

Introduction

This book studies the relationship existing between political youth organizations, music and national identity in contemporary Russia. In particular, it focuses on some among the most representative political youth organizations present in the city of St. Petersburg and aims at describing their contribution to the conceptualization of post-Soviet Russian national identity/ies, as captured through an analysis of their music.

The importance of music in the life of social movements and organizations and, particularly, its potential in forging and sustaining their ideological framework is a well-recognized but yet underexplored phenomenon, especially in the Russian context. The starting point for the analysis is Eyerman and Jamison's definition of music as a central element in the construction of social movements' meanings and in the making and organizing of their collective identity (1998). According to the authors, despite the importance of music in the formation and remembrance of a wide range of social movements, "these musical components have seldom been examined explicitly in the social movements, or broader sociological, literature" (Eyerman and Jamison, 1998: 7).

Moreover, the authors point out a tendency among scholars of social movements to operationalize culture (and music) as a dependent variable, ignoring its role in "supplying actors with the sources of meanings and identities out of which they collectively construct social action and interaction" (Ibid: 162).

Following Eyerman and Jamison's approach, the book deals with processes of construction of meanings that characterize contemporary Russian political youth organizations, by looking at music as a cultural tool which takes part in the creation of the ideological and interpretative framework in which these organizations operate.

Broadly speaking, two main aims of the research can be identified: firstly, the examination of music's role in the life of the selected political youth organizations and, secondly, the analysis of the organizations' ideology¹ as produced and reproduced in their music with particular attention to the national identity issue. More specifically, through a comparison between organizations, the study

¹ Here "ideology" is conceived as "the clear and consistent definition of the principles of membership in a desired political order" (see also Hanson, 2010: XIV).

aims at detecting convergences and divergences between the selected political groups with regard to both their relationship to music and their conceptualization of post-Soviet Russian national identity/ies.

A number of obvious objections concerning the case selection and methodological foundations of such a work can be brought forward. Nonetheless, in the following pages, the reader will be provided with the theoretical framework which justifies the focus of the current research on youth organizations, national identity and music, and on the peculiar constellation composed of these elements in contemporary Russia.

The analytical choice to focus on the sub-theme of political youth organizations is based on three main reasons². Firstly, since the 1990s, Russia has registered a significant proliferation of political youth organizations and movements (Siegert, 2005) and, compared to other forms of political participation which are significantly below the European average, Russian youth engagement in political groups and organizations is quite in line with that of Europe³: thus, the centrality of the phenomenon for post-Soviet Russian civil society. Secondly, as pointed out by Blum, “youth identity is useful proxy for national identity more broadly” and “the contours of youth (national) identity have been widely regarded to have enormous implications for national identity as a whole” (Blum, 2007: 3). Therefore, the youth can be conceived of as a central player in the construction of post-Soviet national identity/ies since “youth identity represents a key modality through which society goes about reproducing itself” (Ibid.). Thirdly, in juxtaposition to Western Europe, where young people tend to be more resistant to xenophobia, Russian youth shows the highest rate of xenophobia, the greatest desire to ensure the preeminence of ethnic Russians in the country and to oppose immigration, much more so than elderly persons (Laruelle, 2010: 45). Similarly, teenagers and young adults in Russia are more inclined to refer to concepts such as white race and Slavic brotherhood in their talks, to support the slogan “Russia for Russians” and identify themselves through criteria such as race and blood (Ibid. 46). Thus, the importance of the youth with regard to the issue of Russian national identity and of political youth organizations, conceived as an agency of the youth, as central player in the Russian political field.

This book is organized as follows. The first and second chapters provide the theoretical frame of reference in which the research is grounded. In particular, the first chapter is dedicated to the complex issue of Russian national identity in historical perspective and to its centrality and actuality in the current political debate. Remarkably, as pointed out by Laruelle in this regard, nowadays the

² It seems quite superfluous to remind that music is especially a youth phenomenon

