Drinking to the nation: Russian television advertising and cultural differentiation

Jeremy Morris

Online Publication Date: 01 December 2007
To cite this Article: Morris, Jeremy (2007) 'Drinking to the nation: Russian television advertising and cultural differentiation', Europe-Asia Studies, 59:8, 1387 - 1403
To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/09668130701655218
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09668130701655218
Drinking to the Nation: Russian Television Advertising and Cultural Differentiation

JEREMY MORRIS

Abstract

This article explores the utilisation of cultural nostalgia for the past (Soviet and pre-revolutionary) and the concern with Russian cultural values in television advertisements for beer in post-Soviet Russia. In these adverts the effect of the foregrounding of these values is more significant than their effectiveness in selling products. Advertising, as a pervasive element of popular culture, is as contested as any other, such as film or television serials, in terms of refracting cultural discourses. Such adverts are termed ‘culturally differentiated’ to contrast them to global and glocalised adverts (where a few concessions are made to local cultural factors).

This article examines the development of television advertising in Russia in recent years, focusing on the marketing of beer in particular, the second most advertised product on television and a key arena in the overlap of selling products and promoting culture-specific values. I adopt a semiotic approach, focusing on an analysis of a number of important advertisements that appeared after 2000, rather than exploring issues of state or private financing of channels, legislation on advertising, or the murky world of kickbacks within channels, characteristic of the early days of post-Soviet television advertising.

The article is divided into four sections. First, I define television advertising in Russia in terms of three different types: global, naturalised (‘glocalised’), and culturally differentiated. The focus is on the latter which results in cultural resonances (‘effect’), distracting but also potentially augmenting the primary selling mode (‘effectiveness’) of advertising. The most striking aspect of the ‘effects’ deployed in this ‘culturally differentiated’ type of advertising is a preoccupation

1According to TNS-Gallup, the leading market research organisation in Russia, the quantity of television advertising for beer (4.5 million seconds) came second only to that for mobile telephones in 2005. Soft drinks and dairy products came in third and fourth place, respectively, with over three million seconds of adverts each. Caillat and Mueller (1996) have highlighted the importance of product categories such as beer in revealing culturally differentiated approaches in advertising.

2Over 200 separate beer adverts were examined for the present study, including over 25 brands. Most adverts were shown on national channels between 2002 and 2006.
with Soviet cultural artefacts, including television, film and literature that comprise a form of nostalgia. This is often interconnected with a focus on the ‘greatness’ and implicit destiny of the nation, tracing pre-revolutionary excess to the boundless human and material resource of today’s Russia. Then I examine in chronological order the development of television advertising from 1988 within the context of the mass media and its imbrications with wider cultural and social contestation of imaginary space that marked the period up to 2000. This second section gives an overview of the content and conflict in the discourses of global and home-grown advertising of this period, and investigates to what extent it reflected the bigger picture of societal and cultural changes. The third section deals with the existing analysis and scholarship of the reception of advertising among the new consumers (or non-consumers) of the fruits of Russia’s transition. The final section focuses on the development of the television market for beer advertising since 2000. This period is especially important in terms of the consolidation and development of discourses that had contested the social and cultural space towards the end of the 1990s.

Political and economic factors, including the struggle for control of ‘the first button’ (Channel One), and the weakness of local producers had a significant impact on the quantity and form of the advertising viewers saw in the early 1990s. With the decline of independent media in the second half of the 1990s, and the rise of both the ‘society of the spectacle’ (Zassoursky 2004, p. 21) and state-nurtured discourses of nostalgia for the Soviet Union, ‘Great Power’ pretensions, and a general cultural chauvinism, a significant part of Russian advertising and popular culture in general began to resonate with such ideas. The dramatic and symbolic value of national ideas was, at times, echoed more loudly, and was certainly as vivid in television advertising as in the arena of everyday political discourse. For example, a series of expensive beer commercials for Baltika (Figures 1, 3, 4, discussed below) afforded precious little space to the presentation of the product, but were garrulous on the subject of ‘whence and whither Russia’, with more than a nod to categories resonant with political discourse. In a country with a media model based on strong, if largely indirect interference from the state, even the popular cultural artefacts of production, whether intended to entertain, or geared to encourage direct consumption of products, are not immune to the vector of self-description or role-searching in Russian cultural praxis. In both cases, towards the end of the 1990s, economic aspects were linked to the ‘political’, in that adverts that projected an image of a proud and resurgent Russia provided the revenue for TV serials and films that in turn were nostalgic for Soviet or pre-revolutionary cultural life, or self-conscious about the ‘national question’ (Omelchenko & Bliudina 2002, p. 34). The selling message of a significant number of Russian adverts was drowned by the urge to display and support searches for national identity. However, in so far as popular culture and the media in Russia have always been magnetically attracted to the wider social and political discourse, itself highly charged at the beginning of the new millennium, a category such as ‘advertising’ is a site of renegotiation between economic interests and cultural values in their broadest sense. Indeed, effectiveness and effect may be seen as merging, as marketing of those companies that employ specific cultural values
shows that advertising themed according to the ‘national question’ is believed by foreign and native marketers alike to affect the preferences of a significant segment of the population. This underlines that the popular cultural space of advertising is as contested as any other, and that the rhetoric of consumption in relation to key sectors is tempered with ‘interference’ from the cultural and national identity issue.

