

# **Well-Oiled Cultural Politics in the Altai Republic: Promoting Indigenous Heritage in Gazprom's Resource Colonies**

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## **Abstract**

A growing number of scholarly work in the field of cultural studies has been investigating the role of culture in corporate relationship management. By assessing the use of indigenous heritage and the repatriation of archaeological finds by multinational Gazprom, a natural gas company, in the Russian Federation, this paper contributes to the cultural politics research in Russia by critically repositioning some of its core paradigms and its predominant emphasis on nationalist patriotic projects. As explored in this paper, archaeology and heritage are cultural technologies of rule that help a plethora of non-state agents in shaping local subjectivities and regional governmental frameworks. By exploring a case study investigating the corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives of a resource extraction and transport giant in Russia, this paper contributes to the extensive literature on neoliberalism in developing economies characterized by an authoritarian electoral regime. By using an indigenous case study from Siberia to describe cultural policy in Russia, it also adds important nuance to a debate currently dominated by analyses focusing on Russia's European cosmopolitan centers.

**Keywords:** Gazprom, Russia, Culture, neoliberalism, repatriation

## Introduction

Confronted with stringent politics of austerity and decreasing funding for the culture and arts cash-strapped museums, heritage sites, art institutions, and non-STEM disciplines at universities have become increasingly encouraged to search for alternative funding avenues. At the same time, companies in search of a ‘license to operate’ (Nelsen 2006) have to a certain extent filled this gap and as part of their—often long running—social corporate responsibility (CSR) programs have become important players in the cultural field, bankrolling national museums and cultural institutions from Georgia to the US, from the national folklore museum in the Netherlands to the British Museum. Ultimately providing art historians, archaeologists, historians, architects and cultural entrepreneurs with new deontological challenges how to mediate the interests of corporate players that historically<sup>1</sup>, despite early critical warnings (Schiller 1991), have not been central in discussions over ethics, deontology and integrity (c.f. Dolan and Rajak 2016). Perspectives in this paper on this tension in the cultural policy field, and the significant impact of these players in perpetuating specific social responses by the consumers of culture, will especially draw on experiences of the author with investigating cultural heritage politics; how history and memory are being presented in the present and shape contemporary identities and subjectivities.

One of those actors and themes that has traditionally received most attention in discussions of cultural politics is the nation state, which is still popularly conceptualized as the main authoritative entity that defines the rules of the game in the field of culture to further particular nation-wide identities and subjectivities. The concept of methodological nationalism, coined by Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002) to critique the omnipresence of the nation state as the dominant scale, and nationalism as the perceived structuring agenda, in studies by the social and human sciences, has finally started to become more mainstream in cultural politics analyses. A growing number of researchers have urged us to transcend the state as the “dominant vector of analysis” (Winter 2015: 2) and map the imbrications between culture, heritage, and

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<sup>1</sup> Corporate private funding into the cultural sector is definitely not a new phenomenon as in Europe, the US and Western colonies already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial conglomerates and resource multinationals used culture and strategic funding to raise their corporate image, and co-opt civil society organizations and academics. This history deserves further scrutiny.

the suite of (international) non-state actors (NGOs, multilateral agencies, corporations, etc.) influencing cultural policy and heritage preservation (Plets 2018).

Although it is true that culture is caught up in a drastically changed environment, this does not mean that the state has become obsolete or that we should adhere to the popular “myths of state withdrawal” (Peck and Theodore 2012: 181). Instead of transcending the nation state as our vector of analysis, below I contend that the nation state is a legitimate analytic focus. However, I wish to challenge the traditional apprehension of the nexus between the state and culture by providing an updated and context-dependent understanding of the state in a space intricately affected by neoliberalism and globalization. A new analytic lens will be suggested, moving away from the monolithic state model still dominant in many analyses of culture (especially in *loci* defined by authoritarian governmental structures), by drawing attention to the neoliberal modernities and logics texturing the state and how a constantly changing meshwork of players and technologies (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Sharma and Gupta 2006; Aretxaga 2003) constitute a cultural policy characterized by *exception* (Ong 2007) and not one-policy-for-all nation-wide schemes.

By mapping how multinational (hydrocarbon) corporations and the Russian political elite (i.e., Putin and his inner circle) strategically marshal culture and heritage to structure their social, political and cultural environments to tap into the full potential of the global market, this paper aims to draw attention to the highly variegated and diffuse role of culture and heritage in furthering the Russian state and its neoliberal interests. Russia is popularly conceptualized as an electoral authoritarian regime where culture and heritage are being strategically marshalled as part of the Kremlin’s political portfolio. Tools used to create a Russian Federation united behind strong historical origin myths, nationalistic (Slavic) symbols, and narratives textured by the state sanctioned Christian Orthodox Church (Wood 2011; Goscilo 2013; Etkind 2014; Shnirelman 2008). However, this paper will argue that although it is true that Moscow’s ‘cultural wars’ (Smyth 2014, 584–85) are central in mediating regime stability and strengthening the power vertical (Sakwa 2014), at the same time—paradoxically—the same Kremlin allows exceptions to this centrally administered metanarrative when it enables them to strategically tap into the potential of the global (energy) market (Harmes 2012). This is especially striking in relation to non-Russian

indigenous minorities which are traditionally depicted in literature (Newcity 2009; M. M. Balzer 2010) as victims of well-directed anti-regionalist policies and structural discrimination.

This argument will be explored using ethnographic data collected in the Altai Republic, a federal subject of the Federation (FIG. 1) that during a large part of the Soviet Union and 1990s-2000s held a semi-autonomous status because of its large indigenous population. This meant that Moscow was less involved in day-to-day political decision-making. This *laissez-la faire* approach to political and cultural life changed when plans were drafted in the early 2000s to construct a pipeline connecting the Northern Siberian gas fields to China through the Altai. Overnight Altai became a ‘resource frontier’, which be Tsing (2003) describes as a region geographically far removed from the center but politically close to the capital because of economic interests. A whole ‘complex’ (Watts 2005) of parastatal players, NGO’s and opposition parties entered the social arena drastically changing not only the political and economic fabric of the Altai, but through local media outlets and co-opting cultural institutions, the individual logics and mentalities of indigenous activists and politicians were also being redefined.



Figure 1. Location of the Altai Republic within the Russian Federation.

