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Beyond the state as the 'cold monster': the importance of Russian alternative media in reconfiguring the hegemonic state discourse

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ABSTRACT

The article brings Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory into the empirical context of contemporary Russia to analyse the complex relationships between the state and alternative media. In contrast to the mainstream narrative that paints the picture of a strong authoritarian state with a grip over democratic liberties and civil society, we suggest a more nuanced perspective on the subject that focuses on the struggle over the articulation of the identity of the state. Through an ethnography (combined with interviews and textual analysis) of three Russian alternative media outlets – *Avtonom*, *Discours* and *DOXA* – this article demonstrates how they critique the hegemonic state discourse, how they evade it through their practices, and how they perform counter-hegemonic alternatives. Even if their resistance is severely countered by the state, their practices are seen to de-naturalise the nodal points of centrality and unity which constitute the hegemonic state discourse. As these practices contain alternative articulations of the state discourse, the importance of alternative media for rethinking the state (and resisting it) should not be underestimated.

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Introduction

The scholarly narrative on Russia tends to paint a picture of a strong repressive state: at first glance, Russia's 'hybrid regime' (Colton & Hale, 2009; Ekman, 2009; McMann, 2006; Owen & Bindman, 2019; Petrov et al., 2014; Robertson, 2009; White & Herzog, 2016), appears to have successfully solidified its grip over the political life and popular consent despite keeping the semblance of democratic institutions and procedures, such as elections. Notably, the state enacts its control through the ever-tightening legislation that regulates and successively restricts civil society and democratic freedoms (Flikke, 2016; Malkova, 2020; Malkova & Kudinova, 2020).

In this article, however, we would like to take a step away from this familiar narrative, without disregarding it, and use the Russian case to make a broader theoretical point

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about the state and its limits. Following Foucault's (1978) definition of power as something exercised rather than possessed, we refrain from the political analysis that presumes the division of the political field between actors struggling for the control *over* the state. This perspective overlooks and conceals the internal fragmentations *within* the state, but, more importantly here, such an approach also tends to ignore the role and contingency of what we call the discourse *on* the state. The power of the state, rather than being 'a naked fact, an institutional given' (Foucault, 1982/2002, p. 345) is also exercised from within the discourse that articulates it as a unified system and as the central actor of the political process.

While the state is an assertive actor, also in exercising control over the discourse on itself, this discourse remains a social construction – and thus, at least potentially, subject to political interventions that aim to change it. In this article, we are interested in looking at the discursive and performative contestations of that position by alternative media (a particular type of civil society actors) that propose, through their signifying and material practices, competing definitions of the state. Thus, on the one hand, this article intends to contribute to the deconstruction of the hegemonic discourse on the state. Considering the well-established discourse on the strong state in Russia, this country is a particularly unusual and still promising site for such an analysis. On the other hand, this article makes the case for conceiving alternative media as signifying machines which not only produce texts that attempt to re-articulate and define the state, but that also perform their identities in ways that disrupt the hegemonic state discourse. In order to do so, we first engage in a discussion on discourse theory, which will then be deployed to reflect about the hegemonic state discourse. In a second main part, we present a case study analysis of three Russian alternative media outlets and analyse how they counter the Russian hegemonic state discourse.

A discourse-theoretical starting point

With ontological roots in poststructuralism, discourse theory (DT) stems from Laclau and Mouffe's (1985/2014) seminal work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* that has been since reworked for analytical purposes by rich secondary literature (e.g. Carpentier, 2017; Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007; Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Marttila, 2015; Torfing, 1999; Van Brussel et al., 2019). DT offers a sizeable conceptual apparatus; for the purposes of this paper, we will focus only on a few key notions.

One important starting point of DT is the contingency of meaning-making practices, which is to say that meaning is never completely fixed. It can be, however, temporarily arrested through the practice of articulation, which in turn produces discourses. What Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2014, p. 91) define as *discourse* is a temporary arrested flow of meaning, a structured totality that emerges from articulatory practice. The signifiers that structurally sustain meaning are called nodal points (for instance, discourses on democracy are often articulated through liberty as their main nodal point). DT maintains that there is no necessary connection between different elements of a discourse; they can be re-articulated and disarticulated by competing discourses.

Contestation is thus intertwined with meaning-making, which makes conflict and antagonism central for DT (Mouffe, 2005, p. 16). Antagonism is first of all constitutive of social identities, where the antagonistic relationship allows to assert the subject's

difference through the enabling role of the Other as *constitutive outside*, but this construction simultaneously threatens that very same subject. Antagonism also plays a vital role in the relations between discourses, as they struggle for hegemony. When discursive struggles are successful, the victorious discourse becomes sedimented, and its political origins become ‘forgotten’ as they gradually transform into a taken-for-granted ensemble of rules and norms (Torfing, 1999). In other words, they become hegemonic discourses. Importantly, though, no hegemony or sedimentation is total; discursive struggles can always be re-activated, contesting and potentially changing a particular hegemony.