The global, glocalised, and culturally differentiated in Russian advertising

Because of the lucrative and largely untapped Russian market,³ multi-national advertising agencies moved quickly in the early 1990s to buy up fledgling joint-venture enterprises set up during perestroika (Omelchenko & Bliudina 2002, p. 35). The accounts for the major brands advertised on Russian television in 2007 show that the dominant players are the multinationals who entered early and established a strong presence in terms of a core Russian staff and a willingness to pursue the growing market for Russian goods. However, behind the ‘authorial’ control of a large agency such as McCann Erikson, the production and creative ideas behind

³Although it would be mistaken to assume that advertising, consumer preference and even brands played no role at all in the Soviet Union, the resources spent by the state on manipulating consumption in a market of nearly 300 million consumers in 1979 (including satellite states) worked out at little more than $2 per person (Mattelart 1991, p. 27). Good overviews of the role of advertising in the Soviet Union can be found in Mickiewicz (1988) and Kelly (1998, pp. 223–46).
most television advertising are farmed out to smaller local production companies and agencies (Aleksandrov 2003, pp. 14–16). For example, the 2004 Baltika beer adverts at the core of this analysis were produced by the Russian company Dago, set up in 1994.

A hybrid model of advertising is now in existence with the majority of adverts culturally differentiated in contrast to global campaigns more typical of the early 1990s. Such global campaigns used unadapted and dubbed (usually American) material; a variant of global adverts are those created specifically for a multi-national market which may have a mixture of national elements that do not allow the identification of a specific locale. Between the ‘home-grown’ and the ‘one-size fits all’ model, naturalised or glocalised advertising continues to be popular, where the form of an advert conforms to a global template, but may be re-shot in the locale, or slightly adapted to allow for cultural differences. Consumer and celebrity endorsements are typical of this: for example, a Russian housewife played by a well-known actress waxing lyrical about washing powder is usually preferable to the commissioning company. A good example of glocalisation is a recent advert for the electrical retailer Eldorado (Mironenko 2006), which is a nearly identical copy of a 2003 German Media Markt advert without the mildly sexual humour of the original.

Global advertising is predicated on theories of cultural homogenisation and the dominance of Western cultural values made popular towards the end of the twentieth century by marketers like Theodore Lovett. While adverts of this kind are still dominant, especially for product brands associated with the cultural values of the country of origin (Levi jeans for example), following the critiques of this view within marketing studies itself (De Mooij 2003; Maynard 2003) and the popularisation of the term ‘glocalisation’ by sociologists such as Zygmunt Bauman in the 1990s, so-called ‘peripheral’ markets, like Russia, have experienced a rise in adapted or naturalised advertising. What I term here culturally differentiated advertising—of which beer advertising is most representative—can be defined as containing cultural discourse specific to the locale which is not merely an adaptation or localisation of a transferable global marketing idea. Clearly the contrast between the naturalised and the ‘differentiated’ is often a matter of argument and may become indistinguishable when a creative team is ‘inspired’ by the advertising form and content from a different locale.

The movement from global to domestic in advertising is a reflection of profound economic shifts, including the key event of the devaluation of the ruble in 1998, which gave a significant boost to local producers. It also connects to other cultural and media production, in particular the growth of Russian television and domestic film and television serial output. Most interestingly, television advertisers have sought to capture the national mood of consumers in a market typified since 1999 by domestic products that have national reach, of which beer is a fine example.