In this process heritage was one of the many neoliberal “statecraft mechanisms” (see below) used to drastically reformulate social relations between the key actors defining the intricate interplay of the state, civil society and the market. In this paper, following Conaghan and Malloy (1995), statecraft mechanisms are defined as technologies that can be used by a variety of players to strategically redefine the institutional and sociopolitical environments defining the state. In a neoliberal setting, these players defining the political economy of the state are diverse and range from political elites, to bureaucrats to multinational corporations. These together are engaged in the process of furthering the broad sociopolitical community of a certain territory—with the logic of the market as one of the many structuring components of the different players’ rationales.

The central case study in this exercise concerns the repatriation of indigenous archaeological remains to the semi-autonomous Altai Republic. In 2012, a highly contested 2,500-year-old mummy was returned to the indigenous people of the Altai Republic, a unique restitution of cultural heritage in a country (Russia) well known for its structural alienation of indigenous minorities (Stammler and Wilson 2006; Newcity 2009; Plets 2015). This repatriation, however, was negotiated by Gazprom to a museum funded by the same energy giant, which was determined to build a Russian direct pipeline to China through the multicultural Altai Republic (Plets *et al.* 2011). Through the restitution of inherently symbolic capital to a community actively negotiating for cultural autonomy, Gazprom and the Kremlin not only created a zone of exception but also used heritage as a statecraft mechanism to formulate new mentalities amongst indigenous people in favor of resource development.

Building on different ethnographic vignettes detailing this contested repatriation and its social responses, in the interpretative part of this paper I will appraise cultural heritage, as a proxy for cultural policy, as a mechanism in neoliberal statecraft that drastically implicates local fields of practice and social networks of power. As such I will underline that cultural (heritage) politics is not a zero-sum game (Graham and Howard 2008; Graham *et al.* 2000) where only one particular discourse can be legitimized by state actors, as is often suggested in current literature (Smith 2006). Instead, I wish to draw attention to the diffuse and highly situational nature of contemporary cultural policy in managed democracies such as Russia, China, India and different nations in South-East Asia—centralized states whose socioeconomic

fabric has dramatically evolved at the turn of the millennium and has become strongly depended on the global (resource) market. In these nations specifically, and in others states across the world more broadly, governmental cultural frameworks are uncomfortably defined by an almost contradictory agenda: on the one hand, they are oriented towards producing manageable subjects equally adhering to the rule of law and centralized conceptions of citizenship, and, on the other hand, they are focused on creating environments and structures fostering the state's economy to strategically tap into the global market (Ong 2007). In this process, as evidenced by ethnographic explorations in fast developing economies characterized by a democratic deficit (Benson and Kirsch 2010; Coombe and Baird 2015; Welker 2009; Rogers 2012), corporations are often allowed by central power to provide, to local actors, unique privileged access to cultural capital in an effort to co-opt local elites and drastically impact local epistemologies underpinning perceptions of socioeconomic development and sustainability.

These broader conceptualizations of cultural policy in a neoliberal age will be briefly brought into conversation with current analyses of cultural politics in the Russian Federation. Ultimately this should encourage researchers of Russia to include these peripheral regions far removed from the European cosmopolitan centers of Russia, which are often central in most assessments, into studies of everyday cultural life in the Russian Federation.

Ethnographic data collected between 2009 and 2015 will serve as my empirical baseline. Experience as a key member of the Altai Mountains Survey Project (Plets et al. 2012) and extensive applied anthropological fieldwork (participation in heritage planning and active involvement in repatriation discussions) with heritage practitioners and indigenous communities in Siberia has enabled me to trace how Altai's transformation from a marginalized post-Soviet republic into a resource frontier has drastically changed the sociocultural fabric of Altaian society. In addition to participant observation, over 300 interviews with local politicians, bureaucrats, community members, contract archaeologists, religious leaders, and members of environmental NGOs have enabled me to map how the insertion of the assemblage of actors and corporate and state structures connected to resource development has affected the production of cultural heritage and altered perceptions of indigenous culture and identity.

## **Well-oiled Heritage Management: Paradoxical Federalism in a Centralizing Petrostate**

### *The Altai Republic: a 'little corner of freedom' becoming a resource frontier*

Strategically located where the main Eurasian powers meet, the once largely peripheral Altai Republic has moved into the Kremlin's limelight and a once *laissez-faire* approach to Altaian politics has been drastically changed by a careful management of Altai's legal and societal fabric since it became important for pipeline transport (early 2000s). This federal subject that has its own parliament (*El Kurultai*), constitution and ministries, largely thanks to its special status due to the large and growing number of indigenous Altaians (31.1%) that dominate the rural parts of the Republic, and their political activism after the collapse of the Soviet Union. When central power started to wane in the late 1980s, members of the Altaian intelligentsia were extremely active in reviving their nomadic culture, promoting their shamanistic lifestyle and negotiating ethno-cultural sovereignty from Moscow in an effort to protect their indigenous lands from development (Halemba 2004; Tyuhteneva 2009).

National identity especially crystalized, following a broader trend in indigenous Siberia (Filippov and Filippova 1994; Balzer 1999), after ecological protests against large scale development projects threatening Altai's unique natural landscape. Protests originated during the late Brezhnev years and were piloted by environmental societies active in local nature reserves<sup>2</sup> and were successful in creating 'little corners of freedom' (Wiener 1999) in the Altai, where environmentalists and indigenous leaders could experiment with indigenous land-use practices, habitat protection and sustainable resource extraction. Especially the protests against the construction of an enormous hydroelectric dam on the Katun river deeply embedded an anti-developmental and preservationist mentality in the identity of post-Soviet Altaians (Klubnikin *et al.* 2000; Tyuhteneva 2009). During the first years of my project many interlocutors proudly reproduced their reservation *vis-à-vis* economic development and stressed that ontological unity with the landscape based

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas Weiner (2002) has stressed in his work on environmental preservation during the Soviet Union, that in many natural reserves there was relative freedom, and environmental societies had the possibility to interact with international counterparts, develop critical assessments of the Soviet Union's ecological policy and experiment with alternative livelihood practices.

on shamanistic beliefs and nomadic social organization was more important than infrastructure advancing Altai's dire financial climate. Even plans for developing certain tracts of lands for tourism, which would benefit ecological preservation as the more than a million tourists that pour into the Altai every year camp in the wild, were being explicitly countered during community meetings by both regional politicians and ordinary indigenous community members.

