

# THE “RUSSIAN IDEA” ON THE SMALL SCREEN: STAGING NATIONAL IDENTITY ON RUSSIA’S TV

MARLENE LARUELLE

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

**Abstract:** Television is a central driver of Russia’s national identity debates. The topic of the “Russian idea” (*Russkaia ideia*) is successfully staged through the *Rossiiia-K* (formerly *Kul’tura*) network, which demonstrates the political authorities’ conscious strategy to feed the intelligentsia and to respond to its requests for a cultural channel sensitive to national identity issues.

Television remains the most widely disseminated media in Russia today, and a majority of the population believes that it provides reliable information. Even if the internet is starting to challenge this supremacy, television continues to shape public opinion, which sees in it not only a means of information, but also a form of entertainment accessible to all segments of the population. Television thus contributes both to reproducing and shaping cultural and political consensus in Russian society. Topics that create consensus among society are scarce, but national identity is assuredly one of them. While there is no unanimity on the content making up Russia’s national identity, the notion that it is an important topic to which the authorities should pay a lot of attention is largely accepted. It frames an understanding of domestic evolutions and international affairs for the majority of citizens, and disseminates a culture that is based on the Soviet legacy—the lowest common denominator, but the most broadly shared. This article hypothesizes that television is a central driver of Russia’s national identity debates.<sup>1</sup>

The role of cinema and television in the Kremlin-backed revival of the patriotic mood in Russia has been the topic of many studies. They

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the anonymous reviewers’ comments.

Marlene Laruelle is Research Professor at The George Washington University, 1957 E St. NW, Suite 412, Washington, DC 20052, USA. Email: laruelle@gwu.edu.

have mainly concentrated on the production of fiction rather than on the role of historical documentaries or talk shows. This latter aspect, little of which is known, is the focus of the present investigation. In the following sections, I argue that the tradition, born in the nineteenth century, of discussing the topic of the “Russian idea” (*Russkaia ideia*) through the genre of *publitsistika* is now successfully delivered through television. The empirical work draws from Russia’s main patriotic channels, mostly *Rossiia-K* (formerly *Kul tura*), but also, to a lesser extent, *Zvezda* and *Spas*, which offer a unique lens for the televisual staging of the “Russian idea.”

From a quantitative sociological point of view, the choice of *Rossiia-K* as the focus of the content of Russian television may seem questionable. The channel has a relatively small audience, only 1.7 percent in 2012 (14<sup>th</sup> position), with the three main channels – NTV, Pervyi kanal, and Rossiia-1 – occupying 43 percent of the ratings.<sup>2</sup> *Rossiia-K* appeals to a particular subset of the television audience that does not identify with post-Soviet cultural transformations and rejects the “invasion” of foreign, especially American, programs on the country’s airwaves. Its core audience is older and well educated: 40 percent are aged 45–64 and 35 percent are over 65 years of age; more than 90 percent have at least a median education and 43 percent have a higher education (the highest rate of all Russian networks).<sup>3</sup> Statistically speaking, then, *Rossiia-K* is not representative of the Russian media landscape as it targets a specific group, the intelligentsia. Yet it reflects a quasi-ideal debate about Russia’s national identity, one that took shape in the 2000s and led to something of a cascade effect by conveying a symbolic repertoire to a mass audience.

In the first part of the article, I define the notion of the Russian idea and the major role of the *publitsistika* genre in it, and then explore briefly the “visualization” that has been ongoing for several decades, transforming the Russian idea from a written concept to a visual one, relayed by painting, cinema, and television. In the second part, I discuss *Rossiia-K* programming strategies and investigate how the program “Who are we?,” launched in 1992 and presented as “the first program devoted to Russian (*russkaia*) civilization,” contributes to “reloading” the Russian idea by offering a consensus narrative based on empathy and non-critical thinking.

### The Russian Idea and the *Publitsistika* Genre

The term “Russian idea” conventionally refers to an impressive body of texts discussing the “essence” of Russia’s national identity.<sup>4</sup> It emerged at

<sup>2</sup> “Reiting populiarnosti rossiiskikh kanalov,” *Vedomosti*, February 4, 2013, [http://www.vedomosti.ru/library/news/8690401/rejting\\_populyarnosti\\_rossijskih\\_telekanalov](http://www.vedomosti.ru/library/news/8690401/rejting_populyarnosti_rossijskih_telekanalov).

<sup>3</sup> See statistics at <http://www.startmarketing.ru/media/tv/channel/kultura>.

<sup>4</sup> On contemporary texts on the “Russian Idea,” see W. Helleman, ed. 2004. *The Russian Idea: In Search of a New Identity*, Bloomington: Slavica Publishers.

the end of the nineteenth century, but now is used to encompass nearly two centuries of debates, whose thematic framework is shaped by two main questions: the relationship with Europe (whether Russia is part of Europe, part of Asia, straddles both worlds, or is separate from both),<sup>5</sup> and the relationship between the state and its population (whether Russia is a nation-state, an empire, or a multinational federation, with a political nature that is autocratic, democratic, or ideocratic). The body of texts established the atemporal traits of the nation’s “essence,” in various ways combining messianism (the myth of Moscow as the Third Rome), Orthodox spirituality, the sense of the collective (*sobornost’*), and of the person (*lichnost’*), the belief in a central role for the state and/or the autocrat in guiding the people, the worship of the peasant masses as bearers of the “original” culture, and the idea that Russia and its imperial margins constitute a separate world and unique civilization that the West does not understand or respect.<sup>6</sup>

Similar to the other European states, national identity became a topic of discussion starting in the second half of the eighteenth century. The idea of a specific path (*Sonderweg*) inspired by the Germanic example was counter-posed to the claimed universalism of both the French royal model and the republic. This idea spread throughout Russia, both in university milieus and aristocratic circles.<sup>7</sup> In the 1830–1840s, the Slavophiles (Aleksey Khomiakov and his disciples), glorifying the Slavic identity and the authentic culture of the rural people, opposed the Westernizers, who were looking westward, but also the supporters of state nationalism, grounded in the dynastic fidelity to the Romanovs (Sergey Uvarov, Konstantin Pobedonostsev). In the 1860–1880s, the Panславists tried to reconcile both Slavophiles and state nationalists by focusing Russia’s foreign policy on Balkan issues, but also by supporting the conquest of Central Asia and a more assertive policy in Asia. At the end of the century a new trend of *pochvennichestvo* or “return to the soil” (Konstantin Leontev, Vladimir Soloviev, Nikolai Fedorov and Nikolai Berdiaev) emerged, which insisted on religious and philosophical values and viewed modern ethnic nationalism with suspicion.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> E.C. Thaden 1990. *Interpreting History: Collective Essays on Russia’s Relations with Europe*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>6</sup> A. Walicki. 1989. *The Slavophile Controversy. History of a Conservative Utopia in Nineteenth-Century Russian Thought*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.