Equally important to mention is that discursive struggles are not merely linguistic. Obviously, language plays a significant role in communicating (and structuring) discourses. But as Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2014, p. 82 emphasis removed) stress: ‘a discursive structure is not a merely “cognitive” or “contemplative” entity; it is an articulatory practice which constitutes and organizes social relations’. If we extend the DT framework slightly, we can argue that discourses are performed, and that this performance is an integrative part of the process of discursive articulation and construction.

Hegemonic discourses on the state

In this article, we will focus on a particular discourse, namely the discourse on the state. The state is a multi-layered concept that includes a range of ideological, material and judicial relations (e.g. Fuchs, 2018, p. 72). Here, we are not so much concerned with the notion of the state in terms of institutions, territory or population; nor are we interested in the relation between the state and economic production. Instead, we direct our attention to the discursive articulations of the state (looking primarily at theoretical literature on the state). At the same time, we regard the state as a signifying machine that allows for the circulation (and thus privileging) of particular discourses, also about itself. Moreover, we wish to argue that the state is hegemonically constructed in particular ways, with two nodal points: one articulating it as an ordered homogenous system with little internal diversity, and the other nodal point discursifying it as the central, indispensable actor in society.

The state as a homogeneous and ordered system

One nodal point of the hegemonic discourse on the state – as can be found in theories on the state – articulates the state as a political system, separated from the rest of the social: ‘a self-contained entity surrounded by, but clearly distinguishable from, the environment or setting in which it operates’ (Easton, 1957, p. 384). Statist approaches in political studies contain this articulation of the state as an autonomous entity, whose agency is independent from forces within society (Mitchell, 1991, p. 82) and which operates ‘as a cohesive and unitary whole’ (Gupta, 1995, p. 392). Also in older work, the political system is seen to comprise an institutional apparatus of the executive, the bureaucracy, the legislature, the courts, etc., which are seen as an integrated whole (Almond et al., 1955; Easton, 1953). The state is articulated as having clear boundaries, ‘defined by all those actions more or less directly related to the making of binding decisions for society’ (Easton, 1957, p. 385). In the hegemonic discourse, the state comes to us as a sedimented and well-ordered assemblage, even if it has a multitude practices and institutions.

This discourse is supported by what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) called arborescent thinking, which represents the philosophy of the state. The arborescent – a tree-like structure – is ‘linear, hierarchic, sedentary, and full of segmentation and striation ... Arborescent thought is vertical and stiff’ (Best & Kellner, 1997, p. 98). In the hegemonic discourse of the state, the arborescent – as opposed to the rhizomatic – describes the well-ordered and hierarchical (ideal) structure of the state. As a hegemonic (and hegemonizing) force, the arborescent state discourse is considered to be vastly superior towards other discourses and their performances, sometimes inadvertently incorporating them, and sometimes actively disrupting and destroying them, as they are deemed to threaten the state.

The state as the central actor

The second nodal point of the discourse of the state, found in academic and judiciary sources, articulates the state as a central actor of the political processes that holds the monopoly of governance.¹ For instance, the oft-mentioned Montevideo convention (1933) defines the state, *inter alia*, through the presence of the government, i.e. formal institutions capable of decision-making. One location where this nodal point is prominently present is Marxist theory, given its strategy of gaining control over the state. Poulantzas (1968, p. 44), for instance, wrote that the state is ‘the instance that maintains the cohesion of a social formation’. Marxist analysis, despite privileging the economy, attributed the crucial function of organising the ruling class to the state. In late Marxist thought, not only did the state maintain its analytical significance but gained an even more prominent role: neo-Marxists have criticised the old Left for never presenting ‘a systematic study of the state’ (Miliband, 1968, p. 5). Moreover, the state’s reach was expanded through the creation of the concept of *state apparatus*, which allowed to complement repressive state apparatus with ideological state apparatus and to include multiple social institutions, such as schools, media and even family, into the definition (Althusser, 1970/2014). Thereby, the state was understood not only as central but effectively omnipresent.

Another place to find the centrality nodal point is in the pluralist school of democratic theory, whose authors (Dahl, 1956; Parsons, 1959; Truman, 1951) articulated the state as the key guarantor of political freedoms that mediates and adjudicates between the demands of multiple groups in society (Held, 2006). In pluralist models, the state is articulated as a system of checks and balances between the strictly separate branches of government and the bureaucracy. The state apparatus takes the centre stage to ensure the stability of the democratic system amidst the competition of the various groups seeking power, while itself remaining outside these struggles.