In March 2006, Russian President Putin put forward his intention to build two direct pipelines to China. These pipelines would make Russia less dependent on the European market and tap into the significant resource demands of China. One of these pipelines, the Altai Pipeline, would connect the northeastern Siberian gas fields with western China. Cutting right through the Altai Mountains is neither the most cost-effective (the region is seismically active, has permafrost and high mountains) nor the most ecological route (large territories of the Republic are part of the World Natural Heritage site, the Golden Mountains of Altai, including the entire border region with China). A variety of investigations by international scholars and organizations have highlighted the serious environmental concerns and economic shortcomings of the project (Plets et al. 2011; UNESCO 2012, 17; The Moscow News 2012). However, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine had painstakingly brought the importance of direct connections into the limelight, and construction needed to go ahead at any cost. One Gazprom engineer told me during an interview that it is indeed nearly impossible to build the pipeline because of the mountainous landscape, but 'if Gazprom wants a pipeline to the moon they will build it, at any cost!'.

Despite prior activism against small and large construction projects by both indigenous Altaian organizations and regional politicians, today Gazprom's project has been accompanied by a scarcity of local opposition. During my fieldwork, a significant number of my informants even how important it was that Gazprom would keep its promise and advance the project. Many argued that the pipeline was imperative for economic development, energy independence of the Russian Federation in the face of the growing chasm with the West, would connect Altai to the global energy project, transform their nation (i.e. Altai) into a region with modern infrastructure, and that Gazprom's gas would advance ecological sustainability, because burning gas was perceived to be better for the environment than burning wood. This is a remarkable shift in mentality, not only because of prior opposition to

large projects by politicians and local indigenous groups, also because the project has clearly no projected long-term economic benefit. The new pipeline will not directly transport gas to Altaian homes. In reality the domestic gas network that already serves parts of Altai will be extended to include regions most affected by construction. Furthermore, a long list of small and large political scandals which have dominated regional newspapers—including the Altaigate scandal a hunting incident where the bodies of investors, a local minister and the carcass of a protected species were found near a crashed Gazprom helicopter (Plets et al. 2011)—support the idea that neither ecological sustainability nor regional development are central to Gazprom's plans.

The lack of (regional) political and public opposition to this large-scale development is remarkable, especially in light of prior indigenous opposition to any medium to large development project. Two interrelated and intrinsically conflicting dynamics have been structuring the local sociopolitical climate since the Altai Republic became of key interest to the Kremlin and Gazprom: (1) Moscow's de-federalization of local indigenous controlled institutions and juridical frameworks; and (2) the cultivation of an economic rationality amongst local politicians and community members through an elaborate series of corporate social investments into culture, with repatriation of ethno-culturally powerful archaeological objects as one of the most important initiatives. These two diametrically opposed developments will prove central in discussing the characteristic nature of cultural and political life in Russia's resource frontiers (Tsing 2003; Coombe and Baird 2015).

### *Structural curtailment of collective agency under Putin: the de-federalization of heritage*

A first important dynamic explaining the limited opposition to the pipeline is connected with Putin's de-federalized governmental model and the unfavorable legal and institutional climate for indigenous people, ultimately undermining collective agency. Since Putin's rise to power, Yeltsin's federal system and pro-regionalist institutional architecture has eroded and been replaced by a centralized state (Goode 2011; Balzer 2010; Gel'man 2015). A long series of legal modifications have institutionalized the power of the Kremlin to the detriment of regional parliaments and democratically elected politicians (Heinemann-Grüder 2008), who previously

defined political culture in federal subjects like the Altai Republic. There is little doubt that undercutting the sovereignty of regions where non-Russian ethnic groups stand strong, is permeated with the patriotic discourse of the Kremlin (Gel'man, 2015; Laruelle, 2009). However, many semi-autonomous indigenous territories, including the Altai Republic, are at the same time located in those regions strategically important for resource extraction or transport. Anthropological research in such environments (Anderson 2002; Balzer 2010; Habeck 2002; Novikova 2008; Stammler and Wilson 2006), sadly illustrates that Russia's hunger for resources and transport facilities is not only putting increasing pressure on indigenous livelihoods, but goes hand in hand with well-directed changes to existing institutional and legal frameworks, making it almost impossible to legally or politically oppose actions by Gazprom and the federal government that formally break the law.

Some of these striking legal changes include: the federal reforms of late 2003 stipulating that regional governors and presidents (including those of autonomous subjects) would now be appointed by the Russian president (Sakwa 2014); the 2006 NGO law (Kamhi 2006) and amendments in 2012 reformulating this law into the Foreign Agents Law requiring non-profit organizations receiving foreign funding to register as "foreign agents" (*inosranni agent*); recent efforts to dissolve the Russian Association of Indigenous People of the North, one of Russia's oldest organization uniting all non-Russian nationalities (Balzer 2010); and the contested and highly selective restrictions under which indigenous minorities can become officially 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). This administrative category is contested as of its numerical restrictions. Groups larger than 50,000 people, who include most influential indigenous groups (such as the Altaians), are too large to be formally recognized. Instead smaller subgroups of those nations are encouraged to apply for recognition. Challenging the unity of a particular ethno-national group. Allured 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 and eroding national cohesion.

Besides legal changes on the federal level directly connected to Putin and his inner circle, on the local level, minor legal changes are intermittently made to secure economically strategic sectors or undercut the actions of certain groups or individuals. In the Altai Republic, heritage is uncomfortably caught up in this careful subversion of regional power. Besides serving as a vehicle for legitimation and sociocultural rights (see below), regional heritage legislation and self-governance also operates as a tool to oppose, influence or at least delay, construction projects<sup>3</sup>. Because of these nationalistic and pragmatic dimensions, the Kremlin has been skillfully undercutting regional heritage structures in the Altai Republic. Voted in 1997 in an effort to gain more control over the system of archaeological permits, a symbolic decree (Decree of the Government of the Altai Republic from July 10, 1997, number 22-25) prohibiting excavations in the southeastern part of the Republic was one of the first legal victories of indigenous people in Russia against the archaeological establishment. But in 2002, a new federal cultural heritage law was passed, explicitly ascribing ownership over archaeological finds to the federal state (Federal Law N73-F3, article 49). In the Altai Republic, this law overruled the constitution defining the Altaians as the privileged stewards of their heritage.

Nevertheless, because Altai was not of key interest to the Kremlin, the 1997 regional law stayed in place until the mid-2000s, drastically impacting the local archaeological landscape. Consequently, from 1997 onwards excavations and construction projects became dependent on indigenous consent and participation. When archaeologists of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences (SB-RAS) refused to agree to the terms of the indigenous people, most excavations halted in the archaeologically rich Altai Republic. In 2009, archaeologists of the SB-RAS, however, turned to the federal service for monitoring compliance with cultural heritage protection law to challenge the regional Altaian heritage law. In the end, the regional legislation was found unconstitutional and was dissolved (Decree of the Government of the Altai Republic from January 29, 2010 number 36-5). When in June 2012 a new regional heritage and nature protection law was voted in, once again institutionalizing indigenous control over excavations and infrastructure development, it immediately came under fire. Less than two months after voting in the new law, in

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

August 2012, the Kremlin-controlled *El Kurultai* (Altaian Parliament) adopted an amendment, stating that the construction of “linear objects” should be allowed in protected cultural zones (Amendment from August 2, 2012 number 202). Finally, in May 2013, the entire new heritage law was canceled because it was found to be in conflict with the 2002 federal cultural heritage law (Novosti Gornogo Altaya a 2012).

