

‘Without freedom, there is no creation’ – liberating the arts in Russia to stimulate cultural development

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**DURHAM UNIVERSITY, 2019 NATION-BUILDING IN
CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA: POLICY ANALYSIS**

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Abstract:

Government policy in Russia currently represses freedom of artistic expression, out of fear of political dissent, through legislation designed to protect the feelings of religious believers that is used to censor creative projects considered counter to the interests of the government. This is having a negative impact on wider Russian society by stunting the growth of an authentic and vibrant culture sector. Policy must instead be designed with the intention of supporting and encouraging free artistic expression

Introduction:

The Russian government's creative expression policy limits the development and growth of Russian culture. Though the constitution stipulates that literary, artistic, scientific, technical and creative freedoms are guaranteed to everyone, recent years indicate that this is not a commitment the government upholds.

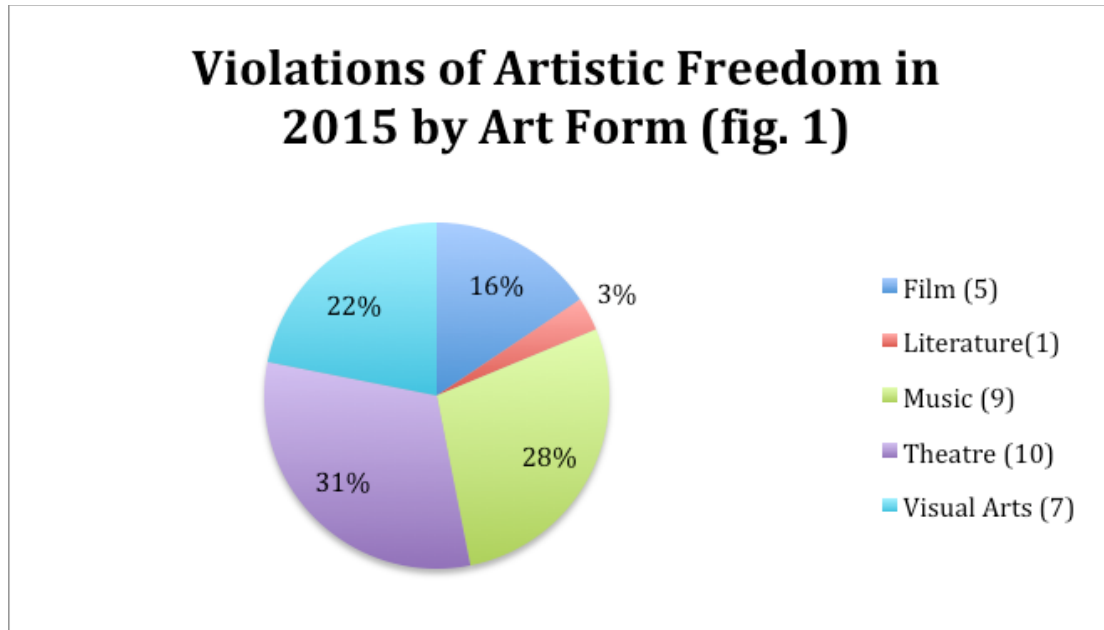
Creative freedoms have declined considerably over the duration of President Putin's terms in office, as cases of government interference in the Russian arts scene to censor cultural projects have increased. This is because the government problematizes freedom of artistic expression as a source of political dissent, resulting in policy characterised by fear of opposition and western influence, rather than an intention to support the arts.

Existing policy is ill suited to supporting Russian cultural growth, thus a new government approach that will encourage creativity and stimulate cultural development is needed. This paper will propose a new role for the government, which emphasises maximising artistic freedom and providing sufficient support for creative endeavours on a non-discriminatory basis.