**Russian advertising 1988–98: from ‘American invaders’ to ‘knightly saviours’**

The problem of global, undifferentiated advertising in the virgin market of Russian television has been analysed in some detail (Mickiewicz 1997, 2001; Omelchenko & Bludina 2002; Morris 2005; Beumers 2005). The first television advertisement proper in
the Soviet Union was for Pepsi in 1988. Beumers notes that, given the pauperisation of the population in the first years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, television advertising created a distancing effect, with the ubiquitous exposure of products already known to consumers but unaffordable or of limited appeal (2005, pp. 318–19). Advertisements for cat food, anti-perspirants and nappies ignored the realities of post-Soviet life while creating a dream world which revealed an idealised view of Western life that barely corresponded to the immediate post-Soviet experience of unbridled capitalism. These goods then were often advertised in a culturally insensitive way, which occasionally included mistranslated copy (Kelly 1998, pp. 223–24). In addition, only a limited number of companies either wanted or could afford to advertise their goods and services. This gave the impression that corporate and investment banks, toiletries, information technology and industrial machinery were the main goods on offer to the consumer in the early 1990s (Omelchenko 1993, p. 4). These were in the main offered by global players arriving early in a completely undeveloped market. They were in no way a mirror of consumer needs and therefore were of little help in gauging values and beliefs projected and reflected by consumers and producers typical of a more developed capitalist consumer economy. Confused fascination with global advertising quickly gave way to annoyance and indifference. Consumers could not but draw comparisons with some of the equally obtuse propaganda of Soviet times. For many, both discourses might well have been expressed in a foreign language. We can only speculate as to the effectiveness of one of the first slogans of Russian television advertising—an unadapted global Citibank advert of the 1980s: ‘Your Citi never sleeps’, which must have sounded like a threat to a population still only too familiar with state supervision and control of the Soviet era.

However annoying these positioning adverts may have been to a general population that had little need for corporate banking services, they fulfilled an important function in the development of national television. Before 1993 Russian channels were state-owned, and advertising was the only significant source of revenue they could draw on—apart from tiny budgets that were quickly eroded by high inflation and the need to replace antiquated equipment. Piracy of American films was rife (Mickiewicz 2001, p. 34) with channels showing immensely popular films starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, such as Predator and Commando, without owning or paying for the rights to show them. In the short period between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the true commercialisation of television stations, advertising revenue rose by 800%, reaching $250 million in 1994. During 1993 the number of advertisements

---

4 Levinson (1997) stressed the culture ‘shock’ not only of content (feminine hygiene products) but of the novelty of the advertising form itself as contributing to the negative reaction by the poorest members of society. He also highlighted the ‘social function’ of advertising in disposing of the Soviet period (and its after-effects) entirely by rendering it invisible on the screen.

5 The small amount of existing research on audience response in Russia is dealt with below.

6 The MMM pyramid scheme in which clever advertising directly courted the poorest in society was an exception proving the rule. Banking initially was seen by consumers as a murky area of the new capitalist system. The MMM pyramid scheme in many minds proved this supposition.

7 Figures from the Association of Communication Agencies of Russia, available at: http://www.akarussia.ru/rinok3/, accessed 3 March 2007. In 2006 that figure stood at over $3 billion, reflecting an increase of over 30% in each of the last two years.
shown on national television nearly doubled to almost 80 minutes a day during the weekend (Mickiewicz 1997, p. 313). At best the revenue from advertising went directly to finance the purchase of rights to show imported serials or films; at worst the intermediary concerns that controlled the sale of advertising slots pocketed the vast majority of funds. Similarly, domestic producers of television programmes found that funds allocated by the central budgets of channels only covered 5% of their production costs (Mickiewicz 1997, p. 123). Therefore, in the absence of centralised control over advertising revenues, they tapped directly into those revenues, bypassing the central administration. They even managed to disguise blatant plugging for one or another producer as consumer affairs programmes or news slots.8

This unholy alliance of global advertising and US films raised many hackles. The association was clear, in many minds, between the vulgar commercialisation and indoctrination into alien cultural values advertising offered, and the similar ideological and political undermining of Russian values presented by Hollywood (Mickiewicz 1997, p. 292). The Snickers chocolate bar, given blanket promotion in the over-marketed confectionary sector, came to represent the palpable aspirations of many Russians for a better material life, but also symbolised a perceived cultural, economic and political imperialism (Beumers 2005, p. 319; Mickiewicz 1997, pp. 234 – 35).

Analysing the symbiotic nature of advertising and the supply of American films in the early 1990s, Mickiewicz asks the rhetorical question: ‘How could the emerging Russian national identity be detected in the plethora of foreign-made television shows?’ (1997, p. 234). An answer of sorts came with the financial crisis of August 1998. Channels could no longer afford imported serials and films, while domestic production remained economically viable and significantly increased after that date. Similarly, as advertising revenues dried up, television slots became affordable—discounted by up to 80% in some cases—to the Russian producers who leapt at the chance to enter the prestigious television market.9 A commensurate style à la Russe in advertising was soon found, emphasising Russian cultural difference and historical achievements, mythic and real, and the stability of Soviet times. References were made to popular cultural texts of the 1970s which stood in direct contrast to the ‘alien’ imports of global advertising. Perhaps the lowest common denominator of such tendencies was a 2002 advert for Three Bogatyrs (Tri bogatyrya) beer, in which Russia’s mythic heroes returned to literally save Russia from its enemies, albeit in an international hockey competition. Chainmail-clad warriors were shown whipping opponents with hockey sticks, dressed in the manner of Eisensteinian Teutonic knights, on an improvised ice rink in a forest setting, as bearded Russian peasants looked on approvingly. The tagline of ‘together we are strong’, supplemented by the encouraging words: ‘to the health of those supporting ours [nashikh]’, highlighted the

