

Nov 04, 2016 by **Robert Albrow**

Cultural Exchange and the Politics of Suspicion ^[1]


This past week the *Washington Post* ran a story about the troubles of Russian lawmaker Dimitri Gudkov, assailed by his government for having the temerity to visit the U.S. and address U.S.-Russian relations on Capitol Hill. As the short article explained Gudkov was in the U.S. to participate in a forum dedicated to “democracy and human rights,” organized by Freedom House, the Foreign Policy Initiative, and the Institute of Modern Russia, a 501(c)(3) organization incorporated in New Jersey in 2010 “to support democratic values and institutions in the Russian Federation,” and whose president is the son of a Russian oil tycoon jailed by Putin in 2003.

For his trouble, Russian parliamentarians immediately pilloried Gudkov, while accusing him of treason, espionage, betrayal of national interests, ethics violations, calling for U.S. interference in Russia, and potentially damaging state security. If brief, the article paints a picture of surging Russian animosity toward the U.S. amid the curtailment of public freedoms, with Gudkov at the center of a witch-hunt.

Left unreported by the *Post* was a next level of context for the ire directed toward Gudkov by his fellow Russian lawmakers: Putin’s ongoing “war on civil society,” which he has been ramping up, against foreign NGOs described as “foreign agents” who use “soft power” to “meddle” in Russia’s affairs. From Putin’s perspective, Freedom House has been particularly problematic. It is regularly criticized in Pro-Russian online forums, and Russia has accused it of bias and of promoting U.S. interests in Russia.

The activities abroad of U.S.-style democracy promotion NGOs like Freedom House have, of course, not been a sore point just among members of the Russian Duma. The sharp debate over tensions created by Freedom House activities in post-Mubarak Egypt in late 2011 readily comes to mind. Nor is Putin alone in vilifying international NGOs and depicting them as foreign political operators bent upon undermining national sovereignty or security. Venezuela’s Chávez also regularly did the same, as do others.

I have no wish to extol the authoritarian behavior of a Putin or a Chávez. But too often U.S. responses to hostility regarding democracy promotion abroad tend to ignore that government “by the people” can mean many things in practice, and that authoritarian or populist leadership does not exhaust the reasons for why foreign governments (or publics) do not always eagerly adopt the liberal and secular “transition toolkit” of democracy assistance, as peddled by the Freedom House’s of the world.

As Thomas Carothers  has highlighted – and what Freedom House, and in this case the *Post*, too often ignores – is that in parts of the world where “identity-based divisions” are basic features of the political landscape, the problem is often a lack of legitimacy. Voluntary associations with an ethnic or religious component are often assumed to be more legitimate

and locally grounded than are their international human rights or democracy-promoting counterparts.

In other words, these are cultural arguments, as Putin indirectly recognizes with his charges about “soft power” manipulations. As an explanation, Russia’s own culture wars, including the relationships among rising Russian nationalism, the Russian Orthodox Church, Soviet-era nostalgia, or Pussy Riot, rarely find their way into journalistic accounts, except as epitomizing Putin’s prickly paranoia amid the Manichean struggle between “freedom” and “authoritarianism” – threadbare Cold War distinction though it might be.

The *Post* might not understand contemporary Russia that well. But it often also appears thoroughly unconvinced about, or just uninterested in, the salience of cultural agency as a variable in international affairs, except to dismiss it.

Several weeks earlier the *Post* also published a gotcha-style investigative exposé, framed in the familiar terms of a story about congressional profligacy, which of course is low-hanging fruit in this era of dismal approval ratings and fiscal austerity. In brief, this story documented the frequency of overseas trips by congressional representatives and staff, “arranged by lobbyists” and funded by foreign governments, with what the *Post* described as a loophole Congress granted itself from oversight of travel restrictions “for trips deemed to be cultural exchanges.”

China is the biggest sponsor of such trips. The *Post* cited all-expenses-paid trips to China, organized by the U.S.-Asia Foundation, and described staffers staying at “luxury hotels” and indulging in “recreational activities.” It noted “briefings” about Chinese history and culture, and went on to quote the concerns of watchdog groups about “propaganda junkets” that generate a “conflict of interest” for Hill staffers. The article, which could have been written by a pro-Putin Russian legislator, raises ethical concerns, noting the nondisclosure of trip itineraries and the lack of a requirement to itemize time spent on congressional work while traveling.

The exposé appeared intent upon rehearsing the same kinds of objections as raised by the irate Duma members over Gudkov’s trip to the U.S. That article sought to highlight the deterioration of democratic freedoms in Putin’s Russia, while the cultural exchange-as-loophole exposé opted to use the language of conflict of interest and of sympathy-peddling to suggest the need for more oversight over congressmen perhaps not sufficiently dedicated to the peoples’ business. Both articles participate in the same way in a larger universe of skepticism.

Whether intentional or not, the exposé’s point of view is reactionary with regard to the value of cultural exchange. It does not seriously entertain the idea that congressional types would want to improve their foreign policy chops by learning first-hand at no cost to taxpayers about the history, society, and culture of their hosts. But skepticism about cultural exchanges between U.S. and Chinese policy-makers is hard to fathom. Surely, U.S. decision-makers need a regularly updated and first-hand account of China’s ongoing and far-reaching social transformation, as a responsible basis for “dialogue” between Washington and Beijing.

Skepticism about the value of cultural exchange programs is not uncommon, particularly among critics in and out of government looking to trim the budgetary fat. Partly, this is because “cultural exchange” – as a concept—understood to be vague—can encompass a lot of different activities, while also resisting the technocrat’s need for oversight and metrics. The experience and effects are not best understood as quantifiable and so become illegible in

such numbers games.

Distance-learning is no substitute. The study of cultures from afar might produce best sellers, like Ruth Benedict's 1946 study of Japan, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, which influenced a generation of U.S. decision-makers. But understanding U.S.-Japanese relations as a subset of the distinction between "guilt" and "shame" cultures is akin to understanding U.S.-Russian relations as the difference between "freedom"-loving and "authoritarian" politics. Such distinctions are neither descriptively nor analytically helpful, and they entrench geopolitical boundaries of difference that make dialogue harder.

For China, even if – as is most definitely the case – Chinese counterparts view visits by U.S. delegations as soft power opportunities, there is still much to be learned. This includes the extent to which, and the various ways in which China's command and control apparatus understands foreign affairs as a cultural encounter. But when not phrased as a sweeping dichotomy, cultural explanations have been a hard sell in the U.S. and skeptical journalists are not helping matters.