<sup>7</sup> James Billington. 2004. *Russia in Search of Itself*. Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

<sup>8</sup> See W. Dowler, 1982. *Dostoievski, Grigoriev and Native Soil Conservatism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; L. Gerstein. 1971. *Nikolai Strakhov, philosopher, man of letters, social critic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; S. Lukashovich 1967. *Konstantin Leontev. A Study in Russian “heroic vitalism.”* New York: Pageant Press; S. Lukashovich. 1977. *N. F. Fedorov, a Study in Russian Eupsychian and Utopian Thought*. Newark: University of

The theme of the Russian idea did not disappear during the decades of Soviet rule. It survived among émigrés and reappeared in the Soviet Union in the mid-1930s, during Stalinism, when the regime moved toward a Russian-centric mass culture promoting a form of “national-bolshevism.”<sup>9</sup> After the shock of the twentieth CPSU Congress and the realization of its full magnitude in the 1960s, the famous “village prose” idealized a peasant life on the verge of disappearing.<sup>10</sup> Khrushchev’s atheist campaigns and new industrialization wave raised the alarm among intellectual circles on the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. Village prose reached its apogee in the 1970s, when its main writers—Viktor Astafiev, Vasili Shushkin, and Valentin Rasputin—were awarded the most prestigious Soviet prizes, ensuring that each of their works would have several million copies published,<sup>11</sup> and benefited from the support of a portion of the Soviet establishment, the so-called “Russian Party.”<sup>12</sup>

Debates on the Russian idea belonged to the long tradition of *publistika*. This term defines a specific genre of publications that includes philosophical essays, journalistically inspired political texts, and more literary works, all which have in common debating major national issues. The absence of press freedoms in imperial Russia gave a noble pretense to this literary genre. The great figures of Russia’s intellectual life used the so-called *thick journals*, which were literary publications restricted to the intellectual elites in the capital and emerging cultivated classes in the provinces, to discuss the nation’s future. The Soviet era saw the same scheme replicate itself. The major journals of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—mainly *Nash sovremennik*, *Molodaia gvardiia*, *Moskva*, and *Volga*—served as the forum for debates on the Russian idea, and their print runs increased by more than 100 percent between 1971 and 1982.<sup>13</sup>

In post-Soviet Russia, the Russian idea has again become a subject of public debate. Although he is usually blamed for having broken with patriotic values, Boris Yeltsin nonetheless sought rapidly to reconcile with Russian patriotism. On June 12, 1996, the date of the national holiday to celebrate the adoption of Russia’s Declaration of Sovereignty of 1990, he

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Delaware Press.

<sup>9</sup> D. Brandenberger. 2002. *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; K. Clark. 2011. *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

<sup>10</sup> K. Parthé, 1992. *Russian Village Prose: The Radiant Past*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Y.M. Brudny. 2000. *Reinventing Russia. Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953-1991*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p. 103.

<sup>12</sup> N. Mitrokhin. 2003. “*Russkaia partiia*”: *dvizhenie russkikh natsionalistov v SSSR 1953-1985 gg.* Moscow: NLO.

<sup>13</sup> Brudny, *Reinventing Russia*, 103.

claimed that “the most important issue for Russia is to seek out a national idea, a national ideology.”<sup>14</sup> The government newspaper *Rossiiskaia gazeta* launched a competition around a new Russian idea and collected hundreds of slogans sent in by readers. If Vladimir Putin rejected all ideological references during his first term in office and concentrated on restoring the “vertical of power,” his second term saw the structuring of different ideological wings within United Russia, with explicit references made to conservatism and patriotism. This tendency intensified during his third mandate. In his presidential address at Valdai on September 20, 2013, Putin officially made national identity a topic of concern for the Kremlin: “Today we need new strategies to preserve our identity in a rapidly changing world, a world that has become more open, transparent and interdependent. (...) For us, questions about who we are and who we want to be are increasingly prominent in our society. (...) It is evident that it is impossible to move forward without spiritual, cultural and national self-determination.”<sup>15</sup> The national identity promoted by the Kremlin remains without explicit content, and is above all based on Soviet nostalgia, which transcends all social and ideological divisions, and even, albeit more moderately, all age brackets. The contemporary *Russkaia ideia* debate is heavily influenced by this Soviet—and militarized—patriotism advanced by the Kremlin, but the topics discussed extend far beyond it.

If freedom of the press is partly limited in post-Soviet Russia, freedom of book publishing is not. The means of diffusion diversified, but the *publitsistika* genre was able to adapt to the changes underway. Today bookstores, as well as public and university libraries display large specialized collections, especially from Eksmo, which, with 20 percent of the market, is Russia’s largest publisher. Eksmo publishes works from authors of the late Soviet period (Igor Shafarevich, Vladimir Chivilikhin, Vadim Kozhinov), authors who have been established for the last twenty years (Aleksandr Prokhanov), and new names that have appeared in the post-Soviet period (Sergey Kara-Murza, Natalia Narochitskaya, Maksim Kalashnikov, Yuri Mukhin, etc.). Added to this list are dozens of reissues from major authors of the nineteenth century and the main representatives of the Silver Age of Russian philosophy (Vladimir Soloviev, Nikolai Berdiaev, Sergei Bulgakov, George Florovsky) and authors from the early twentieth century like Ivan Il’in, who were relatively unknown previously, but are enjoying growing popularity. The presidential party United Russia also entered the fray in 2005, when it created its own publishing house Evropa, which sponsors pro-Kremlin *publitsistika*.

The *publitsistika* tradition has also moved to the internet. Since the beginning of the 2000s, online journals have flooded Runet, the

<sup>14</sup> “El’tsin o natsional’noi idee”, *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, July 13, 1996, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> See the transcript of the speech at <http://valdaiclub.com/politics/62880.html>.

Russian-speaking internet. A former dissident and until recently Russia's foremost image maker for Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin, Gleb Pavlovsky, played a central role in putting the "Russian idea" tradition online, by launching *Russkii zhurnal* (the Russian Journal)<sup>16</sup> as early as 1997, and many other sites, such as Kreml.org, strana.ru, SMI.ru, gazeta.ru, lenta.ru, smi.ru, and vesti.ru, which shape and reshape public opinion. The "national-democrats," a new generation group led by Konstantin Krylov that calls for a democratic ethno-nationalist Russia, launched another online journal, *Voprosy natsionalizma* (*Questions of Nationalism*).<sup>17</sup> Hitherto this remains the only scholarly journal about Russian nationalism published by Russian nationalists. Finally, blogs and livejournals are becoming a venue for information and debate that all groups, regardless of political persuasion, use to contribute to narratives on the Russian idea.

