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Exceptions to Authoritarianism? Variegated sovereignty and ethno-nationalism in a Siberian resource frontier

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ARTICLE



Exceptions to authoritarianism? Variegated sovereignty and ethnonationalism in a Siberian resource frontier

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the governance of culture and nationalism in Russia is far from uniform but rather, characterized by exceptions and diffuse sovereignty. It responds to a literature exploring the use of culture and identity in the Kremlin's governing practices through the idiom of "exceptions to authoritarianism." The dominant conception that culture is strictly instrumentalized by the Kremlin for regime legitimation and the maintenance of the so-called power vertical is countered by anthropologically examining cultural institutions and identity politics in the Altai Republic. More specifically, the Gazprom-sponsored renovation of a museum celebrating Altaian indigenous culture is explored. This contribution highlights the agendas, interests, and players defining the culture-political fields of practice in authoritarian states by analyzing how Gazprom enables the blossoming of indigenous cultural institutions. It repositions Gazprom, which successfully enabled a temporary exception to centrist policies, as a parastatal company, located between the global market and authoritarian state.

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Introduction

On 20 September 2012, the Altai Princess, a 2,600-year-old Scythian mummy and proclaimed progenitor of the Altai people, finally arrived back in the Altai Republic (Figure 1). While shamans performed rituals at the place where she was excavated, indigenous leaders and elders accompanied her to the newly renovated National Museum of the Altai Republic in Gorno Altaisk, a state-of-the-art historical museum curated by indigenous elites celebrating Altaian culture and otherness vis-à-vis Russia. After having been displayed by the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) in Novosibirsk for two decades and claimed as a Russian body by Russian archaeologists based on her DNA, the princess was now back in the Altaian homeland and controlled by the Altai people. As one key journalist and wife of a recently deceased indigenous leader-politician told me, "sometimes it is difficult to openly talk about politics, so we use her as a metaphor to discuss the difficult position of Altaians in Russia. Claiming her is claiming our land." Two years later the princess continued to structure political debates, when a serious spring flood was allegedly linked to the fact that she was still not reburied. The museum and body again influenced gubernatorial elections, ultimately forcing the candidate of the Kremlin to legitimize indigenous needs and interests.

It is tempting to connect these developments with the early post-Soviet ethnonational activism of the late 1980s and 1990s, during which non-Russian nationalities were encouraged by the Kremlin to "take as much sovereignty as you can swallow." For many groups, heritage and the political lives of dead bodies (Verdery 1999) were especially key in mediating indigenous ownership and control over their lands.

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Figure 1. Map of the Russian Federation highlighting the Altai Republic in black and the projected Gazprom pipeline that will directly connect Siberian gas fields with China with a dotted line.

Another reason to connect this Altaian assertion of cultural sovereignty with the *pre*-Putin period, is the prevailing image in academic and popular literature that since the mid-2000s the Kremlin is increasingly undermining the political agency of the regions. Constitutional restrictions restrain indigenous sovereignty (Bernstein 2013, 1–2), while proliferating Russian patriotism normalizes a political culture unfavorable to cultural diversity and non-Russian minorities (Alexseev 2016; Prina 2016).

Encoded in most studies of identity politics in contemporary Russia is the prevalent image that the Kremlin treats culture as a zero-sum game where only carefully curated images of the nation-state are allowed (Gill 2013). Different scholars agree that a “culture war” (Smyth 2014, 584–585) has especially deepened at the end of last decade, once dwindling gas and oil prices started to threaten Putin’s image and the social contract ensuring regime survival (Sakwa 2014; Smyth, Sobolev, and Soboleva 2014). Prina (2011, 83–84) similarly explains the strict management of indigenous affairs by the Kremlin not out of an “imperialist desire to Russianize national minorities but ... simply to the objective of strengthening and maintaining the state.” This broadly corresponds with how key literature has traditionally described governing by the Russian polity at large (Monaghan 2012; Gel’man 2015; Gill 2015): authoritarian, primarily geared at strengthening existing regime configurations, and built around a top-down integrated body of power called the *vertikal*. This model of the *vertikal* has been furthered by contributions from international relations and political sciences (Sakwa 2004; Kropp and Schuhmann 2016; Gel’man and Ryzhenkov 2011; Monaghan 2012) in which Putin and his *nomenklatura* are described as key protagonists ossifying their sociopolitical arena using a variety of carrots and sticks.

This paper challenges this dominant lens and investigates the idea that identity and culture in Russia is (a) *uniformly* governed by a (b) *single* vertical body of power. By contextually explicating an example where non-Russian culture is politicized without much resistance from the Kremlin, an alternative description of cultural government in the Russian Federation is developed. This paper argues that,

although it is true that Moscow's "cultural wars" are central to strengthening the power *vertikal*, at the same time – paradoxically – the same Kremlin does allow exceptions to its authoritarian control over identity and culture in specific zones and contexts. Even in regions where such exceptions produce cultural agency, this can potentially erode the legitimacy of the central state.

