

2 A history of dissensus, consensus and illusions of a new era

To set the stage for the analysis, the first section of this chapter presents a brief overview of dissensus in Russian art during the twentieth century. The next section describes the political context of Russian art today and the major parameters of the Putin consensus as it developed during his first two presidential terms (2000–2008). The illusions of the new glamorous era, reflected in critical comments in the Russian media, are captured in the final section.

A history of dissensus in art

The view that art is capable of changing the way the world is understood runs like a red thread through Russian art during large parts of the twentieth century. At different periods, however, it found different forms of expression. As the saying goes, in Russia the poet is always more than a poet and thus an artist is more than just an artist.¹

The Russian intelligentsia has historically played a key role in demanding the liberalization of society. Ever since the word ‘intelligentsia’ entered the Russian vocabulary in the 1860s (Pipes, 1990: 249–256), it has represented the resistance by intellectuals against the authoritarian Russian regime, concern about the conditions of society and dedication to the idea of repairing the torn ethnic and social fabric of the country (Hosking, 1997; Shalin, 1996). The intelligentsia defined in this way is not the same as the official definition in Soviet times – people with a high level of education. Instead, it is a moral and normative category of people who speak out against the rulers not in their own material interests, but for the whole of society. It has always constituted the core of the counterculture of its time. The intelligentsia developed the skill of hiding messages in innuendo or allusion, which would evade the eyes of the censor but be understood by those who could read them. Hidden criticism masked by ambiguity – in a book, a play or a painting – is an age-old tradition of the Russian intelligentsia.²

Stalinism almost deleted the intelligentsia – in both a physical and a mental sense. Many intellectuals were attracted to and identified with the Soviet modernization project and with the goals of social and cultural transformation espoused by generations of the Russian leftist intelligentsia. Stalinism manipulated their original values of self-improvement, social activism and commitment to being

an agent of historical progress (Zubok, 2009: 6). Soon after the death of Stalin, restrictions were eased and the intelligentsia was visible on the scene again.

The avant-garde in the 1910s

The roots of Russian art dissensus can be traced back to the avant-garde of the early twentieth century. The avant-garde played a crucial role as an alternative model of artistic practice and approach in Russian and European art history. Nonetheless, some authors believe that its ideas had an inherent trajectory that explains why it became the instrument of totalitarian regimes.³ The US Russian scholar Nina Gurianova (2012), however, makes a distinction between the early and late Russian avant-garde. She dates the early period to 1910–1918, claiming that it had an aesthetic ideology of its own, which she calls ‘the aesthetics of anarchy’. Only the late avant-garde movement, which dated from the Bolshevik takeover in 1917 and peaked in 1923 with Constructivism and the creation of the Left Front of Art (LEF), had an aesthetic ideology in line with the new Bolshevik regime. Even so, it was suppressed in the second half of the 1920s.

The Russian avant-garde of the 1910s was influenced by Bakunin’s concept of ‘creative destruction’ and Dostoevskii’s anti-utopian and anti-rational comments on the individual’s fight against the utilitarianism and determinism of the time. The art group ‘Jack the Diamond’ (Bubnovyi Valet), created in 1910 around the artists Mikhail Larionov and Natalya Goncharova, played a crucial role in the development of the avant-garde. For almost ten years the avant-garde exploded in a creative diversity of styles while sharing an aesthetic and philosophical foundation that Gurianova calls ‘ontological anarchism’. This can be described as an attack on all closed concepts and systems of thinking. In their search for a new language of art, the avant-gardists challenged established concepts in art and in society at large (Ashton Sharp, 2006). Their vision was to integrate art and life. Art was to be open to life, and life was understood as a flow without goal or purpose and without an answer to the question ‘why’. Provocation was regarded as an instrument for shock effect. Unexpected breaks in the flow of words, images or tones should force the viewer out of habitual perceptions and into new associations. Art enticed the viewer to think independently.

The early avant-garde shared with many in Europe a strong premonition that an epoch was coming to an end. As the outbreak of the First World War came closer, this feeling grew stronger. In Russia, thoughts of apocalypse and catharsis intensified as the tsarist system became increasingly authoritarian after the brief reform period after the 1905 mass disturbances (Selunskaya and Toshtendal, 2005). The artists of the early avant-garde were socially concerned but not politically engaged. In contrast to their contemporaries, the political revolutionaries, the avant-gardists were anti-utopian – politically and aesthetically. They did not allow their art to be subordinated to social or political interests and rejected art schools and styles. Their activities still had a political effect as they helped to liberate the minds of people in a society that was stuck in old ways and with old ideas.

The First World War radicalized the Russian avant-garde. After Goncharova and Larionov left for Paris in 1914, younger and more radical artists defined the Russian art agenda. For a short time Malevich was one of the most influential. He wanted to create a general aesthetic ideology valid for all fields of art (Nakov, 2010). Such an approach was far from the previous thinking of the avant-gardists and signalled that a new era was on its way.

Most avant-gardists supported the Bolshevik takeover of power, but they soon reacted to the restrictions on freedom of speech and the new regime's efforts to control cultural life. Several artists (among them Malevich and Rozanova) began to cooperate with political anarchism, contributing articles to the cultural section of the *Anarkhiya* newspaper, an organ of the Moscow Federation of Anarchist Groups that was in open opposition to the Bolshevik regime (Gurianova, 2012). Its first issue was published in September 1917, but by July 1918 the Bolsheviks had shut the paper down.

Tension grew among the avant-gardists between utopians and anti-utopians. The former wanted a cultural revolution in support of the political and social revolution. The Bolshevik takeover strengthened utopian ideas as well as a utilitarian view of art. Soon, artists abandoned painting in favour of industrial design, construction projects and photography in the service of the revolution. It was not long before they had to submit to party directives and were integrated into the Bolshevik propaganda machine. The avant-garde's dream of a cultural revolution was dashed when in the early 1930s the Party dissolved all independent organizations in the various fields of culture in favour of a single centralized organization in each field. In 1934, Socialist Realism was made the official doctrine of Soviet literature at the First Congress of the Writers Union. All fields of art and culture soon followed (Clark and Dobrenko, 2007). The aims of Socialist Realism were to guarantee that art was easily understood by the masses and that it transmitted the communist vision of a future paradise. According to the standard official formulation, art was now to be 'realistic in form and socialist in content' (Groys, 2008). According to Boris Groys (2010: 2), Socialist Realism was like Soviet society in general during these years: 'a society completely oriented toward the future, completely immersed in the vision of the future – a society living in a unifying communist project'.⁴ Avant-garde art was taken away from public view and removed from museums for many decades. Yet, the memory of this art lived on among a small group of artists who would hand it over to a younger generation.

Art did not immediately conform (see, for example, Degot, 2006) and in literature anarchistic absurdism continued underground. In the autumn of 1927, the writer Daniil Kharms together with the poets Nikolai Zabolotskii, Aleksander Vvedenskii and Igor Bakhterov created *Obedinenie Realnogo Iskusstva* (OBERIU, the Association for Real Art), which was only allowed to exist for a few years (Kharms, 1991: 8–11). Their absurd texts continued in the Soviet underground and, more than 80 years later, a member of Pussy Riot would refer to them as a source of inspiration in her defence in court.

The post-Stalin Soviet underground

The years that followed Stalin's death in 1953 created a relative freedom that made it possible for dissensus to find its way in art once again. The late 1950s and early 1960s were years full of hope and expectation. In their enthusiasm for the new freedom in life and art, young people gathered to read poetry at the statue of Mayakovskii in central Moscow. Poems by Yevtushenko, Voznezenskii and Akhmadulina and songs by Okudzhava framed the mental world of the young generation (Manevich, 1991; Sokolov, 2007; Volkov, 2008).

Khrushchev's 'thaw' reopened the door to the international art world. There was a Picasso exhibition in 1956, international art exhibitions during the 1957 Moscow International Youth Festival and a huge exhibition in 1959 of US abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky and Mark Rothko. These exhibitions were eye-openers for young Russian artists (Zubok, 2009: 110–111).⁵ A first exhibition of Russian abstract art took place in Gorky Park in 1958. It was organized by Eli Belyutin and his group of artists called the New Reality. Belyutin's group was one of the first autonomous artist communities, and by 1960 it consisted of about 250 painters (Zubok, 2009: 178).