---

8Good examples from the early 1990s are spots on fashion and finance (Condee & Padunov 1995, p. 133). The practice is clearly still common in regional television. Mickiewicz cites figures of over 80% of airtime as ‘bought’ in some way or another (1997, p. 238).

9Many multi-nationals had severely curtailed their Moscow agencies’ operations and cancelled television contracts. At one point Channel One was close to bankruptcy, as it was owed tens of millions of dollars in unpaid advertising charges (Rivituso 1999).
emotive binary us/them and ours/ theirs that proved an enduring feature of Russian advertising in this period. A series of further medieval-themed adverts for Three Bogatyrs aired in 2003 (Figure 2).

‘Theirs’ or ‘ours’?—the post-1998 advertising dialectic

At the level of theory on globalisation, influential sociologists such as Ulrich Beck (2000) have heralded the death of ‘methodological nationalism’ or the ‘container theory of society’ in the face of a cosmopolitan or more global network model, in which, by extension, there is no room for the culturally particular or the local, especially in the universal, supposedly translatable language of television advertising. In the Russian context, Frank Ellis has argued that the ‘cultural imperialism’ mindset is unsustainable within the new ‘infosphere’ of Russian popular culture (Ellis 1999, p. 161). However, the only rigorous sociological research to focus on the responses of consumers to advertising in Russia has concluded that a sophisticated discourse of Russian cultural superiority has been consistently articulated by consumers (the focus being youth in this study) through reference to popular cultural imports, including adverts (Pilkington 2002, p. 207). Youth focus groups in Pilkington’s study stressed an ‘innate difference’ for Russia in the face of the narrative of the West that they clearly understood as implicit in the global adverts shown to them. The importance of such opposition of values to Russian advertisers should be clear: ‘Collectivism’ versus ‘Individualism’, ‘Warmth’ versus ‘Coldness’, ‘Sincerity’ versus ‘Falsity’, and ‘Emotion and Spirituality’ versus ‘Rationality and Emptiness’ were the key binaries most applicable to Russian advertising (Pilkington 2002, p. 208). These binaries were

FIGURE 2. THE TRADITIONS OF BEER BREWING AND DRINKING IN OLD RUSSIA, THREE BOGATYRS BEER TELEVISION ADVERTISEMENT (2003), BBDO AGENCY
adopted by beer advertisers in particular and foregrounded in advertising during the Putin era.

Advertisers using the model of cultural differentiation are, in fact, offering a clear alternative worldview to that in the global adverts. Discourse conflict of thesis and antithesis can often be read in the movement between global and culturally differentiated adverts within the same commercial break. The most striking example of an advert read as a vessel for alien values by Pilkington’s focus groups was that for Harley Davidson aftershave, which featured a motorcycle ridden by a woman in a desert location, accompanied by the slogan ‘free space—Legendary Harley Davidson’ (Pilkington 2002, p. 232). Holstein beer with its slogan of ‘one world, one beer’ also fell into the category of global, undifferentiated advertising singled out by Pilkington’s focus groups. These adverts from the late 1990s would have been broadcast many times back to back with adverts for domestic products in the ‘national question’ mode. Thus the binaries of ‘our’ versus ‘their’ culture and values are connoted, often repeatedly, in the course of one and the same commercial break. If we add to the equation the increasingly nostalgic and nation-questing television series, these commercial breaks punctuate prime-time television, largely composed of Russian-produced television series, thus exposing the viewer to a heady mix of messages, with advertising playing an important role in the support and dissemination of a discourse of cultural difference and superiority. It seems that those politicians (including Yel’tsin and Zhirinovsky) who lamented the ‘Snickersisation’ of Russian popular culture (Mickiewicz 1997, p. 159) had their calls for the ‘defence’ of native culture answered in the form of producers and advertisers forming a popular cultural response as a selling proposition for diverse ‘native’ products. As the sector analysis below shows, what is ‘sold’ is as much the cultural identity discourse itself, as any of the products featuring such an approach.