A more nuanced approach to statecraft in Russian studies is proposed by building on the work by Schmitt (1996) and Agamben (2008) on "the state of exception." In their ideas, both liberal democracies and autocracies rarely govern over their subjects uniformly, nor do they stick to their guiding principles or constitutional frameworks. Instead, it is natural for modern states to regularly suspend norms or allow anomie in order to guarantee a smoothly functioning government. Regimes especially allow exceptions to ensure regime survival or deal with external challenges. This is arguably no different in Russia; because of its entanglements with the volatile international market (Rutland 2013), the Kremlin cannot govern all its regions uniformly and has to apply a much more flexible approach to government.

Because these exceptions are often mediated by non-state players, this also means sovereignty needs reconsidering. According to Barkan (2013), neoliberal mentalities and the sociopolitical entanglements produced by the global market today ensure that some groups or places (both elites and subaltern ones) are excluded from certain regimes, while the majority continues to fall under the same set of rules. Instead of seeing corporate behavior as being governed by political institutions, Barkan encourages us to approach corporations and states as ontologically bound, both holding sovereignty and being able to govern the economy, politics, and culture. As such, corporations are also active players that through negotiations with the state effectively produce "permissive spaces" (Cooper-Knock 2018) or "zones of exception" (Ong 2006) where different rules and norms apply.

Building on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out over seven years in the Altai Republic (2009–2015), the modes of sociality that such zones of exception produce are mapped. The cultural life of the mythical Altai Princess and the politics surrounding the museum in which she is exhibited will be used as a key case study through which the sociopolitical changes in the Altai Republic are explored since it became a "resource frontier" (Tsing 2003), a region of central importance to the hydrocarbon sector and the Kremlin. Before Gazprom launched its plans in the mid-2000s to build the large Power of Siberia-2 pipeline through the Republic, connecting the West Siberian gas fields directly to the Chinese market,¹ the region was one of the many examples of the impact of the centralization of government and strict management of cultural life by the Kremlin.

One would think, building on the literature on resource exploration in Russia (Habeck 2002; Alferova 2006; Balzer 2010) and beyond (Tsing 2003; Benson and Kirsch 2010), that Gazprom's pipeline project would go hand in hand with further careful management of the cultural and political field by the central state in an effort to tamp down collective activism against the project. Instead, when the construction plans became concrete around 2010, institutions and symbolic capital imperative for a cultural arena suddenly became available to indigenous Altaians. Impressive investments in Altaian culture and heritage by Gazprom, inconsistent with the centralizing policies of the Kremlin, were allowed, providing indigenous people with tools enabling them to strengthen their own identity.

This paper focuses on the period 2009–2015, when actual preparations were made to start with the construction of the pipeline. Today, low gas prices and difficult negotiations with China have made the future of the pipeline project uncertain. Subsequently, the region has become of less interest to Gazprom, which has gone hand in hand with recentralization. However, these recent developments have become difficult to assess for the author because of political restrictions in the Altai, as it is a border zone controlled by the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB).

Conforming to the dominant image: the institutional homogenization and folklorization of Altaian minorities before the pipeline

When in 1994 archaeologists of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences finally announced their 1993 discovery of a uniquely preserved 2,600-year-old mummy of a Scythian girl

who was buried with magnificent grave goods, Altaian activists and intellectuals were quick to capitalize on this unique discovery. As an example of textbook nationalism, and partially building on Soviet ethnic categorizations (Hirsch 2005), the past was mythologized by the local intelligentsia in an effort to legitimize the deep ties to the land. Subsequently, the female mummy became one of the most important markers of Altaian identity and, buried with her horses, was conceived as their nomadic progenitor. Reactions of marvel about their “Altai Princess” went hand in hand with serious protests against the fact that Russian archaeologists excavated and removed the mummy from their lands, had her body conserved by the institute in charge of Lenin’s body, and displayed her in their Museum in Novosibirsk. Promptly, repatriation and reburial was requested. When the archaeologists of the Russian Academy of Sciences flatly rebuked repatriation and continued excavations, a deep conflict unfolded that further deepened Altaian demands for cultural sovereignty.

The situation further worsened when scientists claimed modern Altaians have no biological links² with the Altai Princess and that DNA research suggested she was Caucasian (Molodin and Polosmak 1999), thus making Altaians recent settlers. Similar to necropolitics in other places of the former Soviet empire (Verdery 1999; Bernstein 2013), the Altai Princess increasingly became a symbolic political issue during the 1990s, successfully used by both Altaian indigenous leaders and non-Altaian political figures as capital during municipal and gubernatorial elections (Halemba 2008; Plets et al. 2013). This not only created a sense of sameness, but this strong collective agency also ensured Altaians were successful in creating and maintaining their own state institutions and laws. Many of these frameworks provided control over their own land and restricted the development of infrastructure in the region, influenced by Altaian shamanism in which the ontological unity of humans and nature stands central.

Whereas the political use of the Altai Princess typifies indigenous nation-building after the collapse of the Soviet Union, at the same time, the unresolved fate of the Altai Princess during the 1990s and 2000s exemplifies the ethnocentrism and institutional estrangement of indigenous people in post-Soviet Russia, a reality that became especially dire when President Putin rose to power in the 2000s. Public protests, petitions, and official demands for reburial remained largely ignored. At the same time, a long list of new federal laws, manipulation of regional politics, and discursive politics curtailed and undermined indigenous collective agency and access to culture and heritage.