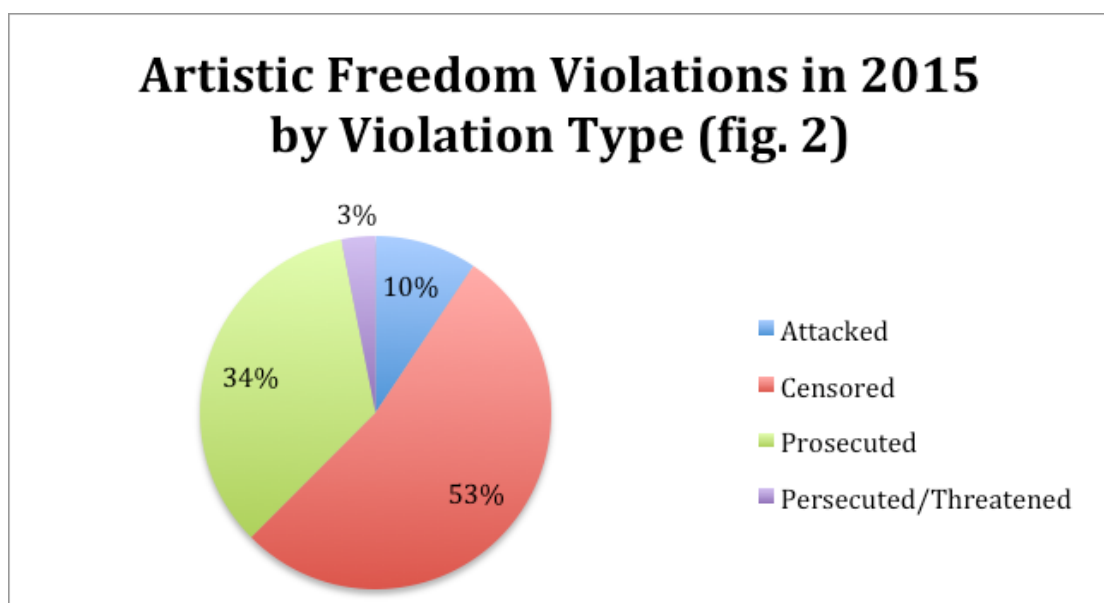
This paper will first outline the problem, consider the current policy environment and highlight why it is of significance to the Russian government. This is followed by discussion of policy options: the existing approach, a reduced role for the state, and a new role for the state. The paper will conclude with a final policy recommendation.

Policy Problem Description:

The ability of Russian citizens to freely express their creativity is being increasingly restricted. All areas of the arts have been affected by the government's repressive policy; music, theatre and film have suffered the most violations, though the visual arts and literature have not been spared (Freemuse, 2015; fig.1).



Freemuse recorded 32 violations of artistic freedom in Russia in 2015 (fig.2), including the high profile 'Tannhauser' case that involved the closure of a production directed by Timofey Kulyabin at Novosibirsk's State Opera and Ballet Theatre in Siberia (BBC News,08.04.2015). The case exemplified the growing influence of the Orthodox Church on culture policy, and made 'transparent the state's attempts to establish control over the field of artistic expression' (Kotkina, 2016:86).



Three years prior, the restriction of Russian creative freedom made international headlines with the trial of three members of the feminist-punk group Pussy Riot, who were charged with ‘hooliganism’ (The New Yorker, 07.08.2012). It was claimed that the band had offended Orthodox believers, illustrating the problem that arises when religion clashes with freedom of expression (Kuznetsov, 2013:75).

This policy has serious repercussions for the development of Russian culture. The government has developed a securitised conception of culture, in which it is considered a key national asset, and a fixed canon rather than an amalgamation of everyday life (Kotkina, 2016:68-69). They have attempted to establish a static cultural canon, which generally slows down the independent development of the arts, if it doesn’t cease growth entirely (Berghaus & Dobrenko, 2000).

Government attempts to influence the arts are fraught with many challenges. Policymakers ‘should not believe that they can plan creativity, because ‘creativity always comes as a surprise’ (Hirschman, 1970: 80). Culture policy designed to serve political means through control and repression is harmful; free support for creative expression is crucial to the emergence of an authentic and distinctive national identity.

Free creative expression also has positive effects on social cohesion; through providing non-discriminatory support for a diverse range of artists, government policy can encourage the integration of and appreciation for a wide variety of social groups.

Between 2017 and 2018 the national level of cultural engagement in Russia increased from 71% to 88% (Russian Public Opinion Research Centre, 2018). However negative perceptions about the situation regarding Russian culture have increased, hinting at the need for policy reconsideration (fig.3).

In your opinion, how has the situation in the Russian culture changed over a year? (Closed-ended question, one answer, % of total respondents) Fig. 3

	2016	2017	2018
It has improved/definitely improved	37%	36%	34%
It has worsened/definitely worsened	9%	13%	22%
No changes	44%	42%	36%
Don’t know	10%	9%	8%

The problem facing the Russian government is clear: repressing citizens’ creative expression is having a negative impact on Russian culture, stunting the development of the arts. This has consequences for Russian national identity and social cohesion, and hence a new policy is required.

