



Patriotic (Non) Consumption: Food, Fashion and Media. An Introduction

AN ESSAY BY

OLGA GUROVA, EKATERINA KALININA, JESSIE LABOW AND VLAD STRUKOV
*Aalborg University, University of Copenhagen, Central European University,
University of Leeds*

Abstract: In this introductory essay the guest editors provide a critical account of the concepts of patriotism and consumption. Whilst nationalism is on the rise in many countries in the world, there has been little research on citizen participation outside the conventional politics of the nation-state. There is even less scholarship on consumption and patriotism and digital media; and finally, there has been little work emerging in relation to the countries of the region. Therefore, the authors explain how this special issue of Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media aims to fill in these gaps. They also present their own theoretical framework for thinking about patriotic (non)consumption. They argue that patriotism thrives in human agency, especially emotions, and can play a central role in mobilization processes and identity construction. It produces attachments located in the fantasies of the societal cohesion, unity and a sense of belonging.

Keywords: Patriotism, nationalism, consumption, citizen, participation, digital media, discourse, globalisation, Russia, Ukraine

National sentiment has regained prominence in calls for political unity often to protectionism, separatism and even aggression. In countries such as Belarus, Hungary, Poland, Russia and Ukraine, the rise of protectionist, nation-centric movements and patriotism is driven by domestic political issues, on the one hand. On the other, patriotism and nationalism have emerged in response to the ongoing geopolitical tensions in the region and in response to globalization and associated (and often imaginary) threats.

For a long time there had been a decline of political participation in ‘conventional politics’ due to the lack of trust in existing political institutions and a general apathy of the pub-

lic. As a result, citizens across the world are increasingly getting involved in so-called ‘self-actualizing’, ‘do-it-yourself’, ‘unallocated citizenship’ practices and ‘subactivism’.¹ Such activism penetrates spheres of life previously considered as private and non-political, for example consumption. Political consumption, understood as a form of civic and political engagement (Atkinson 2015), publicly motivated consumption (Neilson 2010), or the use of consumer choice to influence politics, in a broader sense, as a decision-making process (Strømsnes 2009: 303) has become widespread.² Moreover, social media has become one of the most important platforms for such civic engagement (Bakardjieva 2009; Couldry et al. 2010).

Although patriotism / nationalism can be perceived well beyond the programmes of political parties and rallies, the bottom-up dynamics and mundane practices of patriotic consumption are still under-researched.³ There is even less scholarship on consumption and patriotism and digital media; and finally, there has been little work emerging in relation to the countries of the region. Therefore, this special issue of *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* aims to fill in these gaps.

The issue also provides a theoretical framework for patriotic (non)consumption. Although patriotism is one of the concepts of political science, sociology and communication and media studies, recently it has been revised due to a number of reasons including: (a) the rise of the far right movements which aim to re-claim the ‘patriotic ground’, (b) the growth of social media which have promoted new forms of belonging and participation, and (c) the advancement of globalisation which challenges national contexts, i.e., the emergence of the post-national, globalized context (see, for example, Kania-Lundholm 2012). Patriotism is often defined as an affective reaction to societal changes which possesses a great potential to become a trigger for complex social practices. We argue that patriotism thrives in human agency, especially emotions, and can play a central role in mobilization processes and identity construction. It produces attachments located in the fantasies of the societal cohesion, unity and a sense of belonging.

We suggest that a patriotic agenda influences consumption patterns, including non-consumption, or a deliberate agreement or refusal to consume particular types of products, symbols and discourses which can be exercised by states, companies and citizens. For example, after the annexation of Crimea, Western countries imposed sanctions against the Russian Federation. In return, Russia introduced counter-sanctions, banning a range of consumer goods produced in Western countries such as Finnish cheeses, Polish apples and Spanish hams. A state-sponsored refusal to consume these goods has been framed as a demonstration of patriotism, hence the televised destruction of tons of apples was conceptualized as ‘pot-latch’ aimed at proving Russian sovereignty to its citizens and the whole world. At the same time, for many critical patriots and active consumer-citizens in the Russian Federation, consumption of these goods has been a way to reject the government agenda and reclaim Russia’s position as a country linked to the West. In Ukraine this dialogue between the citizens and the state has taken a different direction. Here the government banned a number of Rus-

¹ See, for example, Bakardjieva 2009; Bennett, Wells and Rank 2009; Hartley 2010; Ratto and Boller 2014; van Zoonen, Visa and Mihelj 2010.