First, a whole series of legal challenges at both the federal and regional levels undermined the cultural sovereignty of the Altai people. A suite of federal reforms made it almost impossible for indigenous people to elect their own leaders,³ collaborate with international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs),⁴ coordinate with other Russian minorities,⁵ and become recognized as “indigenous numerically small peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East.”⁶ On the regional level, minor legal changes are intermittently made by representatives of United Russia. Heritage, amongst other cultural practices, is especially caught up in this subversion of regional power not only because heritage institutions operate as a vehicle for legitimation and sociocultural rights. At the same time, heritage institutions and laws are also tools to oppose, influence, or at least delay construction projects.⁷ Consequently, for these reasons, regional heritage structures in the Altai Republic have been skillfully undercut or dissolved by a series of players connected to the Kremlin. A symbolic decree⁸ making any archaeological work dependent on indigenous consent and management of local heritage institutions was revoked for being in conflict with the 2002 federal cultural heritage law that ascribes ownership over cultural heritage to the federal state.⁹ The Altaians could no longer control the archaeological bodies excavated on their homeland and mobilize them as nation-building tools. Furthermore, less than two months after enacting a new law reinstating indigenous stewardship, in August 2012, the Kremlin-controlled Altaian Parliament adopted an amendment allowing the construction of “linear objects” in protected heritage zones.¹⁰ Although a linear object is deliberately defined vaguely to signify any kind of infrastructure, including basic infrastructures such as water pipes, power lines, and roads, in reality, it directly relates to the large pipeline that was planned in the region and would cross several-protected

zones, including the Ukok nature preserve that covers the entire border zone between Russia and China in the Altai Republic.

Second, these federal and regional legal attacks were also matched by strong symbolic politics and discourse by the Kremlin geared at promoting Russian cultural citizenship. While depictions in the media of indigenous culture and religion focused on its oriental otherness, Russian accomplishments in the arts and the Russian Orthodox Church were instantiated as the culmination of modern civilization. At the same time, indigenous pasts were also appropriated by the Russian state and archaeologists were encouraged to identify in indigenous pasts the “common features that have ensured the shape of a cultural meta-unity such as Russia” (Makarov, Belayev, and Engovatova 2015, 13). Also, the Altai Princess became one of the key sites through which the Kremlin delegitimized Altaian sovereignty and indigenesness. In 2004, the archaeologists who refused to repatriate the Altai Princess because of the alleged European descent of the find, received the prestigious State Prize of the Russian Federation (*Gosudarstvennaya Premiya Rossiiskoi Federatsii*) from President Putin. During the award ceremony, Putin praised their excavations in the Altai Republic and post-excavation scientific research, labeling their discoveries and analysis of the finds as “exceptional and bright events in Russian science and the arts; they are the pride and glory of our nation.”¹¹ Not only did this prize objectify the non-indigenous descent of the find (stressing its “European,” i.e. Russian genealogy), it also instantiates the Altai Princess as Russian national heritage.

These multilayered curtailments of indigenous culture are indicative of broader direct and indirect challenges to indigenous cultural sovereignty. It clearly represents Putin and his *nomenklatura* as quintessential nation-builders who use heritage legislation and artifacts as part of their political portfolio. The political struggle over the body of the Altai Princess perhaps best describes the changed political arena for non-Russian nationalities; whereas during the 1990s the Altaians used the body of the Altai Princess to negotiate a new relationship with the Russian Federation (Bernstein 2013, 6), the same body was used during the 2000s by the Kremlin to impose its own version of this relationship. Caught in a web spun by the Kremlin, the Altai Princess seems to represent yet another victim of the *vertikal* whereby the Kremlin strictly defines the rules of the game and where there is only room for celebrating the ethnic Russian.

In her recent monograph exploring the ethnonational policies affecting indigenous groups, Prina (2016) interprets such formal and informal actions undermining the status of titular culture as a deliberate push by the Kremlin to strengthen the regime and its institutions. However, this does not mean indigenous culture is completely banned from public space. Indigenous expressions are allowed, traditional dance and songs are still center stage at state-sponsored festivals, and indigenous heritage is preserved. Yet, Prina (2016) convincingly argues that indigenous culture has rather become *folklorized*, stripped of any political meaning and value, making it increasingly difficult to employ heritage objects or traditions as political and symbolic capital for expanding cultural sovereignty and strengthening group membership, as was done during the 1990s.

Becoming a zone of exception: bankrolling the Altaian cultural sector and the return of the Altai Princess

In September 2012, the Altai Princess was repatriated to the newly constructed National Museum of the Altai Republic. This new state-of-the-art museum not only holds the Altai Princess; as one of the most monumental, luxurious, and expensive regional museums of Siberia, it celebrates Altaian culture, explicitly communicates Altaians’ otherness, and establishes deep archaeological links with their homeland. Such a tribute to the Altaian people in a museum that falls under the control of the Russian state is clearly at odds with the bleak political reality described above. The museum and the repatriation were organized by Gazprom, as part of its corporate social responsibility agenda. Gazprom, aware of the long history of successful indigenous protests and legal challenges against large infrastructure developments in the Altai, has strategically sponsored a suite of initiatives in an effort to maintain a good image amongst the various groups involved in everyday life in the Republic.

