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Cancel culture towards Russia and how to deal with it

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Abstract. Cancel Culture originated in Western society and was initially interpreted as a social phenomenon, but over time it began to acquire an increasing political dimension. Its main distribution platform are social networks, where, due to the almost instantaneous reaction on the part of society to information stuffing, the “cancellation culture” has become truly global. Since 2022 cancel culture is a tool for managing socio-political phenomena that can be used for foreign policy purposes. The authors make an attempt to conceptualize and operationalize this term, formerly used in public-journalistic discourse. They also set themselves the task of identifying the subjects of dissemination of cancel culture and suggesting mechanisms to combat its negative manifestations.

Keywords: cultural heritage, soft power, cultural diplomacy, paradiplomacy, museums, cities, regions, non-governmental actors, cultural and historical factor, West

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«Культура отмены» в отношении России и способы борьбы с ней

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Аннотация. «Культура отмены» зародилась в западном обществе и изначально трактовалась как социальное явление, однако со временем стала приобретать все большее политическое измерение. Ее основной платформой распространения стали социальные сети, где благодаря моментальному реагированию со стороны общества на информационный вброс «культура отмены» приобрела поистине глобальные масштабы и с 2022 г. впервые затронула целое государство. «Культура отмены» представляет собой инструмент управления социально-политическими явлениями, который можно использовать во внешнеполитических целях. Авторы предлагают вариант концептуализации и операционализации этого термина, ранее бытовавшего в общественно-публицистическом дискурсе, а также ставят перед собой задачу рассмотреть каналы распространения «культуры отмены» и предложить механизмы борьбы с ее негативными проявлениями в отношении России.

Ключевые слова: культурное наследие, мягкая сила, культурная дипломатия, парадипломатия, музеи, города, регионы, негосударственные акторы, культурно-исторический фактор, Запад

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The Origins of “Cancel Culture” and the Approaches to its Manifestations

“Cancel culture” has become widespread in the wake of the #Metoo and #BlackLivesMatter movements and has shortly become a popular research subject [Mueller 2021; Cook, Patel, Guisihan, 2021; Saldanha, Mulye, Rahman 2022; Geusens, Ouvrein, Remen 2023; Whipple 2023], considered as a new phenomenon of social reality. Nevertheless, the practice of excluding someone from society has a long history. A distant resemblance to “cancel culture” in its modern sense can be found in the judicial procedure of ostracism in the Greek poleis, the medieval Inquisition aimed at suppressing religious heresy, and in the actions of the Jacobins during the French Revolution. The struggle against dissent has

been going on throughout history, acquiring a radical character when change of political power occurs, as the ruling regime falls. Penitentiary functions were divided between the state and society, and the execution of the convicts was public, often humiliating.

In the era of the Internet, the availability of information and the continuous broadcasting of the media, when the global public instantly reacts to social upheavals in any part of the world, the novelty of this form of ostracism lies in the fact that it acquires qualitatively new scale and consequences. Compared to the state regulated system of persecution of dissent under totalitarian regimes, “cancel culture” is spontaneous and unmanageable, as there is no central decision-making body that issues verdicts on which phenomena should be “cancelled”. At the same time, “cancel culture” claims to have a regulatory function, as a tool that transforms social norms.

Western researchers interpret “cancel culture” (also called “call-out culture”) differently, mainly based on the fact that it has a pronounced social character, and its distribution channel is primarily social networks, where society exposes the offender to censure, thereby damaging their reputation. The Cambridge Dictionary defines “cancel culture” as “a way of behaving in a society or group, especially on social media, in which it is common to completely reject and stop supporting someone because they have said or done something that offends you”.¹

Harvard University Professor P. Norris describes “cancel culture” as “attempts to ostracize someone for violating social norms” [Norris 2020: 2]. The rejection of an undesirable phenomenon in a capitalist society is in the nature of consumer boycotts. For example, the “cancellation” of a brand or corporation due to unethical employee or environmental policies can lead to a campaign of public condemnation of their activities, which invariably leads to a drop in sales. The same rule applies to public figures and politicians who are highly dependent on their audience.

M. Clark focuses on the very process of “cancelling”, comparing it with free will, as a result of which an individual deprives someone who offends them with their actions, words, or beliefs of their “attention, presence, time and money” [Clark 2020: 88]. At the same time, it is worth distinguishing “cancel culture” from what O. Lorde calls “useful anger” [Lorde 1984], since it is aimed at resisting pressure, is constructive, effective in contrast to brutal violence, and as a result leads to the consolidation of social groups. “Cancel culture”, on the other hand, only creates the appearance of consolidation, giving rise to intra-group disputes and unfounded, unsubstantiated criticism based on personal (group) beliefs.

