The Significance of the ‘West’ in Processes of Post-Soviet Russian Identity Formation (Societal and Cultural Perspectives)

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Abstract

This article discusses to what extent the “West” has been successful in reshaping the Russian identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The article aims to acquaint the reader with various issues and challenges in dealing with the western effect on the Russian culture, such as the misunderstanding of the western culture by the Russian youth, and also how the recent relationship between Russia and the “West” has again changed the western impact on the formation of the culture and identity of the Russia’s recent generation.

Keywords: Post-Soviet Russian identity; The west; Culture; Identity formation

Introduction

The influence of the West and outside culture can be seen throughout the history of Russia, from Peter the Great in the 17th century to the contemporary period under Putin. From the historical view, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 can be regarded as another “Revolution” as the country opens its doors to the outside world, and more precisely, to the West again. Therefore, the main goal of this article is to explore to what extent the influence of the West has reshaped or reformed the post-Soviet Russian identity.

Several scholars have investigated the Western influence on the Russian culture and society, such as Paramonov, Mc Daniel, Smith. One question that comes to mind while facing more modernized western societies is that: should we follow the same values of these modernized western countries in order to promote the country or should we stick to our traditional cultures and values? This question put the Russian intelligentsia into two contradictory situations: According to one, Russia was backward, ever catching up with the ‘West’, while the other believed in Russia's special path and spiritual light and contrasted it to the morally decadent ‘West’. Hall believes that each individual and society can fill the gaps in its wholeness by the help of outside the self. ‘Identities are constructed through, not outside, difference, through the relation to the Other’

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References

Russian culture, because as one of the participants in the current globalization process, Russia, like all other countries, inevitably, has been under the influence of the Western values. Though, this does not imply that Russia has lost its cultural uniqueness, but it goes along with the world’s cultural development; it integrates its cultural values with the world’s values. Thus, at the same time that maintains its unique ‘Russian’ way, does not move away and act isolated in the modern global world [1-8].

This article, first of all, theorizes the concept of “the West” in Russia. However, considering the major question of this article, instead of defining this term as an entity and territory, it is been defined from the view of the Russian writers and also other writers from different countries, who have done research on Russian identity. Later on, the Russian identity is conceptualized. This section, however, only offers a general explanation, since a detailed definition of “Russianness” is quite broad and is beyond the scope of this article. Third, by looking at the Russian fashion and style, music and food practices the Western influence on the culture of the Russian youth is examined. The reason why these factors are chosen is that material culture, for instance clothes, food, music and so on, can demonstrate the perception of a country’s identity, and in this article, the Russian identity. They can exhibit the global image of Russians showed in media and other social networks. As an example, potato and cabbage, fur coat and some forms of Soviet songs and music are such items and material culture that recall us of Russians, and therefore, they serve as representatives of ‘Russianness’ and ‘Russian identity’. There are several other elements of material culture such as religion, language, literature and so on, that represent the cultural values of a country, but due to the word limit of this article, only three elements have been studied [9-12].

**Theorizing “the West” in the Russian Mentality**

Defining “the West” in the Russian mentality is a complicated task, since we have Russia as a single country and therefore can identify it forthrightly, while defining the West in the context of Russian society and culture can be quite confusing. Here, the focus is on the concept of the “West” from the Russian view. The term “the West” has been used frequently in many books and articles, such as Russia and the West, The end of the West: the once and future Europe, Islam and the West. “The West” is being seen as “other” in the eyes of many countries, cultures and beliefs like Islam, Russia and the East. Several Russian politicians have declared that Russia is Europe and as a goal Russia should move forward to achieve development and modernity. At the same time, the ‘West’ in Russia has mainly been imaged as a contrast to Russian unique identity, culture and values. By looking at each period of post-Soviet Russian history, we encounter the West as the ‘Other’ in defining Russia’s identity [10]. However, the influence of the West on Russian culture is a truly undeniable phenomenon throughout the Russian history. As Bonnet has mentioned: ‘the notion of “the West” was developed in Russia, from the mid-eighteenth century on, as one of the key terms in an ongoing debate on the country’s destiny and identity’ [11]. The time of Peter the Great can probably be best considered as the starting point of the relationship between Russia and the West. Peter ‘wanted to Westernize and modernizes all of the Russian government, society, life and culture’ [12]. During the Soviet Union, the West was mostly defined as a ‘non-Communist and an anti-Soviet place’ [13]. Later on, after becoming more open to the outside world, by looking at the Mikhail Gorbachev’s period, we can see how he ‘looked on Western Europe as providing the model for a political and economic system’ [14]. During his time, as Pilkinson has mentioned, the West was considered to be “normal” and an “ideal life” [15]. After Gorbachev, in 1997, Boris Yeltsin came up with the idea of Novaya Rossia ‘New Russia’ [16]. Tregubova has defined this term as capitalism with equal opportunities for all [17]. Also, in one of his speeches, Yeltsin has declared that ‘the spirit of the Cold War in relations between Russia and the West has been overcome once and for all’ [18], which denies any kinds of potential enmity between Russia and the West. After all, “Vladimir Putin has repeatedly said that Russia is a European country”, and has asserted that “historically Russia has shared common values and experiences with the other European countries”. This resembling of Russia and the West could be seen as Russia’s attempt to end its isolation from the world’s civilization during the Soviet Union. Regarding this matter, Utkin has used the term “catch-up modernization” [20], where he equates “modernization” with “westernization”. Moreover, Buyandelgeriyn identifies the West as a “single modernity” [21].