### The Russian Idea Becomes Visual

Although writing remains the main mode of diffusion for the canons of national identity, visual means are not far behind. Under the umbrella of Socialist messianism, Soviet propaganda played a crucial role in forging the visual stereotypes of "eternal Russia," popularizing the faces of its national heroes (Alexander Nevskii, Dmitri Donskoi), and creating an image of *Rodina-mat'* (the Homeland Mother). Soviet history textbooks were richly documented with images, and the Tretyakov Gallery has been almost entirely dedicated to the Russian idea. In the last decades of the Soviet Union, the rediscovery of painters such as Mikhail Nesterov (1862–1942), whose canvases of an endless Russia of rivers, birch trees, and shrines, deeply shaped representations of Russianness. Designers such as Ivan Bilibin (1876–1942), whose sketches became the standard illustrations for Russian fairy tales and legends, brought a new shape to the debates on the Russian idea. Iliia Glazunov (1930), the champion of Russian nationalist painting—he received the distinguished title of USSR national artist in 1980, despite the anti-Semitic character of some of his paintings—also greatly contributed to reframing a visual ideal of Russia's identity. The national theme continues to inspire artists from younger generations, such as Aleksey Belyaev-Gintovt (1965), who received the Kandinsky prize in 2008 and is probably one of the best representatives of the "second modern" art movement in Russia.<sup>18</sup>

More so than painting, however, it is cinema that plays the leading role in providing a medium for the staging of Soviet and post-Soviet

<sup>16</sup> *Russkii zhurnal*, <http://russ.ru/>.

<sup>17</sup> *Voprosy natsionalizma*, <http://vnatio.org/>

<sup>18</sup> M. Engström, "Neokosmizm, imperiia i aktual'noe iskusstvo: Aleksei Beliaev-Gintovt," International Conference *Russian Aviation and Space: Technology and Cultural Imagination*, University of Leeds, October 28-30, 2010.

Russia’s national identity debates. The national theme occupied one of the first films of the post-Soviet period, *The Russia that We Lost* (1992), by Stanislav Govorukhin, who rehabilitated the imperial past.<sup>19</sup> However, it was not until the first post-Soviet blockbuster, the *Barber of Siberia* in 1999, by Nitika Mikhalkov, that the Russian movie industry and especially the genre of patriotic film was rehabilitated. Since then, the combination of Hollywood techniques and national themes has ensured contemporary Russian cinema’s commercial success and has played a decisive role in shaping public opinion.<sup>20</sup> A Fund for the Support of Patriotic Cinema, created in 1996 and financed by various charitable organizations linked to the military,<sup>21</sup> offers exclusive financing and distribution to directors who work on patriotic themes or play up Soviet nostalgia. From 2009, the Education Ministry has received special financing to enable it to commission films based on “ideas of humanism, of spirituality, of patriotism, and of other traditional values of the peoples of Russia.”<sup>22</sup> Many productions are devoted to World War II, while others focus on the conflicts in Afghanistan and Chechnya, presenting reflections of the contemporary state of the country in metaphoric form.<sup>23</sup> Staging the Russian idea in cinema became one of the main genres of what Mark Lipovetsky refers to as *post-sots* (post-Socialism).<sup>24</sup>

The cinema industry also greatly invested in producing high-quality television series, the viewership of which burgeoned through the 2000s.<sup>25</sup> Largely controlled by the Kremlin, television remains the principal means for the state to spread its patriotic message, especially the rehabilitation of everything military. Television channels have been broadcasting series devoted either to the police, the army, and the secret services,<sup>26</sup> or to

<sup>19</sup> For more details on the main post-Soviet films see Peter Rollberg. 2008. *Historical Dictionary of Russian and Soviet Cinema*. Lanham, Toronto, Plymouth: Scarecrow.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Norris. 2012. *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: Movies, Memory, and Patriotism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

<sup>21</sup> See its site, <http://www.patriotfilm.ru>.

<sup>22</sup> A. Zaitseva, “Novoe kino Rossii: patriotizm za gosden’gi”, *BBC Russia News*, November 6, 2008, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/russian/russia/newsid\\_7712000/7712514.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/russian/russia/newsid_7712000/7712514.stm).

<sup>23</sup> B. Beumers. 2000 “Myth-making and Myth-taking: Lost Ideals and the War in Contemporary Russian Cinema”, *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 42, no. 1-2: 171-189. D. Gillespie. 2005. “Confronting Imperialism: The Ambivalence of War in Post-Soviet Film”, in S. Webber, and J. Mathers, eds., *The Military and Society in Post-Soviet Russia*. Manchester: Manchester University Press: 80-93.

<sup>24</sup> Mark Lipovetsky 2004. “Post-Sots: Transformations of Socialist Realism in the Popular Culture of the Recent Period,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 48 (3): 356-377.

<sup>25</sup> See Peter Rollberg’s article in this issue.

<sup>26</sup> During the 2000s, the audiences of these series increased, as an indication of the popular interest in military fiction. Examples include *The Special Services* (2002), a series about elite troops fighting the Chechens and their Islamist allies; *The Code of Honor* (2002-2003), which takes up the various military exploits of special units; *Sarmat* (2004), which is based on the story of a professional soldier of Cossack origin who served in Afghanistan and then

national history, with melodramatic stories inspired by events from medieval, imperial, or Soviet Russia, as well as to television adaptations of major novels of the nineteenth century or of the Soviet Thaw. This reloaded history, not interested in historical accuracy, displaying above all feeling and characters, plays a major role in reshaping views of national identity, in both the literal and figurative senses.<sup>27</sup>

Television channels do not just produce fiction series. They contribute to diversifying the genres by which identity is staged by rebroadcasting historical commemorations,<sup>28</sup> and patriotic concerts, which are something of a genre in their own right since Soviet times. Concerts systematically accompany the professional celebrations of the different military corps, days of Russia's military glory, and other major national holidays, such as February 23, May 9, June 12, and November 4. They are also organized for the jubilee days of large companies that, like Gazprom, symbolize the country's success and occupy the prime evening time slot on *Pervyi kanal*. Historical commemorations and concerts share similar ritual features: pompous opening speeches, ceremonial gestures such as a moment of silence, patriotic and military objects as symbolic backdrops, and the presence of major political figures and variety singers (*estrada*). Again, the themes that are drawn upon during these events are closely linked to the supposed ethnic Russian identity and include folk groups in Slavic peasant and Cossack dress, stylized representations of the Russian countryside, and recurrent allusions to Orthodoxy. The Soviet past is also present through well-known films and songs.<sup>29</sup>

Numerous "authors' programs," and talk shows regularly debate national identity as well. Vladimir Solovyev's talk shows on Rossiia-1, *Poedinok* (which has existed since 2002 as *K bar'eru*), in which two individuals go head-to-head on current political issues, and *Voskresnyi*

Chechnya; *The Saboteur* (2004), a series celebrating the sacrifice of an elite unit of the Soviet army operating in Nazi Germany; *The Criminal Battalion* (2004), which emphasizes the cooperation between the Orthodox Church and the Red Army during World War II; *The Cadets* (2006), which recounts the adventures of young members of the Suvorov Military Institute; and *Soldiers* (2006), which is based on multiple adventures and humorous anecdotes in the daily lives of conscripts and officers.