These constant attacks on regional heritage legislation since plans were made public to construct the pipeline correspond to the above-outlined institutional alienation of ethnically non-Russian minorities in Russia. Heritage, as important sociopolitical capital that intrinsically legitimizes wider cultural and territorial claims and fosters collective agency, is one of the many ethno-political tools that the Kremlin has skillfully appropriated away from regional governments. Although these developments are connected to the broader nationalist agenda of the Kremlin, making amendments facilitating the construction of linear objects, suggests these legal developments are also defined by economic imperatives geared at safeguarding resource development and transport.

#### *Wining hearts and souls: repatriating indigenous heritage in an authoritative space*

A second major force which explains the relative absence of opposition to Gazprom’s mega-project is related to the company’s successful CSR strategy, geared at co-opting local politicians and their constituency. At the center of this exercise stands the recent repatriation of one of Russia’s most contested culture heritage objects to a newly constructed state-of-the-art museum in the Altai Republic. Excavated in 1993 by the SB-RAS and claimed back for reburial by the indigenous Altaian elite, a unique 2,500 year old female mummy has been at the nexus of discussions over indigenous cultural emancipation and rights to culture in post-Soviet Siberia (Mikhailov 2013; Plets et al. 2013). Named the Altai/Ukok Princess by the Altaians, the political and symbolic life of this dead body (Verdery 1999) illustrates how indigenous heritage is skillfully stewarded by the Kremlin and semi-private multinationals in a concerted move to streamline their access to the global energy market.

When in 1994 archaeologists of the SB-RAS finally announced their 1993 discovery of a uniquely preserved frozen burial mound, Altaian activists and intellectuals were quick to capitalize on the magnificent finds. In the midst of a period

characterized by ethno-political activism and attempts to negotiate Altaian national unity, the female mummy became one of the most important markers of Altaian identity. Reactions of marvel went hand in hand with serious indigenous protests and repatriation and reburial was promptly requested. When the archaeologists of the Russian Academy of Science flatly rebuked repatriation and continued excavations without indigenous involvement, a deep conflict between indigenous people and the Russian scientific establishment unfolded, bitterly fought out in the media. The Altai/Ukok Princess increasingly became a symbolic political issue, skillfully used by both Altaian indigenous leaders and non-Altaians political figures seeking votes in municipal and gubernatorial elections (Plets et al. 2013; Halemba 2008).

The intelligentsia of the Altaian nation were quick to use this unique archaeological treasure as a national symbol. The discovery was not only important because it could be connected to the rich Scythian Pazyryk period (Sixty-third century BCE), a moment where the Altai was a central region in the long-distance connections defining Eurasian steppe culture. Buried with her horses, the mummy also embodied nomadism. Today, nomadism is more than a livelihood strategy for many Altaians; it is an idealized lifestyle where people are ontologically one with their land. Nomadism had, however, almost completely disappeared during the Soviet Union and was especially under threat during the late 1980s because of ecological problems and huge infrastructure projects. Throughout the 1990s, the mummy quickly became known as the “Altai Princess”; represented as a nomadic warrior princess she was believed to be a progenitor of modern Altaians.

Controlling this unique find, both in a discursive and material sense, was extremely important for the Altaian elite in the midst of reviving Altaian culture and identity after almost seven decades of Soviet identity politics. This ethno-cultural revival coincided with Altaian efforts to strengthen the status of the Altai administrative region within the federal structure of Russia. Maintaining and expanding this, albeit limited, cultural sovereignty has been a key effort throughout the short history of the Altai Republic. Legitimation of de facto cultural autonomy was especially formed around national symbols and narratives textured by Soviet interpretations of nationality and ethnicity (Tishkov 1997; Shnirelman 1996). Consequently, Soviet markers of ethnicity (language, religion, livelihood, nativeness to the land and material culture) were perceived as imperative. Controlling the

discourse over the Altai Princess was especially important as it could be used to objectify the Altaian's deep historical ties to the territory of the Altai Republic and their specific nomadic identity.

Repatriation of the mummy from the museum of the SB-RAS to the national museum in the capital of the Altai Republic has been a central demand throughout various local and regional election campaigns. 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 exemplifies the continuing ethnocentrism structuring heritage and memory politics in post-Soviet Russia, a reality that became especially dire when President Putin came to power in 1999. Not only have a long series of public protests, petitions and official demands from various Altaian civil society organizations been ignored, but at the same time, a long list of legal changes and public statements by officials criticizing the Altaian's politicization of the mummy exemplify the structural discriminations impeding non-Russian minorities to celebrate their heritage freely (see above).

A pertinent event exemplifying this difficult political climate is when the excavators of the Altai Princess personally received the prestigious State Prize of the Russian Federation (*Gosudarstvennaya Premiia Rossiyskoy Federatsii*) from President Putin in 2004. During the award ceremony Putin praised the work of the archaeologists as “exceptional and bright events in Russian science and the arts; they are the pride and glory of our nation” (Putin 2005). This legitimized earlier very public statements in the popular press made by leading scientists of the Institute of Archaeology of the Russian Academy of Science involved in the excavation of the mummy, they claimed modern Altaians have no right to undermine archaeological research because they do not have any biological link<sup>4</sup> with the Ice Maiden (Agranovich 2004), or that demands for repatriation are merely “nationalistic whims of a small group of people far removed from science” (Molodin and Polosmak 1999). To date these state archaeologists still receive a lot of state support from the Kremlin for their work in Crimea and Palmyra. This support has transformed the top of the Russian archaeological establishment into political agents actively supporting the

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<sup>4</sup> 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 the archaeologist to claim that she was European and that Altaians only recently migrated to the Altai Republic.

Kremlin' project. In a co-authored keynote paper presented at the ninth All Russian Archaeological Congress in 2015, director of the IA-RAS Nikolai Makarov reminded the Russian archaeological community of their duty to use their research to further the state and popularize the rich Russian past to the public. Makarov underlined the importance of including the rich archaeological history of Russia in national textbooks. A diverse heritage that is important because it indicates that the territory of Russia is not 'a random location on the world map' (Makarov, Belayev, and Engovatova 2015, 12).