Policy Options:

Existing Policy:

Existing policy on artistic expression is underpinned by fear of political dissent. This is partially a symptom of the government's broader interpretation of human rights and personal liberties, which considers them contrary to national security interests. Russian culture is one of many areas securitised by the government over the last decade (Kotkina, 2016:68). In policy terms, this has involved the violation of creative freedom primarily through censorship and legal prosecution (fig.2).

Another problematic aspect of government culture policy is the extent of the Russian Orthodox Church's influence: it 'increasingly intervenes in the sphere of culture and art, while the actions of radical Orthodox Church activists are becoming more aggressive' (Freemuse, 2018:97). This highlights two challenges facing any attempt to improve policy: Church influence on the government, and religious extremists. The former is derived from the Church's backing of the government's securitisation of Russian culture while the latter is a consequence of both state and Church utilising 'moral panics' to achieve this goal (Kotkina, 2016:87). These can only be addressed by a policy that supports the arts on a non-discriminatory basis, which counterbalances the effect of extreme views on culture stirred up by the Church.

Legislation on freedom of expression is notably vague, creating further complications. This includes laws against 'propaganda of homosexual lifestyles', and 'insults to the feelings of believers' (Boutsko, 2015). The lack of specificity makes these laws efficient tools for government officials, allowing them to decide which creative endeavours to censor. This makes it difficult for artists to work around government restrictions; according to actor Ivan Vyrpaey, 'Anyone can come and say that wardrobe on the stage hurt my feelings' (ibid). This discourages innovation by rendering artistic projects that challenge the status quo higher risk and unattractive for artists and private investors. Government financial support for the arts that depends on performance is inimical to innovation (Frey, 2002:372). As such, the current government approach to creative expression evidently has a counter-productive impact on the development of Russia's artistic output.

Belarus demonstrates the harmful effects of such culture policy. Belarussian culture comprises two diametrically opposed sectors: one that is state-sponsored and another 'counter-culture' (Ohana, 2007:6). The 'official' culture is considered 'morally corrupt and moribund', while the 'counter-culture' is 'dynamic, modern, free, experimental, creative' (ibid:7). This is because culture policy serves an 'instrumental function', to legitimise and support President Lukashenko's regime in an approach similar to Moscow's repressive policy. Consequently, a nation-wide identity crisis is considered 'one of Belarus' crucial contemporary problems' (ibid:18). This demonstrates that a vibrant and

authentic culture is crucial to sustaining cohesive national identity, and that freedom of expression is integral to this.

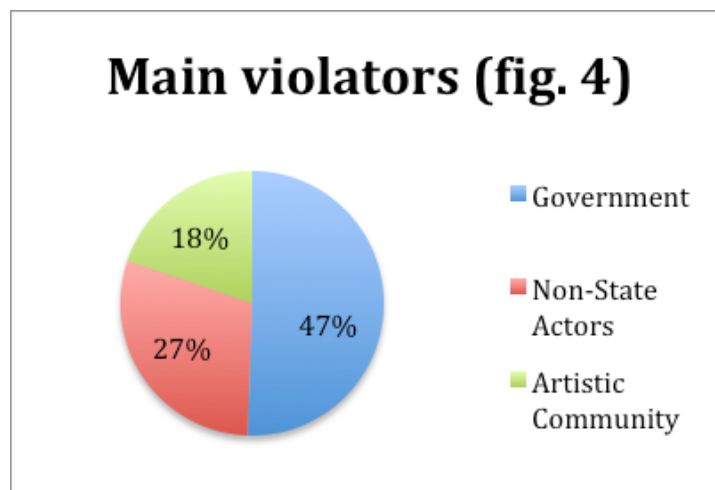
Overall existing policy is repressing freedom of creative expression, which is having a negative impact on Russian cultural development.

Option 1: Privatising the Arts

The first policy alternative was pursued in the early years of the Russian Federation. The 1990s were characterised by a dramatic reduction in government involvement in all aspects of policymaking, including the arts. This involved a significant reduction in funding for artistic endeavours and the active pursuit of cultural policy objectives (Jakobson, Rudnik & Toepler, 2018:297).