<sup>27</sup> Elena V. Prokhorova. 2010. "Flushing Out the Soviet: Common Places, Global Genres and Modernization in Russian Television Serial Productions," *Russian Journal of Communication* 3 nos. (3/4): 185-204; B. Beumers, 2009. "The culture of serialization, or the serialization of culture," B. Beumers, S. Hutchings, and N. Rulyova, eds., *The Post-Soviet Russian Media. Conflicting Signals*. London: Routledge: 159-177.

<sup>28</sup> S. Hutchings, and N. Rulyova, "Commemorating the past/performing the present: Television coverage of WWII victory celebrations and the (de)construction of Russian nationhood," in Beumers, Hutchings, and Rulyova, *The Post-Soviet Russian Media. Conflicting Signals*, 134-155.

<sup>29</sup> V. Zvereva. 2007. "Televizionnye prazdnichnye kontserty: ritorika gosudarstvennogo natsionalizma," in M. Laruelle, ed., *Sovremennye interpretatsii russkogo natsionalizma*. Stuttgart: Verlag-Ibidem: 318-335.

*vecher*, are one example. Mikhail Leontev’s shows (*Odnako* and *Bolshaia igra*) are another. Well-known ultranationalist publicists such as Alexander Prokhanov and Vadim Kurginian, as well as more controversial figures such as Eurasianist geopolitician Alexander Dugin and his Islamic acolyte Geydar Dzhemal, and major cultural figures such as Nikita Mikhalkov, appear on them. They offer cultural interpretations of current political events, based on the Russian idea’s canons.

In 2005, two channels appeared which openly displayed patriotic agendas: *Zvezda*, launched by the Ministry of Defense, and *Spas*, created by the Orthodox Church. Both the army and the Church constitute the main “armed wing” of the Kremlin in its promotion of patriotism, and each channel cultivated possible ranges for the “Russian idea.”

Named in reference to the Soviet army newspaper *Krasnaia zvezda*, *Zvezda* was launched for the sixtieth anniversary of the victory against Nazism. Mentioned in the first State Program for Patriotic Education in 2001, *Zvezda* is funded by advertising revenue and therefore exists on the basis of commercial support. However, it aims to become “an instrument of preservation for the national heritage and of patriotic education for the new generations (...) for the sake of the motherland.”<sup>30</sup> For its executives, “only a man sincerely dedicated to his country is capable of living in harmony with the interests of the state, defending his country, and having an informed understanding of contemporary realities.”<sup>31</sup> The former Minister of Defense, Sergey Ivanov, who played a key role in launching the channel, defined its mission as follows: “This entire channel works on the patriotic education of Russian citizens, those in uniform and those not. Both children and young people more generally happily view good old Soviet films.”<sup>32</sup> The ideological shortcut between “patriotic education” and “cinema” is striking. At its launch, the president of the new channel stated that it would show very few Western productions, especially of a violent or sexually explicit nature, nor any “depicting Russians as barbarians and bandits.”<sup>33</sup>

The channel dedicates around 10 percent of its airtime to the army itself, by playing documentaries and showing archival images, mainly in relation to Soviet commemorations and professional days. The remaining time is divided between reruns of Soviet cinema classics—in the main films related to war and re-enactments of war—musical events, and

<sup>30</sup> “Patrioticheskii kanal “Zvezda” nachnet veshchanie s mul’f’il’mov, muzyki i kino,” Media-online.ru, February 16, 2005, <http://www.media-online.ru/index.php3?id=7286>; S. Savushkin, “I ne nado gorovit’ o tuposti voennykh,” *Novaia gazeta*, April 7, 2005, <http://2005.novayagazeta.ru/nomer/2005/25n/n25n-s37.shtml>.

<sup>31</sup> <<http://www.tvzvezda.ru/tv/about/>.

<sup>32</sup> V. Sungorkin, and V. Baranets, “Sergei Ivanov: My s Putinyim poznakomilis’ v razvedke...,” *Komsolmol’skaia Pravda*, March 5, 2013, <http://kem.kp.ru/daily/26041/2955749/>.

<sup>33</sup> “Patrioticheskii kanal “Zvezda” nachnet veshchanie s mul’f’il’mov, muzyki i kino.”

cartoons.<sup>34</sup> This schedule of programs reproduces, without innovation, what the Kremlin considers to be cultural norms, namely the Soviet legacy, without updates: programs on military topics, and broader topics related to Russian history, with a clearly formulated conservative agenda in terms of values, family, and mores; and a classic definition of what is the core of Russian identity, the state great power. Zvezda has only authorized a single cultural import from American television, which I call the “Discovery” model. Following the example of the Discovery channel, Zvezda airs many documentary films on world aviation, navy and weapons history, techniques and know-how, and conspiracy-minded explanations of world events.

Spas occupies another, even narrower television niche. Funded by the Moscow Patriarchate, it reproduces the Church’s narrative by contributing to “the creation of a world view and value system necessary for the effective development of the state based on actual Orthodox values; and the reinforcement of the spiritual foundations of the Russian state.”<sup>35</sup> Orthodox catechism takes up about 10 percent of airtime, while one-third goes to the promotion of Orthodox culture, and more than half to broader cultural topics, always with a moral angle. Unlike Zvezda, Spas has developed its televised *publitsistika* tradition via many talk shows. At least three of them give voice to contemporary conservative thinkers and promote nineteenth-century authors that are considered heralds of Russian conservatism.<sup>36</sup> Vsevolod Chaplin, chairman of the Synodal Department for the Cooperation of Church and Society and one of the principle ideologues of the Patriarchate, has his own program, *Vechnost’ i vremia* (Eternity and time), through which he propagates his philosophical viewpoints in a similar way to his own written works.

### Rossiia-K: No Culture without National Identity, and Vice Versa

Through painting, cinema, and television more generally, debates on Russia’s national identity have gone beyond the narrow field of written and online *publitsistika*, “democratized” and reached the broader public. Rossiia-K (called Kul’tura until 2010) is part of this trend. It offers an elite-oriented range of television culture that is largely based on the Soviet legacy. As in the *publitsistika* tradition, “culture” is represented as an inescapable element of “national identity” and vice versa: the notion of being

<sup>34</sup> S.L. Myers, “Red Star Over Russian Airwaves: Military TV Network,” *New York Times*, February 11, 2005, p. A4; J. Bransten, “Russia: Patriotic TV Channel Nearing Launch, But Will Anyone Watch?” *RFE/RL Newswire*, February 16, 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/reports/mm/2005/02/5-240205.asp>.