These official prizes legitimizing the Russian archaeological establishment, their claims over the non-nativeness of indigenous titular inhabitants, centrality of a Slavic historical narrative in their broader historical agenda, and the above described legal challenges to regional heritage and culture clearly represent Putin and his *nomenklatura* as quintessential nation-builders who use heritage legislation and discourse as part of their political portfolio. Thus far this reality corresponds to the popular image of the Russian Federation as a managed vertical democracy where there is only room for celebrating the ethnic Russian past such as for example the intrinsically Russian victory during World War II (Linan 2010; Wood 2011; Etkind 2014). This image of the Russian heritage and memory fields aligns with the above-critiqued research agendas in studies of (Russian) culture textured by methodological nationalism, where a central state is perceived as the key actor defining the "rules of the history game" for ethno-nationalist interests.

There is no doubt that nation-building through carefully managing the different narratives and discourses in society is extremely important for the Kremlin, but recent developments connected to the fate of the Altai Princess make a one-dimensional interpretation where the selective instantiation of national communities is the main driving force behind cultural politics impossible to sustain. In September 2012, the Altai Princess was repatriated to the newly constructed National Museum of the Altai Republic. This 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 also celebrates Altaian culture and the deep archaeological links with their homeland. Such a tribute to the Altaian people and their rich culture is, however, at odds with the bleak political reality described above and other international repatriation examples. Compared to other repatriation cases in settler

societies such as Australia and the United States (C. Smith and Wobst 2005; Zimmerman 1996), neither the Russian state nor Russian academia mediated this expansive renovation of the national museum or negotiated the repatriation in an effort to redefine the Russian nation and further a multicultural meta-narrative. Instead, a corporate player with clear links to the political establishment of the Kremlin, Gazprom, realized the repatriation and reconstruction, serving an inherently economic agenda.

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 from both inside and outside the Republic. With a lot of grandeur, representatives of Gazprom, the regional government and indigenous leaders opened the museum. In their speeches, the various political protagonists praised Altaian culture and its important role in the wider history of Russia (Novosti Gornogo Altaya b 2012). The festivities attracted a big crowd, whom armed with Gazprom promotional material also praised Gazprom's accomplishments (FIG. 2). Not only the celebrations were carefully managed; and so too was the layout of the museum which adroitly positioned Gazprom's initiatives in the Altai Republic (FIG. 3). A very large banner in the museum's central hall showed Altai's president Alexander Berdnikov and Gazprom's CEO Alexei Miller shaking hands at the opening of the museum. Before entering the main room of the museum displaying the Altai/Ukok Princess, every visitor is instructed about Gazprom's accomplishments in the Altai (construction of schools, airport, sports infrastructure and so on). In a Western reading of these practices, such unsubtle communication strategies could be described in more pejorative terms as propaganda, ensuring that the museum would become a landscape fraught with public controversy. However, a vast majority of my informants who visited the museum did not see it that way. Many were proud to have a modern museum presenting their rich culture and past. Most even applauded the large investments that catapulted the once decrepit Stalinist museum into the 21st century, as this investment enabled them to "get their Princess back."



Figure 2. A) Opening ceremony of the museum; B) People holding signs praising Gazprom at the opening. One says “Gazprom—Trustworthy Partner.”  
*The creation of pro-developmental mentalities and co-option of indigenous political elites*

That Gazprom’s CSR strategies have been relatively successful in shaping new regimes of truth in favor of the construction of a mega pipeline is not only reflected in these positive attitudes towards the museum. As indicated above, whereas the Altaians are generally extremely critical of any construction project because it could disturb their unique animist connection with the land, the pipeline receives less public criticism. Other than some critical voices (predominantly headed by Soviet-trained Altaian intellectuals) and the traditional resignation by a broad number of people to the ‘power of the large multinational’ (cf. Benson and Kirsch 2010), clear grassroots support for the pipeline project has materialized. The explicit positive stance to the economics of pipeline was remarkable. During many interviews, I was surprised how the pipeline had become rationalized in economic terms because of its connection to a strategic commodity traded with a global economic power, while prior plans for hydroelectric dams and other public infrastructure works had been discarded because of their impact on the environment. Furthermore, similar to the timely ethnographic research of Rogers (2012) in Perm region (Russia), the pipeline had received a positive connotation because it materialized connectivity and transnational economic cooperation, which was perceived to be an imperative for a modern nation. However, the belief in ecological return of the pipeline was most striking, and could be connected to Gazprom’s PR initiatives and co-option of scientists in an effort to redefine local subjectivities.



*Figure 3. Promotional material inside the museum. Left) Image of the large banner showing Berdnikov and Miller, the caption reading “Congratulations on the opening of the museum” (in Altai and Russian); Right) Overview of the room celebrating Gazprom’s accomplishments in the Altai Republic (Photographs by G. Plets).*

As exhaustively discussed by journalist Alexey Tarasov (2012), environmental rhetoric has occupied a central role in Gazprom’s communication strategy; its website says that “[t]he ongoing gasification process will improve the environmental situation in Gorno-Altai and its suburbs, where dozens of coal-fired boiler houses are polluting the air especially in winter” (Gazprom 2014). A “routinization” (Giddens 1984: xxii) of a discourse underscoring the ecological benefits of gas and its economic imperatives—promoted through media, strategic funding of local sport initiatives, Gazprom funded cultural centers and resource extraction discourse in the national museum—has ensured that pro-pipeline statements have gradually become the majority and that having energy infrastructure and contributing to the international energy market has become perceived as a quality of being modern and developed, which is part of a broader strategy by Gazprom in Russia that is geared at the ‘gasification’ of subjectivities and regional political cultures (Tynkkunen 2016). This positively framed discourse is of course strengthened by the significant investments in local roads, schools, sports infrastructure, airports and solving the biggest cultural conflict that has paralyzed Altaian politics (i.e. the repatriation of the Altai Princess), responsibilities the electorate usually connects to the regional government.

The Russian scientific establishment from the Russian Academy of Sciences, which is often contracted by Gazprom as independent experts for these major projects, have also played an important role in furthering this rhetoric. Some scientists have publicly underscored the ecological benefits of pipeline transport for the region using a scientific framework—scientists are seen in high regard by many Siberians because of the history of scientific materialism (Smolkin-Rothrock 2011) and general prestige connected to education by indigenous groups (see Plets *et al.*, 2013). By adopting an environmental discourse apropos to local predispositions to environment and scientific expertise, Gazprom was able to further structure reactions to the project.