“Cancel culture”, as a reaction to events and information that cause a feeling of protest and rejection, can be considered a type of “wokeism”, which has affected the general population and is based on a sense of moral superiority. “*Wokeism*”

¹ Cancel Culture. *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved March 12, 2023, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cancel-culture>

refers to a mobilizing force, a manifestation of a social position or group identity in case a person is sensitive to social and political injustice.

Researchers considering “cancel culture” through the prism of the protest movement in the United States and European countries sought to answer the question of who is behind this phenomenon, and if there is someone who controls the process of spontaneous expression of will, and if “cancel culture” can be considered an example of social self-organization “from below”, a form of expression of citizenship. J. Velasco [Velasco 2020: 3], G. Bouvier and D. Machin [Bouvier, Machin 2021: 307–327] note the role of social networks in managing public discussion and the emergence of a new form of collectivity. Media resources have become a prism through which information is exchanged, which indicates a change in the type of political and civic activities, the advent of an era of participatory information culture.

At the same time, a distinctive feature of the new information culture is the predominating discourse of the majority group, where the minority, under the threat of pressure, will strive not to express their opinion at all, since their views have ceased to fit into the dominant culture [Noelle-Neumann 1974]. Thus, by analogy with a totalitarian society, in “cancel culture”, the right to freely express an opinion that differs from the mainstream is subjected to large-scale violations by society, but state structures are not able to influence this process.

The interpretation of “cancel culture” takes on a completely different angle in J. Habermas’s approach to the public sphere [Habermas 1962]. If we follow the logic of his theory, the public discourse is formed by the elites, which means that in order to identify the reasons for “cancelling”, first of all, we need to analyze the relations of power, the balance of power in the media space. Hence, civil society is assigned a rather secondary role.

J. Pilon, referring to the analysis of the public discussion about cases of police brutality against African-Americans in the United States, came to the conclusion that, basically, the levers for managing this process are still in the hands of government structures [Pilon 2020]. Considering the case of George Floyd, she notes that in the wake of the protests, local municipalities took advantage of the situation and redistributed finances to more significant programs that are a priority for local authorities. So, in Portland, the police budget was cut by \$15 million, and funds were allocated to a program that sends unarmed rescuers to calls of the homeless, and in Philadelphia, \$14 million reallocated from the police budget was spent on affordable housing programs [Pilon 2020: 5].

Upon analyzing how the “cancellation” of this or that political figure took place, we can notice the methods of struggle traditional for political elites such as involving the audience in a dialogue and creating a controlled public discussion. The discussion then usually reaches the stage of putting forward demands for the politician’s dismissal due to loss of confidence. Thus, socio-political “cancellation” is not exclusively a horizontal interaction and an initiative at the level of civil society. The spread of “cancel culture” towards Russia manifested

the mobilization potential of this phenomenon, used to create controlled pressure, at a global level. Taking into account the scale of this phenomenon and its focus on changing the already established international norms and traditions, “cancel culture” can be defined as a mechanism for developing a new political culture, which, through undermining the image of the object of “cancellation”, is designed to exclude it from the existing norms of international communication, that is to delegitimize it.

“Cancellation of Russia” as a Manifestation of “Cancel Culture” at the International Level

In diplomatic practice, the cultural factor is often used to strengthen mutual understanding and friendly relations between two nations, to bring cultures closer together, and also to prevent the emergence of xenophobia and distinction based on the “friend or foe” principle. At the same time, cultural figures were the first to encounter “cancel culture” in Russia, which can be considered a departure from the fundamental principles of cultural diplomacy. “Cancel culture” affected the theatrical art, music, Russian literature, cooperation between museums, as well as sports and religion.

Representatives of Russia were suspended from participating in the Eurovision Song Contest and the Cannes Film Festival; the cooperation of the Bolshoi Theater with major foreign theaters,² as well as the cooperation with long-term partners of Russian academic theaters and ballet troupes³ were suspended; contracts with the most famous Russian conductors were terminated;⁴ there were cases of ultimatum demands put forward to cultural figures requiring to publicly condemn Russian foreign policy.⁵ Works by Russian composers were cancelled⁶ or completely excluded⁷ from repertoires.