<sup>35</sup> “O kanale,” <http://www.spastv.ru/history.html>

<sup>36</sup> *Rossiia i mir* (Russia and the world), *Konservativnyi klub* (The conservative club), *V poiskakh smysla* (In search of meaning).

a *kul'turnyi chevolek* (a cultured person, with culture being understood as involving not only knowledge, but also values and mores) encompasses the idea of being a responsible citizen and a true patriot.

Rossiiia-K is part of the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK), which also controls several important state channels, such as Rossiia 1, Rossiia 2 and Russia 24. Entirely state owned, Rossiia-K remains the only national channel without advertisements. It was created in 1997 by a presidential decree, at a time when the political atmosphere in Russia had started to change. An increasing number of voices were calling for a “recovery” of the Russian state and centrist figures, such as Aleksandr Lebed, Yevgenii Primakov, and Yuri Luzhkov, “set the mood” for the new political scene. The failure of Yeltsin’s first years of liberalism also affected the cultural domain. Patriotism was being rehabilitated since the May 1995 commemorations of the end of the Great Patriotic War.<sup>37</sup> Rossiia-K is reminiscent of this period—as is the Fund for patriotic cinema—and a symbol of the authorities’ will to reinvest in the cultural domain and promote a consensus vision of the past.

Rossiiia-K presents itself as Russia’s cultural channel and cultivates this unique brand. Since its creation, the channel has benefitted from the support of many major cultural figures. The “faces of the channel” (*litsa kanala*) have included Dmitri Likhachev, who is often described as the guardian of national culture and Russia’s conscience, cellist and conductor Mstislav Rostropovich, filmmaker Karen Shakhnazarov, and writer Daniil Granin.<sup>38</sup> In 2002, when Vladimir Putin was bringing the independent channels controlled by oligarchs back under state control,<sup>39</sup> the functions of the board of Rossiia-K—some thirty figures from the cultural world—were transferred to the Council for Culture and Arts under the Presidency, confirming the recentralization of television production.<sup>40</sup>

Similar in many respects to the French-German channel Arte, Rossiia-K offers high-quality programs and documentaries with a broad spectrum of what is included in “culture”—literature, cinema, theater, classic and modern music, opera, dance, painting, sculpture, religion, science, education, and history. The programming alternates between the channel’s own productions and rebroadcasts of major Soviet cinema classics, including cartoons for children. This Soviet cinema element was

<sup>37</sup> For more on this issue cf. M. Laruelle. 2009. *In the Name of the Nation. Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary Russia*. New York: Palgrave/MacMillan: 120-133.

<sup>38</sup> <http://old.tvkultura.ru/news.html?id=2212&cid=376>.

<sup>39</sup> J.A. Dunn, “Where did it all go wrong? Russian television in the Putin era,” and S.A. Greene, “Shifting media and the failure of political communication in Russia,” in Beumers, Hutchings, and Rulyova, *The Post-Soviet Russian Media. Conflicting Signals*, respectively 42-55 and 56-70.

<sup>40</sup> “Telekanal Kultura: istoriia sozdaniia i rukovodstvo,” *RIA Novosti*, November 19, 2009, <http://ria.ru/culture/20091119/194532918.html#ixzz2rhrJN0t1>.

at the core of the channel's brand at its inception in 1997, but now is less specific to it, as the reemphasis on national productions has given greater visibility to Soviet era films on all networks. Rossiia-K offers, nonetheless, some unique programming, such as *Smekhonostal'giia* (Nostalgia laughter), a fascinating retrospective on the different genres of humor during the Soviet period, based on the idea that today's generations need to know "what made us laugh twenty or forty years ago, what were the jokes of our parents and grandparents."<sup>41</sup> Globally, Rossiia-K has reoriented its programming toward documentaries and talk shows dedicated to culture, as well as historical television series.

The channel does not limit itself to offering a frozen definition of culture based on past achievements. It sees culture as a living process and tries to celebrate contemporary art and culture as well. This courageous decision opened a space for polemics, which goes to show just how much cultural processes are interpreted within the framework of the national identity debates. For instance, in 2013 one of the channel's shows, *Bolshoi dzhaz* (Big jazz), was at the center of a social media debate about the place of cultural imports into national culture. *Bolshoi dzhaz* broadcasts a competition for young musicians in which they have to play, among other things, American jazz classics. Some members of the jury resigned, stating that they did not want to participate in the selection of "American clones" and the "assassination" of Russia's national roots.<sup>42</sup> Among participants in the social media discussion, two camps stood opposed, those that consider playing American jazz to be treason against Russian culture and its ability to produce its own national jazz, and those who think that Russian culture needs to integrate itself into its international context. The debates on national identity therefore can arise as a detour on nearly any cultural subject that the channel takes on.

They are also at the center of many discussions on the channel's two main talk shows, *Tem vremenem* (In the Meantime) and *Chto delat?* (What is to be done?<sup>43</sup>), where scholars and figures from the cultural and intellectual realms debate current matters that divide Russian society. The first talk show deals regularly with topics linked to identity issues: the future of the Russian language abroad, the Kremlin's goal of writing a single textbook

<sup>41</sup> See [http://tvkultura.ru/brand/show/brand\\_id/20884](http://tvkultura.ru/brand/show/brand_id/20884). See E. Mickiewicz, "The conundrum of memory: Young people and their recollections of Soviet television," in Beumers, Hutchings, and Rulyova, *The Post-Soviet Russian Media. Conflicting Signals*, 125-137.

<sup>42</sup> S. Al'perina, "Ne zhiurite i zhiurimy budete. Na teleproekte kanala Kul'tura "Bolshoi dzhaz" razgorelsia skandal," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, May 13, 2013, <http://www.rg.ru/2013/05/13/skandal-site.html>.

<sup>43</sup> The title is borrowed from Nikolay Chernyshevskii's book, *Chto delat?* (What is to be done?), written in 1862-63, a manifesto of Russian philosophical materialism and radicalism, which deeply influenced Russian revolutionary movements in the last third of the nineteenth-century.

on the history of the twentieth century, defining traditional values, the role of religion in public life, and evolutions of the intelligentsia. It regularly gives its airtime to schools and universities. The channel also devotes a great deal of its schedule to historical subjects. The knowledge of the past is a “cultural” element that is traditionally valued. Historical reports are numerous. Some are organized around a classic topic (a historical event), while others have a more original approach. One example is *Vazhnye veshchi* (Important things), which constructs a historical narrative around an object such as a Suvorov manuscript, Fidel Castro’s hat, or Pushkin’s chair. By providing a history of objects, the program participates in promoting the museological patrimony of the country; the main museums in Moscow and St. Petersburg are involved in the making of the show.