Abstract art was perceived as a language of individual expression and contravened everything prescribed in the doctrine of Socialist Realism (*Drugoe iskusstvo*, 1991a). The free form of abstract art was perceived as a reaction to the Party's collectivist plan and reflected the individual's search for an inner private truth. Thus, the 'rebellion in forms' by the Belyutin group on the canvases of abstract art carried a much larger cultural and social meaning: 'The formalist trend [abstract art] became a universal yearning for change and liberalization, a social symbol of progressivism' (Zubok, 2009: 178). This inward-looking individual-oriented art would soon become highly controversial.

The Belyutin group was invited to represent young artists at an exhibition to commemorate 30 years of the Moscow Union of Artists in December 1962. When Khrushchev arrived with his entourage, he looked at the artworks in shock and disgust. In an emotional outburst he called them 'shit' (govno) and the artists 'faggots' (pidarasy). The scandal was complete when politburo members joined in with such phrases as 'send them abroad', 'arrest them' and 'liquidate them' (Gerchuk, 2008: 101–117). *Pravda*, the Communist Party newspaper, followed up the incident with a campaign against what it called formalism and nihilism in art. As a result, a sharp divide was drawn for years to come between official art and non-official, non-conformist art.

Non-conformist artists went underground, continuing their work within circles of friends who met, discussed, read poetry and exhibited works in private apartments. Most of them were educated at art schools, but because this kind of art was not officially recognized, they were not allowed to exhibit it in public. Instead, they lived double lives, earning income as illustrators, designers or manual workers while dedicating their free time to non-conformist art.⁶

The non-conformists made a conscious decision to stay out of politics. They reacted to the political dictates under which artists had to subordinate themselves

and defended the idea of art as an autonomous space and their own right not to engage politically. In this way they contributed to a process of intellectual emancipation in society. In 1974 the artist Oskar Rabin and his friends decided to test the limits of freedom by organizing an open-air exhibition in a suburb of Moscow (*Drugoe iskusstvo*, 1991a: 16–17). The time seemed ripe. Soviet leaders had announced a policy of detente with the West and people expected improved East–West relations to create more relaxed conditions domestically. Instead, the exhibition was immediately bulldozed by the local authorities and several paintings were destroyed. This brutal intervention resonated internationally as foreign journalists and diplomats had witnessed the event. The local authorities were reprimanded by higher officials, and two weeks later a four-hour open-air exhibition of non-conformist art was permitted in Izmailovo Park (*Drugoe iskusstvo*, 1991a: 211–217). The Izmailovo exhibition began a gradual and partial legalization of non-conformist art. The underground existence continued and slowly began to penetrate the public space as it found its way into non-traditional exhibition venues such as research institutions.⁷

By the early 1970s, some underground artists had begun to critically deconstruct Soviet cultural codes and political-ideological clichés in an effort to deconstruct the myth of Soviet utopia. They wanted to get behind the facade of official Soviet life. Some would later form Moscow Conceptualism,⁸ while others formed Sots-Art. While the former drew mainly on the narrative, the latter drew primarily on the image, although such a strict definition is difficult to maintain when examining individual artists and their work.⁹

Sots-Art artists used irony and satire to twist the original meaning of Soviet symbols and signs. In so doing they deconstructed the myths of Soviet utopia and its leader, Stalin.¹⁰ Sots-Art derived its name from the word ‘Socialist’ and American Pop Art, but where Pop Art aimed its irony at a society of mass consumption, Sots-Art addressed a Soviet society of mass ideology. Also religious symbols and signs were used to criticize Soviet ideology. Mikhail Roshal-Fedorov’s ‘Let us over-fulfil the plan for coal’ (1972) is one example (see Chapter 4). Had this piece of art been shown in public at that time, it would probably have caused marginal reaction for its use of religious symbolism. When exhibited 30 years later, its use of religious symbols in secular art was seen as scandalous.

If Sots-Art dealt thematically and quite bluntly with the symbols of power, myths and ideology of the Soviet system, Ilya Kabakov, the best known of the Moscow Conceptualists, concentrated on the aesthetics of everyday life. His focus on Soviet Man, ‘Homo Sovieticus’, formed by the stagnation and degradation of society, captured the life and dreams of the individual in the void of the failed collective dream.¹¹ The *kommunalka*, a large apartment with one room per family and a shared kitchen, became for Kabakov a metaphor for Soviet life. His works became like a diagnosis of the surrounding Soviet society.

A younger generation of Moscow Conceptualists gathered in 1976 in the group Collective Actions (*Kollektivnye deistviya*).¹² Their regular performances, ‘Walks beyond the City’, were part of a highly intellectual and conceptual project that they claimed was not about politics or society. Nonetheless, these performances

had an important social-political dimension (Bobrinskaya, 2010; Groys, 2011). Andrei Monastyrskii, a key figure in the group, invited friends to join the walks, or rather long excursions to the outskirts of Moscow by train, bus and on foot, to watch for something unexpected and inexplicable to happen during a few minutes in an empty field. The actions were carefully documented. Monastyrskii called these walks ‘empty actions’. The intention was to create a zone for contemplation beyond all officially regulated political, social and ideological conceptions: ‘In the Stalin or Brezhnev era, contemplation of an artwork involved a certain compulsion, a kind of tunnel vision. There was nothing peripheral. But when one comes to a field – when one comes there, moreover, with no sense of obligation but for private reasons of one’s own – a vast, flexible space is created, in which one can look at whatever one likes. One is under no obligation to look at what is being presented – that freedom, in fact, is the whole idea’.¹³ Boris Groys, who took part in several actions, later characterized them as: ‘a void, an emptiness, a . . . rift in the texture of the world’ that tears this world apart and opens a clearing in the middle of it. ‘Only through and in this clearing, inside this rift, the moment of “un-concealment” . . . becomes possible – [of] the concealment of the world being produced by the routine of everyday life’ (Groys, 2011: 7). Against the background of Soviet ideology, which at the time still aimed to penetrate society and the life of the individual, these performances of Collective Actions became acts of dissensus.

It is true that Soviet underground artists avoided becoming involved in opposing the regime, but they belonged to the same larger subculture that included human rights campaigners and political dissidents. The arrests in September 1965 of the writers Yuri Daniel and Andrei Sinyavskii for publishing anti-Soviet works in the West under pseudonyms had had an enormous impact on a whole generation. When they were found guilty in the first post-Stalin political trial, a new movement emerged among the young generation of intellectuals and artists – the movement for human rights (Jonson, 1980). As a result, the independent Moscow Helsinki Committee was created in 1975 to monitor the Soviet Union’s implementation of the so-called third basket of the Helsinki Final Act.¹⁴ Nevertheless, artistic dissensus and political dissent developed along parallel but separate lines (Groys in Kozlova, 2008). Visual art artists – part of the same generation and the same subculture – avoided being branded dissidents.

The Glasnost and Perestroika of the late 1980s brought an end to the distinction between official and non-official art. When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, art was liberated from party directives. By then another event of great importance and a symbol of the new era to come had already taken place – the Sotheby’s art auction in Moscow in 1988. Works of art by about 30 Russian artists, who not long before had been considered ‘beyond the law of their own country’,¹⁵ were sold for high prices on the international market. By the start of the post-Soviet era, many non-conformist artists of the older generation, including Kabakov and most Sots-Art artists, had already emigrated to the West. The remaining artists were now to react and work under completely new conditions.¹⁶

Post-Soviet art of the 1990s

The situation for both art and society was radically altered by the new social, political and economic conditions of the early 1990s. Soviet state structures broke down, market reforms were initiated and democratic reforms were announced. At the same time, the economic reforms hit the population like a slap in the face. These were years when the great narrative was dissolved and the struggle for survival consumed the lion's share of people's time and energy. In this situation, Anatolii Osmolovskii, Aleksander Brenner, Avdei Ter-Oganyan, Oleg Mavromati and Oleg Kulik became highly influential through their immodest, aggressive and naked art performances. In Moscow, Actionism became a dominant art trend of the 1990s.

Actionism was formulated as a reaction to Conceptualism, which the Actionists perceived as too intellectual and too focused on texts. The Actionists wanted direct action rather than contemplation. According to Osmolovskii, they wanted the force of reality to break down the textuality that had completely taken over in Soviet times.¹⁷ Many years later, Avdei Ter-Oganyan characterized Moscow Actionism as a successor to the provocations of the avant-garde in the 1910s.¹⁸ Both, he said, wanted to use confrontation and shock to make a spontaneous impact on the audience.