² The Bolshoi Theater has canceled April showings of a joint production with the Metropolitan Opera. *Information agency Interfax*. 04.03.22. Retrieved March 9, 2023, from <https://www.interfax.ru/culture/826405>

³ The summer tour of the Bolshoi Theater in London will not take place. *Information agency "Interfax"*. 26.02.22. Retrieved March 9, 2023, from <https://www.interfax.ru/culture/824757>

⁴ Valery Gergiev dismissed from the Munich Philharmonic. *Newspaper "Kommersant"*. 01.03.22. Retrieved March 9, 2023, from <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5238441>

⁵ Toulouse may refuse Tugan Sokhiev in concerts. Classical music radio “Orpheus”. *News*. 04.03.22. Retrieved March 9, 2023, from <https://orpheusradio.ru/news/news/24958/tuluza-mozhet-otkazat-tuganu-sokhievu-v-kontsertakh>

⁶ The British orchestra "cancelled" Tchaikovsky and paid with its reputation. *Information agency "RIA Novosti"*. 09.03.22. Retrieved March 9, 2023, from <https://ria.ru/20220309/chaykovskiy-1777375806.html>

⁷ Tchaikovsky's opera was removed from the program of the festival in Switzerland. *Information agency "Regnum"*. 23.04.22. Retrieved March 9, 2023, from <https://regnum.ru/news/cultura/3573491.html>

The censorship also affected Russian writers of the 19th century, whose works were about to be excluded from the curriculum.⁸ Russia faced with the rules of the international sports movement being rewritten.⁹ “Cancel culture” was manifested when works of art belonging to the funds of the Hermitage, the Tretyakov Gallery, the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, museum-reserves were detained on the Finnish-Russian border.¹⁰ Along with the illegal exclusion of Russia from concert venues and the restriction of opportunities for holding international competitions,¹¹ there have been widespread cases of renaming cultural objects, deleting the “Russian trace” from the world cultural heritage by “changing the nationality” of their creators,¹² whose masterpieces have always been perceived as a product of high Russian culture.¹³

Along with the general negative flow of publications about Russia and its exclusion from the existing formats of interaction at the global level, precedents have emerged for the governments of liberal democratic countries to interfere in the spiritual sphere of society and the system of church administration. For instance, the Saeima (Parliament) of Latvia approved the law on the independence of the Latvian Orthodox Church from the Moscow Patriarchate,¹⁴ and then the LOC, under pressure from the authorities, turned to Patriarch Kirill with a request to grant it autocephaly.¹⁵

The desire of the West to consign to oblivion and belittle the cultural contribution of Russia to the world heritage is politically conditioned and has nothing to do with the request for social justice. First of all, the “cancellation” of Russian culture was initiated not by individuals who boycotted celebrities or Russian cultural products, but by institutions closely associated with

⁸ The University of Milan wanted to ban Dostoevsky. *Newspaper “Izvestia”*. 03.03.22. Retrieved March 9, 2023, from <https://iz.ru/1299808/2022-03-03/v-universitete-milana-zakhoteli-zapretit-dostoevskogo>

⁹ IOC EB recommends no participation of Russian and Belarussian athletes and officials. *IOC News*. 25.02.22. Retrieved March 16, 2023, from <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/amp/ioc-eb-recommends-no-participation-of-russian-and-belarusian-athletes-and-officials>

¹⁰ Bagdasarova, S. The Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation introduced a moratorium on the export of works of art abroad. *The Art Newspaper Russia*. 24.06.22. Retrieved March 9, 2023, from <https://www.theartnewspaper.ru/posts/20220624-zzsx/>

¹¹ The World Federation of International Music Competitions (WFIMC) excluded The International Tchaikovsky Competition from its ranks. *Official site of The International Tchaikovsky Competition. News*. 19.04.22. Retrieved March 9, 2023, from <https://tchaikovskycompetition.com/ru/news/414.htm>

¹² The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York recognized artist Arkhip Kuindzhi as Ukrainian. *Information agency TASS*. 10.02.23. Retrieved March 16, 2023, from <https://tass.ru/kultura/17016591>

¹³ In Vilnius, the Pushkin Literary Museum will be renamed. *Information portal of the Russkiy Mir Foundation*. 09.03.23. Retrieved March 16, 2023, from <https://rusскиymir.ru/news/311086/>

¹⁴ The Saeima of Latvia adopted a law on the independence of the Latvian Orthodox Church. *Information agency “Interfax”*. 08.09.22. Retrieved March 16, 2023, from <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/16122983/amp>

¹⁵ The Russian Orthodox Church considers the Latvian Orthodox Church too small for autocephaly. *Information agency TASS*. 21.10.22. Retrieved March 16, 2023, from <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/16122983/amp>

governments. The second difference from the “cancel culture” in the West in relation to public figures whose words or actions “offended” the public is that in relation to Russian cultural figures, “cancellation” took place not after public condemnation and reaching a certain consensus, but covertly, without attracting public attention and holding any discussion.