Rossiia-K is not a shelter from the polemics that stir the Russian academic world in relation to history. The boundary between science and para-science is particularly blurry in Russia, a legacy of decades of Soviet rule during which what was “true” and what was “false” could shift based on the political needs of the authorities. The widespread attraction to alternate history, often with a nationalist coloration,<sup>44</sup> is echoed by the—unassumed—influence of the Discovery channel model, which offers a large window to “conspirological” views on historical events and seeks to promote a sensational reading of world history. Two of the channel’s programs feed Russian society’s appetite for alternate history. *Po sledam tainy*<sup>45</sup> (On the traces of secrecy) and *Iskateli*<sup>46</sup> (Seekers) exploit the sensational success of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*-style stories. The first focuses on paranormal activities, eschatological predictions of the end of the world, mysteries of ancient civilizations from Egypt to the American Indians, including the Atlantis myth, unidentified flying objects (UFOs), and pre-historical human races. The second focuses on the unknowns of Russian history: unsolved murders, cases of espionage, secret Nazi trips to the Soviet Union, and the discovery of the Holy Grail in the Caucasus. In 2012, the show announced that it had discovered the skulls of a race of giants in the Caucasus, which drew official protests from researchers at the Institute of Archaeology.<sup>47</sup> A similarly blurry line between academic scholars and *publitsistika* figures has sometimes marked the program *Akademiia* (Academy), which reproduces lectures for students in a fictitious classroom. Although major names of science come to present a diverse array of topics, from the genesis of the brain to the interpretation of a historical

<sup>44</sup> M. Laruelle. 2012. “Conspiracy and Alternate History in Russia: A Nationalist Equation for Success?” *The Russian Review* 71 (4): 656-580.

<sup>45</sup> See [http://tvkultura.ru/brand/show/brand\\_id/28975](http://tvkultura.ru/brand/show/brand_id/28975).

<sup>46</sup> See [http://tvkultura.ru/brand/show/brand\\_id/20907](http://tvkultura.ru/brand/show/brand_id/20907).

<sup>47</sup> A. Borisova, “Kul’tura verit v velikanov na Kavkaze,” *Gazeta.ru*, May 14, 2012, [http://www.gazeta.ru/science/2012/05/14\\_a\\_4582405.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/science/2012/05/14_a_4582405.shtml).

text, one also can find more questionable figures on it, such as the fascist publicist Alexander Dugin, who taught a course on the sociology of the imagination.

### Reloading the Russian idea

Rossiia-K thus seeks to articulate the different ways to promote “culture” and to include within it elements deemed proper to the *national* culture. The channel explicitly devotes at least three broadcasts to Russian national identity. Each of them corresponds to various timeworn criteria of the debate and explores a particular way of framing Russia’s multifaceted national identity: through the West’s eyes, through the *kraevedenie* tradition, and through the *publitsitika* one.

*Rossiia, liubov’ moia* (Russia, my love<sup>48</sup>) corresponds to a long tradition of the Russian idea, that of the outside gaze from the West. This tradition insists on the country’s national diversity. In the show, a French person who has been living in Russia for twenty years narrates and promotes the folklore of the different peoples of Russia. It is one of the only programs where the focus is placed on non-ethnic Russians, in purely folkloric fashion: old women in traditional costumes singing and dancing, Buryat shamans performing rites, and reindeer herders working in the far north. All the clichés of Russia as a multinational country are displayed in an empathic view, with no comments about the socio-economic realities surrounding them. The fact that the narrative comes from a Westerner contributes to a kind of “self-orientalizing” that marked Russia’s ethnographical knowledge already in the nineteenth century.<sup>49</sup>

“Letters from the provinces” (*Pis’ma iz provintsiĭ*<sup>50</sup>) is directly inspired by the “village prose” tradition. It “de-centers” Russia from Moscow and St. Petersburg by stating/staging that the authentic Russia is the provincial one. It thus revives the tradition of *kraevedenie*, the knowledge about Russia’s regions that animated elites in the provinces and two capitals in the nineteenth century, constituting its own genre of amateurs.<sup>51</sup> The show is a hymn to rural life, with an offstage voice using an intimate tone, intersected with traditional Russian songs and bard melodies. The focus is on local cultural life, with an emphasis on writers and artists from the region, on the renewal of religious life, and the lives of

<sup>48</sup> See [http://tvkultura.ru/brand/show/brand\\_id/43908](http://tvkultura.ru/brand/show/brand_id/43908).

<sup>49</sup> On this question, see the regular debates in *Ab Imperio*, and, among others, N. Kniegh. 2000. “On Russian Orientalism. A Response to Adeeb Khalid,” *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1. No. 4: 701-715.

<sup>50</sup> See [http://tvkultura.ru/brand/show/brand\\_id/20920](http://tvkultura.ru/brand/show/brand_id/20920).

<sup>51</sup> On *kraevedenie*, see D.S. Likhachev. 2000 “Kraevedenie kak nauka i kak deiatel’nost’,” in L.P. Mariupol’skaia, ed. *Russkaia kul’tura*. Moscow: Iskustvo, 159-173, [http://www.lihachev.ru/pic/site/files/fulltext/russ\\_kultura\\_12.pdf](http://www.lihachev.ru/pic/site/files/fulltext/russ_kultura_12.pdf).

villagers and those who seek to revive traditional crafts. The geographical distribution is indicative of the spatial self-projection of contemporary Russia, with a particular emphasis on the north (the concept of “*Ruskii sever*,” the Russian North, is en vogue), European regions, the edges of the Volga, and Siberia from the Altay to Buryatia and Tuva. The rest of the country—southern Russia, the North Caucasus, Far East, Arctic region, and Urals—is largely absent from this mental atlas. The show promotes a very folkloric national introspection. It synthesizes a form of permanence of “Russianness,” rehabilitates a vanished past, glamorizes lifestyles that are fading away, and enhances “traditional” values.

However, Rossiia-K’s most famous program on Russian national identity remains *Kto my?* (Who are we?). The oldest on Russian television, it was created in 1992 and originally aired on the first channel. In contrast to the two programs described above, it aims at a more ideologically structured debate around the concept of the Russian idea. Its producer, Feliks Razumovskii, a historian by training, has conceived and presented the show since its very inception. *Kto my?* presents itself as being devoted to “Russian (*russkaia*) civilization,” and discusses “our traditions, manners, habits, saints, and chimeras, those of which we can be proud and those that bring sorrow.” Paradoxically, the program refers to Petr Chaadaev (1794–1856), whose *Lettres philosophiques* (1836) opened the debates between Slavophiles and Westernizers, but who was always very dismissive of everything Russian, considering Russia could not do better than to learn from Europe. The program chose to insist on another aspect of Chaadaev’s narrative, according to which “history is the key to understanding peoples.” The show claims to belong to the *publitsistika* tradition and seeks to answer the questions of “who are we” and “on what path do we find ourselves.”<sup>52</sup>