In spite of their critique of Conceptualism, the Actionists were children of conceptualist ideas. Like Sots-Art and Moscow Conceptualism, they dealt with different aspects of power, tried to desacralize them and emphasized the perspective of the vulnerable individual.¹⁹ The Actionists lived the rapid flow of events in the 1990s, when it was difficult to grasp what was happening, although the absurdities of social life were fully exposed. One of the first actions to attract attention took place in Red Square in April 1991. Osmolovskii and his group of young artists, Expropriators of the Territory of Art (ETI), lay down in front of the Lenin Mausoleum, the most sacred place in the Soviet Union. Their bodies formed the word 'khui' (prick) as a shout of "Fuck you!" to the absurdities that surrounded them. The action built on the contradiction between the sacredness of the location and the use of a vulgar and taboo word,²⁰ in the turbulent months before the break-up of the country.²¹

Throughout the 1990s, similar actions were reported in the media, which at the time was free enough to report such events. When President Eltsin ordered the attack on parliament in October 1993, Osmolovskii, Brenner, Ter-Oganyan and Mavromati demonstrated in front of the burned-out parliament building, naked from the waist down with their backs to the building. In 1995 Brenner, dressed only in shorts and boxing gloves in the middle of winter, challenged Eltsin at Lobnoe mesto in Red Square, shouting that he wanted the president to come out and fight (Kovalev, 2007b: 172–173). Brenner said this was a protest against the Chechnya war, which Russian troops had just embarked on.²²

The Actionists remained artistically rather than politically motivated (Kovalev, 2007c). They promoted the gesture and the action, and they used their bodies for this purpose. Exploring limits their performances were physical in all senses,

including the exposure of naked bodies, aggression, blood – and vulnerability. Oleg Kulik, naked and vulnerable in his role as a chained dog aggressively trying to bite people at Russian and international exhibitions (Bredikhina et al., 2007), could be interpreted as a metaphor for the new life of millions of former-Soviet citizens after the introduction of neoliberal economic reforms. Some years later, a younger generation of artists spoke of how the Actionists had expressed ‘the existential conditions in the range from euphoria to total despair including masochism, renouncing God and so on’, and that their leitmotif had been the metaphor for the struggle for survival (Lomasko and Nikolaev, 2011).

The Actionists expressed a duality in relation to the authorities. They focused their actions on the absurd realities of political life, on the one hand, while supporting the democratically elected president, Boris Eltsin, on the other. Their actions played on the remarkable political vacuum in which there were no proper political parties or organizations but only economic, political and criminal cliques that manipulated events from behind the scenes. The absurd cheerfulness of Oleg Kulik’s campaign as a candidate for the fictive ‘Party of the Animals’ reflected the political situation of ‘[a] dispersing reality and the impossibility of direct political statements, and the fatal lack of real political movements’ (Kovalev, 2007c: 9). The Actionists played the role of the jester according to the tradition of carnival culture.²³

A 1998 street performance on Nikitskii bulvar commemorated the May 1968 student revolt in Paris. It simulated a political demonstration by building false barricades, carrying banners with slogans written in French and shouting slogans in Russian. The participants managed to convince the police that it was a genuine political demonstration. The slogans, however, followed the absurdist tradition of the Russian avant-garde of the 1910s, such as: ‘There is no money – and no money is needed’ (Deneg net – i ne nado), ‘God Exists and there is no God’ (Bog est i net Boga) and ‘Freedom to the Parrots’ (Svoboda popugayam) (Degot and Riff, 2008; Kovalev, 2007b: 308–309).

In late 1999 the art actions took a more political turn. In December, during parliamentary elections and three months before the presidential election in which Putin was standing for the first time, the art groups ‘Nongovernmental Control Commission’ and RADEK, in which Osmolovskii played a leading role, managed to hang a banner from the roof of the Lenin Mausoleum (Kovalev, 2007b: 360–361) which read ‘Against all [candidates]’. It hung there for three minutes before the guards took it down. The phrase ‘Against all’ was an option on the ballot paper to demonstrate discontent with all candidates and parties. The artists were thus using an existing legal electoral option for their art project. Their manifesto explained that: ‘We are brought up and exist in a system which is built on the desire for power. What we ought to really hate is power itself. And we must renounce this desire to take power. . . . Therefore the only thing we can do is to not join the power but to fight it’ (Kovalev, 2007b: 362).

The KGB found ways to make Osmolovskii understand that his actions were straying too far into the realm of politics and were therefore unacceptable. After three months of being openly harassed by the secret police, Osmolovskii came to

the conclusion that the group must make a choice between either continuing as an art group or becoming a conspiratorial underground political group. He explained that the authorities were frightened at the prospect that ‘Against all’ would become the preferred option of voters in the upcoming presidential election. In local elections this option had received a remarkably high percentage of the votes and new elections had had to be held. The authorities felt that ‘the intelligentsia having to choose between Putin and Zyuganov’ would choose the third option, and therefore took to playing dirty tricks (Osmolovskii, quoted in Kovalev, 2007b: 363). The last performance by the Osmolovskii group took place in August 2000, three months after Vladimir Putin’s inauguration as president.²⁴ In retrospect, this was the end of an era.

This brief overview of twentieth century Russia suggests the existence of art that questioned the official consensus of its time even though artists did not engage directly in politics. The periods of freedom of expression in art mirrored the vacillations of what was allowed in terms of the intellectual and cultural spheres in general. Nonetheless, art visualized a dissensus before it was verbalized in political terms. In this sense, Ales Ervajec seems to have got it right when he emphasizes the important role of art in paving the way for the revolutionary changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Ervajec, 2003).

Looking back, the 1990s was a dynamic period in Russian art (Rekonstruktsiya, 2013). Yet, the political developments made the decade seem like an interlude. Something was being created in its own right but was never consummated. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, a completely new symbolic order would replace the one of the 1990s. At the beginning of the new millennium, however, few foresaw that what was to come in Russia would completely change the political conditions.

The political context, 2000–2008

Putin became prime minister in August 1999. His most urgent task was to deal with the Chechnya conflict, and in September he initiated a second war against the small republic. He became acting president at the end of December 1999, was elected president in March 2000 and then successfully consolidated his power by exploiting various crises in the following years. In so doing, he also gradually built a new understanding of the ‘proper’, that is, how people should identify with and look at society, its past and its present.²⁵ This section identifies the major parameters of Putin’s evolving consensus, which provide a new political context for art.

The Chechnya war secured Putin support among nationalists. At the same time his Internet article, written as he became acting president, ‘Russia at the Turn of the Millennium’, read like a liberal manifesto and raised hopes of a policy of reform to come.²⁶ Instead, as soon as he was inaugurated president, he began attacking the media empires of Vladimir Gusinskii and Boris Berezovskii. In 2003 the oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovskii, a major possible rival for power, was arrested. After being re-elected in 2004, Putin skilfully exploited the tragic Beslan terrorist drama to further centralize decision-making. If the authoritarian shadow

of his policy had not previously been fully visible, it now became clear in all its darkness. Well before the 2007 parliamentary elections, new legislation circumscribed elections and the activities of political parties and non-governmental organizations (see Evans, 2013: 105–108; Remington, 2013: 45–56; Sakwa, 2010: 164–169). His plan to prevent the liberal opposition from entering parliament was successful, and he secured the dominance of the pro-Putin United Russia Party in the federal Duma and regional assemblies throughout the country. The political party system of the Eltsin era evaporated and Putin blocked independent public debate about alternative policy avenues. As a result, the existing political institutions in Russia came to resemble decorative facades.²⁷

By closing down the public space for free exchange of political opinions, Putin killed a forum not only for airing grievances but also, and more importantly, for new ideas and public demands. The vacuum that appeared when genuine political life in the country was cut off was filled by a ‘virtual reality transmitted to the population by media in close cooperation with the authorities’ (Dubin, 2009). The media, especially television, reported what the government wanted it to report. Journalists also accepted the official worldview without direct instructions to do so.