³ See, for instance, the European Social Survey – Round 4 (2008)

topic of nation “has come to dominate the whole of the political spectrum and constitute the common denominator of political correctness. Political space is saturated with it and public figures are unable to acquire legitimacy, whatever their duties, unless they justify their choices in terms of the overriding national interest” (Laruelle, 2010: 10). In order to fully understand the centrality of the national identity issue in the Russian case, the reader should keep in mind the complexity of the post-Soviet context and the several economic, political, social and cultural transformations that have affected the country in the past twenty years, which Sztompka (2000) refers to as a “cultural trauma”. Indeed, the substitution of the Leninist one-party and of the socio-economic system based on a near-total state control characterizing the USSR for over seven decades with a democratization of society and a liberalization of the economy has significantly affected the cultural foundations of the country itself, leaving Russia in a sort of ideological vacuum (see also Hanson, 2010). And, according to Laruelle, it was in this context that the idea of the Russian nation has gained its centrality as an element able to “integrate citizens and legitimate the power of the elite, all that while ensuring social cohesion in a period of significant disruption” (2010: 2). For Laruelle, through the idea of the Russian nation it was possible to establish a consensus on which the stabilization and normalization of the country was grounded.

In addition to a theoretical excursus on the concept of national identity *per se* - which will be of pivotal importance to understand the particular notion of national identity underpinning this book - the chapter briefly summarizes two centuries of Russian history. It looks at how political and historical events have affected the different theorizations of Russian national identity in the course of time, and describes the ways in which this issue has been interpreted and instrumentalized by the political actors animating the post-Soviet Russian political field.

The second chapter reviews the literature on music and social movements, and describes the two main approaches characterizing the sociology of music, the ideological potential of this medium, the relationship existing between national identity and music and the particular meaning of music in the Russian case. In this regard, worthy of note are the works of Eyerman and Jamison (1998) and Roscigno, Danaher and Summer-Efflers (2002) who, with their analysis on the role of music in the life of the social movements of the 1960s (the former) and workers’ movements of the 1920s and 1930s (the latter), concretely illustrate the contribution of this medium to the construction of the culture and collective identity of social movements, thus representing a theoretical and methodological template for this research.

Chapter three constitutes a bridge between the theoretical and the more empirical account of this study and introduces the reader to the context—in particularly after an excursus on Russian youth and youth policies, the political youth organizations selected for the study are presented and positioned inside the Russian and St. Petersburgian political field.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters are devoted to the examination of the ways and extent to which music plays a part in the life of political youth groups in contemporary Russia. Worthy of note is that in the analysis, music is conceived and approached in different ways, both as a research tool and as a research object.

The analysis is conducted in two phases. In the first phase, I concentrate on the relation existing between the selected political youth organizations and music. As emphasized by Rosenthal, although it is often asserted, the value of music for social movements is only rarely examined so that we don't really know "what functions does music provide for social movements and how does it provide these tasks" (2001: 11).

Taking up the challenge raised by the scholar, four main questions have been identified that lead to a logical progression through the analysis:

- What role does music play in the selected organizations?
- What is the concrete musical engagement characterizing the selected organizations?
- Why do the organizations identify themselves with a specific song, band, music genre, etc.?
- What kind of relation exists between the selected organizations and their representative artists and bands?

Looking at music as an analytic lens for the study and comparison of organizations, I evaluate whether and to what extent this medium contributes to the life of the selected youth political groups.

The second part of the research is instead dedicated to the study of the different conceptualizations of post-Soviet Russian national identity/ies emerging from the song lyrics of the selected organizations and on the detection of similarities and differences in their definition of *Russianness*.

Interestingly, in this section, music acquires ontological status and becomes an object of research *per se*. As a result, the analysis enables the detection of similarities and differences in the conceptualization of post-Soviet Russian national identity characterizing the selected youth political groups and their ideological positioning in the Russian political spectrum with regard to the national issue.

Let us consider the content of these empirical chapters in more detail.

Chapter four explores the relationship existing between the selected organizations and music. Particular attention is assigned to the study of their conceptualization of music, to their concrete music engagement such as, for instance, the organization of concerts and music events, and to the relation existing between organizations and bands and musicians. Through this, the elaboration of typologies of different forms of music commitment – as, for instance, the different degrees of artists' involvement in the organizations – is made possible. The chapter is based on data collected in the course of fieldwork conducted in the city of St. Petersburg during the summer and autumn of 2010.