² See, for example, Atkinson 2015; Koos 2012; Littler 2009; Micheletti 2003; Neilson 2010; Strømsnes 2009.

³ The following is an indicative list of publications on consumption and nationalism: DeSoucey 2010; Foster 1999; Kania-Lundholm 2012, 2014; Kemper 1993; Özkan and Foster 2005; Prideaux 2009; Ram 2007; Volcic and Andrejevic 2011, 2016; Wang 2006).

sian television networks and films thus depriving its citizens of choice. At the same time consumer-citizens willingly participate in statecraft by buying Ukrainian products and rejecting consumer goods produced in or associated with Russia due to ongoing geopolitical conflict.

Patriotic consumption can appear in different spheres, from high arts to popular culture, and engage with many actors in discussion over contested meanings. Fine art and ‘culinary art’, streetwear and screenwear, performance and self-performance on social media intersect with politics and ideology and produce cultural forms in which these contested meanings become apparent. In our special issue we focus on these political and politicised contexts of patriotic (non)consumption. We explore how these processes have been documented in social media where users reveal their ideological allegiances by making comments about what otherwise appears to be mundane objects and practices.

We argue that in the twenty-first century all (non)consumption exists in a mediated form, that is, as a form of engagement with symbols and discourses, and also as a way to construct identities across different media platforms. To define this type of engagement we use the term *prosumption* (production + consumption) as it emphasizes the active engagement of consumers nowadays facilitated by social media (see, for example, Beer and Burrows 2010; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Zajc 2015). Focusing on consumer citizenship activities, promotion of regional brands and statecraft online, this issue provides insight into the wide range of forms of patriotic (non)consumption of (digital) media.

Figure 1. Sergei Katran: ‘Types of the matrices’



Photo: Dasha Dafis

In our special issue we demonstrate that patriotism in the act of consumption can take different forms, for instance, ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig 1995) is revealed in purchases of consumer goods that make reference to current or past national symbols. It can take the form of emotive consumption of the past as a kind of nostalgic palimpsest (see, for instance, Oushakine 2013) which describes multiple layers of cultural memory mobilization. In this case patriotic consumption opens a dialogue with the ideology and politics of memory of a country. Patriotic consumption can also be viewed as ‘consumer citizenship’ (Cohen 2001) when citizens choose to buy locally produced items and support regional brands. Consumer citizenship and patriotic (non)consumption often employ strategies of patriotic boycotting and patriotic ‘buy-cotting’.

More complex forms of patriotic consumption include political engagement as environmental activism when people choose to (non)consume certain products because they are motivated by ecological concerns. Therefore, we look at a number of agents such as governments, corporations, small businesses and individuals who advance their agenda using all available means including social media. These focal points help us problematize the notions of patriotism and nationalism. We consider them in relation to neo-liberal global economies which have been re-positioned within local historical and cultural contexts. Our principal concern here is to consider how neoliberal economic principles have been re-appropriated in countries with a legacy of centrally-controlled economies. Finally, social media have advanced a whole new industry of consumption which depends on conscious exchange of symbols such as liking, ranking and sharing, which can be monetised by media content providers.

We attempted to visualise our ideas by choosing a specific lead image. It is a photograph by Dasha Dafis showing an artwork by Sergei Katran.⁴ The Moscow-based artist describes himself as an ‘artventor’ because he aims to produce works that look like lab tools or scientific models. This particular work belongs to a series made in 2016 and entitled ‘Types of the matrices’. Its aim is to explore metaphorically how modelling can be used to account for changes in political, cultural and societal systems.