Previously, Russia has repeatedly managed to use new directions of diplomacy, including cultural diplomacy, in order to present its view of world processes, events of the past and present. The successful organization of international classical music concerts and tours of Russian theaters had a positive impact on the generally negative background of Western media publications. The tools of cultural diplomacy played a compensating role even during the Cold War. “Cancel culture” in relation to Russia is an attempt to deprive it of these tools.

Even before the wave of “cancelling” Russia launched, K. Walker and J. Ludwig suggested using the tactics of maximum pressure against authoritarian countries that use “soft power” not to “win hearts and minds”, but to skillfully manipulate the target audience by distorting facts and forming falsified content in information flows, calling them countries using “sharp force” (they also indicated Russia among those who use “sharp force”) [Walker, Ludwig 2017].

If you look at the culture of “cancelling” Russia, it becomes clear that its main goal is to delegitimize the country in the international arena. At the same time, along with the fact that Russian cultural figures were excluded from foreign venues, Ukrainian political and cultural figures, in a number of cases, on the contrary, were provided with them: for example, V. Zelensky was given the opportunity to convey the Ukrainian vision of the development of current events at the opening ceremonies of the Cannes Film Festival, the Circus Festival of Monte-Carlo, the Grammy Awards in Las Vegas, and the Frankfurt Book Fair.

The demonization of Russia’s image abroad was also joined by those figures of Russian culture and science who, disagreeing with the current policy of the Russian state, chose emigration, which, in turn, led to the fact that the phenomenon of “cancel culture” partially spread against them, in this case in Russia.

“Cancel culture” touched not only the image of Russia: the ideology of the “Russian world” is being demonized, and the historical heritage of the interethnic and interfaith world is being revised. As “cancel culture” creates a dangerous precedent for changing existing practices in interstate relations, leading to a split in civil society along the “friend or foe” principle, Russia needs to develop a set of measures that would help combat its most dangerous manifestations.

Methods of Dealing with “Cancel Culture”: Non-State Alternatives

Russia’s cultural diplomacy is based on promoting traditional values and achievements of high culture. This allows to appeal to the audience of non-Western countries with original ideas, different from the Western views. The

Concept for Russia's Humanitarian Policy Abroad of September 5, 2022, adopted at the peak of the events around "cancel culture", notes that the multinational people of Russia are united by a common cultural and civilizational code,¹⁶ despite the variegated combination of religions and ethnic groups on the territory of the Russian Federation. Mutual assistance, social justice, humanism — these and other principles contain a powerful unifying incentive for closer dialogue between Russia and the states of the Asia-Pacific region, as well as the Near and Middle East.

The first sharp reaction was followed by a rollback of "cancel culture" and awareness in the international community of the counterproductiveness of these actions. In the case of theaters, cultural exchanges have begun to develop more intensively with the CIS countries; artists from far abroad, for example, Argentina, Brazil, Vietnam, India, China, South Africa, are also present at theater festivals. Works by Russian composers are presented at world cultural venues. In particular, the opening of the theatrical season at the La Scala theatre was marked by M.P. Mussorgsky's opera "Boris Godunov" in Russian.¹⁷

The diversity of cultures and religions in Russia opens up wide opportunities for paradiplomacy,¹⁸ which has long been actively used in the religious dialogue between the entities of the Russian Federation with a Islamic majority population and Muslim states (for example, the countries of the Persian Gulf). Cities establish twinning ties, become venues for cultural and sporting events, host international economic forums and representatives of the business community. With the "cancellation" of Russia, many Western cities have abandoned or suspended twinning agreements, however, sister city links with cities in non-Western countries continue to expand. So, for example, Chinese cities have expressed a desire to establish ties with Perm¹⁹ and the municipalities of the Moscow region — Kashira, Stupin, Sergiev Posad.²⁰

International platforms for exchanging experience between cities are alternative formats of global governance, where the political conjuncture manifests itself to a lesser extent. Such cooperation platforms include, for example, the international organization United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the association of large cities Metropolis, The C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, the Global Parliament of Mayors. The re-election of Kazan Mayor Ilсур Metshin

¹⁶ Concept for Russia's Humanitarian Policy Abroad approved by the Executive Order of the President of the Russian Federation of September 5, 2022. No. 611.