The fifth chapter is concerned with the organizations' online music engagement. Following Zuev's definition of the Internet as an "expressive equipment used by the organizations for the successful presentation of the self, by allowing the organizations to build up an attractive public profile and assuring them a permanent performance visible to the audience" (2010: 274), the Internet is used here as research tool for the collection of the most representative songs of the selected political groups taking part in their online self-presentation. This collection of songs constitutes the material for the semantic field analysis presented in the final chapter of the book.

Finally, Chapter 6 is centered on the contribution of the organizations' music, and, in particular, of their lyrics, to the definition of post-Soviet Russia. This calls for an important qualification: the focus of the study is on the different interpretations of Russian national identity emerging from the music of the selected organizations. The aim is to provide an accurate as possible description of the different conceptualizations of *Russianness* produced in the songs of some of the numerous political youth organizations animating the Russian political spectrum. Therefore, neither the historical accuracy nor the outcomes and individual response to these theorizations are taken into account in the analysis. The main result is the positioning of the selected organizations in the Russian political spectrum with regard to the national identity issue employed as an "operational category offering a [new] relevant framework for the study of contemporary Russia" (Laruelle, 2010: 6).

As emphasized by Evans and Whitefield (1998) with regard to the formation of cleavages in post-Soviet societies, whereas in Western countries the terms "left" and "right" are established as central terms of political discourse and identity, this is not the case in societies experiencing democratic transitions, where their meanings may be particularly volatile (1998: 1023). In fact, "left and right placement varies considerably as a result of political and economic histories, and in response to current events and these circumstances make it likely that the nature and development of left-right (self-)positioning will be quite distinct

from that found in the West” (Evans and Whitefield, 1998: 1036). Therefore, according to the scholars, it can be concluded that the employment of conventional categories and labels (as, for instance, “left” and “right”) for the study of the contemporary Russian political field can be misleading, oversimplifying the particular political trajectory followed by the country.

Similarly, talking about the transformation affecting post-communist Russia in the 1990s, Hanson provides some evidence on the instability of the meaning of “left” and “right.” For instance, whereas Yeltsin defined the defeat of pro-Gorbachev forces as a “left” conquest, the supporters of Yeltsin’s Westernization depicted themselves in the following years as “right” with the aim of underlying the influence of Margaret Thatcher on their policies and reforms. Moreover, also “public opinion polls taken at the time demonstrate a remarkably wide range of public understanding of the meanings of “left” and “right” (Hanson, 2010: 46).

Therefore, apart from providing new insights into the different conceptualizations of post-Soviet Russia produced at the societal level on behalf of some of the most representative political youth organizations in the country, the chapter suggests the adoption of the Russian national identity issue as an analytic device for positioning political actors in the Russian political field, able to capture the specificity of this post-Soviet country.

Some methodological remarks

The reader should be aware that the research topic of this book constitutes a yet underexplored phenomenon in contemporary Russia. In fact, albeit several studies have been devoted to the examination of the role of music in youth subcultures in contemporary Russia (see, for example, Pilkington 1994, 1996, 2002), none of them have been explicitly concerned with formal political organizations.

Moreover, the focus selected for the content analysis of the organizations’ songs - the national identity issue - made necessary the search for and the use of a method with which the uniqueness of the historical heritage and the cultural traditions characterizing the country could be taken into account. Due to the novelty and complexity of the phenomenon under examination, a tool box approach was adopted, allowing the employment and integration of different materials and methods.

As pointed out by Baker, the analysis of popular music by a cultural outsider requires the researcher to adopt an “ethnographic approach to the textual analysis” of the lyrics. In other words, fieldwork is needed as an “extra analytical method which helps to understand ‘the field of social relations’ in which texts