The opening ceremony of the Altai museum, which coincided with the celebration of the return of the mummy, was a well-orchestrated public relations event receiving a lot of attention both within and outside the Republic. With much grandeur, representatives of Gazprom, the regional government, and indigenous leaders opened the museum. In their speeches, various political protagonists praised Altaian culture and its important role in the broader history of Russia (Novosti Gornogo Altaya 2012), clearly transcending the trope of folklore. The festivities attracted a big crowd that, armed with Gazprom promotional material, also praised Gazprom's accomplishments. Not only the celebrations were carefully managed; so too was the layout of the museum, which adroitly positioned Gazprom's initiatives in the Altai Republic (Figure 2, left). As this can be uncontestedly read as an effort by Gazprom to win hearts and minds in a region known for its environmental activism against major construction plans (see Plets 2016), at the same time it is remarkable that a company that is popularly conceptualized as the handmaiden of the Kremlin was able to overrule the Kremlin's ethno-national policy.

Gazprom did not only provide Altaians with political instruments to celebrate their culture and identity, it also directly legitimized Altaian nationhood and otherness. This is not only evidenced by the clear-ethnicized semiotics of the exhibition that explicitly differentiate Altaians from Russians as being a different ethnic community with its own distinct culture and past (Figure 3). More directly, a very large banner in the museum's central hall shows Gazprom's CEO Alexei Miller congratulating (in Russian and Altaian native languages) the Altaians with *their* museum (Figure 2, right), affirming Altaian ethnonational claims and otherness. Gazprom not only provided the Altaians with political capital, it clearly ensured the survival of indigenous-controlled cultural institutions enabling collective action and identification.

During Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, gubernatorial elections were reintroduced, and the Princess and indigenous culture again played an important role during the 2014 regional election – similar to that during the 1990s. During this highly contested election, various candidates appropriated the Altai's culture and heritage as an important rallying point in their campaigns, hinting that indigenous culture had neither become folklorized, nor had it become depoliticized over the past years. Many interlocutors indicated that cultural life in the Altai was very much alive, partially because of the new museum that almost all of my respondents had visited multiple times and was heralded by them as a celebration of Altaian greatness. Furthermore, the return of the Altai Princess also affirmed Altaian sovereignty and legitimacy over their land. At the same time, many



Figure 2. Left, Gazprom room in the new museum. Before entering the main hall where the Altai Princess is stored, all visitors must pass through a room displaying all the accomplishments of Gazprom. Right, in the entrance hall of the museum a very large banner of Altai governor Berdnikov and Gazprom CEO Miller welcomes visitors, and states in Russian and Altaian "congratulations with the opening of your museum" (emphasis added).



Figure 3. Reconstruction of the burial mound of the Altai Princess as an example of the ethnified reconstruction practices at the museum. In the center of the exhibition are real-life mannequins who are depicted as the ancestors of current Altaians. Contrary to the claims of Russian Academy of Sciences archaeologists, all reconstructions have Eurasian traits.

festivals and indigenous cultural institutions continued to operate, enabling indigenous cultural life. For example, at the indigenous *El Oyin* festival,¹² which took place two months prior to the elections, Siberian cultural diversity was also put center stage during various well-choreographed performances. Offstage, in and around the festival grounds, politics and ethnocultural issues were being discussed within the context of the upcoming election.

The regional ministry of culture had allocated funding for the construction and maintenance of the museum, as well as for organization of nationwide festivals and various other indigenous cultural events. Clearly, these investments ensured that indigenous cultural life was very much alive, despite stringent laws complicating the funding of indigenous associations elsewhere in Russia. The very limited financial and political support for regional cultural institutions provided by the Kremlin was instead overcome through the contributions of Gazprom, which during the years 2011–2016 provided at least 71%¹³ of the funding for culture in the Republic as part of their corporate social responsibility efforts.

The museum and the returned princess had an impact on local cultural politics. In the run-up to the 2014 election, smaller opposition parties such as the party “Volya” capitalized on the Altaian Princess and used her as a metonym to criticize the Kremlin. They specifically linked the still unburied fate of their princess to a deadly flood that had devastated the Altai in June 2014. During my fieldwork that summer, I was amazed by the rumors and informal discussions about these types of connections; it was clear that indigenous culture and heritage was, yet again, put center stage during the election. Although Vladimir Petrov, the main opponent of the Putin-appointed incumbent, abstained from using the princess directly in his campaign, in the 2014 gubernatorial and 2016 parliamentary elections indigenous culture, cultural diversity, and indigenous well-being was a core theme in his campaign. Petrov publicly criticized the attacks against cultural diversity in the Altai since the “acting authorities operate on the principle of ‘divide and conquer’”¹⁴ and actively pit different minorities against each other. The fact that such discourse could find its way into the public sphere was not only remarkable, but that it resonated extremely well in the Altai Republic was impressive as well. Even after serious election fraud, involving fake voting ballots and bribery, the United Russia candidate Berdnikov only received 50.6% of the votes, just enough to prevent a second round. This was by far the slimmest margin a Kremlin candidate had scored in recent elections and was even portrayed in the popular media as a first crack in the authoritarian management of Russia.¹⁵