**Beer: heady new historicism, frothy nostalgia**

It is no surprise that a number of strands of cultural differentiation should coalesce around beer advertising. What is perhaps surprising is that in such an important market so many adverts were as memorable for the connotations of cultural values as for the denotation of the product and its ‘benefit’ to the consumer. Unlike most food staples, the market for beer is almost exclusively male and therefore many of the Soviet cultural references found in other advertising are deemed inappropriate in marketing a drink often enjoyed in male company only.10 In Soviet times, unlike vodka, beer was not a staple consumer product and often in very short supply indeed.11 The pub, *kabak* or *pivnushka*, was viewed as a socially and morally ambiguous space, often reserved for the least savoury, and therefore least visible members of society. Historically, beer was brewed specifically for festivals, especially in the autumn and winter after the harvest,

10 A number of adverts for dairy products more or less obliquely referenced some of the sentimental and romantic films of the late Soviet era such as Menshov’s *Moscow Doesn’t Believe in Tears* (1980).

11 The very irregular supply led to beer becoming something of a sought-after commodity, if not a true luxury product. A line from the comic novel by I’lf and Petrov, *The Golden Calf* set in the 1930s, ‘beer is served only to members of the trade-union’, passed into common currency as a shorthand for the peculiarly Soviet forms of material rewards and incentives.
but not as an everyday drink. Once a ‘deficit’ product, perhaps understandably it is now a product with a particularly strong domestic market. Beer is big business and like cigarette production, Western companies were quick to buy into the Russian brands, which equally quickly established brand identities and some loyalty on the part of consumers. Beer advertising has been most prevalent during prime-time (6 – 10 pm), which is due to the fierce competition between many similarly priced and marketed brands. These commercial breaks during the most popular programmes invariably featured beer adverts.

Baltika—the flag carrier

The biggest television advertiser in this sector is Baltika, a brand encompassing a number of different beers aimed at middle and low-income groups. It is also the brand with the most consistent culturally differentiated identity: an amalgam of ‘one nationism’ stressing the greatness of Russia ‘reborn’, symbolised by her territory and people, clearly containing echoes of propagandistic modes from the Soviet era. More recent adverts for Baltika have complicated the ‘masculine’ pitch by including elements of Soviet cultural nostalgia, more typical of advertising aimed at women for products such as food staples.

Appeals to the ‘traditional’ and ‘historical’ in terms of brand marketing began almost immediately in post-Soviet Russia, but it was during the Putin era that the association of specific products like beer with the ‘national question’ (how Russia might regain the greatness of the Soviet Union) became explicit. A good example of this type of selling proposition was the ‘Friendship of the Peoples’ campaign for Baltika in 2001. Rather than a specific historical event, the geographical extent and ethnic diversity of the Soviet Union were used both to celebrate a defunct political entity (whose certainties were presumed by marketers to be pined for by the impoverished drinkers of Baltika) and express the idea that the ‘one country of many nations’ is brought back to a virtual, post-Soviet union by the simultaneous and identical shots of the quaffing of a single brew by representatives of different national groups. The image of Georgians, Kazakhs and Finns in stereotypical national dress

---

12 The Baltika group is the fastest growing part of the portfolio of a multi-national corporation, see note 16.
13 In 2003 a person watching an average of four hours of national television a day during prime-time would see nearly one hour of adverts. In 2006 a federal law restricted the amount of adverts that could be shown in a 24-hour period to 20% of broadcasting time, and in 2008 this is to be reduced further to 15%, bringing Russia broadly into line with most other European countries. In 2004 the Duma adopted a law (discussed since 2001) limiting the time when beer adverts could be shown to between 10.00 pm and 7.00 am. In response to the plethora of beer brands visible on the screen the law also stipulated a number of other restrictions, including a ban on the use of any images of people or animals (Tkanchuk 2005). Some of these restrictions have now been lifted.
14 Tobacco and vodka advertising was banned from television in 1995.
15 Borenstein (2005, p. 56) sees the borrowing of Soviet propagandistic modes (worker as hero) and the interplay between the personal and the collective as key to the success of the MMM marketing. Bank Imperial’s expensive and pretentious ‘World History’ adverts (1993 – 97) were an attempt to associate the bank, for corporate clients only, with the gravitas of momentous events in Russian History such as the Emancipation of the Serfs or Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow.
recalls a scene from the film *Circus* directed by G. Aleksandrov in 1936, in which different representatives of Soviet nations sing a lullaby to a babe-in-arms. They may be speaking in different languages (‘*Baltika*—brewed for me’) but remain part of a single Empire-space (as if proven by the presence of a map of the Russian Federation with the ex-Soviet republics tactfully obscured by a bottle and glass of the product in question). The campaign’s slogan ‘Beer brewed for you’ stresses the national status of the product in contrast to imported beers.