Official political life was wrapped in new grandiose ceremonies and rituals to aggrandize the power of the regime. The presidential inauguration ceremony in the renovated tsarist halls of the Kremlin and the military parades in Red Square emphasized grandeur and greatness (Dubin, 2011: 233–253; Gill, 2013: 85–86, 101–103). At the same time, political participation by the people at the polls had become an empty ritual. The less political weight carried by the vote of a citizen, the more powerful and ornamental high politics became: ‘Glamourization of the public sphere, of politics and culture has been the dominant trend in the social and cultural life of the country in recent years’ (Dubin, 2009).

Opinion polls demonstrated political passivity. There was a general interest in political issues, but little interest in taking part in political life. This apolitical mood went hand in hand with low levels of confidence in political institutions. At the same time, there was a perception that no alternatives to the current regime existed (Dubin, 2011: 230). This lack of trust in society included a lack of trust in collective action. The feeling of being without means to influence politics gave rise to political alienation and mass apathy. Lev Gudkov (2009: 16), director of the Levada Centre, described this as a logical reaction of people who feel that ‘nothing can be changed’. Several scholars described Russia’s political system as characterized by fragmentation and atomization, having in mind the absence not only of a civil society but also of a social fabric between people and bonds of solidarity. Against this background, it is easy to understand how large groups of the population became easy targets for political manipulation from above.

Nevertheless, in spite of the strong state control over television broadcasting, small and comparatively outspoken private television channels appeared from time to time and, together with a few small independent newspapers and journals and the Internet, free debate continued – albeit at the margins.

Liquid society

Zygmunt Bauman characterizes life in modern European society as the feeling of living on quicksand – something that is repeatedly changing, shifting form and without a solid core (Bauman, 1999: 5). He calls it liquid society (liquid modernity): ‘What all these fluid features amount to, in simple language, is that liquids, unlike solids, cannot easily retain their shape. Fluids, so to speak, neither fix space nor bind time. . . . Fluids travel easily . . . they pass around some obstacles, dissolve others and soak their way through others still. From meetings with solids they emerge unscathed, while the solids they have met, if they stay solid, are changed – they get damp or are drenched’ (Bauman, 2000: 2). Bauman uses the term *Unsicherheit* to describe the feeling that follows from this state of society – a term that blends experiences that in English demand three terms: uncertain, insecure and unsafe (Bauman, 1999: 5).

Feeling unsafe creates a dangerous passivity: ‘[P]eople wary of what the future might have in store and fearing for their safety are not truly free to take the risks which collective action demands. They lack the courage to dare and the time to imagine alternative ways of living together; and they are too preoccupied with tasks they cannot share to think of, let alone to devote their energy to, such tasks as can be undertaken only in common’ (Bauman, 1999: 5). In this state of mind people more readily listen to the alluring tones of an authoritarian voice that offers partly illusory stability and security. These characteristics are perhaps even more true of Russian society than of the societies studied by Bauman. In contrast to the relative predictability of life in Soviet society, Russia’s wild and perverted forms of capitalism and neoliberalism increased the feeling of uncertainty about the future among the old as well as the young.

The efforts of the Putin regime to create a feeling of belonging and a new collective ‘we’ should be seen against the background of the *Unsicherheit* of post-Soviet conditions. The authorities tried to win the confidence of the population by presenting a vision of stability, consolidation and continuity. The pro-Putin youth organization Nashi (Compatriots), created in 2005 at the initiative of the presidential administration and its chief ideologist, Vladislav Surkov, reflected the regime’s fear that something similar to the ‘colour revolutions’ in Ukraine and Georgia in 2004–2005 would happen in Russia. The youth organization was created as an active standby force in case public opinion shifted towards a Ukrainian scenario.

The regime soon learned how to exploit and build on sentiment in society. Opinion polls had shown since the mid-1990s a trend for a return to traditionalism, including elements of ethnic nationalism, religiosity and a longing for a ‘golden past’. These were general trends seen throughout former Soviet territory (Pain, 2009: 38–49). Putin exploited these trends and channelled them for his own purposes.

Constructing a new identity

A main task of the regime was to strengthen its legitimacy by creating a collective ‘we’. Russia has a long history in search of itself, and many of its most brilliant

thinkers of the most diverse political views have tried to formulate what constitutes 'Russia', or what is a Russian.²⁸ Putin's search for ideas at first seemed to go in various directions – discourses of the Great Power, a Russian national idea, Orthodox belief and an authoritarian Russian Eurasia-oriented Unique Path. Gradually, these different discourses were linked together into an overall discursive formation that developed common traits with the state conservative thought of Official Nationality under Tsar Nicholas I in the nineteenth century (Riasanovsky, 2005: 133–148). Thus, while Western scholars claimed that the Putin regime lacked an ideology, this was becoming less and less the case as the outline of a Putin consensus gradually took on a more distinct form. Western scholars may be forgiven as this policy was initially not formulated on paper but took shape in interactions with major actors, among them the church. The evolving consensus was, however, reflected in words and deeds by high-level state representatives. Four aspects of the identity discourse in the Putin consensus stand out.

State Nationalism: A stronger emphasis on the central role of the state gave a top-down perspective, where the interests of the population became subordinated to those of the state. This also implied identification with Russia as a great power, although the interpretation of what this meant in practice and how such status was to be regained varied.

The state nationalist emphasis underlined continuity in the Russian state-building process and opened the door for the pragmatic selection of historical leaders of whom to be proud, regardless of whether they were from tsarist or Soviet times. Eltsin had also understood the value of references to the great past of the Russian state, reintroduced the tsarist flag and other symbols from tsarist time and recognized the status of the Orthodox Church. His motive, however, was first and foremost to counterbalance the Soviet heritage, while Putin by contrast seemed to be exploiting these symbols as part of a political strategy to create legitimacy for his own power (Pain, 2009).

Against the background of the state nationalist discourse, it is not surprising that Putin considered the break-up of the Soviet Union to be 'the largest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century' (Putin, 2005). Nor is it surprising that the victory in the Second World War received such a prominent place. The ceremonies on 9 May to commemorate the end of the war became a demonstration of the success and greatness of Russia. The enormous celebrations in 2005 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the end of the war could have been a natural peak to be followed by a reduced focus on the Great Patriotic War as it receded into the past. Instead, the celebrations took on an even larger scale in the years that followed. Memorial concerts were televised in honour of the armed forces, blending elements of national, military and religious discourses with pop and hip-hop music in order to attract younger generations to the homage to Russia and create the image of a great power.

This strong emphasis on the victory in 1945 resulted in a more pronounced role for Stalin as a war leader. Soon, this was extended to Stalin as a statesman capable of modernizing and developing the country. Television series exploited a new interest in Stalin as a person, portraying him as a lonely old man in his final days in a 40-episode broadcast in 2007, *Stalin Live*.

Viewed from a state-building perspective, Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great and Stalin were great statesmen and ‘managers’, while the huge humanitarian costs of their regimes were ignored. In 2007 the Russian Ministry of Education approved teaching guidelines for history teachers in schools according to which Stalin’s terror should be mentioned, but his decisions and policies should be understood in the larger context of his own time and the problems of external and internal threats (Filippov, 2007; Jonson, 2010: 286–292). It should perhaps therefore have come as no surprise when quotes from the old Stalinist national hymn, which refer directly to him, were restored to the ceiling of the Kursk metro station in Moscow in 2009 and, 130 years after Stalin’s birth, several Russian cities expressed a wish to build new Stalin monuments. Local and national authorities and television companies, in particular, took a new, uncritical look at the Soviet past. As a result, the percentage of the population who were positive about Stalin increased substantially during the 2000s.²⁹

Individual scholars, journalists and others tried to carry out critical investigations of the past as part of the intellectual debate and academic research, but the official emphasis on historical continuity, state-building and eternal Russian state interests coloured the official understanding of Russia’s past, present and future. The positive effects were emphasized. Just as during the harsh reality of Soviet times there had been the promise of a glorious future and a better life, Putin now promised stability, and harmonious and corporate striving towards the goal of a golden economic future. Against this background, highlighting the bleak sides of reality was labelled ‘chernukha’ and was considered an act of exaggerating the darkness of social life.³⁰

Russia the Nation: On 4 November 2005 a new state holiday was introduced and celebrated for the first time – the Day of People’s Unity (Den Narodnogo Edinstva). It was invented to replace the holiday of 7 November, the anniversary of the 1917 revolution.³¹ The new holiday referred back to 1612, when Russian troops repelled the invading Poles during the Time of Troubles. According to the church calendar, this day was a holiday in praise of the Kazan Icon of the Godmother and in commemoration of the victory over the Poles. Although this victory seems natural to remember, the celebration took on complicated political overtones.