Archaeologists and ethnologists have been amongst the many players actively rationalizing the pipeline. Illustrating that not only locals and local politicians (below) are co-opted by Gazprom, but also so-called objective scientists. In 2011, archaeologists of the SB-RAS, one of the main players in Russian contract archaeology, were charged with the survey of the preliminary route of the pipeline and mapped 300 threatened sites. It was clear from the start that the SB-RAS would be the only player able to manage such a large contract. Based on the several millions of Rubles the survey alone already had cost, the estimated salvage archaeology would be in the range of multiple tens of millions of Rubles. In the aftermath of significant budget reforms after the collapse of the Soviet Union, public-private contract archaeology associated with large mega projects have become an important lifeline for state controlled archaeology institutes and university departments (Makarov *et al.*, 2015; Engovatova 2012), transforming benign archaeological institutes/departments into political powerhouses (Plets 2016). Klejn (2012: 46–49) went so far as to argue that significant income from the oil and gas sector have piloted archaeology out of the financial difficulties of the 1990s transforming it into one of the few prosperous fields of research—compared to other (softer) disciplines. Chief SB-RAS archaeologist Vyachislav Molodin, interestingly one of the central protagonists in the conflict over the ownership of the Altai/Ukok Princess, affirmed in a press statement that the Russian Academy of Sciences will be able to guarantee (*ex situ*) preservation of the archaeological heritage of the region, ensuring that this important project can go ahead:

I do not see any problem with the gas pipeline and I'm sure we will [either] be able to investigate all monuments before construction begins or adjust the

route of the pipeline so the development minimally affects archaeological sites ... [G]as is the most environmentally friendly available energy resource, so the construction of the pipeline will be advantageous for the local residents... We studied this question with the geologists—Academician Alexei Kontorovich and Nikolay Dobretsov—and came to the conclusion that construction is necessary. I think that amongst the opponents there is certain inertia. It is imperative to explain to them the feasibility and logicity of [the proposed] solution...(SB-RAS 2012)

Besides influencing public opinion by taking over key responsibilities of the local government (i.e., cultural education), structuring the subjectivities on the ground and influencing Russia's scientific establishment, Gazprom was also able to directly co-opt the political elite of the Republic through giving them access to political capital essential for their re-election campaigns. Although different government officials have always been quick to downplay my apprehensions about Gazprom's political influence—one minister in charge of spatial planning even claimed during an interview that Gazprom was hardly present in the Altai Republic, while interestingly at the same time Gazprom jeeps were parked in front of the ministry—swift changes to existing laws (e.g., amendments to the 2012 heritage law that enables the construction of linear objects in protected areas) illustrate that huge efforts are being made to accommodate Gazprom's needs. There is no doubt that Gazprom's impact on republican politics is connected with the Kremlin's efforts to get the regions and large minorities into line.

Occupying 25 of 36 seats in the regional parliament, Putin's party, United Russia (*Edinaya Rossiya*), dominates the political landscape and holds the most important political positions, including the regional president. Obligations to the center (Moscow) undoubtedly influence regional decision-making, ultimately creating a favorable context in which Russia's key industry can overcome its dependency on the European market. Gazprom has taken over a large number of the responsibilities of the regional government through funding infrastructure work, prestigious sociocultural initiatives, various grant systems and solving ethno-political stalemates. Consequently, local politicians and bureaucracies have become indebted directly to Gazprom for their significant financial support. Such support has provided Altai's

political elite with much needed political capital, imperative to maintain their positions in a social context dominated by persistent rumors (documented during ethnographic fieldwork), about corruption and nepotism.

That Gazprom's assistance in providing basic governmental services has provided local politicians with electoral capital is illustrated in the recent reelection campaign of Alexander Berdnikov. On May 19, 2014, during a speech at the museum opening, Berdnikov stressed the importance of Gazprom in accomplishing the reconstruction. He reminded the crowd and media that the renovation and repatriation of the Altai/Ukok Princess was one of *his* most important ambitions when he was initially appointed as head of the Republic:

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 west of the Ural and is the only one that has been restored in Russia in the past twenty years

(Government of the Altai Republic 2014).

Interestingly, this speech was made months after Berdnikov's status was changed into president ad-interim. In an effort to pull back some authoritarian undemocratic reforms from the early 2000s (Sakwa 2014), President Dimitri Medvedev in 2012 revoked Putin's decision that the Russian President would appoint presidential envoys as heads of federal states. Consequently, previously Putin-appointed regional leaders had to seek reelection in 2014. This included Berdnikov, who was placed in power merely months before Putin publicly announced his plans to construct a direct pipeline to Western China. Berdnikov's statement about his unique role in negotiating the construction of the museum coincided with the start of the political campaigns of his main opponents. Following a two-decade long tradition, different political candidates again appropriated the fate of the Altai/Ukok Princess. Berdnikov was keen to capitalize on the Gazprom-funded developments that had taken place during his term. On August 19, weeks before the opening of the polling stations, Berdnikov responded to the revived calls for reburial and promised to address this as a top priority in the near future. In his blog, he swiftly reminded the

electorate that he, and not his opponents, was the only lawful political actor that could solve this issue, drawing his legitimacy from the successful repatriation of the Altai/Ukok Princess:

I would like to recall that the demand for repatriation of the famous Scythian mummy from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography in Novosibirsk to Gorno-Altai was addressed with my direct participation. While respecting the views of the local [Altaian] people ... I asked the head of Gazprom Alexei Borisovich Miller to help us solve this problem, and finance the [required infrastructural improvements] required for the storage of the mummy (Berdnikov 2014).

After his highly contested reelection, the newly elected president 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. A month after his election, he restructured Altai's institutional fabric 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 ecology, were merged into the single political authority called the ministry of natural resources, ecology and property relations. However, it is still unclear whether or not this reform was made to facilitate land expropriations and expedite construction in protected areas. Berdnikov's promise to act in the best interests of the people clearly does not include a criticism of the organization that provided him with political capital and was responsible for funding most of the accomplishments on which he based his campaign.

His favorable position towards Gazprom became especially clear in his reaction to the momentous signing of the trade agreement between President Vladimir Putin, President Xi Jinping, the heads of Gazprom and the China National Petroleum Corporation. In his statement Berdnikov assured that Gazprom is

a company that adheres to the highest requirements, world-class environmental standards in the construction of the pipeline to treat the natural heritage with the utmost respect...[T]his project will significantly increase the standard of

living in the Altai Mountains, heralding a new stage of socio-economic development. Therefore, we will not only dream, but also do everything in our power to ensure that the gas pipeline project goes ahead (Berdnikov 2015).