Here, it can be concluded that “the West” in the mind of Russian intellectuals is a concept equal to “modernization”, “development”, “moving away from isolation”, “normal and ideal life”, “Europe”, at the same time accompanied with the concepts like “the Others” and “the threat towards Russian ‘unique’ identity, culture and values”. Also, “the West” here includes Europe, not the U.S., since Russia is being introduced constantly as a European country [11,12].

Russia and Russians

In order to measure the degree of the Western impact on the formation of Russian identity, we need to know what Russia is, what “Russianness” is and who Russians are. However, each of these questions requires a long and detailed answer. For example, defining Russia itself can be as long as an article, since one can look at many factors such as geography, technology, customs, history and so on, to define a country. This also applies to defining “Russianness” and “Russian identity”. Consequently, in this article a general definition is provided and further, the focus will be on the main question of the article based on the theoretical part.

In order to identify Russia, we do not need to know how Russia is being perceived from the Western perspective. What we need to know is what perceptions Russians have of themselves. Many Russian writers have seen Russia as a territory, such as Kluchevskii, Dunaevskii and Grigorii Alek sundrov. There is a very popular Russian short poem by Fyodor Tyutchev that describes the vastness of Russia: ‘Russia cannot be measured by common arshin, just as she cannot be understood by mere rationality. Her spirit, like her space, “Russianness” is and who Russians are. However, each of these factors such as geography, technology, customs, history and so on, to define a country. This also applies to defining “Russianness” and “Russian identity”. Consequently, in this article a general definition is provided and further, the focus will be on the main question of the article based on the theoretical part.

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of the Russian youth with different beliefs. Accordingly, ‘Progressives’ are the ones, who tend to be more western, and ‘Normals’ are the ones, who tend to stick more to their local and traditional values. Pilkington also notes that ‘this peer pressure restricted still further the stylistic practice of “alternative” youth, already limited by the specific positioning of provincial Russia in the global-local flow of commodities’31. Polhemus has argued that this “style surfing” was something that existed in the practice of the western style32. This dependence on the western commodities was moving the Russian youth away from their “own” and “unique Russian” style. Along with Normals and Progressives, Gurova has distinguished another group, who has a ‘hybrid look’33 and demonstrates the ‘casual look’ (progressives) and ‘social look’ (normals) at the same time. Dwyer has defined “hybridization as a ‘style repertoire created through the cultural mixing of previously existing styles with new patterns and a denial of bounded dichotomies’34.

As an example for the impact of the West on the Russian fashion consumption, the change of Russian-style markets and fashion media in post-Soviet Russia can be considered. By the beginning of the 2000s, the fashion retail market and also the fashion media started to develop in Russia35. As a result, many Western journals, such as Vogue and Cosmopolitan entered the media market in Russia and even the Russian versions of the magazines that were under the influence of the former socialist culture demonstrated a combination of the ‘Western meanings’ and ‘post socialist dress’36. The ‘former socialist women’s magazines, such as Rabotnitsa and Krestianka, had to negotiate their Russian versions of the magazines that were under the influence of the former socialist culture demonstrated a combination of the ‘Western meanings’ and ‘post socialist dress’36. The ‘former socialist women’s magazines, such as Rabotnitsa and Krestianka, had to negotiate their Russian versions of the magazines that were under the influence of the former socialist culture demonstrated a combination of the ‘Western meanings’ and ‘post socialist dress’36. The ‘former socialist women’s magazines, such as Rabotnitsa and Krestianka, had to negotiate their Russian versions of the magazines that were under the influence of the former socialist culture demonstrated a combination of the ‘Western meanings’ and ‘post socialist dress’36. The ‘former socialist women’s magazines, such as Rabotnitsa and Krestianka, had to negotiate their Russian versions of the magazines that were under the influence of the former socialist culture demonstrated a combination of the ‘Western meanings’ and ‘post socialist dress’36. The ‘former socialist women’s magazines, such as Rabotnitsa and Krestianka, had to negotiate their Russian versions of the magazines that were under the influence of the former socialist culture demonstrated a combination of the ‘Western meanings’ and ‘post socialist dress’36.

