

## **FIGHT FOR WALLS: "PATRIOTIC GRAFFITI" AS A METHOD OF THE PUBLIC IMAGERY FORMATION BY PRO-KREMLIN YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS IN RUSSIA.**

**Assoc. Prof. D. Galkin** <sup>1</sup>

**E. Kyrsanova** <sup>2</sup>

**M. Netesova** <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Tomsk State University, **Russia**

<sup>2</sup>National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University, **Russia**

### **ABSTRACT**

This article is devoted to the study of the phenomenon of "patriotic graffiti" in the aspect of a new ideological public imagery formation; also the questions of expropriation tactics of street art and the term "graffiti" are considered.

"Patriotic graffiti" apparition caused great public and media response: media publications, online publications, stories and entire programs on TV, and the status of discussion on the social networks. At the same time, this scientific socio-cultural phenomenon was outside the scope of research interests. Also the image of street art as an independent people's statements; murals as the most democratic form of retransmission and fast images; effective forms of representation of the image; popularity of street art on the Internet; the common use of the term "graffiti" in respect of all non-classical contemporary murals were considered.

### **Methods**

While writing this paper the following methods were used:

A method of historical periodization, systematic and structural approach, comparative method, methods of dialectics (the principle of historical and logical approach), which allow to reflect the extremely complex and contradictory processes of material and spiritual world.

**Keywords:** ideology, Pro-Kremlin activists, "Patriotic graffiti", Street art,

### **INTRODUCTION**

Large murals, the so-called "patriotic graffiti", causing great public interest, have been created in Russia since March 2014.

It should be noted that the phenomenon of "patriotic graffiti" have appeared in the Russian Federation since the late 2000s, but it have not caused intense debates, arguments, scandals or sensation. As a rule, those small paintings were ordered by the authorities (regional or municipal departments) and took small areas of different objects - transformer boxes, fences, temporary stands.

Those surfaces were given to writers (graffiti artists) to create art works, and their topics were determined in advance. Typically, the range of topics was not very wide and related to the Great Patriotic War (World War II), and the victory in this war, the themes of military glory of Russia (some legendary battles before the Second World

War), outer space exploration during the Soviet period, the pictures of Russian landscapes or reproduction of textbook works of Russian realistic painting ("Three heroes" by Vasnetsov, "Alexander Nevsky" by P. Korin, etc.).

Thus, until March 2014, patriotic themes were either linked to the theme of love for mother nature, or with significant events of the past - the main war battles and victories, scientific and cultural achievements. It virtually excluded modernity from the artistic component of patriotic discourse. The "neutral" topics on which social consensus had been reached were at the heart of patriotic imagery.

### **Images, manifestos and ideological attitudes "patriotic graffiti"**

In 2014, for the first time, contemporary events were included in the imagery of "patriotic graffiti". The first work that caused a storm of public debate, was "the Crimean graffiti" on Taganka Square. It was created 6 days after the signing of the



**Picture 1**

multinational agreement on the adoption of the Crimea and Sevastopol to the Russian Federation (March 18, 2014). The authors created a giant drawing of a map of the peninsula with the inscription "the Crimea and Russia together forever" (picture 1). The geographical outline of the republic was painted as the Russian tricolor, and in the corner of the painting the logos of the party "United Russia" and the project "The best city in the world - ART" ("BCW - ART") were located.

Apart from the fact that there was no consensus in Russian society concerning the annexation of Crimea and that the theme itself was quite provocative, other scandalous activities, accompanied the creation of this art work.

It should be noted that scandalous, provocative artistic gestures and statements and illegal appropriation of urban spaces are elements of street art tactics [1],[2]. Of course, this tactic has been used in contemporary culture since the time of the early avant-garde, but it increases its influence on the public with the artistic gesture (the message of the work) outside the borders of the established institutions (museums, galleries, art centers). It occurs because unprepared viewers who are potentially all citizens, faced with a work of art (the message) directly in the urban environment, are driven into communicative space. After the first "Crimean graffiti", murals created by the artists of the federal youth project "Network" appeared, which also reflected the current political events.