circulate” (Verdery 1991: 19-20 in Baker 2010: 5). Therefore, the analysis of the organizations’ music was substantiated with fieldwork in the city of St. Petersburg during which interviews and participant observations were conducted. The choice of placing the fieldwork in St. Petersburg was not accidental; rather, it was grounded on political and cultural rationales. St. Petersburg was the capital of Russia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the course of time, the city has been characterized by political effervescence, hosting some of the pivotal events for the nation’s political history. Worthy of note, are the Revolution of 1905, which began in the city and rapidly spread into the province, and the February and October Revolutions of 1917, which gave St. Petersburg the title of “the city of three revolutions,” stressing its centrality to further political developments occurring in the country during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Apart from being very active from a political point of view, the city is often depicted as the cultural center of Russia and, in the past years, has been the home of Russian cultural and artistic avant-gardes. In particular, it was in St. Petersburg that, in the course of the 1970s, the Leningrad rock club (LRC) was founded by many bands of the “underground” such as DDT, Kino with their singer Viktor Tsoi, Alisa, Mashina Vremeni, and Televizor, representing *de facto* the birthplace of the *Russian Rock* phenomenon. During the 1980s, the LRC became the sole refuge for Russian rockers who succeeded in integrating rock music with Russian cultural traditions: for them, Russian rock became a tool for self-expression and an escape from repressive policies. Indeed, as confirmed by Barzikin, singer and leader of the band Televizor, “We saw rock as the only way to an inner freedom, a way of thinking that was long since dead and gone in the West” (Steinholt, 2003: 95). Therefore, it is due to its political effervescence and its importance for the development of Russian music and, in particular, for the Russian rock tradition that the city of St. Petersburg was chosen as the location for the study.

During the four-month fieldwork in St. Petersburg, interviews with the main leaders and representatives of the political organizations selected for the study were conducted. The starting point for the analysis was the sample of the most representative political youth organizations according to the independent social research institute FOM, which annually conducts a national survey on this topic. In the course of the field research, the original sample of organizations was slightly modified and adapted to the specific case of St. Petersburg. The Young Guard of United Russia, Nashi, the National-Bolsheviks, the Vanguard of the Red Youth, the Resistance Movement named after Petr Alexeev, the Movement Against Illegal Immigration, Oborona, Youth Yabloko and the People Democratic Youth Union were included in the final sample.

On average, the interviews would last between 45 and 60 minutes. After the respondents had introduced themselves and their organization, they were asked about the role and contribution of music to the life of their group, about the organizations' relationship to bands and musicians, and about the organizations' music engagement in terms of concerts organization etc. Two general questions on the role of the Internet in the life of the selected organization and the positioning of the organization with regard to the Strategy 31 were also addressed in the course of the interviews (more on the centrality of these issues in the Russian context will come in Chapter 3).

Moreover, informal conversations were also conducted with representatives and activists of other organizations and groups – such as Antifa, the Federation of Socialist Youth, Solidarnost, White Causes – as well as with one political journalist, one political blogger, two experts on social movements and organizations in Russia, an employee of the Department of Youth Policies of the Government of St. Petersburg, and musicians taking part in the protest actions “Strategy 31” and “For St. Petersburg.” Altogether, the interviews were performed in Russian, English, German and Italian and were of pivotal importance for the reconstruction of the Russian and St. Petersburgian political field and for the positioning of the selected organizations within this field. Following Zuev (2010), after having demonstrated the importance of the Internet for the self-presentation of the political groups included in the study providing them with the opportunity of a unique permanent performance visible to the audience (see Chapter 3), the organizations' webpages were used as research tool for collecting data on their online music self-presentation and engagement.

Theoretically speaking, the analysis was grounded on Eyerman's observations on the relationship existing between music, the Internet and the underground groups taking part in the White Power phenomenon in Sweden. In particular, as pinpointed by the scholar, music materials made available on the Internet by political organizations are a central factor in “opening initial psychological and social contact” with them, allowing “participation without apparent commitment”, thus representing a first step for more contact and committed participation” (Eyerman, 2002: 450). Even if taking part in live performances and collective listening of records play a major role in promoting collective identity, the employment of music on the Internet on behalf of political groups contributes in spreading their messages, fulfilling an important recruitment function (Ibid.).

Methodologically speaking, a grounded-theory approach was adopted for the analysis of the organizations' webpages. Indeed, as pointed out by Weare and Wan-Ying, despite the many advantages of employing the Internet for research purposes – as, for instance, making “available data which used to be prohibitively expensive to collect” and advancing “the researchers to employ scientific

sampling techniques, thereby improving the external validity of their research” (Weare and Wan-Ying, 2000: 275-276), the “intermingling of textual, video, graphic and audio information on the world wide web poses hurdles to the development of valid descriptive categories” (Ibid.: 273).