The new holiday had an anti-Western flavour but its nationalist concept also seemed in line with the growing distrust of non-Russians. Xenophobic attitudes were growing, most notably in hostile sentiment towards Central Asian and Caucasian guest workers in Russia, but also in the tense relations between Russia and Georgia after the 2004 Georgian revolution. The ethnic overtones of the holiday became obvious when Russian nationalists tried to co-opt it. Both the Russian authorities and the public were surprised by this multifaceted mobilization of radicalism. In 2006 the nationalist demonstrators on 4 November faced a huge police presence in Moscow. By 2007 the authorities had managed to reduce the number of nationalist participants.³²

What happened around this holiday reflected the larger problem of defining Russia as a nation. Russia was an empire of many peoples, religions and cultures, and the 1993 Constitution made the Russian Federation a secular state. Muslims

therefore became concerned about the presence of Orthodox representatives, Orthodox symbols and the attendance of the Patriarch at state ceremonies. Putin tried to tread a cautious line between supporting ideas of Russia as a nation state and avoiding ethnic references. Although he tried not to play the ‘ethnic card’, the appearance of the Orthodox Church in the official discourse was in itself taking an ethnic Russian stance.

Russia the Orthodox Nation: Religion was controlled in the Soviet Union and to become a believer before 1991 was therefore for many a demonstration of a civic independent stance. In the 1990s the church was rehabilitated and the state began to return previous rights and proprieties. During the 2000s, the church strengthened its influence as the Putin regime needed its support and moral authority, and Orthodox belief offered a unifying concept of a new Russian identity. The growing status of the church was reflected in 2006 when, during the Easter ceremony in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, the then Patriarch, Alexei II, greeted Putin publicly in the name of God for the first time.³³

The state allowed the church to take on a role in state and public life, but also in spheres that according to the constitution should remain secular, such as prisons, the military and schools.³⁴ The church wanted to be an educator and formulator of norms. The Orthodox tradition, however, exerts ‘a conservative influence on Russian history, culture and the Russian mindset’ as traditionalism, the so-called imperial constant, and close church–state relations (‘symphony’) are fundamental characteristics of Russian Orthodoxy (Bodin, 2009: 25–42). This fitted the Putin regime perfectly. The church emphasizes national unity, patriotism and conservative values, especially on moral issues. The extent to which the state would allow the church to set the agenda now became the crucial question.

The church, claiming Orthodox belief to be the defining factor of the Russian nation, actively participated in discussions on the future of Russia and its policy, arranging seminars and initiating book projects (Krug, 2008).³⁵ The church also contributed to the production of a film on the Byzantine Empire with clear references to the contemporary political situation in Russia. The film *The Death of an Empire: Lessons from Byzans*, produced by Father Tikhon, head of the Sretenskii Monastery in Moscow, was shown on television several times in 2008.³⁶ The film addressed the question of how it was possible for the Christian Orthodox Byzantine Empire to collapse after more than 1000 years of existence. It opened with a camera panning Istanbul, showing women in hijab and the sound of muezzins calling to prayer. Tikhon’s thesis was that the West was responsible for the fall of the Empire, as Western states exploited its domestic splits and refused to provide assistance when it was attacked by Islamic forces. He used a contemporary Russian political vocabulary and references to contemporary society, and the viewer could easily recognize the narrative about external and internal threats and enemies of the Russian state. According to Tikhon, the domestic weakness of the empire was the result of power struggles at the top, weak central authority, greedy oligarchs, failed reforms, nationalist splits and ethnic ambitions, a reduced role for Orthodox belief and an intelligentsia that admired the West. In Tikhon’s view, the only way to prevent such a development happening again was a strong centralized

authority, a common ideology and a platform of Orthodox belief. The film was an excellent fit with much of the rhetoric of the Russian authorities at the time, but it took the arguments further than the state authorities did.

A Unique Russian Path: The idea of a unique Russian path and the belief in a special Russian destiny became fundamental parts of official Russian rhetoric. When Eltsin tried to formulate the concept of a Russian national idea in the mid-1990s, he did not refer to the uniqueness of Russia. This idea was given its distinct form under Putin, with an emphasis on the differences between Western and Russian values and traditions, the virtue of the old patriarchal and hierarchical characteristics of Russian society and Orthodoxy as its moral and religious basis.

The concept of sovereign democracy, coined by Vladislav Surkov in February 2006, was a contemporary effort to draw a line between Russian and Western political ideas and a response to the colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. The concept was in line with Russian debate over the centuries about Russia's relationship with Europe – whether it was a part of Europe or 'unique' and following its own path.³⁷ Although Surkov claimed that Russia was a part of the European civilization, he stressed that the authoritarian tradition was a central component of Russia's political and cultural heritage: 'Culture [political culture] is our destiny' (Surkov, 2007). He therefore saw the tragic history of oppression and autocracy in Russia as a part of its political tradition and a factor in forming its political institutions.

As dividing lines were drawn up, the concept of the 'enemy within' was also identified. Concerns were raised by independent Russian media as early as September 2004 over what they saw as the beginnings of such a campaign. After the Beslan tragedy, when North Caucasian terrorists took hostages in a school and people were killed in the police operation that followed, Putin declared that Russia was at war with both external and internal enemies. Surkov expanded on the internal enemies, explaining that in Russia, as in a besieged country, a 'fifth column' had appeared, which consisted, he said, of 'leftist and rightist radicals' and targeted explicitly both liberals around the Yabloko leader, Grigorii Yavlinskii, and the national Bolshevik leader, Eduard Limonov. They share the same sponsors and the same hatred of Russia, he said: 'We must be aware that the enemy is at the gate. The frontline now runs through each city, each street, each house. We need vigilance, solidarity, mutual help, and joint efforts by the citizens and the state' (Kaftan, 2004).

This was the regime's attempt to delineate the 'inner' borders of Russia as a political-ideological entity. The key individual behind this campaign, as in all the major ideological moves by the regime at this time, was Surkov. He had an enormous ideological influence on everything related to the domestic sphere in the early 2000s. He determined the thinking of the regime for a number of years. Aleksander Dugin, a radical conservative and an ideologist of the Eurasian school of thought, wrote in a moment of clear-sightedness that Surkov and his concept of sovereign democracy disguised authoritarian management as formal democracy: 'This means dictatorship disguised by democratic procedures where major processes are directed from the centre' (Dugin, 2012).

Although Surkov's influence cannot be underestimated, Putin defined the political–ideological line with regard to the West. His tone became sharper after 2003. His Western audience was taken aback by the blunt language he used at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy in early 2007, when he criticized US world dominance and the Western policies of international organizations (*Washington Post*, 2007). While his critique was principally not new, his tone was.

The West was now depicted as an enemy trying to undermine Russian society and giving support to Putin's liberal opponents. Putin developed this argument in December 2007 at the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow, in front of 5000 young supporters of the United Russia Party. He said that Russia's enemies 'need a weak and sick state [Russia] in order to do their dirty business' (Melikova, 2007). There are people, he said targeting his liberal opponents, who hover around like jackals (*shakalit*) outside foreign embassies and are dependent on foreign money. 'Shakalit', KGB jargon from the world of prisons and work camps, meaning pitiful beggars for cigarettes, now entered the mainstream Russian political vocabulary.

Putin's harsh words surprised Russian commentators, but this did not restrain his future rhetoric. That Russia was completely different from the rest of Europe became a fundamental part of the Putin consensus. This view was soon shared by a growing number of people, as evidenced in opinion research by the Levada Centre. 'Russia's unique path' is a mythological archetype with consequences for the way people view themselves and their rulers, according to the Russian sociologist Boris Dubin (2012). By creating a collective 'we' in line with 'Russia's uniqueness', any deviance from the norm can be labelled as 'other' and 'foreign', and references to universal norms can be excluded. The unique path concept is static and implies that people accept existing conditions because they are perceived as 'our way'. The ruler is looked on as the superior authority beyond the reach of ordinary citizens. The notion of a unique Russian path is an effective obstacle to the very idea of reforming Russia (Dubin, 2012).

