such a backlash. This is especially evident since the group sang in protest in the middle of the Red Square (right next to the seat of the government) a few weeks earlier, but was largely unnoticed (Mirovalev 2012).
The conspicuous choice of place worked in tandem with the (un)fortunate timing: one month before the federal elections. Some analysts have argued that the sole reason the punk group got any attention at all was because of the close proximity in time to the elections (ORT 2012). While this may be contested, it is true that other similar cases across the world have scarcely received similar attention. Not only were there protests outside of the courthouse during the trial, but governments across the world expressed their disapproval for the verdict. Others (like Amnesty International and Madonna) condemned the verdict and demanded their release. Latest headlines show that the group has been nominated for the Time Magazine Person of the Year award. The question remains, however, why this case? Why this time, and not another? True, the verdict may be exemplary of a disproportionate use of power on the state’s part, but the fact that this case was singled out is what is most interesting. The answer lies in the symbols that the Russian state communicates.

By looking at the circumstances of the protest—specifically the time and the place—the current symbols defended by the Russian Federation are recognizable. These two specific instances are what make this case a most recent and useful example of symbolic control (since it certainly is not the punk music). To put it bluntly, the government’s reaction to this case reveals which symbols matter most to the contemporary Russian state.

Essentially, the Russian government is protecting the careful symbolic structures that it constructed after the disintegration of the USSR. The state’s reaction to the punk group’s protest illustrates the main facets of the ‘new’ symbolic formation. These include endorsing unquestioned support for the Russian government (like the Orthodox Church) and the ‘New Russians’ necessarily acquiescing to “appropriate” behavior rather than political involvement. By protecting these two facets, the Russian state is attempting to reinforce the symbols already in
place in the society to ensure continued symbolic control. The trial, while revealing the symbols, is simultaneously reinforcing them. New rules and conceptions are re-distributed into public consciousness and continually influence perceptions of the Russian state. Nevertheless, the symbolic structures formed as part of the symbolic capital deployed by the state do change. As people assess the value of the information they receive (such as information provided by the media regarding trials), they also re-create and affect those symbolic systems. The extent to which the government can affect the symbols then becomes crucial to investigating symbolic production in an authoritarian state.

While the state’s symbolic capital may play the dominant role, it is nevertheless influenced by the kinds of values that the population itself gives to the symbols deployed. While the people’s conception of symbols may be heavily controlled by the government, they can, in most cases, create their own perceptions. Without the opportunity for people outside of the state to create their own meanings, a case like the Pussy Riot protests could not happen at all. The extent to which the government controls the symbolic capital and the reaction to it, therefore, reveals the strength of the symbolic control of the state at large. If the population’s reaction to the symbolic capital is deployed and maintained in a way that the society affirms symbols without deviating reactions, the government has gained sufficient control over its symbolic capital. How is the “hold on symbolic capital” then different in an authoritarian state?

One can arrive at the answer by recalling Bourdieu’s conception of “fields”, but paying much more attention to how they interact. When the state acquires enough symbolic capital to permeate through all fields of activity – not just the political, but even the journalistic – it is beginning to control the conceptualization of symbols outside of its usual political field.
the state combines its hold on symbolic capital with its subjugation of different fields of activity, it has a monopoly on the production of symbolic structures.

The Russian Population and the re-creation of Symbolic Capital

Despite the monopoly on symbolic production, the state still requires that the audience recreates the symbolic content produced. Mass media is, after all, only one of the many tools used to construct meaning and symbols in a society. People do not blindly follow messages of the media. Human agents must integrate these “modes of information into a coherent knowledge system with corresponding ways of perceiving and understanding human existence” (Chesebro & Bertelsen 1996:146). It is the people, after all, who interact with their own environments and construct meanings and representations based on their experiences (Chesebro & Bertelsen 1996:147). Mass media is only a fragment in the daily experience of people’s everyday lives. Despite the media’s influence in transmitting symbolic content, the people themselves must be receptive to this content and use it to construct their daily lives. These individuals augment and change the meaning, thus creating events and issues that are culturally bound even as they are broadcasted on television (Chesebro & Bertelsen 1996:148). Moreover, as much as the state can acquire a monopoly on symbolic production (through things such as media); it still needs to stay in proximity to the population’s immediate needs.

Nevertheless, the state can remain within the cultural space, and within the proximity to the population’s needs, while still maintaining advantage of symbolic capital. Mass media, therefore, remains influential and is worth investigating because of its potential for symbolic transfer. While the audience is a crucial part for symbolic control to work, the state can still mobilize enough symbolic capital to impose on the population. That is because the state has
access to many fields of influence. Although an event such as the Pussy Riot protest would be impossible without at least some of the population disagreeing with the affairs of the state, the government was still able to deal with the event in a way as to reinforce symbolic preferences. In a society where the state does not have control over symbolic fields, such a protest may have had a different impact. However, in a tightly controlled society, the protest was used to re-establish the symbolic controls.

Conclusion

This paper aimed at investigating the control of symbolic structures of the contemporary Russian society by the Russian state. The state has two sets of tools to govern a society: direct controls and symbolic controls. This paper concentrated on explaining specifically how the state uses its symbolic controls, by investigating the monopolization and deployment of symbolic capital through mass media. In Russia, occurrence is especially pertinent, as a new set of symbolic material had to be deployed following the disintegration of the USSR – which led to the collapse of the previous symbolic system. To cope with the rapid symbolic change, the Russian state encouraged the production of certain consumer symbols and re-adapted other symbols to secure its own legitimacy, all the while trying to disassociate the population from paying attention to the political sphere. Subsequent control of the population was then possible because of the state’s accumulated symbolic capital.

Though symbolic control of society looks very similar regardless of the government society lives under, there can be subtle differences in the way the state interacts with the other parts of the society (in this paper, specifically, with the journalistic field). Bourdieu would argue that there is indeed a difference in the way symbolic capital operates – that nature of the state
does determine the kinds of interactions (and policies) it has in regard to the media and in regard to the symbolic content that is transferred. In Russia, the political field does have challengers, but it is also able to subjugate most of the population. The control over journalism, however, is still much stronger than in some other countries. Since control over the journalistic field can be either enabling or restrictive, the relationship between the two will affect the kind of control the population experiences. In Russia, the media policy operates so that the enabling and restrictive boundaries are tightly bound together, producing a more coercive effect and subjugating the population under symbolic content that is strongly state motivated. Despite challenges to the symbolic structure, the state’s hold on the symbolic structure is strong enough to use deviant instances as re-enforcement of existing rules, rather than being direct challenges to symbolic legitimacy.

While the state may have been successful in portraying the latest trial as a reinforcement of symbolic control, the symbolic structure of a society does constantly change. Obviously some new symbols will be created, others modified, while some will be discarded altogether. The negotiations take place in the everyday lives of ordinary people (even among the state officials). Tracking the changes of the symbolic structures of a society, helps discover the pulse of a society. It sheds light on how people conceive of themselves and their problems, but also who has the ability to best control these conceptualizations.
References:


Beumers, Birgit (2005) Pop culture Russia! media, arts, and lifestyle.