The celebration of ethnic diversity even became an integral part of the election campaign of Berdnikov when it became apparent after polling that indigenous Altaians *en masse* supported Petrov. Weeks before the election, Berdnikov met with indigenous leaders, affirmed their legitimacy,

and agreed to support the reburial of the princess when elected. In the blog tied to his election campaign, he swiftly reminded the electorate that he, and not his opponents, was the only lawful political actor that could solve this issue. He drew this legitimacy from the successful repatriation of the Altai Princess because he “asked the head of Gazprom Alexei Borisovich Miller to help us solve this problem, and finance the [infrastructural improvements] required for the storage of the mummy.”¹⁶ This illustrates that even within the discourse of candidates of the Kremlin party United Russia, diversity and indigenous custodianship can become important topics matched by tangible actions on the ground.

On 19 May 2014, during a speech at the museum, Berdnikov reminded the crowd and media that the renovation and repatriation of the Altai Princess was one of *his* most important accomplishments, of course aided by Gazprom:

We should be proud that we have such a museum. A great accomplishment; we thank the management of Gazprom. When I was appointed as the Head [of the Altai Republic] one of my main goals and dreams was to have a bright opening of a renovated museum and that we could welcome the “Siberian Ice Maiden” home again. Today our museum is the best one east of the Urals and is the only one that has been restored in Russia in the past twenty years. (Government of the Altai Republic 2014)

The museum, the repatriated Altai Princess, and a vibrant cultural life, all indirectly bankrolled by Gazprom, clearly provided indigenous people with the tools and venues to discuss, leverage, and politicize their culture and identity. The large support for Petrov running on an agenda imbued with an indigenous rights discourse and Berdnikov’s sudden support for reburial illustrate that, at that point, regional cultural institutions enabled a climate in which culture, indigenous nationhood, and politics were intrinsically entangled and publicly discussed.

After his highly contested reelection in 2014, the narrowly elected head of the autonomous Altai Republic promised a return to normality and to serve the interests of the indigenous people and develop a more efficient and transparent government. However, only a month after Berdnikov re-assumed power, Altai’s institutional fabric was restructured to secure the “socio-economic goals” of the Republic (Berdnikov 2014). Besides replacing many older bureaucrats with young administrators from outside the Altai Republic, some key ministries were restructured. For example, the agencies responsible for the management of natural resources, land property relations, and the environment were merged into the single political authority called the Ministry of Natural Resources, Ecology, and Property Relations, which played into the hands of Gazprom’s plans to construct its pipeline through protected lands.

Although cultural freedom could still be exercised after the election, when it became obvious that Gazprom might not be able to build its pipeline because of price disagreements with China, investments into the cultural sector waned and the strong grip on local politics was reintroduced. In the next election cycle in 2016, Petrov, who had his eyes set on a seat in the Russian State Duma and, yet again, ran on an indigenous agenda, was barred from participating in the election. Clearly, Altai was not only geographically a *space* of exception, but also temporally, indigenous culture could be politicized and celebrated during a specific *window* of exception. As discussions are ongoing about the pipeline and the political field continues to change in the Altai Republic, further ethnographic research is necessary to fully fathom contemporary developments.

Discussion: Exceptions to authoritarianism? The power of the market and disaggregated sovereignty in the cultural sector

When only analyzing the legal actions and public discourse of the Kremlin, we seem to be presented with an authoritarian state that strictly manages minorities and undermines a public cultural sector in an effort to strengthen the unified central state around homogenous symbols and values. However, ethnographic perspectives from the ground show that, despite formal limits, some indigenous groups in Russia are provided with important tools, institutions, and capital that

strengthen their cohesion, politically activate their culture, and put multicultural citizenship on the political agenda. Access to these tools and instruments was not only “permitted” (Cooper-Knock 2018) by the central state, but Gazprom, a hydrocarbon multinational directly tied to the Kremlin (see below for critique), actively provided the funds and expertise. These ultimately enabled collective action and activism that were diametrically opposed to the needs of the Kremlin. This can either mean that the dominant image in existing literature depicting indigenous culture as being folkloric is inaccurate, or a much more nuanced and less generalizing approach to cultural policy in Putin’s autocracy is necessary.

This discussion, first, will argue that it would be wrong to think that Russia’s cultural policy is a zero-sum game where only specific discourse and understandings of identity are allowed, or that patriotic policies and discourse simply trickle down across the Russian Federation in the same manner. Rather, calculated exceptions to the strict authoritarian uniform control of culture and identity are allowed by the Kremlin to guarantee stable access to the international market.¹⁷ Second, by further exploring the political entanglements produced by Gazprom, the mode of sovereignty we popularly connect to Russia, and authoritarianism in general, will be challenged. Building on research on neoliberal governance, I suggest that the tendency to treat Putin and his *nomenklatura* as the main sovereigns structuring the political game in Russia needs to be transcended. Rather, sovereignty in Russia should not be conceived as singular, but as variegated and disaggregated.