Talking about web-based content analysis, Herring highlights the need of methodological innovation through the employment of non-traditional approaches coming from outside the discipline of communication and, more specifically, from the linguistic and sociological realms (2010: 237). With this regard, the scholar identifies two main approaches employed for the study of new communication technologies: a language content analysis focused on texts and images contained on the webpages and a social network analysis focused on hyperlinks conceived as part of the content of the websites themselves. Nevertheless, according to Herring, a methodologically plural paradigm is needed in the case of Web Content Analysis (WebCA), able to take into consideration various types of content characterizing the web, including texts, themes, features, links and exchanges (Ibid.: 248).

With such methodological considerations in mind, an analysis of the music materials and hyperlinks present on the organizations’ webpages was conducted: rather than on what was communicated – the content of the music links - the web analysis was focused on how the music contents were presented in form of audio, video, text, image, link etc. Through the analysis, a categorization scheme was developed which allowed the comparison of the selected youth political groups with regard to their online music engagement and the detection of similarities and divergences as in the summer 2011. Moreover, through the analysis of the organizations’ webpages, the sample of songs taking part to their online self-presentation was constructed.

The songs of the sample were then examined through semantic field analysis (see Robin in Glowinski 1980: 252-281), taking into account the “triumph-over-alien-forces” narrative template introduced by Wertsch (2000; 2002; 2008; 2009) in his study on Russian collective memory. The narrative templates can be defined as “cognitive instruments that make possible the ‘configurational act’ of grasping together information about settings, actors, events, motivations, and other elements in particular ways” (see Minsk 1978 in Wertsch 2002: 937). According to Wertsch, they are cultural tools which shape the speaking and thinking of individuals when reflecting on the past, making them their coauthors. These templates operate at a high level of abstraction and organize nebulous knowledge with few specific events; they are provided by formal education, public holidays, family discussions, the media and so forth (Olich, 1999).

The “triumph-over-alien-forces” narrative template can be traced back to several sources; one of the most important is Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp

(1968). Despite the variation in the concrete characters, events, dates, and circumstances involved, four distinct generalized functions and recurrent constants typical of a broad range of Russian narratives can be identified, which can be summarized as follows:

- a. An initial situation in which the Russian people are living in a peaceful setting, where they are no threat to others is disrupted by
- b. the initiation of trouble or aggression by an alien force or agent, which leads to
- c. a time of crisis and great suffering, which is
- d. overcome by the triumph over the alien force by the Russian people, acting heroically and alone (Wertsch, 2002: 92).

Although it may appear quite ubiquitous and typical for many nations around the world, Wertsch points out that the “triumph-over-alien-forces” narrative template is employed and applies especially in the Russian tradition due to historical and cultural reasons, representing “*the* underlying story of Russian collective remembering” *par excellence* (2002: 93-94).

Indeed, from an historical perspective, although other nations may employ the “triumph-over-alien-forces” narrative template for the reconstruction of their past and collective memory, this template is not exclusive but may be supplemented by others. According to Wertsch, it is only in the Russian case that this template offers “the basic plot line for several of the most important events in Russian history, including the Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century, the Swedish invasion in the eighteenth century, Napoleon’s invasions in the nineteenth century, and Hitler’s invasion in the twentieth century” (Wertsch, 2002: 93).

From a cultural point of view, a binary opposition has operated in Russia for the past several centuries (see Lotman and Uspenskii 1985) and a “Manichean consciousness” has pervaded post-Soviet Russian society according to which “the world is divided strictly into the light and darkness, true and false, our own and alien” (Kvakin, 1998: 39 in Wertsch, 2002: 92). This has led to the adoption of a dichotomous narrative emphasizing the distinction between “we” – the Soviet or Russian people – and “they” – the alien external forces which has affected also the political discourse. And, for Wertsch, the “triumph-over-alien-forces” narrative template, based on the opposition “Russians” versus “alien forces” and portraying Russia as the victim of foreign invasion to which only Russians united can put an end, well captures this dichotomous consciousness and the victimization tendencies characterizing the country in the course of its history.

Music and Political Youth Organizations in Russia

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