‘Cut off the head of the king’: de-centring the state

The hegemonic discourse on the state, which is also communicated and propagated by the state itself, has been contested by a series of counter-hegemonic discourses. These can also be found in political theory. For instance, reflecting on contemporary political science, Foucault (1978, pp. 88–89) noted that ‘we still have not cut off the head of the king’. The state, he argued, was too often represented as the ‘cold monster we see confronting us’ (Foucault, 1978/2002, p. 220), which further exaggerated its importance. Foucault saw power rooted in the very network of social relations, with no central point (e.g.

the state) from which it would emanate; it is everywhere and comes from a multiplicity of points, continuously exercised in social practices (Foucault, 1978, pp. 93–94). He deemed the inflated importance attributed to the state, as a ‘target needing to be attacked and a privileged position needing to be occupied’ (Foucault, 1978/2002, p. 220), analytically unhelpful. ‘Maybe’, Foucault (1978/2002, p. 220) continued, ‘after all, the state is no more than a composite reality and a mythicized abstraction, whose importance is a lot more limited than many of us think’. In particular, the notion of governmentality helped Foucault to de-centralise the state, by referring to the ensemble of institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections that enable the form of power which ‘has as its primary target the population and as its essential mechanism the apparatuses of security’ (Foucault, 1978/2002, p. 219). Governance then, rather than merely an institution of power, owned by the state, is seen as a set of techniques and practices produced by particular rationalities.

Foucault’s perspective was further developed, particularly in the anthropology of the state, that looked into ways to disaggregate and de-centre the state. These cultural approaches view the state as an assemblage of fragmented practices and sedimented meanings; they seek to

bring together the ideological and material aspects of state construction, and understand how ‘the state’ comes into being, how ‘it’ is differentiated from other institutional forms, and what effects this construction has on the operation and diffusion of power throughout society. (Sharma & Gupta, 2006, p. 8)

The state as a forward trench: ‘becoming state’

The hegemonic discourse of the state is also critiqued in those parts of political theory that deal with more strategic considerations and the mobilisation of active resistance. Here, Gramsci’s distinction between political society (the coercive apparatus of state power used by the ruling class to impose its rule) and civil society (the network of voluntary social institutions through which consent given by masses to the general direction of social life is organised) (Egan, 2016) is helpful, even if it problematically conceives the political society as a field that is separated from other hegemonic struggles permeating society. Crucially, Gramsci located the struggle for hegemony in civil society, where the consensus of popular classes is achieved through the inclusion of their interests in the hegemonic class (Mouffe, 1979/2014). The new hegemonic block – what Gramsci (2007) called a ‘collective will’ – is thus formed through struggles within civil society, which de-centres the hegemonic state discourse where the state is seen as the central actor.

These struggles can be waged in a variety of ways, which brings us to Gramsci’s distinction between the war of position and the war of manoeuvre. The war of manoeuvre refers to the revolutionary strategy that consists of a frontal attack against the repressive apparatus of the state, i.e. the political society. However, such an attack is considered undesirable, given that consensus is indeed located in civil society:

when the state tottered, a sturdy structure of civil society was immediately revealed. The state was just a forward trench; behind it stood a succession of sturdy fortresses and emplacements. (Gramsci, 2007, p. 169)

Instead of the quick and local war of manoeuvre, Gramsci suggested siege warfare, i.e. a protracted struggle against an *ideological* enemy. With the state merely being a ‘forward trench’ protecting hegemony, the struggle should be directed at what remains on the other side: ‘the entire organizational and industrial structure of the territory that lies behind the arrayed forces’ (Gramsci, 2007, p. 162). As a political strategy, the war of position consists in the construction of counter-hegemonic discourses in civil society aiming at ‘creating alternative institutions and alternative intellectual resources within existing society’ (Cox, 1983, p. 165). Mouffe (1979/2014, p. 197) draws attention especially to the notions of re-articulation and disarticulation as constitutive of the war of position. The struggle for hegemony, she points out, consists not in the war between two elaborated worldviews, but rather in the appropriation of ideological elements which might result in disarticulation of previous ideological terrain and re-articulation of ideological elements into a new form.

While the state as such may not be the immediate and exclusive objective of the struggle, the state and its institutions still remain the ‘forward trench’ and part of this discursive struggle. As Mouffe (2018, p. 47, emphasis in original) writes in her more recent work, ‘[t]he objective is not the *seizure* of state power, but, as Gramsci put it, one of “*becoming state*”’. ‘Becoming state’ can thus be understood as the redefinition of the previously taken-for-granted positions and spaces where the power of the state is exercised. This, in turn, also implies the re-articulation of the nodal points of the discourse of the state which hegemonically position it as a centre of society – that is, separated from the ‘rest’ of society. Mouffe uses a counter-hegemonic discourse that re-articulates the state as one of the political actors in society, without allocating it a privileged position, placing it instead at the *service* of pluralist democracy and its diversities. The existence of these types of counter-hegemonic discourses does not imply that the hegemonic state gives in. On the contrary, the state will defend itself and the hegemonic discourse of the state. In Gramsci’s terms, the state will engage in, and respond to, the war of position.