The first work that occurred in Moscow on April 26, 2014, was the mural painted on a fifteen meter-high wall of a residential building. It was called "Yura, we've changed!" The creators of the art work identified it as a picture-interpretation of the modern Russian reality through the image of Yuri Gagarin. "Gagarin is not just the first man in space, but it is a moral exemplar and a symbol of pride for the great achievements of the country. Some time ago pictures of Yuri Gagarin appeared on the Internet. Those responsible for posting the images apologized to the astronaut for the fact that everything was destroyed, and his feat was denigrated. We totally disagree with this! We have a lot to be proud of! In recent years Putin's policies have been marked with fantastic geopolitical, sports, cultural and social breakthroughs. The artist of "Network" will report to Gagarin's image for these achievements by means of their art works"[3].

As the main achievements the ideologists of the "Network" chose and represented several images. Among them are: the Crimean peninsula, aircraft "Sukhoi Superjet 100", the Olympic Games in Sochi, the image of a "polite person" returning the boy a cat (a well known picture of Russian troops presence in the Crimea during the self-determination of the peninsula), a sign of a Russian ruble and an oil platform "Prirazlomnaya".

Yuri Gagarin was chosen as the perfect "trial" and a higher moral authority not by chance, but because he is considered as a national hero. Gagarin is the only unique positive character of the Soviet period, known throughout the world and among contemporary Russian youth. In addition, the USSR victories and breakthroughs in science and technology, as well as the struggle against the United States for supremacy in space are associated with the name of Gagarin.



Picture 2

It is symptomatic that the activists of the «Network» manifest their creativity, derive their ancestry from Soviet propaganda art: "It's a sort of evolution of the Soviet ideological wall newspapers and posters, but it is much bigger, brighter and more informative... The street art 'toss' shares opposition views and use them in the context of its work. Perhaps it is an easy way to become famous, but it is not true about us. We do not like the modern buzzword 'street-art', but we use a Russian definition "ulichnoye iskusstvo." We are trying to promote traditional Russian values"[3].

In addition, an important element of building one's own identity is a desire to resist American cultural influence. "In the early nineties, during American culture expansion to Russia, Russian youth began to use the word "graffiti ". This word was used to refer to mindless inscriptions on the walls and the facades of houses. In those times it was difficult to talk about it as about one of the street art branches. New born graffiti writers were sure that it was really cool to make incomprehensible inscriptions.

Even in such a small text it is possible to observe self-identity due to the creation of binary oppositions, where "the real street artist" is contrasted with "graffiti writer" (a pejorative word, substituting neutral "writer"), "works of art" - "senseless graffiti", "conservative Russian ideology" - "Russian opposition views. "So the idea about the correct (true) and wrong (false) street art in the context of Russian reality is carried out.

Also ideologists and activists of the "Network" and "BCW - ART" (later this organization was renamed "ART Facade") refuse to use the terms "agitation", "monumental propaganda painting" which existed in Soviet times. Despite the declared opposition to Western culture, they continue to use the terms "graffiti", "street art". (Although an attempt to introduce a new designation for these images such as "picture-interpretation" was made in the creation and promotion of the work devoted to Yuri Gagarin ).

The contradistinction of "Russian" and "Western" values and cultural attitudes continues in the works of "Network"

A huge mural on an eight-storey building in the heart of Moscow appeared in 2014. As well as the phrase "there are more important things than the stock market" (picture 3) we



Picture3

can also see a book of Russian history from 2014 to 2114. The authors propose 2014 as a critical moment in the history of the country: "We live in an era when history is being written in the decades and centuries ahead. Putin is writing it.

The reunion of Russia with the Crimea and Sevastopol is the beginning of a self reunion, reunion with millenary Russia. Graffiti is intended to remind the Moscow audience that there are more important things than the stock market. They are personal but shared by everybody " [4].