The 'Putin consensus' and its definition of 'we' took form with the support of actors with similar views – the church, and different patriotic–religious organizations and nationalist movements. Each of them had its own interests and agendas, and sometimes more far-reaching goals than those of the Putin regime. Together, they found a common language around ideas of Russia as a unique civilization, a great power with a glorious past and a similarly glorious future founded on Orthodoxy. Gradually, the Putin consensus moved closer to the core of the Russian conservative tradition of 'Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality' (*pravoslavie, samoderzhavie, narodnost*), coined in the 1830s during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I (Pipes, 2005). When Dimitrii Medvedev became president in 2008, things had, however, not yet come full circle.

The Kremlin tried to mask the gap between the rulers and the ruled by political manipulation (Pain, 2008). Conscious efforts were made to ideologically and mentally reprogram the population. Regime-initiated campaigns hammered home the values and messages of the official consensus. With state-controlled television channels dominating the media space, independent voices were hardly ever

heard. Putin's form of reprogramming has been described as intellectual–utopian constructivism, based on two fundamental ideas: first, that any social mass movement is the result of the goal-oriented activity of a small group of people; and, second, that any small group of political consultants is able to form trends in social development by working out a strategy for such a scenario and then using means of social manipulation (Kukulin, 2007: 169–201).

With this belief in manipulation it was not surprising that the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine were regarded by the Russian authorities as nothing more than the work of foreign agencies. The headmaster of the Higher School of Management, where the elite of the pro-Putin youth receive their education, explained that 'no youth movement can spring up from below; it can only be created from above either by the authorities or by the opposition'. The question is, therefore, who is first to organize the youth – because he will have the advantage (Vinogradov and Bolotova, 2005). This approach characterized Surkov's creation of the pro-Putin youth organizations in 2005.

Putin glamour and its aesthetics

Many Russian observers characterized the four successful years after 2005 by the buzzword 'glamour'. An interest in everything marked by glamour was awakened in the late 1990s when the 'nouveaux riches' first appeared. This was followed by the petrodollar boom of the 2000s. Champagne, oysters, fur coats and diamonds became prominent symbols.³⁸ In the spring of 2005 a centre of exclusive boutiques, restaurants and entertainment opened in the wealthiest part of Moscow. Nothing could have more clearly represented the time than the name given to the shopping mall, the Barvikha Luxury Village. In the autumn of 2005 the first Millionaire Fair was held, offering for sale the most extreme luxury goods. The dominant taste of the day was the glossy, grand and glittering. Glamour became the new utopia.³⁹

It was not only the upper social classes that longed for glamour. Many tried their best to live up to the level of luxury or dreamed of a status never to be gained. Just 10–15 per cent of the population could afford a truly glamorous lifestyle, but they became role models and set the cultural expectations and values. Money was a prerequisite to enter this circle, but so too was strict adherence to the informal rules of this specific social group.

Glamour with a patriotic and authoritarian bent also affected aesthetics. In 2007, the editor-in-chief of the journal *Iskusstvo kino*, Daniil Dondurei (2007: 94–95), characterized the official and semi-official culture and art of the Putin regime in the following way:

1. Patriotism as defined by the ideological concepts 'sovereignty' (suverennost) and 'uniqueness' (samobytnost) and resulting in the perception that what comes from Russia is unique, more interesting and special than what emanates from other nations of the Soviet Union or from the West.

2. Glamour and its image of the world as completely free from controversial questions. Glamour does not raise political aspects or dramatic social events; it is indifferent to issues of justice; its heroes are all rich; and consumerism, shopping, beauty and the cult of successful commerce are the traits of this civilization.
3. Banality in the sense of expensive tastelessness. The state welcomes archetypical products such as gold and all that is pompous, voluminous and made from expensive or pseudo-expensive material, since this ‘demonstrates greatness, and hence helps the state win the love of the people’.
4. The presence of a middleman – a producer or curator – to guarantee commercial success.
5. Eclecticism with regard to genres and styles.

The author concludes rhetorically: ‘How to oppose this?’

Critics thus accused glamour of a distance from all problems, eclectic aesthetics and a tendency to focus only on the surface and make things appear smooth and uniform. The phenomenon was discussed in novels and journals.⁴⁰ The novel *Generation P* by Viktor Pelevin described the new commercial conditions under which the first post-Soviet generation entered their adult life (Pelevin, 1999). In his novel *Empire V: The Tale of a Real Super Man*, Pelevin made ‘glamour’ and ‘diskurs’ key concepts for understanding Putin’s Russia (Pelevin, 2006). The poet Lev Rubinshtein called glamour the official ideology of contemporary Russian society (*Bolshoi gorod*, 2006). Nikolai Uskov, chief editor of the journal *GQ (Gentlemen’s Quarterly)* and a historian by training, talked about ‘Putin glamour’ and also used the ironic term ‘sovereign glamour’, alluding to Surkov’s ‘sovereign democracy’ (Uskov, 2006). Uskov said that the nouveaux riches had set the agenda and the political elite quickly adopted it, as reflected in their suits, watches, hairstyles, and so on. He characterized ‘Putin glamour’ as a feeling of expectation similar to the eve of some great event, transmitting the feeling that everything can only get better. There was an expectation, he argued, of economic growth that would never end, which would solve all problems. The fact that political freedom was circumscribed was of minor importance (Chernysheva, 2007: 13–14). A few months later Uskov added: ‘... in front of us you find the grandiose simulacrum of the country. We live in a world of appearance of what seem to be films, stars, television, literature, president, prime minister, constitution, domestic and foreign policy, success, rigour, honesty, morality and strength. All as it seems’ (Uskov, 2008a). Rubinshtein, who had come to a similar conclusion, wrote in early 2009 that ‘glamour is the current official ideology and the *ersatz* of a national idea’ (Rubinshtein, 2009). He emphasized that the term not only described a philosophy of material consumption but also constituted ‘the regular Russian dream of the grand utopia, and of the cloudy and alluring horizon’, which ‘also depicts a universal system of values’.

Nonetheless, Uskov saw that the nouveaux riches were no longer satisfied with just wealth – they also wanted to ‘have principles, a footing and belief in ideals’. The new buzzwords were ‘autocracy, Orthodoxy and emotions’ (samoderzhavie, pravoslavie, emotsii) and the existential question “Why all this?” (Zachem vse?) appeared in the salons of the rich (Uskov, 2008b).

Life and art in the time of glamorous consensus

In the midst of the predominant illusion of glamour some expressed concern about the evolving authoritarianism. Vladimir Sorokin published his novel *One Day in an Oprichnik's Life* in 2006. Oprichniki were members of the security police created by Ivan the Terrible in the 1560s, and Sorokin used them in a metaphorical way to present Russia's authoritarian future trajectory (Sorokin, 2006). The story takes place amid a future revival of Holy Rus, when the country is cut off from the West by a grand Western Wall and, in an act of loyalty to the regime, citizens have burned their passports in Red Square. Sorokin regarded the book as a fantasy inspired by life,⁴¹ but it was read by many as an informed illustration of where Russia was heading.

A few years earlier, Sorokin had personally been the target of the new authoritarian wind. In the summer of 2002, the Putin loyal youth organization Going Together (Idushchie vmeste) had, in a symbolic action in central Moscow, thrown several of Sorokin's books – most notably his novel *Blue Fat* (Goluboe salo) – into a huge mock-up lavatory pan (Shusharin, 2002, 2009). The action was in response to Putin's statement that he wanted to 'whack [terrorists] in the john/shithouse' (mochit v sortire) (Litnevskaya, 2010).⁴² Sorokin also received death threats.⁴³ In March 2005 his libretto for the opera *The Children of Rosental* (Deti Rozentala), with music by the composer Leonid Desyatnikov, was heavily criticized by Duma deputies, and the Bolshoi Theatre, where it was being performed, temporarily removed it from its repertoire (Lyubarskaya, 2005).

However, Sorokin was an outsider. The cultural mainstream fell in line with the evolving Putin consensus.⁴⁴ The weekly newspaper *Kultura* described in its chronicle of cultural events during 2006 two trends that bore witness to the rising neo-conservatism in society: a 'religious interpretation of life' and a 'nostalgia for Soviet life'.⁴⁵ The film *The Island* (Ostrov), directed by Pavel Lungin, reflected the new interest in religiosity and was enthusiastically applauded in church circles.⁴⁶ Nostalgia for Soviet life was expressed in television series about Stalin, Brezhnev and the people around them, photographic exhibitions about Soviet life, and popular songs and films from the Soviet era. Nostalgia for tsarist times was evident in the film *The Admiral*, about Alexander Kolchak, one of the leaders of the Whites in the civil war. The film was produced in 2008 and shown as a television series in 2009.