In a 2009 interview, Razumovskii proposed a kind of new manifesto for the Russian idea debates. He describes the permanent search for “Russia’s national self-consciousness” (*russkoe natsional’noe samo-soznanie*) in terms that nineteenth-century Slavophiles would not have rejected. He proclaims that Russia lost its national consciousness under Peter the Great due to the shock of a violent Europeanization. Since then Russia has been searching for her own identity but could not find it because it is borrowing its thoughts, techniques, and references from another culture. “All our intellectual activity in the humanities heavily depended and still depends now on Western Europe and more specifically on Western science. But we have lost sight that (...) all that Western researchers have discovered—concepts, methods—is thought for their civilization, but is often not suitable for ours. (...) From this comes the mission to overcome the habit of using a common template for issues of

<sup>52</sup> See [http://tvkultura.ru/about/show/brand\\_id/21144/](http://tvkultura.ru/about/show/brand_id/21144/)

national consciousness.”<sup>53</sup>

*Kto my?*, therefore, aims to build this new “national self-consciousness” by systematizing a narrative on Russia’s history and identity. The show is organized into large thematic cycles divided between six to twenty episodes. All of the major classical topics of Russian history have been covered: the first Slavs, the opposition between Novgorod democracy and Moscow autocracy under the Mongol yoke, the Time of Troubles, the relationship between the tsar and the Duma, between the intelligentsia and the bureaucracy, the Silver Age, relations with Poland, and so on. The show offers a cozy ambiance, designed for an elite already familiar with national history. Feliks Razumovskii appears in a sweater and slacks to provide context to the places in the story: in front of a landscape of plains and rivers when discussing the arrival of the first Slavic populations, in front of churches when debating the destruction of the Orthodox clergy by the Soviet regime, and in the apartments of major figures of Russian history. The program combines long narrations by Razumovskii himself, archival images, and historical reenactments by costumed actors.

A *derevenshchiki* atmosphere shapes the overall narrative: the dehumanization of Russia’s soil by the Soviet regime, and the destruction of the landscape (*landshaft*) have led to the spiritual impoverishment of the Russian nation and its descent into depression. An entire series, *Istoriia, raspiataia v prostranstve* (History strewn in space) focused on the impact of Russia’s territorial vastness on national identity. Classic precepts of the “Russian idea” endorse the idea that space is more important to national identity than the political nature of the state. Razumovskii states that Russians are better than any other people to work the earth, conquer new spaces, and occupy the territory (*osvoenie*). In this logic, he thinks the Russian empire cannot be compared to a classic colonial empire and sees the comparison as a “historical lie.” He legitimates the Russian empire through several arguments: Russia paid a heavy toll, both human and financial, to develop its peripheries, saved the Baltic region from Germanic assimilation, and brought Enlightenment to the peoples of Central Asia.<sup>54</sup>

The program’s tone is one of consensus and the national history is captured in terms of its long duration and continuity. The Soviet experience is fully integrated into imperial history, even though there is a measured anti-Soviet slant. Two specific series have been dedicated to the violence of the twentieth century: one to the destruction of the peasant world, *Krov’ na russkoi ravnine* (Blood on the Russian plain), and one to the liquidation of the Orthodox Church, *Russkaia golgofa* (Russian Golgotha). The series on the revolutions, called *Prem’era russkogo absurda* (The premiers of

<sup>53</sup> F. Razumovskii, “My utratili znaniia o samikh sebe,” *Kul’tura*, March 4, 2009, [http://tvkultura.ru/article/show/article\\_id/30898](http://tvkultura.ru/article/show/article_id/30898).

<sup>54</sup> See <http://old.tvkultura.ru/page.html?cid=5924>.

the Russian absurd), is a good example of the prevailing logic of historical continuity. In it, Razumovskii puts in parallel view the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 and those of 1990–1991, and concludes that “revolutions must not be analyzed as political events, but spiritual ones in which the people expiate their sins and express their grief.”<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the long series devoted to political violence, *Kaznit’ nel’zia pomilovat’* (Execute Not Pardon) intensively psychoanalyzes Russian leaders from Ivan III to Stalin and compares the executions that the latter perpetrated against the old Bolshevik guard to an ancient Russian tradition of divisions and competition between emotionally fragile figures and obscure political games.

National history as told by Razumovskii is consensus based, but only for those who recognize themselves as a part of the ethnic majority. The program gives minorities little space to tell their own versions of events; neither Tatars, nor North Caucasians, nor Siberian peoples are recognized as full-fledged actors in Russia’s history.

Three series of *Kto my?* focus on those who have embodied, or currently embody, “otherness” in Russia: Jews, Georgians, and North Caucasians. The series *Evreiskii vopros, russkii otvet* (Jewish question, Russian answer) rehashes, to a certain extent, the ambivalences of Alexander Solzhenitsyn in *Two Hundred Years Together* (2001).<sup>56</sup> It does not deny the existence of historically rooted anti-Semitism in Russia, but it also does not deconstruct it as a social or political phenomenon. The first show of the series insists on the under-played, original historical link between Orthodoxy and the Holy Land, and affirmed that the “Russian soul” owes much to Palestine. The following ones review centuries of exchanges between “Russians” and “Jews,” from accusations of heresy in the Middle Ages to the *pogroms* of the nineteenth century and the anti-Semitic policies of the Soviet Union under Stalin. The broadcast message is largely depoliticized. Razumovskii reiterates that Russian masses were “disoriented” and “crushed” by the socioeconomic changes of the last third of the nineteenth century, which explains *pogroms*, and that anti-Semitism has come back in post-Soviet Russia because the country is “spiritually and morally weak.” But the series’ conclusion remains ambiguous as it indirectly validates the existence of two distinct cultural essences. Razumovskii states that “there is no need to deny the existence of a ‘Jewish question’,” affirms that “Russia accumulated centuries of experience in trying to settle the ‘Jewish question’,” and that “today it is necessary to construct friendly relations but without illusions.”<sup>57</sup> Thanks to these ambivalences, each viewer is able to conclude that the program has

<sup>55</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8IDEcayWx4>.

<sup>56</sup> See Nathan Larson. 2005. *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and the Modern Russo-Jewish Question*. Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag..

<sup>57</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9EFTviz9is>.

confirmed his or her own view of history.