The next series of *Baltika* beer adverts (Figure 1, 3, 4) covered most of the bases from the previous campaign: the vast but homogeneous territory (diversity this time invested only in the peculiarities of pronouncing Ural place names) imagined through the window of a space-age train; social and cultural accord with more than a hint of nostalgia for the immutable and unmistakable Soviet past; economic uncertainty overcome, oligarchs tamed, and an end to unbridled capitalism. *Baltika* in 2004 wanted to show that it was ‘where Russia is’—the slogan for the campaign (Figure 1).¹⁶ In this five part series of adverts following the linear narrative model most famously used by the Nescafe Gold Blend adverts of the 1980s in the USA and Britain, the product was relegated to the corners of the frame, long and mobile shots, and less than a quarter of the screen time.

---

¹⁶The majority shareholders in *Baltika* and its parent company *Baltika Beverages Holding* are *Scottish & Newcastle* and *Carlsberg*, two of the biggest alcoholic drinks companies in Europe, based in the UK and Denmark, respectively. The 2004 series of advertisements was created by the Moscow office (run and staffed by Russian nationals) of McCann Erikson, the biggest advertising company in the world. In 2006 *Scottish & Newcastle* predicted that the holding would become the biggest brewer in Europe on the back of the *Baltika* brand (Townsend 2006).
Each advert continued the story of a trans-Russia train journey from St Petersburg to Vladivostok and offered a comprehensive vision of national accord. After establishing a group of characters sharing a couchette, it proceeded to display not only ethnic and regional homogeneity but cultural oneness too, devoting an entire 30 second commercial to a group of passengers (joined by the female attendant) sharing a cabin and discussing the film adaptation of I’lf and Petrov’s Soviet comic novel *Twelve Chairs*. This stressed the homogenous cultural heritage of the passengers. In the next advert (Figure 4), a resourceful but socially responsive and responsible entrepreneur was introduced, who quickly found a ‘common language’ with fellow passengers of a lower socio-economic class and the local women selling fish from the platform. The series would not have been complete without a number of characters in uniform, a demobilised sailor and the military-looking train driver himself.

Another advert in the series compared the origins of the passengers with each commenting on the local time of their hometown. The Russian word *sobornost* could have been invented for the message these adverts conveyed: one community, one collectivity, one cultural mind. Other *Baltika* campaigns, such as the ‘Friendship of the Peoples’ series discussed above, consistently pushed the same message, hinting at the resurgent national potential of a united country, eager to put on the mantle of a Great Power again. Finally, the Grey agency’s series from 2005 began with an advert about the achievements of the new Russia: while shining examples of Russian industry and technological progress paraded across the screen, the narrator began by proclaiming ‘today not only the Germans can be proud of their cars’, and ended with the proud assertion that ‘we will take pride in the fact that together we are creating our today, because together we are creating a new Russia. *Baltika*: made in Russia!’.

![FIGURE 4. THE SELF-MADE MAN SHOWS HE HAS NOT LOST THE COMMON TOUCH, BALTIKA BEER TELEVISION ADVERISEMENT (2004), MCCANN ERIKSON AGENCY](image-url)
For over five years the Baltika adverts have formed the most visible narrative of one of the many ‘quests’ for a lost ‘Great National Idea’ (Aleksandrov 2003, p. 212). The industry observer Filipp Aleksandrov, usually not in a hurry to praise adverts’ use of the nostalgia for the Soviet period as a selling proposition, nonetheless was compelled to comment, in the case of the ‘Friendship of the Peoples’ campaign, that its approach was highly satisfying to a significant section of the population. Somewhat infamous in advertising circles, the Baltika adverts were, and continue to be, extensively commented upon in an important discussion forum for advertising professionals: the Internet site and resource sostav.ru. A solely online advertising marketing and PR portal, started in the late 1990s and attracting up to 100,000 hits a day, sostav.ru was unique in that it allowed unlimited comment on specific adverts but restricted this right to accredited advertising industry workers only. While this site was clearly Moscow-orientated, and in no way could be said to provide an insight into the reactions of consumers to advertising, it revealed the broadly uncomfortable reaction among the Russian advertising (and intellectual) elite about the use of the ‘national question’ in their work. Observers free to post about any new advert hosted by the site had plenty of opportunity to vent their spleen given the large number of such culturally differentiated adverts. One of the main objections was that in a globalised world there was only really one way of selling: the ‘Western’ way—creating needs based on a materialist, aspirational and envy-based politics. Most observers, including Aleksandrov, who maintained an equally influential personal site on advertising up to 2006, seemed eager to dismiss what they called the sovkovyi approach.17 A typically polemical reaction was provoked by an advert for Golden Barrel beer (Zolotaya bochka, a slightly more expensive brand than most of the Baltika beers) featuring a male work collective in a drab office under pressure from their boss to come up with a business solution to an unspecified problem. Reacting to the advert by the BBDO agency under a Russian team, one commentator said the advert was ‘saturated with the indescribable taste of the sovak’. Another gave the following appraisal:

This beer is for the most positive of positive middle-managers (it’s not important whether they exist in reality or not). Who [sic] don’t allow any such capitalist-egotistical career-orientated thoughts to trample their faith in shining ideals like ‘it is good when everyone wins’.
But there is a problem with the form:
It’s clear that they have constructed metaphors. It is clear that the bloke helps out the collective. . . .
But what grates is that these metaphors are set in a Soviet office environment with a touch of the atmosphere from a senior-school lesson.
Personally . . . I don’t really feel like being reminded of a Soviet office.18

17 An adjective derived from the word for ‘dustpan’—sovak, used derogatively to define a ‘Soviet citizen’ and his outlook: supposedly typified by a narrow, suspicious and conservative world-view and especially the persistence of such an outlook after the collapse of the Soviet Union.
The observer went on to say that in such Soviet-style offices one expected to be greeted by the sight of the Soviet coat of arms on the wall, and that these adverts lacked a sense of irony towards the ‘Brezhnev’ era. A number of observers commented on the music for this advert, which was taken from a classic, unmistakable score by the Soviet light-entertainment composer Andrei Petrov, written for Eldar Ryazanov’s 1977 melodrama Office Romance (Sluzhebnyi roman). While observers consistently criticised the ‘Soviet’ feel and look of adverts as anachronistic, the collective theme elicited a more mixed response. Some observers felt that it too was ideologically connected to Soviet times and best committed to the dustpan representative of those values, while others felt that such adverts expressed a tangible difference from many imported adverts and reflected a difference in local values—and therefore they were more than just a glocalised adaptation.

Thus an industry insider like Aleksandrov paradoxically recognised the emotive power of nostalgic adverts and those drawing attention to questions of national identity, but at the same time felt that they reflected something naive and alien to the Western market culture they strove to emulate. In an article on the further intermeshing of the Russian and multi-national agencies in 2005, Aleksandrov responded firstly to the demand among producers for Russia-focused adverts which clearly irritated him, and secondly to the continuing criticism of the look and sound of global adverts by the native camp defending Russian cultural difference. He insisted that in the ‘collision’ between globalisation, consumerism and ‘the Russian national idea’ the latter could only lose out (Aleksandrov 2005). However, such an earnest protest—that there was no point in complaining about the loss of a ‘national idea’ when advertising was a matter of constant cross-fertilisation of ideas and forms—revealed how important the perception of ‘alien’ (ne nasha) versus ‘native’ (rodnoi) values (in Aleksandrov’s words) continued to be in popular culture, and advertising in particular.

In addition to the Baltika adverts’ consistent references to issues of cultural identity, and those for Golden Barrel implying that Soviet norms and values are alive and well, many other brands similarly position themselves as concerned with questions of cultural and national identity. During this period many brands experimented with the historical mode, promoting their products as traditionally brewed Russian beers, but also conveying the ‘timeless’ enjoyment of beer drinking in Russian culture and history. A good example was another Three Bogatyrs beer advert, which featured three working-class men in modern-day Russia, embodying the same values of valour, fearlessness and resourcefulness displayed by the legendary heroes of the bylina. The slogan was ‘together we are strong’ (vmeste my sila). Siberian Crown (Sibirskaya korona), another low-end brew, presented Imperial Russia in all its luxurious glory: candle-lit balls, splendid military uniforms and the Russian tricolour flying from every available pole. A variant on this historical theme saw a series of parodies of the recent screen adaptations of Boris Akunin’s detective stories set in pre-revolutionary Russia.