As a conclusion, the influence of the West is something completely evident in the formation of the Russian post-Soviet consumer culture. The change of open-air markets into big, Western style malls and the expansion of the Western magazines and therefore Western styles and fashion clearly demonstrate the shift of the Russian style to the more “civilized”, “modern” and thus Western style. However, at the same time, we can see some traces of socialist and post-socialist culture in the consumer culture of the Russian youth and the use of clothes as a tool for demonstrating the national identity by the Russians living abroad [17-20].

Music Practice

National music is one of the representatives of a nation’s culture. There are countries that have used music as an instrument to contrast with the West. As Anna Lis has given an example of the Free Monks in Greece, who used its music in order to protest against atheism or treaties with Europe41, or Hieromonk Jovan Culibrk in Serbia, who mobilized anti-Western opinion using rock music42. In Russia, music consumption has an interesting story. As Gorsukh mentions: “Russian interactions with popular Western and global music, moreover, had a history dating back at least to the early twentieth century”43. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western music became more involved with the everyday life of the Russian youth. Instead of moving away from their “own” music, the Russian youth implemented creative ways to domesticate the Western form of music into their own, as Pilkington calls it: “authentic”44 music. Increasing exposure to the Western art and music and the globalization process, the Russian youth, inevitably, had to make a connection between their “authenticity” and the “West”. The Western and global music has produced such subgenres as “Soviet” or


31 Ibid, p:175.
42 Anna Di Lellio,”The Missing Democratic Revolution and Serbias Anti-European Choice:1989–2008, International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society 22 (2009), 382. The following is an example of the Free Monks lyrics,”Hold on tight to the faith, hold on to the great ideals / We wont sell the fatherland off / The church will not die / History won’t be forgotten / This atheist civilization signs treaties and agreements / You’re not a person anymore, just a bar code number,”http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGTePB-dups (accessed March 04, 2016).
"Russian rock" and Russian "pop"\textsuperscript{45}. Pilkington looks at the different uses of music between two groups of Russian youth, that is, "progressives" and "normals", and shows different approaches towards music consumption by these groups in post-Soviet Russia. As progressives try to create a "new commercial Russian" by using the commercialism of Western culture\textsuperscript{46}, while normals "find it hard to even concrete Western cultural phenomena\textsuperscript{47}. A good example is an article about the famous group "L.A.Tu" in Russia. The performance of these two faux-lesbian teenagers has been interpreted as a misunderstanding of the Western culture. The open demonstration of homosexuality by this teenage group was supposed to show their "tendency to mock the presumed cultural hegemony of the West\textsuperscript{48}. However, their show in Eurovision in 2003, not only contradicted the Russian national identity, but also indicated the misunderstanding of the Western culture by the Russian youth.

By looking at these articles, it can be concluded that the Russian youth is facing an ambiguity in both their national identity and the Western culture and values. They strive to catch up with the "developed", "civilized" West and want to put themselves on the same line with them, while at the same time, they attempt to maintain their own "Russianness" and their "pure" national identity. They show their historically formed beliefs that shape encounters of "Russianness" with the "Western-ness", and meanwhile recommend that "we" retranslate "their" conducts to fit "our" norms, mores and culture, and therefore, they fail both in imitating the "correct" Western norms and demonstrating their "unique Russianness".

Food Practice

The cookery of one country plays an important role in formation its nation's identity. In search for the Russian identity and the impact of the West through the food consumption, Glen Mack and Asele Surina have made a distinction between the Russian haute cuisine that symbolizes the Western food style and the Russian peasant food which represents the simplicity and shows the contrast of the traditional against the modern\textsuperscript{49}. Here, I have looked at the way how Russians approach to their own (nashi) foods and foreign (ne nashi) foods in order to demonstrate their national identity and to what extent the Western food has influenced their cuisine\textsuperscript{21-23}.

During the Soviet period in the 1980s, fast food, such as Pepsi-Co., Pizza Hut and in the early 1990s McDonald's arrived in the Soviet-bloc\textsuperscript{50}.