The two series on the Caucasus are based on similar ambiguities. *Gruzinskaia pesn' Rossii* (The Georgian chant of Russia) insists on the intensity of historical, religious, and cultural links between Russians and Georgians, and complains of the “nationalist diseases”<sup>58</sup> that have become a post-Soviet epidemic. The series is done without almost any reference to the political and geopolitical character of the tensions between the two countries. The series *Rossiia na Kavkaze* (Russia in the Caucasus) is probably one of the most interesting discursive reconstructions. It does not deny the conflicts related to Russia’s conquest of the Caucasus and describes in detail the wars of the nineteenth century. However, it heavily emphasizes the criminal nature of many Caucasian resistance groups, drawing an explicit parallel to the contemporary situation. Razumovskii recalls, for example, “Chechen society functions according to an archaic structure, and the criminal world is founded on the same types of structures.”<sup>59</sup> According to him, the military conquest was legitimate: he highlighted the specialization of Chechens and their neighbors in kidnapping Russian travelers and selling them at slave bazaars, concluding that “for Russia it was not possible to reason with bandits [because] they only understand the use of force.”<sup>60</sup>

However, the central message of the series is more sophisticated. The goal is to deconstruct the ethnic identity of the North Caucasus and redraw the region as a part of greater Russia by insisting on a central theme: that the North Caucasus has a second, often forgotten, identity: the Cossack one, which must be rehabilitated. Memory wars thus rage within the show, which assigned a place of pride to the Cossacks in order to Russify the North Caucasus. For instance, Razumovskii proclaims that Stalin’s deportations of “punished peoples,” the violence of which he does not deny, are meaningless unless they are seen in the context of preceding events, namely the liquidation of the Cossack world by the Bolsheviks. The North Caucasian drama is thus reformulated as a Russian drama, in which the North Caucasian people are relegated to a secondary status and their memorial and identity claims are absorbed into a pan-Russian context.

The aim of *Kto my?* is to offer a reconciled and consoling view of the major moments of Russian history: the Tsarist empire is rehabilitated; the Soviet Union is decried for its ideology but integrated into the nation’s continuity and traditions, and valorized as far as its status as a great power and its culture are concerned; ethnic minorities are not denied but consigned to a second-rank status. The overarching pathos is that of a suffering nation, decimated by pathologically unstable leaders and frantic

<sup>58</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSe85gU-pak>.

<sup>59</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykuueMwv8XA>.

<sup>60</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXrQz9Ckxqc>.

masses and by a significant loss of the sense of values and identity. To create this powerful narrative, *Kto my?* uses a simple but effective mechanism: it bypasses difficulties related to ideological opposition, tensions in interpretation, and disagreement of sources by insisting on a subjective perspective on Russia’s history. Each actor is given his own emotional logic; and the “people,” the “soil” and “space” are all depicted as living historical actors. Although devoted to history, the program does not feature on-camera interviews with external contributors: the goal is not to offer a platform for discussion to historians and their scholarly questions, but rather to reconstruct a narrative that is plausible for all. History is thus read through empathy and emotions, which makes it possible to avoid having to take sides in conflicts of interpretation and thus having to choose one side against another.

### Conclusion

The role of the small screen in society can be discussed in Russia as anywhere else in the world: does it educate citizens or entertain them? In the Russian televisual landscape, entertainment is clearly the option that has been taken: the educational option could potentially mobilize against the regime, and the Kremlin is not at all interested in undermining the status quo. Rossiia-K distinguishes itself from the majority of channels by its clearly educative and elitist character. Its talk shows are of a high quality and offer a broad overview of perspectives. Its cultural programs match the standard of Arte and encompass modern and international expressions of art. But its broadcasts on Russian identity are part of a far more traditional framework and leave almost no room for a more modern and globalized version of the national identity debate, one that would put into question primordialist interpretations.

In this domain, Rossiia-K has its roots in the country’s mainstream. It participates in performing a conventional reading of national identity and national history, which subtly combines a dose of nostalgia for the Tsarist empire, a still influential Soviet legacy—with emphasis placed on the Great Patriotic War and the revival of all the “golden funds” (*zolotoi fond*) of Soviet culture, from literature to cinema—and a resigned acceptance of the changes underway. In this overview, consensus is created through three elements: historical continuity of Russia beyond political ruptures; a collective mourning of the lost past (the peasantry, Orthodoxy, rural life, the great cultural heroes of the past...); and an emotional pathos that pushes aside the political and social stakes in order to concentrate on lived experience and the feelings of individuals. The consensus is therefore not created on the doctrinal content of the Russian idea—which remains subject to polemic—but on the container, the frame: styles of speech,

voice, rhetoric, screening respond to deeply rooted cultural expectations that are shared by a large majority of the population. In this regard, *Kto my?* is a success: it legitimizes the very principle of the Russian idea, that of a frame of debate that creates harmony beyond any explicitly formulated doctrinal content.

Rossiia-K has a limited audience rating, but it demonstrates the political authorities' conscious strategy to feed the intelligentsia and to respond to its requests for a cultural channel with no advertising and high quality broadcasting. Some of the channel's audience is critical of Putin's political choices and expresses more cosmopolitan views than the general public, but often remains sensitive to national identity issues.<sup>61</sup> The channel thus offers a balanced product to suit the varying sensibilities of the intelligentsia. Rossiia-K is also likely used as a way of getting a sophisticated narrative on the nation to "trickle down." In other words, it works as a "testing" platform for reshaping the identity consensus, since what it proposes is then offered in a diluted form to less educated mass audiences through formats that are closer to sitcoms and talk shows than to the *publitsistika* tradition. For instance, the more popular talk shows of Rossiia-1, such as those of Vladimir Solovyev, largely overlap thematically with Rossiia-K staging on national identity.

One might wonder whether the formula so successfully propagated by Rossiia-K for almost twenty years now is challenged today. Demographically speaking, the channel's viewership is becoming older and its narrative on Russian identity, based on elite cultural references and modes of expression inherited from the Soviet era, is probably gradually losing its meaning for a newer generation of Russian citizens. One example of the channel's "disconnect" with the new set of identity frames is the lack of any xenophobic atmosphere, massively broadcast on all other channels. Xenophobia has become a key element of the social consensus in today's Russia—between 70 and 80 percent of the population express xenophobic feelings in one way or another<sup>62</sup>—but is absent from the channel's repertoire. Newer generations continue to display nostalgia for a reconstructed Soviet past but grant less importance to amateur knowledge in the arts and culture as being a major part of national identity. They recognize themselves more easily in narratives emphasizing material wellbeing, xenophobia, and Russia's European path—a combination that Alexey

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<sup>61</sup> See for instance S.A. Greene and G.B. Robertson, "The Uses and Abuses of Identity and Nationalism in Russian Popular Politics," paper presented at the PONARS Eurasia D.C. Workshop, March 21–22, 2014.

<sup>62</sup> "Levada-Tsentr ob otnoshenii rossiian k migratsii i mezhnatsional'noi napriazhennosti," SOVA, November 25, 2013, <http://www.sova-center.ru/racism-xenophobia/discussions/2013/11/d28452/>.

Navalny, among others, has come to embody.<sup>63</sup> The channel’s future will thus depend on the way in which the new generation of the intelligentsia thinks about culture and history in shaping the national identity debate, and how television adapts to the growing competition coming from the internet world.

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<sup>63</sup> M. Laruelle. 2014. “Aleksy Navalny and challenges in reconciling ‘nationalism’ and ‘liberalism’,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 30 (3).