Other brands, to a greater or lesser extent, followed the lead of Baltika and addressed their audience according to the market for their product. Masculinity, male-company and manual labour are, unsurprisingly, common features of lower-priced brands. Thus an advert for the beer Fatty (Tolstiyak) stressed the resourcefulness of the
Russian *muzhik*, exhorting men to ‘stick together’. The narrator, cast in the role of compère, in a parody of the long-running game show ‘What, Where, When?’, reacts to the creative DIY work of a group from Tiumen who have sent in a film of their handiwork: ‘Art belongs to the people; the most important thing is that you are a collective’. One of a series, it used the genre of a popular television show from the Soviet period as a framing device for the humorous play on the topics of masculine company and hobbies. *Arsenal* (a low-priced brand owned by the *Baltika* group) similarly stressed the masculine working-class ethic, featuring hard physical work, resourcefulness and the reassurance of like-minded male company in its adverts.19 The Petersburg brand *Bluebelly* (*Sinebryukhov*) parodied a series of recent films about another masculine, resourceful Russian character, employing the Finnish actor Ville Haapasalo (from the 1995 comedy *Peculiarities of the National Hunt* directed by Aleksandr Rogozhkin) where he and a Russian friend discuss their nations’ respective merits—cue the Russian retort ‘How come you Finns haven’t flown in space?’.20 *Red East* (*Krasnyi vostok*) beer, in an attempt to deal with a new (temporary) law banning images of people or animals in beer adverts, resorted to scenes of the rolling Russian landscape accompanied by a pleasant song featuring the choice lines: ‘a new day in our country, how can one not love it….Our country is people and people are our country’.

*Drinking to the nation: the continual re-enactment of cultural identities*

Despite his reservations about the sustainability of an inwardly looking nationalist discourse in Russia, Frank Ellis makes an important point concerning Soviet media culture that can be applied to the consistency of nationally orientated and nostalgic adverts in present-day Russia. He argues that a key to the promotion of the discourse of social solidarity in the USSR was the ‘dynamic enactment’ typical of agitation (orientated towards the masses) as opposed to propaganda (1998, p. 198). The agitational model thus described approximates closely to the field of communication assumed by advertising in the popular cultural space of Russia. However, rather than requiring action on the part of the agitated, televisual advertising enacts by proxy, creating a primal scene (fantastic, reconstructed, idealised) of the myths of cultural identity to be repeated over and over. Advertising of this kind would be a staging of national myths no less important than the more commonly surveyed artefacts of popular visual culture: the television serial and the film. Aleksei Levinson, writing before the devaluation of the ruble in 1997, stressed the disappearing act that global and naturalised advertising performed on the remaining realia of the Soviet Union and the realities of post-Soviet Russia: there were no poor peasants on run-down collective farms, no unpaid teachers and doctors. However, the Putin era has seen a rediscovery and appearance, if not of reality (whether Soviet or new Russian), then of the idealised past, present and future encapsulated within values projected as belonging specifically to the nation. In this sense, television viewers can no longer say of advertising, as

19 *Arsenal* and *Baltika* command a third of the market (since 2004).
20 As might be expected, the Soviet achievement in this sphere is exploited repeatedly by advertisers—from mobile phone providers to chewing gum.
Levinson reported, ‘[they] don’t show our life, our Soviet life (ne nashu, ne sovetskomu zhizn’ pokazyvaiut!’) (Levinson 1997, p. 102).

Television advertising in Russia is as diverse as in any country. There are the same recognisable genres as the family tableau, the washing powder testimonial, the MTV-style soft-drink advert, the alternative and ironic adverts setting out to shock the consumer into recognition of a brand. The premium Tinkoff beer (Figure 5) is a good example, comparable to Guinness, in its pursuit of a unique, quirky positioning outside the mainstream, using a series of provocative, sometimes sexually explicit adverts with the tagline: ‘he’s one of a kind’.21 Stephen Dahl (2000), analysing beer adverts from Germany and the UK, mainly confines cultural difference to the use and understanding of product categories by a particular group—beer and wine—having different cultural significance in the cultures of northern and southern Europe. However, a particularly striking characteristic of many Russian adverts for a variety of products is the persistence of models of social solidarity, issues of national identity, and significant elements of nostalgia for the cultural forms and values of Soviet popular culture. Through these specific discourses that conceptualise the cultural self, Russian advertising sometimes allows its aim of effectiveness in selling product to be at least detuned into foregrounding ‘effect’: the myth-making of cultural identity and difference that seeks to resonate with the members of an

![FIGURE 5. ‘THEY HAVE GUARDS. THEY THINK THAT MEANS SECURITY’. TINKOFF BEER’S POSITIONING: FOR THE FREE-THINKER, NOT THE OLIGARCH. TINKOFF BEER TELEVISION ADVERTISEMENT (2005), AGENCY UNKNOWN](image)

21However, recent Tinkoff adverts in 2004 have included an explicit attack on ‘alien’ values of materialism and greed in a series about the nouveau riche, at the same time as appealing to an emergent affluent middle-class.
imagined community. Especially during the Putin period, these myths continue to be powerful enough for domestic producers (sometimes owned by foreign companies) and cultural workers (sometimes directed by foreign executives) to return again and again to stories about history, the nation and its identity. It remains to be seen whether the consumer of this pervasive form of visual culture is affected by it in a meaningful way.

University of Birmingham

References