Over the past two decades, the jargon of “exception” has become an important heuristic in analyses of how polities govern. Many of the “analyses of exceptional forms of rule” (Huysmans 2008, 166) using the thinking tools of Agamben and Schmitt continue to remind us about the fact that most liberal democracies neither govern over their subjects in a uniform manner, nor do they apply their foundational ideologies consistently. For scholars of statecraft, the lessons of this theoretical framework are especially methodological. Firstly, the government of subjects by states cannot be studied through an analysis of legal frameworks or discourses produced by elites alone. In specific contexts, both limited in space and time, exceptions are allowed for a suite of reasons. Secondly, if we want to understand the inner workings and hierarchy of agendas defining a given regime, we should not only explore how the majority is governed, but we should also study those factors and players that persuade governments to allow a temporary or limited suspension of the rules.

Anthropologist Aihwa Ong (2006) has embraced such a method in her effort to remodel our approach toward authoritarian states. In her research, by studying how subjects are shaped on the ground, Ong refrains from seeing autocracies or managed democracies as vertically integrated bodies of power. Instead, she argues that authoritarian states are forced to adopt a specific zoning strategy because they chose to connect to the international market. In order to flexibly respond to market-based developments and neoliberal logics, special economic zones, where specific tax regimes and limited freedoms exist in conflict with the authoritarian norm, operate as “spaces of exception.” Allowing such exceptions does not mean that there is a full suspension or erosion of the norms. Similarly, the fact that a non-United Russia candidate almost won the 2014 election in the Altai Republic does not signify there was a crack in the *vertikal*, but rather that Russia’s hybrid regime is very flexible and works less in uniform ways than popularly conceptualized. Clearly, political economy and neoliberal logics are influential in defining the mode of government of the modern Russian state (Collier 2011; Rutland 2013). Allowing a key corporate player to optimize its access to the global market is perceived as more important, even if this could challenge political stability and central control over indigenous regions.

Agamben (2008) and Ong (2006) have primarily looked at how formal exceptions, operationalized through administrative constructions and legal frameworks, create zones of exceptions. This focus on the legalist nature of exceptions has been critiqued by Cooper-Knock (2018), who encourages us to explore how sovereignty is subtly negotiated in everyday life. In this paper, I similarly underline that formal zoning is not a prerequisite for gaining exceptions to the authoritarian norm.¹⁸ The formal rules still treat Altaian indigenous movements and regional government unfavorably, and the central

government strategically underfunds indigenous culture. Yet, financial and political support provided by Gazprom has enabled Altaians to display their culture in a state-owned museum, control historical objects that by law belong to the federal state, exhibit otherness in the public discourse, and influence the political establishment. Clearly, Altaians are treated as an exception through a complex web of subtle power relations carefully spun by Gazprom. This web and the exceptions this constitutes can only be understood through methodologies such as ethnography and participant observation that are attentive to indirect forms of power and government.

In addition to challenging the idea that authoritarian states uniformly rule over their subjects, building on her ethnographic data, Ong also argues that within loci where exceptions to authoritarian rule exist, our approach to sovereignty in those states must be rethought. Instead of seeing the state as a unified container that strictly defines the rules of the game, the variegated nature of sovereignty in contemporary authoritarian society, where different players outside the traditional confinements of the state (e.g. industrialists or multinationals) influence the rules of the game, needs to be acknowledged.

Countering dominant perspectives from the social sciences that treat states as bodies controlling corporations, Barkan (2013) encourages us to think of corporations as sovereigns. These also influence states because they employ a “range of techniques – from the consensual to the coercive – for establishing order within their institutional structures and across the places and territories in which they operate” (Barkan 2013, 5). However, as Barkan suggests, this does not mean that both “state” and “corporation” are engaged in a zero-sum game where one attempts to replace the other. Rather, both are ontologically linked in a topological relation where both have agency and influence one another.

Following this line of thinking, and Schmitt’s definition of the sovereign as “he who decides on the exception” (1996, 5), I argue that both the Kremlin and Gazprom present themselves as entities holding power and tools to govern territories and subjects. Describing a similar situation in the Perm region (Russian Federation), where Lukoil provided grants to local cultural institutions, Rogers has termed such an arena an *energopolitical regime*, “a field of power in which state agencies are important but not the sole actors” (Rogers 2014, 433). Through drawing attention to the institutional and discursive impact of Lukoil on regional politics, Rogers (2015) challenges the paradigmatic conception that, after the imprisonment of the oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the Kremlin discouraged corporations from engaging in politics and statecraft. However, whereas Rogers locates the political agency of corporations at the local and regional level, I would argue that this also happens at the federal level. Corporations and the Kremlin dialectically influence each other’s practices and actions. This is evidenced in Altai by the fact that Gazprom was able to provide Altaians with the tools to politicize their culture and directly challenge the nativist discourses of the political establishment without opposition from the Kremlin. Furthermore, during the heated 2014 election cycle, Moscow did not actively interfere and the Kremlin’s candidate even conceded to indigenous demands for repatriation, acknowledging the long connections of Altaians to their land.