### **Discussion: The nature of cultural politics in a disaggregated neoliberal state**

As hinted in various writings on relationship management in Russia (Fayet 2010; Simons 2014), one could argue that the actors defining the political economy of the Russian state draw mainly on Soviet strategies. During the Soviet period, carefully orchestrated strategies aimed at structuring sociopolitical climates were always accompanied by tangible action on the ground that drastically redefined local subjectivities and power relations (Gill 2011). Confronted with the museum practices and use of archaeology in the Altai Republic, basic parallels can be drawn with the picture painted by Hirsh (2005) about the skillful use of ethnography, history and museums in advancing the interests of the Communist Party and normalizing specific imagined communities. For example, the explicit representation strategies, use of science to normalize political agendas, and the use of so-called front organizations to make the opening of the museum look like a spontaneous celebration resemble the public relation strategies used during the Soviet Union (Magnusdottir 2010; Fayet 2010). Although there are, without a doubt, Soviet tactics structuring the discourse and practices of the main protagonists defining the Russian cultural field, in the Altai post-Soviet neoliberal rationales and agendas (i.e. creating subjects thinking in terms of access to the global market) underlie the use of heritage, hinting that old and new strategies and agendas have become entangled. Ultimately, painting a different picture about the instrumentalization of culture in contemporary Russia.

When asking questions about neoliberalism in a given context, we have to be careful about how we approach this broad and much-discussed concept. Neoliberalism is usually seen as a unequivocal doctrine—permeated with the universalist vocabulary of Reagan and Thatcher—strictly circumscribed by the assumed universal linkages between the free-market, less government and free civil society. Rather, anthropologists have argued that a non-essentialist approach needs to be pursued (Collier 2011; Ong 2006; Collier and Ong 2009; Brenner *et al.*, 2010). Methodologically, we should acknowledge that neoliberalism is not a uniform

concept limited to traditional Western interpretations, but a variegated social phenomenon that is highly context dependent (Brenner *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, rather than conceptualizing neoliberalism as an ideological program, we should conceptualize it as a process that structurally incites epistemological reconfigurations. As recently argued by Brown (2015) in her thought-provoking monograph *Undoing the Demos*, neoliberalism should be conceptualized a mode of thought, a logic textured by the rule of the market that increasingly informs our decision making practices and many of our everyday actions—Brown argues that the main difference between 19-20<sup>th</sup> century capitalism and neoliberalism lays in the economization of societal processes previously not governed by the logic of the market such as identity politics, citizenship and culture. Ultimately, as Brown and Collier (2012) argue, the economization of our thinking normalizes the dominance of economic imperatives in strategizing our daily actions (e.g., choosing a PhD program on the basis of the added value of the University's brand value instead of its faculty), and evaluation of environmental and social problems through lenses textured by the market logic.

In the case of the central example of this paper, Gazprom has played a central role in governing the mentalities of the Indigenous Altaians by economizing their subjectivities through their corporate social responsibility programs. Through a suite of PR campaigns spun out in the regional and national media focusing on the economic and ecological trade off, carefully choreographed cultural events, and effectively raising themselves as a player that means well and is actually better suited to mediate Altai's crippling infrastructure and sociocultural conflicts, Gazprom has been successful in promoting a new understanding of economic progress and ecological preservation amongst the Altaian population, breaking with a preservationist mindset that was at the heart of post-Soviet identity politics. Ultimately, as an intrinsically non-governmental actor it has been engaged in what Foucault would call governing; creating “the right disposition of things, arranged so as to lead to a convenient end” (Foucault 1991, 93 - after de la Perriere 1567).

In the context of cultural policy, as congenially discussed in the review by Coombe and Weiss (2015), this neoliberal restructuring of our thought—where the logic of the free market stands central—by corporate players does not mean that there is a total withdrawal of the state. On the contrary, with the rise of certain players and the interest of the government in strategically tapping into the market, new modes of

sovereignty and power are negotiated within the expanse of the state. Traditional state actors often work together with non-state players drastically transforming the state. In the Altai Republic the distinction between state and Gazprom has at times become difficult to distinguish, while Gazprom is definitely a *parastatal* organization with clear ties to the Kremlin (Gustafson 2012), (local) institutions and bureaucracies have in a way become *paracorporate* entities governed by the needs of the resource sector. Clearly the context of culture and heritage governance, we witness a “devolution of authority to new agencies and coalitions of agencies, joint partnerships, public-private alliances, and multiscalar assemblages of NGOs, international authorities, and transnational agencies” (Coombe and Baird 2015: 145), challenging the traditional lenses we apply in the evaluation of cultural politics.

New synergies are in the making; consequently, the traditional image that the unitary nation state with its modernist discourse and agenda is the sole cultural producer has become outdated. However, this does not mean that the nation state and non-governmental players are engaged in some kind of zero-sum game in which the one player is replacing another. Slaughter (1997; 2004) has similarly refuted such simplifications as “medievalist” (Slaughter 1997: 193) and has congenially argued that, indeed, the state’s political elite are no longer the only actors, but still the most important ones.

Although Slaughter’s approach is predominantly macroscopic and a more variegated approach is advisable, in her work the powerful argument that the state has transformed from using a unitary mode towards a disaggregated one stands central (Slaughter 2004: 10–39). In this changed modality, the nation state is disaggregated into different subunits, which to varying degree function *autonomously* from the central government and its foundational metanarratives. These subunits, however, are still engaged in furthering the interest of the nation by semi-independently setting up complex networks of interaction with a variety of players (Slaughter 2004: 33)—actors that have consequently become part of the political community defining the rules of the game. This ensures that in any sociopolitical assessment, the contemporary state should still be conceived as an important locus of analysis; not the unitary state, but the disaggregated state and the intricate entanglements between the traditional governmental and non-governmental actors constituting it. Accordingly, as also pointed out by De Cesari (2012) in her appraisal of the restitution of

archaeological finds in the context of the 2008 Italy-Libya Treaty, because of the changed modality of the state, traditional instruments of heritage and memory recognition (like apologies, repatriation, and reparation) can today be high-jacked for quite different agendas by different players, forcing us to transcend the trope of nationalism and identity politics in appraising the politics of the culture.