Some contend that governments ought to have minimal, if any, involvement in the arts; the market is best at managing creative innovation (Frey, 2002:364). This view is inspired by economic theories about incentivising initiative, and by the belief that artistic matters are best left to elites, as ‘a certain part of society [possesses] expert knowledge about the objectives of cultural development’ (Rubinshtein & Muzychuk, 2014:18).

However a laissez-faire cultural policy is not a viable option. Indeed, the ‘consistent undercurrent of the policy debate is the continued desire not to return to the liberalism of the 1990s’ (Jakobson, Rudnik & Toepler, 2018:310). A reduction in government involvement in the arts would be insufficient to compensate for the damaging effects of contemporary policy. Government censorship, compounded by decades of conditioning under the USSR, has resulted in resilient self-censorship.



There is a need to counterbalance the influence of the Orthodox Church on the creative sector, demonstrated by the fact government was responsible for just under half of all violations of artistic freedom recorded in 2018 (fig.4). While the potential to offend religious believers is still a serious matter, the law regarding such issues is deliberately vague to allow officials to censor at their discretion.

An additional challenge is created by Russia's relatively underdeveloped civil society. Advocacy of a laissez-faire culture policy is predicated on the assumption that private actors will provide the financial incentives to stimulate creative initiative; but in Russia it cannot be guaranteed that this would be the case. This is demonstrated by the lack of cultural improvement during the 1990s in which this policy approach was adopted, and the broad consensus that it did little for the arts in Russia.

Simply reducing the government involvement is inappropriate for sustaining the development of Russian culture. While it would allow greater freedom of expression through the cutting back of repressive legislation, it would not provide the support necessary to allow creative actors in Russia to fully capitalise on their increased liberties, and thus is not the most efficient way to galvanise Russian cultural growth.

Option 2: Liberating the Arts

The first step to improving the conditions in Russia for cultural development is for the government to strengthen legal commitments to freedom of artistic expression. This is vital to creating an environment in which creators are able to freely and effectively engage with Russian culture.

It is crucial that the government adopt an actively supportive role through the provision of non-discriminatory financial support for artistic projects, regardless of partisanship. This would provide much support for creative growth (Frey, 2002: 373). Indeed, it is widely accepted within debates on culture policy that 'the state does not utilise its capacity to the fullest' (Jakobson, Rudnik & Toepler, 2018: 298). As such it is recommended that state funding for cultural projects be granted by merit of creativity and potential benefit to Russian society, rather than by measure of function served to the government itself. At the same time, steps can be taken to encourage the private sector to provide greater support for the arts to prevent the government becoming the sole patron of Russian culture. This includes indirect public support through tax exemption for art foundations, which 'has created stunning examples of artistic creativity', including the Guggenheim Museums in New York and Bilbao (Frey, 2002: 373).

Further measures to improve conditions for artists include the setting of adequate property rights, and a relaxing of restrictive legislation censoring artistic expression.

Active state-support of creative expression is crucial to improving the culture sector in Russia because of the need to counterbalance self-censorship instilled by the Soviet Union, and the contemporary use of the Orthodox Church to justify censorship through creation of moral panics. It is undeniable that the output of this policy approach will challenge the dominant political and religious paradigms present in Russia today, but rather than perceiving this as a threat it must be considered of benefit to wider Russian society. This is one of the most powerful ways in which art can contribute to the nation as a whole, and it is only

through an institutional setting conducive to free creative expression that an authentic articulation of Russian identity can emerge.

Conclusions & Recommendation:

The recommended policy option is to 'liberate' the arts in Russia: for the government to adopt a new role in shaping Russian culture through the active support of free creative expression. This can be achieved through several measures:

1. Legislative commitments to freedom of creative expression
2. Provision of accessible state funding for cultural projects that does not discern between creative endeavours on political or religious grounds
3. Indirect public support i.e. tax exemption for art funds
4. Reconsideration of property rights legislation to ensure adequate protection for artistic output

In conclusion, there is clearly a need for a new government approach to freedom of creative expression in Russia; one that will create an environment which allows artists to engage with existing Russian culture and further its development without fear of repression. The benefits of this policy option include, but are not limited to:

- Greater social cohesion, allowed by the free exchange of ideas
- The stimulation of Russia's culture sector, which enriches citizens lives, attracts tourism and strengthens Russian soft power
- The strengthening of Russian national identity, enabled by a more inclusive concept of Russian culture resulting from freer expression

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