However, most of the imported food products could be found in specific shops and not everybody could afford to buy them\textsuperscript{51}. In the post-Soviet period, imported food products appealed to Russians more than the domestic ones\textsuperscript{52}. The growing popularity of the foreign foods caused the fear of losing the distinctive culture. So, as a Russian nationalist movement, Russkoe Bistro was established, which offered "traditional" Russian fast-food, instead of Western ones, like hamburgers and French fries\textsuperscript{53}. Also, a "Buy Russian" campaign was launched by officials to encourage people to buy Russian traditional foods\textsuperscript{54}. Many producers started to produce the same products as Western ones, but with the Russian brand and quality. The interesting fact is, many Muscovites preferred to buy these products, even if the price was higher, because they claimed that the Russian food has the "Russian soul"\textsuperscript{55}. They started to categorize the foods as "ours" (nash/ svoi) and "not ours" (ne nash/ chuzhoi)\textsuperscript{56}.

The experience of food consumption demonstrates the same experience of fashion and music consumption among the Russian youth. As a member in a globalized world, Russians cannot completely resist the flow of the Western taste and culture in their society. As already mentioned, after the collapse of the Soviet period, they were passionate about trying the new foods and experiencing the Western brand restaurants and cafes. However, at the same time they refer to their national brands of products to show their loyalty towards their nation and identity. In the context of food consumption, Russians have hired a quite interesting way, as they try to apply the same products as Westerns in order to keep going with the "modern" West, but with the Russian brand. This is what we have earlier called "the domestication of the Western culture", that can be seen in all kinds of Russian's cultural consumption.

Current Situation

In addition to all the points mentioned, it should be noted that the relation of Russia and the West had changes from time to time due to the political and foreign relation issues. In accordance to what we have analyzed, Russia has approached the West in a negative way throughout its history. However, after the Ukrainian crisis in 2013 and due to the following sanctions from the West against Russia, this relationship has deteriorated even more. Several newspaper articles show Russia's reaction to the western policy in the current period. As an example, we can refer to the Russia's food import ban due to the sanctions. In an article on the BBC website, it is mentioned that Russia


\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, p: 175.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid: p. 199.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, p: 199.


\textsuperscript{52} McChesney A (1999) "Boost quality or lose sales. Local firms told", The Moscow Times.


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
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destroys banned western-produced products imported to Russia from the western countries, which have imposed sanctions against Russia57. Moreover, groups of girls in t-shirts with the slogan “eat Russian” have supported the banning of the western food58. This banning, however, is not only limited to food, it also applies to importing western clothes to Russia. This decision is made based on the idea that European partners are more dependent on Russia for a number of non-agricultural products and in order to keep the Russian youth away from the western values59. So, as a response to the sanctions, they have decided to ban the western products.

Hence, foreign relations play an important role in shaping a relationship between two countries. Before the sanctions, although there was an attempt to keep both local and western values and make them integrated with each other, after the Ukrainian crisis and the western sanctions against Russia, it was believed that the western values should be completely banned and being kept away from the Russian youth. However, this does not imply that this won’t lead the Russian youth to be entirely against the western culture, but the more negative perception of the West can be an element for encouraging them more and more towards the ‘unique’ Russian products and material culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by surveying the culture practices of the Russian youth in the post-Soviet era, it is hard to deny the West had a significant influence on reshaping the post-Soviet Russian identity. However, it cannot be said that this impact has changed the nature of the "Russianness" or the "unique" Russian identity, nor can be said that Russians are being imitating the Western values and becoming totally "westernized". Instead of the word "Westernization", it is better to say "domestication of the Western culture", and instead of considering Russians as “imitators” of the Western values, it is better to call them “participants of the ongoing globalization”. This means, like any other nations, Russians are also experiencing cultural modernization. As the West is playing a crucial role in the world’s cultures, Russia has been inevitably affected by its values as well. As Panarin noted in 1998 ‘Western modernizing missionaries are hard at work in every country, showing the local authorities and intellectuals how to eradicate traditional Eastern mentality and how to civilize peoples and continents as quickly as possible60. In addition, by looking at some cultural practices in this article, like fashion and style, music and food consumption, we can clearly see how Russians still respect their traditions, social values, and their national identity, how much they are proud of their "Russianness" and how much they believe in the "Russian soul". At the same time, the desire to become more “modern”, "civilized" and more "Western" is something inevitable. Thus, instead of fully imitating the Western rules, Russians have implemented creative ways in order to maintain their "uniqueness" while accepting a part of Western influence in their culture. In this way, they have domesticated the Western values and thus, we can say that they have made their own "Russian west" or "authentic West" in the cultural practices.

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