The religious trend was reflected in various ways. Within the church, radical groups blended Orthodoxy, patriotism and a firm belief in Russia as a great power. One example was the musician Konstantin Kinchev, a member of the group Alisa, which had had a hit in the 1980s with the song 'My Generation' that became a youth anthem at that time (Beumers, 2005: 224–225). In November 2005 he proudly announced: 'I am a derzhavnik (a believer in a strong Russian state) since I am an Orthodox believer. Come to the church – we are all derzhavniki. Everybody stands for the tsar-priest' (*Izvestiya*, 2005).

In general, however, people in the cultural sphere avoided everything that could be considered politically problematic or delicate. The liberals of the 1960s, the

‘shestidesyatniki’, now in their 70s and 80s, were an exception as they staged plays which contained references to contemporary problems. The media, however, paid no attention to such references. Thus, when the theatre director, Yurii Lyubimov, staged *Antigone*, a tale of the classical conflict between the law of those in power and the morals of the individual, the media saw no parallels with contemporary life and society.

While cultural workers sought to avoid politics, the authorities tried, sometimes successfully, to tie them to the regime. In 2005 Surkov held a meeting with popular rock musicians,⁴⁷ and before long the former rebels were holding concerts in the Kremlin.⁴⁸ Putin had a first meeting with writers in February 2007, and further meetings would follow.

Symptomatic of the new atmosphere evolving in society was a scandal in September 2009 around a little Moscow kebab café called ‘Anti-sovetskaya’.⁴⁹ The café was located in a street opposite the hotel Sovetskaya, and its name was an ironic play on the name of the hotel. In Soviet times it had been a café where dissident intellectuals used to meet. Now, 18 years after the break-up of the Soviet Union, the local prosecutor told the café owner to change its name because some citizens were offended by it. The conflict soon lost all proportion. After the name was changed, the liberal journalist Aleksander Podrabinek, who had spent several years in the Gulag, published a letter where he criticized the leaders of the veterans’ organization and regretted that the owner had given in to their request (Podrabinek, 2009). As a result, the pro-Putin youth organization Nashi stirred up a campaign against Podrabinek for offending Second World War veterans and even picketed his home. They demanded that he make a public apology to the veterans or leave the country.⁵⁰ This whole campaign, which at first seemed inexplicable but then became a textbook case of how to make a mountain out of a molehill, demonstrated how authoritarian patriotic paranoia was tightening its grip.

In this situation of glamour and authoritarianism, independent art critics accused Russian visual arts of being commercialized and conformist. The art critic Andrei Kovalev stated in 2007 that ‘independent and critical art has disappeared’ (Kovalev, 2007a: 32). The Russian–German art historian Boris Groys expressed a similar view when he said in 2008 that Russian contemporary art was a commercialized culture (Kutlovskaya, 2008: 20): ‘Like commercialized art, it registers contemporary life but without a critical or investigative gaze . . . that is, Russian art does not conceive urgent analytical statements about the situation “Here and now”. There is no feeling that it clearly reacts to the contemporary socio-psychological or aesthetic situation’ (Kutlovskaya, 2008: 20). Artists seemed to have no ambition to evoke reflections or thoughts, he said. Instead, all ‘actors’ seem ‘to agree on how the scene is organized and how to act in it’ (*The New Times*, 2008: 46–48). This behaviour, he said, fell into the Stalinist tradition, which he described as forcing different opinions to merge into a single version that was acceptable to the top echelons of society (Groys, 2008: 169).

Iosif Bakshtein painted a different picture of Russian contemporary art in 2007. Appointed by the Ministry of Culture as the Commissar of the Moscow Art Biennale, he was part of the establishment. Nonetheless, his background in Soviet

underground art gave him authority in the art community. He argued that contemporary art was a free territory: 'All that goes on there takes place with the maximum of freedom given at that specific historical period' (*The New Times*, 2007: 46). He continued: 'Free people, basically young people, visit the biennale of contemporary art, and it [visual art] reflects their picture of the world more exactly than any other field of art' (*The New Times*, 2007). Bakshtein took as his reference point the tradition in Russian art of questioning established truths and conceptions.

The above statements by Kovalev, Groys and Bakshtein suggest different interpretations of the contemporary art scene in Russia at that time. Was there room for an art that did not accept the glamour of the Putin consensus?

Notes

- 1 The art group Sinie nosy (Blue Noses) used these words at an exhibition in 2007. The group went on to say, 'We have been cradled in the very same way and think it to be the purpose of our work'. Blue Noses, 'Naked Truth/The History of Our Times Seen with the Eyes of a Philistine: The "Shame of Russia" is now in Russia!', M and J Guelman Gallery, 12 December 2007.
- 2 An example of hidden criticism of the authorities presented in an ambiguous way can be found in Pushkin's parody of Aleksander Radishchev's book *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow*, published in 1790. Radishchev's book, which is full of political and social reflections in the tradition of the Enlightenment and against censorship, autocracy and serfdom, earned him a death sentence, although he was reprieved and deported to Siberia. Pushkin's text supports Radishchev's thesis, albeit in a veiled form (Gerner, 2011: 117–21).
- 3 The avant-garde movements are not the only source of totalitarian doctrine, but their role in its appearance cannot be ignored, say Todorov and Walker (Todorov and Walker, 2010). The idea that there is a straight line of development from the avant-garde to the Socialist Realism of the Stalin era can also be found in Groys (1992). Groys would later make a clear distinction between the early and late avant-garde (see Chapter 8).
- 4 On Stalinist art, see Golomstock (2011), Groys (1992) and Groys (2007).
- 5 Research has since shown that it was CIA policy to spread abstract art to the Eastern bloc. Nonetheless, abstract art was an eye-opener for many young Russian artists and played a big role in the development of Russian art at the time.
- 6 On the life of the non-conformists, see the author's interview with Valerii Orlov, Moscow, September 2013. See also the special issue of the art magazine *Iskusstvo* (2012) and Andreeva (2012).
- 7 In 1975 non-conformist artists were legally allowed access to an exhibition space at Malaya Gruzinskaya Street (*Vsegda drugoe iskusstvo*, 2010: 124).
- 8 In 1979 Boris Groys coined the term 'Moscow Romantic Conceptualism' in an article in *A-YA*, a Russian emigrant journal on non-conformist art published in Paris. The term was later shortened to 'Moscow Conceptualism', although it had little in common with the conceptualism in Western art at that time (Groys, 2010: 4).
- 9 Compare Vadim Zakharov, 'Zolotaya kniga moskovskogo kontseptualizma', in Degot and Zakharov (2005: 7).
- 10 Vitalyi Komar and Aleksander Melamid are often considered the fathers of Sots-Art.
- 11 In his 10 albums of drawings, *Ten Characters, 1971–1976* (see Wallach, 1996). For more on Kabakov, see Kabakov and Kabakov (2008), an exhibition catalogue in two volumes.