In contrast to works devoted to Gagarin, this mural does not contain the representation of basic images (characters) of the very things that are "more important than the stock market." The list of these "things" is attached in the manifesto that accompanies the work: "Russia and its people have always had and will have more important things than the stock market. If Western culture gives priority to income, then our priority is honor, theirs is thrift, ours is generosity, for them it is comfort, but for us the main thing is self-devotion.' Thus, again we face the binary oppositions that are at the same time abstract concepts. And it is difficult to visualize them in the unique artistic image or symbol.

The visualization of Russian – Western cultural confrontation was realized in the patriotic graffiti: "Changing priorities" in 2015. "Graffiti was a reproduction of the painting 'The change of priorities' by the young artist from Bryansk Paul Chuvin.



Picture4

As the basis of his work, the artist took a picture of a "Campbell Soup can " by an American artist, a representative of Pop Art Andy Warhol (picture 4) [5].

The art work shows man's hands tearing the label off the can. Surprisingly, under this label we can see the other one! It is label of condensed milk. The design of this label has not been changed since Soviet times, and may also be considered iconic in the context of Russian culture like the image of Campbell Soup in America. In fact, here we come across the search for identity in the framework of the classical opposition "friend or foe", where the image of a "foreigner" (the enemy) is necessary to clarify its essence.

During the period 2014-2015, the artists of the "Network" created art works with the image of Russian President VV Putin in Sevastopol and Moscow ("Welcome back to home port"[6], where Putin was portrayed in the form of a sailor. The next work is "We Returned ours"[7] where the president is represented both as a hockey player and a military man in his image). The work "Thank You" from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok" became an unusual gift for VV Putin's. jubilee On the facades of the houses in Kaliningrad, St. Petersburg, Sevastopol, Moscow, Novosibirsk, Irkutsk and Vladivostok, huge pictures with the words: Power, Memory, Arctic sovereignty, history, security and the Olympics appeared. According to their authors these words personify modern Russia. "These words mean a lot for us, for the generation of 20-year-olds, for Putin's generation. Modern Russia with its rightful place in world history is impossible without these words. Seven huge graffiti that are thousands of kilometers away from each other, form one word – "Thank you" (Picture 5) [8].



Picture 5

Thus, we can talk about attempts to create a set of key images, themes, and symbols associated with the current events of contemporary history of Russia by pro-Kremlin youth organizations and associations. These images can be implemented both in the figurative and symbolic space of Russian culture, and in the matrix of everyday life as markers of "Russian identity." Therefore, the widespread usage of the Western term "graffiti" in relation to the patriotic image seems quite paradoxical. This fact raises the question, why modern young ideologists continue to use the definition "street art" and "graffiti" and why the tactics of street art has become an important form of representation for pro-Kremlin activists.

### **Reasons to use strategies of street art by pro-Kremlin youth organizations**

Here we should talk about a number of factors that influenced the choice of tactics and self-determination of street art (graffiti) by pro-Kremlin youth organizations and parties.

Firstly, the fact that by the beginning of 2010s graffiti and street art had become a powerful global media phenomenon can be considered as one of the main factors. Particular influence was exerted by the development of the Internet, which makes it possible to archive such ephemeral art as street art. The growing popularity of street art on the Internet is evident. Since the beginning of the 2000s, not only has the number of specialized sites and blogs dedicated to street culture increased, but also certain permanent collections of the "best graffiti" or "the best street art" appear, and popular sites on the design, advertising, urban planning are published.

Thanks to the Internet entire communities of street art and graffiti lovers are formed. Street art ceases to be an exclusively subcultural phenomenon, becoming an international cultural phenomenon. Nowadays street-art includes Russian audiences and artists - "hundreds of Web sites and communities of street art lovers help to establish the reputation and self-education; the mobility of artists has increased. They communicate with colleagues and fly to other countries to paint the walls. Some towns offer street art tours, designed for advanced tourists who wish to see concrete work already known over the Internet"[9].

Second, the processes of legitimation and institutionalization of street art and graffiti are strengthened. Since the beginning of the 2010s different exhibitions and creative spaces in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Perm, Nizhny Novgorod and other cities of Russia have held exhibitions of street artists. There are some galleries specializing in street art ('Street Kit', 'Sense') In 2013 the first museum of street art in St. Petersburg, located in the grounds of 'Factory of laminated plastics' invited the public to visit its exhibitions. But perhaps the most significant contribution to the process of legitimization of street art has been made because of the organization of large-scale city festivals with special graffiti programs in different cities (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kazan, Yekaterinburg).