¹⁷ The premiere of the opera Boris Godunov with Russian artists took place at La Scala. *Information agency TASS*. 08.12.22. Retrieved March 17, 2023, from <https://tass.ru/kultura/16532857>

¹⁸ Paradiplomacy is the international activity of local authorities, cross-border relations of subnational actors that do not go beyond their sphere of competence and powers determined by the central government.

¹⁹ Perm plans to establish sister city relations with another Chinese city. *Newspaper "Kommersant"*. 27.09.22. Retrieved March 17, 2023, from <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5582276>

²⁰ Kashira, Stupino and Sergiev Posad will become sister cities with Chinese cities in 2023. *TV channel 360*. 13.01.23. Retrieved March 17, 2023, from <https://360tv.ru/news/mosobl/kashira-stupino-i-sergiev-posad-stanut-pobratimami-kitajskih-gorodov-v-2023-godu/>

as President of the United Nations Advisory Committee of Local Authorities,²¹ representing the interests of 323,000 municipalities, megacities and regions around the world, is symbolic.

In a tense political environment, regional and local initiatives are able to find a foreign response, as they are less associated with the political regime and have a greater chance of cultural cross-border interactions. Border regions of the Russian Federation remote from the European part of the country and the political capital can take advantage of opportunities to attract foreign tourists and cooperate in the field of nature protection. The environmental agenda and ecotourism are especially relevant for 8 subjects of the Russian Federation, where natural monuments are located. According to the world cultural and natural heritage list, which has 1154 sites from 167 countries, Russia, with its 11 natural and 20 cultural heritage sites, is in the top ten.²²

Museum diplomacy can become a powerful weapon in countering “cancel culture”. Russian regional museums in Kozmodemyansk, Krasnodar, Saratov, Samara keep rich collections of Russian art, although the main players in this area are still large state museums²³ that were able to negotiate in difficult political conditions, for example, about the return of the collection of the Morozov brothers from France. The Russian and French sides showed a mutual desire to protect cultural exchanges “despite everything”, diplomats agreed that works of art would not be confiscated when transported through third countries.²⁴ Russian museums store works by foreign, including European masters, so in the near future it is worth striving to resume negotiations on joint virtual exhibitions, expand cooperation with museums in Asia and Africa, as well as implement new approaches to financing cultural institutions enshrined in the State Cultural Policy Strategy until 2030²⁵ in accordance with the new realities.

Conclusion

“Cancel culture” is a political tool that allows countries to use public opinion for the purposes of interstate confrontation. Spreading through social networks and the media, it was intended primarily to deprive its object of the right to vote, lower its image, make its cultural products less attractive. It resulted in not only

²¹ The Mayor of Kazan was re-elected President of the UN Advisory Committee of Local Authorities. *Information agency TASS*. 14.10.22. Retrieved March 17, 2023, from <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/16060205>

²² Russian objects from the UNESCO World Heritage List. *UNESCO in Russia*. Retrieved March 17, 2023, from <http://unesco.ru/unescorussia/sites/>

²³ The best museums in Russia. *Official website of Culture.RF*. Retrieved March 17, 2023, from <https://www.culture.ru/materials/26667/luchshie-muzei-rossii>

²⁴ The Morozov brothers' collection returned from France will be exhibited at the Pushkin Museum. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. 05.05.22. Retrieved March 17, 2023, from <https://rg.ru/2022/05/05/vernushuiusia-iz-francii-kollekciu-bratev-morozovyh-vystaviat-v-pushkinskom-muzee.html>

²⁵ On the Approval of the State Cultural Policy Strategy until 2030, Order of the Government of the Russian Federation of February 29, 2016 No. 326 (ed. of 30.03.2018).

politicizing those areas that previously retained the principles of apoliticity and independence from the state, but also rewriting the established norms of international interactions both at the interstate and the public level. At the same time, the application of “cancel culture” in relation to Russia revealed that “cancel culture” in world politics is not a request for social justice, is not initiated by broader social groups, and has limitations due to the fact that the cultural achievements of high culture that enjoy the real demand.

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