- 12 In addition to Monastyrskii, there were Nikita Alekseev, Elena Elagina, Sabine Häns- gen, Georgii Kizevalter, Igor Makarevich, Nikolai Panitkov and Sergei Romasko (see Groys, 2011a).
- 13 Monastyrski quoted in an unpublished article by Victor Tupitsyn; and Monastyrski quoted in Bishop (2011: 14).
- 14 The 1975 Helsinki Final Act was signed by the 35 nations of the Conference on Secu- rity and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). It dealt with many issues, which were divided into three ‘baskets’. The third basket emphasized human rights, including freedom of emigration and the reunification of families divided by international borders, cultural exchange and freedom of the press.
- 15 *Vsegda drugoe iskusstvo* (2010: 199).
- 16 Oleg Kulik told how the young generation of artists suddenly felt alone in the new situa- tion. Interview by Denis Mustafin with Oleg Kulik, Vimeo, 26 Feb. 2010, available at <http://vimeo.com/9905123>.
- 17 Interview by Denis Mustafin with Osmolovskii, Vimeo, 11 March 2010, <http://vimeo.com/10171949>. Groys (2010: 9) writes: ‘In the 1990s the controversy between Moscow conceptualists and Moscow Actionism very much dominated the Russian art scene. But today these polemics seem to be completely obsolete’.
- 18 Interview by Denis Mustafin with Avdei Ter-Oganyan, Vimeo, 2010, <http://vimeo.com/10267185>.
- 19 On Moscow Actionism and art in Moscow in the 1990s, see Kovalev (2007b).
- 20 The police arrested them and legal action was initiated according to article 206, para. 2, of the Criminal Code: ‘Malicious hooliganism characterized by exceptional cynicism or especial audacity’. The case was closed after three months due to lack of proof of criminal intent. See ‘Iz istorii protestnogo iskusstva v Rossii’, [www.lookatme.ru/mag/ art-design/art-and-design/159845-hlystom-i-pryanikom](http://www.lookatme.ru/mag/art-design/art-and-design/159845-hlystom-i-pryanikom). Interview by Denis Mustafin with Anatolii Osmolovskii, Vimeo, 11 March 2010, <http://vimeo.com/10171949>.
- 21 See the interview with Anatolii Osmolovskii in Kovalev (2005: 247–57).
- 22 *Kommersant Daily*, 14 February 1995, quoted in Kovalev (2007b: 173).
- 23 Nonetheless, some of these artists were later drawn into the political whirlwind of events. Osmolovskii, for instance, worked for a while in the mid-1990s with the gal- lery owner Marat Gelman in the political consultancy ‘For Effective Politics’.
- 24 It was called ‘Demonstration’ and was organized by the RADEK group. Like the 1998 ‘Barricade’, this action simulated a demonstration, with participants carrying banners and flags, and shouting slogans. However, the slogans were absurdist and the demonstrators blended with ordinary pedestrians so that they unintentionally partici- pated in the demonstration. There were five medium-sized banners: ‘Everyone Against Everyone’ (*Vse protiv vseh*), ‘Devil Revolution Onanism’ (*Dyavol Revoly- utsiya Onanizm*), ‘A Microrevolution Is Going On’ (*Mikrorevolyutsiya proiskhodit*), ‘We Will Take Another Way’ (*My poidem drugim putem*) and ‘To Everyone 700 USD’ (*Kazhdomu 700 USD*), as well as two large banners which read: ‘A Microbe Is the Murderer of the President’ (*Mikrob ubiitsa prezidenta*) and ‘Sex Marx Karl Pistols’. There were also two flags. The eight genuine participants in the action selected road crossings where pedestrians were waiting and then joined them, crossing the street and pretending they were protesting. As one of the participants later wrote, ‘It made absolutely no difference what slogans we used. The main thing was that the demon- stration took place. And the people who walked with us were this time not bystanders, but created the event themselves and participated in it’ (Bystrov, quoted in Kovalev, 2007b: 403).
- 25 For an overview and analysis of Putin’s policy during these years, see Sakwa (2008) and Shevtsova (2005).
- 26 The document appeared on 28 December 1999 on the Russian government website, www.gov.ru/ministry/isp-vlast47.html. It was also published in *Nezavisimaya gazeta* on 30 December 1999.

- 27 Lev Gudkov (2012) wrote in 2010 that there was no single accepted characterization or definition of the Putin political system. Scholars use terms like ‘simulated’ or ‘imitated democracy’, or ‘hybrid’, ‘chimerical’ or ‘centaur regime’. Some compared Russia to authoritarian regimes in transitional processes in Latin America and Asia, others saw Putin’s system as a normal dictatorship common to most states on former Soviet territory. Gudkov himself used the term ‘Putinism’.
- 28 There is a rich literature on this. See, for example, Billington (2004). For a contemporary discussion see Emil Pain (2006).
- 29 In 1994, 27 per cent of those polled were positive towards Stalin, but by 2003 this had risen to 53 per cent (in 2009 49 per cent). In the meantime, those critical of Stalin fell from 47 per cent in 1994 to 33 per cent in 2003 (33 per cent also in 2009) (Gudkov, 2013).
- 30 Criticism of *chernukha* in literature, film, the visual arts and music is not just a phenomenon of Putin’s time. On the situation in the 1990s, see Beumers (1999: 1).
- 31 The day of the October revolution was renamed the Day of Accord and Reconciliation (den soglasiya i primireniya) in 1996. The date has not been a state holiday since 2005.
- 32 A dominant organization among the nationalists was the League Against Illegal Immigration, an outspoken xenophobic organization based primarily on ethnic nationalism. It was outlawed by the authorities a few years later.
- 33 ‘I zhelayu chtoby Voskreshii Gospod ukrepil vas v podvige, kotoryi vy sovershaete na blago Bozhie’; ‘Pomolimsya o gospodine prezidente’ (‘I pray that Our Resurrected Lord strengthens you in your heroic deed, which you perform for the good of God’). One of the priests asked the attending public to pray for the president (Melikova, 2006).
- 34 On 1 September 2006 a new topic was introduced as an experiment in four Russian regional schools: ‘The Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture’. The course was compulsory, and critics pointed out that not even in tsarist schools had such subjects been compulsory (*Izvestiya/Nedelya*, 1 September 2006, p. H4). In later years the experiment was developed further but, in order to minimize criticism, offered options for followers of the major official beliefs as well as a secular syllabus.
- 35 See, for example, the seminar in 2008 in connection with the book project *Russian Doctrine* by A.B. Kobayakov and V.V. Averyanov, who argued in favour of Orthodoxy as the central pillar of society (Kobayakov and Averyanov, 2008).
- 36 ‘The Death of an Empire: Lessons from Byzans’ (Gibel imperii. Vizantiiskii urok), 2007 film (Russian), 71 mins.
- 37 For a discussion of the concept, see Hayoz (2012).
- 38 See the study of glamour culture under Putin in Goscilo and Strukov (2011).
- 39 Compare the ‘Introduction’ in Goscilo and Strukov (2011).
- 40 See also the discussion in ‘Diskurs glamura’, *Bolshoi gorod*, 6 December 2006.
- 41 Author’s interview with Vladimir Sorokin, Moscow, November 2009.
- 42 At a press conference, Putin commented on the events of 23 September 1999 when the Russian air force bombed Grozny: ‘The Russian air force are carrying out and will continue to carry out attacks only on terrorist bases in Chechnya, and this will continue wherever the terrorists are. . . . We will hunt them everywhere. If they are at the airport, then at the airport. This means, if you excuse me, we will find them in the toilet and whack them in the john/shitouse. That’s that, the question is finally closed’ (Litnevskaya, 2010).
- 43 See ‘2002. Dela pornografov Sorokina i Ivanova’, Artprotest, 16 May, http://artprotest.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=308&choto=2002-&catid=4&2011-03-04-14-58-14=&ordering=2=4&Itemid=4.
- 44 This consensus was especially visible in the film industry. One example is the film ‘1612’ about Russians fighting Polish invaders during the Time of Troubles, which had its premiere on 4 November 2007. Its purpose was to entertain, but at the same time to foster patriotism in the audience. It failed not because it had a highly doubtful relationship with historical fact, but because the audience did not turn up as expected.

- 45 *Kultura* 51 (28 December 2006–10 January 2007).
- 46 The film ‘Ostrov’ by Pavel Lungin (2006). See the positive review on the website of the Sretenskiy monastery: ‘Retsentsiya na film Pavla Lungina “Ostrov”’, Internet zhurnal Sretenskogo monastyrya, www.pravoslavie.ru/jurnal/060905150536.htm.
- 47 Among them were Boris Grebenshchikov, Zemfira, Sergei Shnurov, the group Bi-2 and the producers of the groups Spleen and Chaif.
- 48 The first two were Boris Grebenshchikov and Andrei Makarevich. After the election of Medvedev in 2008, Makarevich’s group, Mashina vremeni, played at the huge rock concert in Red Square (Kozyrev, 2008).
- 49 ‘Sila slova. Smena nazvaniya odnogo iz stolichnykh kafe sprovotsirovala politicheskii skandal’, Sobesednik.ru, 1 October 2009, <http://sobesednik.ru/node/20442>.
- 50 Ella Panfilova, the President’s Representative on Human Rights Issues, defended Podrabinek against this political onslaught. In a further ratcheting up of the conflict, Duma deputies demanded that Panfilova leave her post.

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