The most revealing in this respect is the work that had been systematically carried out since the early 2010s by the CEO of "NOVATEK ART", Ivan Panteleyev. He is the organizer of the street art festival MOST and one of the organizers of the festival graffiti 'The best city in the world'. Pantelev was the first businessman to convince government agencies to provide funding for the development of street art, and received a large order from the Moscow Government [10]. In fact, thanks to the commercialization of street art the gradual substitution of concepts is becoming possible. The term graffiti is being used for almost all non-classical modern murals.

This term replaces all the other definitions in media, which are often more appropriate - mural painting, decorative painting of facades, agitational monumental painting, etc. Also, the term "mural" which is the most widespread all over the English-speaking world for modern large-scale murals, did not come into use.

Such an expansionary term "graffiti", which is common in contemporary Russia, creates great inertia to use this term. That is difficult to resist.

This explains the reasons for the failure to introduce the term "picture-interpretation" by the activists of the "Network".

Third, street art and graffiti artists in modern Russia are the first who claim for various urban surfaces to create art, rather than advertising messages. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the marginalization of many Soviet art institutes, the city walls have been silent. And only street art representatives have revived walls in the city as a means of communication. All the "patriotic graffiti" are usually placed in locations that are visible to the maximum number of citizens. This fact gives rise to a "spontaneous" information wave that goes through the social networks and blogs.

Only the opposition media, the Internet newspapers devoted to city life and creative youth portals use reports on the creation of "patriotic graffiti" as a material for analytical articles or investigative journalism.

Fourth, an important factor is the aura that has developed around street culture. Street art and graffiti, despite the active commercialization of these cultural phenomena coming from the 1990s, is still perceived by researchers, public and representatives of street and art graffiti as a form of individual and often unauthorized protest artistic activity.

Therefore, key words and phrases that we see in scientific and popular articles, in discussions on forums and websites devoted to street art are "protest", "independence", "capture", "unauthorized artistic practice", "informal image» "free utterance".

In addition, the history of graffiti, flowing from deprived areas of New York areas of New York, or street art, partly evolved from the same graffiti, partially dating back to violent protests in France in the late 60's, is associated with the spontaneous expression of peoples' will and the manifestation of this in the space of the city.

As a rule, this makes it possible to say that the cultural phenomena of any one particular political force in contrast to the political agitation and advertising are unbiased.

The Russian culture expert Dmitry Golyenko-Wolfson considers that street artists ought to keep the reputation of independent invaders of the urban environment. Also he thinks that they settle in and assign it through the application of graphic tags. Street art is consciously on the verge of art and vandalism, free self-expression and unbridled

hooliganism, permitted and criminally prosecuted, the aesthetic and the legal field [11]. Another street art researcher, Natalia Samutina, supposes that this phenomenon includes all types of images that are not produced directly by the authorities and parties (like monuments and agitation) or commercial organizations (such as advertising), all that people and communities of people produce themselves. "Image Informality" is becoming the main feature of street art [12].

The aura of democratic, free, spontaneous, public statements and the reputation of unbiased artist are becoming very important for activists of youth state associations, as a marker of authenticity of works created by them. For example, the manifesto "Art Group Katyusha" emphasizes that the team of graffiti-writers project is one big family of people united in their beliefs and feelings, boundless love and devotion to the Russian president. This team also drew the portraits of V. Putin on the walls in different cities of the Crimea (summer of 2015). They exclaimed: "We draw what we see and feel, and it's so cool!" [13] Therefore, in the discussion of "patriotic graffiti" in blogs and forums commentators understand that the essence of graffiti as a reflection of people's feelings and the moods of society are often automatically transferred onto the image itself, created by government organizations.