Gazprom is, however, not a traditional corporate player and its relationship with the political elite is ambiguous. In much of the literature (Sakwa 2004; Goldman 2008; Gill 2011), Gazprom is conceptualized as a state-controlled corporation that supports the central state and its agendas, similar to how it operated during the Soviet Union when it was still the Soviet Ministry of the Gas Industry. Comaroff and Comaroff (2009, 130–135), for example, frame Gazprom as an instrument of the Kremlin that actively promotes those national identities favored by the Kremlin. However, Kivinen (2012) has pointed out that the relationships between the gas sector and the state are much more intricate, and he contends that Gazprom’s operational decisions are mainly driven by a business rationale. This means that Gazprom sometimes overrules clear political objectives set by the Putin government. The Russian government may be in control of a majority of its shares and may be defining the course of the company, but Gazprom is also traded on the international stock market. Ultimately, if the company wants to attract capital and keep the (international) shareholders happy, this international player not only needs a corporate organization, image, and

strategy; it also needs to build relationships with players otherwise discredited by the Kremlin. In the case study of this paper, Gazprom's corporate social responsibility program tapped into the agenda of Altaian indigenous movements in an effort to secure construction of its pipelines.

In this model of dispersed sovereignty, it would mean that Gazprom is separate from the government, forcing us to adopt more flexible wording when describing the company. In his recent Foucauldian analysis of Gazprom's governmentality practices, Tynkkynnen (2016) asserts that instead of viewing Gazprom as the arm of the Kremlin, we should rather conceptualize it as a *parastatal* organization. In his view, Gazprom is influenced by Putin and his inner circle and serves the Russian government much more than any normal corporation would. However, this does not mean that all decisions and actions of Gazprom are in line with the Putin government. In Tynkkynnen's description, Gazprom is an independent player whose economic interests tend to trump political concerns, and exceptions are usually made with the "blessing of Putin and his closest political allies" (Tynkkynnen 2016, 377). Based on the insights of the central case study of this paper and the understandings of corporate power furthered by Barkan, I would further sharpen Tynkkynnen's description and argue that Gazprom's relationship with the Putin government is not unidirectional (Putin allows certain practices or not) but a synergy, where the parastatal corporate entity also influences or at least constrains the actions of the Kremlin. In Foucauldian terms, Gazprom "conducts the conduct" of the Kremlin, forces them to give their "blessing" for exceptions, compelling Putin and his inner circle to be flexible in their often strict management of state affairs.

Finally, the title of this paper has a question mark following the central phrasing "exceptions to authoritarianism." It is true that authoritarian states sometimes allow positive exceptions that create possibilities for minorities and provide them with agency (Ong 2006). Likewise, in Altai, the perseverance of cultural institutions providing unfiltered access to culture has ensured that culture and indigenous identity are still widely practiced. This has ultimately maintained cultural diversity as a political issue that the political establishment cannot ignore or undermine. Instead, they need to acknowledge and mediate it in their political strategies. Such a situation stands in sharp contrast with ominous depictions of indigenous cultural life in other regions in Russia. However, at the same time, it is difficult to call the appropriation of culture by Gazprom in return for support for a large pipeline destroying and limiting access to large tracts of indigenous land the opposite of authoritarian – i.e. democratic. It is appropriate to say that the subtle power relations produced by Gazprom's grants have to a certain extent entrapped indigenous people in a sticky web curtailing their agency, ultimately enabling the company to create certain types of citizens favoring pipeline transport and hydrocarbon extraction. However, the notion of "exceptions to authoritarianism" that is central in the argument of this paper should rather be conceptualized as an encouragement to see cultural politics not as a top-down uniformity, but a highly contextual negotiation between an assemblage of players, sensitivities, trade-offs, and agendas, which in some cases might provide benefits to certain groups.

Conclusion

Cultural politics in the Russian Federation is defined by a highly intricate set of relations and social structures, shaped not only by the traditional ethnonational mechanisms but also by a plethora of intersecting socioeconomic landscapes, political dynamics, and unconventional actors. This not only makes the Russian cultural field a treacherous space saturated with both financial possibilities and ethical dilemmas for many cultural workers, but it also presents itself as a unique window into how authoritarian states allow exceptions to grand meta-narratives or identity framings. This paper demonstrates that there are different players and competing interests defining the rules of the game in the field of indigenous culture in Russia, by disentangling the tortuous meshwork of interests and relations defining cultural life in the Altai Republic. The use of heritage by Gazprom illustrates that Russia is not a monolithic unitary Soviet relic strictly defined by a nationalistic

agenda built around cultural assimilation and the deconstruction of indigenous agency. Although many of the federal legal frameworks limit indigenous opposition and undercut sovereignty, at the same time, access to cultural capital for non-Russian groups is traded for limited opposition to internationally significant economic projects benefitting Gazprom and the Russian state.

This example is not only of direct relevance for scholars interested in cultural politics in the Russian Federation or post-Soviet space. It is of importance to any specialist working on cultural policy and identity politics in authoritarian regimes. It clearly shows that cultural policy can be defined by a suite of players, and needs a heuristic approach that does not use the uniform top-down lens popular in many analyses. Furthermore, the challenges posed by Gazprom remind cultural practitioners and scholars training the future leaders in the museum and heritage sector to take the challenges posed by corporate funding and consultancy linkages seriously. It is time to update the theoretical paradigms informing our ethical toolkits and acknowledge the challenges posed by methodological nationalism.