Although Russia is popularly conceived of as a centralized state, Slaughter's conceptualizations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century disaggregated state finds congruence with the nature of the private-public energy sector and its wider impact on everyday cultural life. Gazprom and governmental associated agencies present themselves as subunits that have the advancement of Russia's economy as their goal. However, in this push towards fast development, they set up networks with unconventional players that do not necessarily align themselves with the ideological baseline of the central political elite (Kremlin). These unconventional networks and technologies have their roots in neoliberal logic and are connected to the perceived importance of enabling certain corporate players to connect to the global market.

Gazprom is, however, not a traditional corporate player and its relationship with the political elite is ambiguous (Goldman 2008). Gazprom is one of Russia's national champions, a term coined by Putin in his doctoral research (Putin 1999) to describe state-supported economic players believed to engender modernization across the broader socioeconomic field (Balzer 2005). Just like many other national champions in other newly developing economies, but Gazprom has often been seen as a direct extension of the Kremlin, fully integrated and in line with the metanarratives of the central state (Goldman 2008). The Russian government might control a majority of the shares and might define the course of the company; Gazprom is also traded on the international stock market. In order to attract capital and keep the (international) shareholders happy, this international player needs a corporate organization, image and strategy. Russian governmental interests and agendas might influence Gazprom's decision-making (Sakwa 2004), however, securing overall economic growth and competing with international energy players remains an important driving-force. As a result, there is an intrinsic need to optimize its economic position and adapt to new sociopolitical landscapes, even if this means building unorthodox relationships with atypical partners (e.g., indigenous Altaians).

Russia might present itself as a unified state, claiming to serve all Russians inside (and increasingly also outside) its borders in the same manner. However, depending on the strategic importance of a certain region, different regimes might be put into place, privileging certain sectors (Plets 2015), and ultimately providing certain players to strategically take over certain responsibilities of the state (e.g. culture) in an effort to further its specific interests. As outlined earlier, Ong (2006) has investigated these neoliberal ‘spaces of exception’ in Asian emerging economies. In such countries, the political apparatus is generally firmly based on highly centralized rule, but has adopted a specific zoning strategy in a concerted effort to respond to market-based developments. These special regimes ultimately impact the institutional frameworks and legal structures defining everyday realities and subjectivities. The development of such special economic zones is almost idiosyncratic for the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) nations (Gryczka 2010) and has ensured that non-governmental and parastatal players, normally not connected with the management of traditional state affairs such as culture, increasingly structure the social fields of practice in which everyday life takes, identities are negotiated, and individual dispositions are shaped.

Finally, this brings us back to a concept that this paper has used to describe the appropriation of heritage by different players in their integrated management of internal and external environments: statecraft. Statecraft is usually defined relatively broadly as “the careful management of state affairs” (Oxford dictionary). The protagonists engaged in statecraft practices are often conceived of as those governmental players close to the state such as political elites, bureaucrats and diplomats, who are traditionally understood to shape the institutional environments and metanarratives of the state. However, just as Coombe and Weiss (2015) and Slaughter (2004) have argued in relation to neoliberalism, despite the fact that the traditional nation-state players are still the most dominant players, non-governmental actors are intricately entangled with state agencies, synergistically shaping policy and social structures. Accordingly, statecraft should also be uncoupled from its narrow definition influenced by the model of the modernist state. Rather, it should be conceived of as a multi-actor exercise by the variety of players constituting the disaggregated state, geared at strategically shaping their institutional and legal

environment in an attempt to advance particular interests. Following Conaghan and Malloy (1995: 14) a more inclusive definition is suggested where:

statecraft is broadly defined as the elaboration of procedural rules and public policies by agents empowered to act in the name of the states, which mandates and regulates the basic relationships among actors in the state, civil society, and market.

Clearly, non-governmental actors are amongst the many players using a variety of techniques and tools—including culture and heritage—in advancing their interests and negotiating convenient power relationships. Just as we have to transcend the modernist model of the centralized state, within our ethical toolkits as cultural practitioners we need to see culture as a flexible technology constantly in the making in relation to the constantly changing landscapes where different players' interests are often intricately juxtaposed. As such, in this paper heritage—as a proxy for culture—presents itself as a situational social practice in which a suite of players influence agenda's and discourses, and not a symbolic resource where only one player's interests defines the rules of the game.

## **Conclusions**

Cultural politics in the Russian Federation is without any doubt a highly complex web of relations and social structures, shaped not only by the traditional ethno-national mechanisms but also by a plethora of intersecting socioeconomic landscapes, political dynamics and unconventional actors. This not only makes the Russian cultural heritage field a treacherous space saturated with both financial possibilities and ethical dilemmas, it also presents itself as a unique window into the underexplored cultural dynamics defining everyday life and cultural politics in Siberia. I have attempted to disentangle this intricate meshwork in the Altai Republic by focusing on the political life of the Altai/Ukok Princess. The use of archaeology as a tool to negotiate corporate security teaches us that Russia is not some 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 indeed limit indigenous opposition and undercut sovereignty, at the same

time, basic cultural frameworks are paradoxically created to favor local ethno-cultural interests.

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 characterized by an economy dependent on the global market and characterized by neoliberal ‘structuring structures’. It clearly shows that cultural policy can be defined by a suite of players, and that the field is far from a top-down arena defined by the central state. Furthermore, the challenges posed by Gazprom reminds cultural practitioners and those university professors training the future leaders in the museum and heritage sector to take the challenges posed by corporate funding and consultancy linkages serious. It is time to update the theoretical paradigms informing our ethical toolkits and take the challenges posed by methodological nationalism serious.

The unique use of archaeology and heritage as neoliberal statecraft mechanisms in the central example of this paper also provides us insights in the mechanics of governing in a 21<sup>st</sup> century defined by neoliberalism. Gazprom, in tandem with the Kremlin, and using corporate social responsibility initiatives, was able to co-opt local politicians, scientists, and redefine the set of norms and rationalities informing the actions of indigenous Altaians. Ultimately this created a political culture and societal fabric in favor of resource extraction and the construction of an enormous pipeline cutting right through the sacred lands of the Altai Republic, breaking with a previous preservationist climate.

In this 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.

This paper primarily draws on ethnographic data and anthropology theory. The author acknowledges that a more historical perspective comparing Gazprom’s *modus operandus* with Soviet-era resource giants and their social programs would provide important time-depth to the arguments put forward in this paper. Further

reading and archival research investigating Soviet-era mining in the Altai Republic is planned. Neoliberalism was also predominantly approached through an anthropological lens focusing on its epistemological implications. In order to contribute to the field of Russian Studies, which is inherently an interdisciplinary field of study, perspectives from economy, sociology, political sciences and international relations are imperative. This will enable the author to map the broader structural implications of becoming a resource frontier.

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