## Results

This article, in fact, the first approach to deal with the phenomenon of "patriotic graffiti." It is interesting to consider it in terms of the formation of a new ideological public imagery. Manifesto, press releases, interviews of "patriotic graffiti" organizers (performers of these works are generally unknown, so it is practically impossible to find their personal statements in the information space), and the discussion of "patriotic graffiti" in comments to articles and posts in social networks and blogs were analyzed.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is curious, but the anonymity of graffiti and street artists, when they hide behind their tag and mask-respirator, reaches a peak in the context of patriotic graffiti.

Despite the claims about a unified team existence and new modern artists, we can define neither their names nor nicknames. It is really difficult to find out who the author of particular works is. On the surface there are only customers of works (curators, directors of contracting firms), and only the organization tag is usually placed as an image. There is an ambivalent situation where anonymity (the virtual absence of the author) is identified with the "voice of the people", but we do not see authors as real people "with their voices," and we cannot judge the sincerity and independence of their statements. The curators and the organizers of created artworks usually present these works in the media and on the Internet instead of their real authors.

Thus, we can assume that we witness the struggle not only for the walls to have the possibility of obtaining large government contracts and funding, but also the struggle for the channels of communication, where street art acts as the prevailing cultural phenomenon, whose image, tactics, mythology and terminology are the most popular and easy tools to relay the ideology, new public imagery and values of pro-Kremlin youth organizations. As a result there is an attempt to displace the old content of the graffiti concept (such as the independent practice of tags and pictures drawn on walls) and their replacement with a new form, where the "right" graffiti is large-scale murals devoted to socially important topics, sustained in the "right" ideology.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was funded within the framework of realisation of Strategic Programme on National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University Competitiveness Enhancement in the Group of Top Level World Research and Academic Institutions.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Chesova Anya. Wall endures everything: Who decided to decorate Moscow with a patriotic graffiti?/ City website The Village. [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://www.the-village.ru/village/city/city/141449-graffiti> Date of access: 27 March 2014.
- [2] Kiktenko Lisa. "Crimean" Graffiti on Taganka square / Big city. [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://bg.ru/blogs/posts/12581/> Date of access: 25 March 2014.
- [3] "Yura, we've changed!" / [Electronic resource]. URL: [http://proektset.rf/?news & show = 28](http://proektset.rf/?news&show=28) Date of access: 25 March 2014.
- [4] There are more important things than the stock market / [Electronic resource]. [http://proektset.rf/?news & show = 104](http://proektset.rf/?news&show=104) Date of access: 25 March 2014.
- [5] Changing priorities / [Electronic resource]. [http://proektset.rf/?news & show = 267](http://proektset.rf/?news&show=267) Date of access: 16 August 2015.
- [6] Returning to the home port/ [Electronic resource]. [http://proektset.rf/?news & show = 57](http://proektset.rf/?news&show=57) Date of access: 14 January 2016.
- [7] Returned ours / [Electronic resource]. [http://proektset.rf/?news & show = 69](http://proektset.rf/?news&show=69) Date of access: 14 January 2016.
- [8] "Thank you "from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok" / [Electronic resource]. [http://proektset.rf/?news & show = 114](http://proektset.rf/?news&show=114) Date of access: 14 January 2016.
- [9] Samutina. N. Zaporozhets O. Kobysheva V. Not only Banksy: street art in the context of contemporary urban culture / New literary observer, vol.6 / issue 86, pp. 223, 2012.
- [10] Evgeny Gusev. From the underground to the festival: street art as a business. / Media network edition "Municipal information channel m24.ru» [Electronic resource]. <http://www.m24.ru/articles/54545> Date of access: 14 January 2016.
- [11] Golynko-Wolfson D. Street art: theory and practice of street environment habitation / Art Magazine, Russia, issue 81 [Electronic resource]. <http://permm.ru/menu/xzh/arxiv/81/9.html> Date of access: 25 October 2014.
- [12] Samutina N. Zaporozhets O. Street art and the city / Laboratorium: Journal for Social Research, Russia, issue 2, p.5, 2015.
- [13] Art group manifest "Katyusha". [Electronic resource]. <http://art-katyusha.ru/?p=7> Date of access: 14 January 2016