In the process of managing the institutional and legal environment, conflicting cultural discourses were being authorized at the same time – Altaians were able to celebrate their unique culture while many other indigenous non-Russian minorities are subject to stringent anti-regionalist policies. Clearly, in authoritarian (electoral) regimes, neoliberalism encourages the creation of “zones of exception” where *exceptions* to national policies are allowed in order to enable the state and its corporate elite to tap into the full potential of the market.

Future comparative research is imperative, as there are other regions in Russia where minorities or alternative subcultures receive freedoms that others are struggling for. Preliminary insights from the High North (Stammler and Wilson 2006) and Tatarstan (Graney 2009; Plets 2015) signal that states of exceptions are popular instruments of government in authoritarian states. Furthermore, this paper has specifically focused on Gazprom, which is a unique corporation with its own power structure and entanglements with the government. It is highly advisable to explore the impact of other types of corporations and multinationals on statecraft practices in Russia. This paper seeks to encourage researchers to explore whether other corporations in Russia are similarly successful in mediating exceptions and influence the power structures of the Kremlin.

Notes

1. The Power of Siberia-2 pipeline is one of two pipeline projects launched by Gazprom connecting Russian gas fields with China. It is the second and most western proposed route. The Power of Siberia-1 pipeline (formerly known as Yakutia–Khabarovsk–Vladivostok pipeline) is currently under construction and will connect the Russian Far East, Yakutia, and the Amur Region with China.
2. DNA research by the Russian Academy of Sciences pointed out that there were striking genetic differences between the mummy and contemporary Altaian communities. Although the genetic discussion was/is extremely complex, this ultimately led archaeologists to claim that she was European and that Altaians only recently had migrated to the Altai Republic.
3. The federal reforms of late 2003 stipulated that regional governors and chairmen (including those of autonomous subjects) would now be appointed by the Russian president (Sakwa 2014).
4. The 2006 NGO law (Kamhi 2006) and amendments in 2012 reformulating this law into the Foreign Agents Law require non-profit organizations receiving foreign funding to register as “foreign agents.”
5. Since the 2000s efforts have been made to dissolve the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), one of Russia’s oldest organizations uniting all non-Russian nationalities (Balzer 2010).
6. Highly contested restrictions define which minorities can become recognized as “indigenous numerically small peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East,” providing them with certain land rights, privileges, and financial benefits (Donahoe et al. 2008; Newcity 2009). Groups larger than 50,000 people, which includes most of the influential indigenous groups in Russia (such as the Altaians), are too large to be formally recognized. Instead, smaller subgroups of those nations are encouraged to apply for recognition separately. Challenging the unity of a particular ethnonational group, this *divide et impera* tactic has challenged indigenous cohesion in the Altai Republic. Lured by the financial and political benefits (including grazing rights and control over municipal governments), Altaian sub-groups such as the Telengits, Kumandins, Chelkans, and Tubalars have pursued such recognition, creating rifts within Altaian society.

7. Russia has one of the oldest cultural resource protection frameworks, making any intervention that could disturb the cultural or archaeological heritage of a region subject to costly archaeological research.
8. Decree of the Government of the Altai Republic from 10 July 1997, number 22-25.
9. Federal Law N73-FZ, article 49 stipulates that all archaeological objects under or on the ground are Federal state property.
10. Amendment from 2 August 2012, number 202.
11. For the full transcript, see <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23020> (last accessed February 29, 2018).
12. El Oyin is a nationwide festival held biannually in the Altai Republic, and attended by tens of thousands of Altaians. Since its inception in 1988 as an indigenous festival, it celebrates Altaian nationhood, traditions, language, and culture. Many informants stressed that El Oyin was the starting point for much of the indigenous activism and today the event often coincides with large meetings where elders and local elites discuss cultural and political issues.
13. The budget proposal of the ministry indicated that Gazprom contributed 477 million rubles to the budget of the ministry. However, only the costs connected to the museum were included in this budget; interviews and other internal documents suggest Gazprom through a variety of other companies also contributed to other cultural events, including, for example, El Oyin. The full budget proposal for 2011–2015 can be found at: <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/473311100>.
14. For the full interview with Petrov, signaling that indigenous minorities issues should be center stage in politics, see: <http://www.gorno-altaisk.info/news/38,067>.
15. See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/10/01/russias-local-elections-a-sign-of-things-to-come/> for a framing in the popular press.
16. Berdnikov's election blog frequently makes references to his engagement with indigenous culture; see: <http://xn--80aa1ag9a.xn--p1ai/blog-of-head/blog-of-head/37/>.
17. In the end financial constraints and economic needs are also tied to regime survival. However, I want to point out that regime survival is not mediated solely through uniformly adhering to specific conservative norms and careful management of cultural practices. Instead, economic demands force the Kremlin to be flexible in its management of state affairs. Not a hegemonic approach to culture, but carefully calculated mobilization is central to this argument.
18. Although the Altai is officially designated as a special zone, legally this is limited to tourism for the gambling sector. During the 1990s, just as many other autonomous republics, Altai had its own treaty with the center that provided it certain autonomies; however, many of these treaties have since been dissolved or declared unconstitutional.

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