The photo shows objects that look like faceless creatures arranged in a circle. They create a mystical effect on the viewer because their arrangements evokes some ancient rituals. On one level, these objects look like human prototypes, a kind of unknown biological species. On another, they look like matreshka dolls which are obvious icons of consumerism, temporarily emptied of meaning and ready to be filled with whatever (patriotic) content is placed there. But they are not completely neutral, empty signifiers: they can only be filled with certain types of meaning. They evoke the unsettling, anxiety-inducing feeling that we editors feel when confronted with ‘in-your-face’ patriotic consumption. The photograph also reveals another aspect of consumption which is digital consumption: taken on a mobile device and shared on social media, this image no longer belongs to anyone and yet brings everyone together. The faceless matreshkas are a reference to the current obsessions with selfies and the reproducible quality of contemporary culture.

⁴ You can read more about the artist here <http://www.gallery-21.ru/artists/artists/sergei-katran/> 11.04.2017.

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OLGA GUROVA (PhD, Cultural Studies) is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Culture and Global Studies, Aalborg University (Denmark). She previously served as the Academy of Finland Research Fellow at the Department of Social Research, University of Helsinki (Finland) and as a researcher at Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies (Finland), National Research University of the Higher School of Economics (Russia), University of Michigan at Ann Arbor (USA), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (USA) and Central European University (Hungary). Her research interests include cultural studies, sociology of consumption and everyday life, fashion studies, socialist and postsocialist cultures, social-network analysis, qualitative methods of social research and innovative methods of teaching. She is the author of 'Fashion and the Consumer Revolution in Contemporary Russia' (Routledge, 2015) and 'Soviet Underwear: Between Ideology and Everyday Life' (New Literary Observer, 2008). [olga.gurova@helsinki.fi]

EKATERINA KALININA is a postdoctoral researcher at Department of Art and Cultural Studies at the University of Copenhagen (Denmark). She completed her PhD in Media and Communication Studies with the project 'Mediated post-Soviet nostalgia' at Södertörn University (Sweden). She worked as a research fellow at Swedish National Defence University researching on the questions of patriotism, biopolitics, nostalgia and national identity. She is also actively engaged in practice-based research and works as a project manager at the Swedish organization Nordkonst, where she runs cultural projects and conducts research on cross-cultural artistic practices and intercultural communication. She is also a founding member of the International Media and Nostalgia Network. Her current post doc project 'Uncertainty of digital archives: Exploring nostalgia and civic engagement' investigates the role of affective mnemonic experiences, such as nostalgia, in triggering social mobilisation in digital and physical environments. [kalinina.a.ekaterina@gmail.com]

JESSIE LABOV is a Resident Fellow in the Centre for Media, Data and Society at Central European University (Hungary) and a member of the Digital Humanities Initiative. Recent pub-

lishing projects include a co-edited volume, with Friederike Kind-Kovacs, 'Samizdat, Tamizdat and Beyond: Transnational Media During and After Socialism' (Berghahn, 2013), and a monograph entitled 'Transatlantic Central Europe: Contesting Geography and Redefining Culture Beyond the Nation' (CEU Press, 2017). In addition to writing on Polish film, Yugoslav popular culture, and Central European Jewish identity, she has also worked on a variety of digital humanities projects concerned with issues of canon formation, text mining, and visualizing the receptive pathways of literary journals. [jessie.labov@gmail.com]

VLAD STRUKOV is an Associate Professor in Film and Digital Cultures (University of Leeds), specialising in world cinemas, digital media and cultural theory. He is the director of the Leeds Russian Centre (Russia[n] in the Global Context). He is the founding and principal editor of the journal *Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* (www.digitalicons.org). He explores theories of empire and nationhood, global journalism and grassroots media, consumption and celebrity by considering the Russian Federation and the Russian-speaking world as his chief case study. In the past two years he has published a monograph entitled 'Contemporary Russian Cinema: Symbols of a New Era' (Edinburgh UP), and edited volumes 'Russian Aviation, Space Flight and Visual Culture' (Routledge), 'New Media in New Europe-Asia' (Routledge) and 'From Central to Digital: Television in Russia' (Nauka-Press). [v.strukov@leeds.ac.uk]