Alternative media and the state

There are many different parts of civil society that have produced counter-hegemonic positions, also in relation to the state. One type of social actor that has historically directed efforts towards social change by challenging state institutions (among other sites of power) are alternative media. To explain this notion, one may begin by observing that the content of the very signifier ‘alternative’ – as opposed to ‘mainstream’ – is highly contingent and contextually dependent, and the boundaries between alternative and mainstream media are unstable. Still, we rely on a restrictive reading of alternative media, where they are seen not merely as oppositional media,² but as structurally different from their mainstream counterparts at a number of levels, which all emphasise their counter-hegemonic nature. They produce radical content, expressing the perspectives of marginalised social groups (Harcup, 2013; Rodríguez, 2001); they have a non-hierarchical organisational structure that seeks to democratise communication *within* the media and *through* the media (Bailey et al., 2008); and they re-articulate the very identity of media producers in a more inclusive fashion (Carpentier, 2017). Alternative media thus

perform (and strengthen) counter-hegemonic discourses that challenge those produced and distributed by more privileged actors.

In some cases, alternative media tackle the state head-on, not accepting its proclaimed position as a societal centre, arguing for its restructuring or even dismantlement. In other cases, the state might perceive them as a threat or a nuisance, for instance, because of their disrespect for media laws (Moyo, 2012; Olukotun, 2002). Furthermore, alternative media may enact resistance through their very organisation. Operating in a flat media environment (Ahva et al., 2015), they strive to create spaces for participation beyond institutional politics and the hegemonic state discourse. These practices often serve as a compensation of the shortcomings of political representation at the level of state institutions, but they also remind of the need to expand the framework for analysing the distribution of power. Bailey et al. (2008) argued that this potential for performing an alternative to the state logic is embedded in the very *rhizomatic* mode of operation of alternative media, which emphasises their elusiveness, interconnections among each other and with civil society, and the linkages with the market and the state. Through the very contingent process of operation, by balancing verticality and horizontality, alternative media perform resistance to the hegemonic discourse of the state by rejecting its arborescent structure.

Downing's (2020) case study of Czech and Polish underground media provides an illustration of how collective, decentralised self-organisation in the face of the powerful state structure succeeded in challenging the very logic of the state. Another example can be found in the Soviet practices of circulation of semi-legal literature among urban intellectual milieus that would use public spaces (normally cafés and bars) as meetings points. Yurchak (2006, p. 145), quoting the historian Lev Lurie, argued that these interactions essentially took on the Soviet state's function of providing education: '[I]n the 1970s you could receive a better literary and philosophical education in the Saigon [café] than in the departments of philology or history of Leningrad University'. This point can be translated into discourse-theoretical vocabulary as a hegemonic struggle against the state in the cultural domain. The process of state transformation, in this sense, invokes the logic of its gradual replacement by redrawing discursive boundaries between the legitimate and the illegitimate. In this article, we look into a case study on three Russian alternative media outlets that highlight this power struggle over the discursive articulation of the state.

A case study on three alternative media outlets

Describing the three alternative media outlets and their organisational structures

The three case studies in this article are Russian-based media outlets. The selection of the media is explained by their explicit participatory politics and an antagonistic positioning vis-à-vis the state and state media. *Avtonom* is Russia's oldest anarchist magazine, published irregularly since 1995 and originally the mouthpiece of the anarchist movement *Avtonomnoye Deystviye*. There is also the namesake website *avtonom.org*, where any internet user can directly upload their articles (which, under particular conditions, the core team of producers can later decide to remove). Several of *Avtonom*'s materials have been judged 'extremist' by the Russian courts, and their distribution has been prohibited.

DOXA is a student community medium formed in 2017 with an eye to promoting students' rights. Considering that most universities are public in Russia, *DOXA* by default confronts the state apparatus. This antagonistic positioning was intensified by the criminal case opened against four *DOXA* editors in April 2021 who were charged with involving minors in unauthorised political protests. At the time of writing, the four young people were still awaiting trial.

The third media outlet, *Discours*, is an online zine focussed on arts and politics, published since 2015. It features a large variety of expressed political positions, many of which are openly critical of the Russian government. *Discours* labels itself as a 'horizontal editorial team' where content-related decisions are taken by the community of a few hundred contributors who are invited to vote in favour or against incoming materials.

The study presented in this article is based on a mixture of ethnographic observations, in-depth interviews, and analysis of textual content, the details of which are specified in the following section.

Research design, data and ethics

The data collection for this case study was carried out between March 2017 and October 2019. The data consist of field notes and diary notes taken during participant observations, analytical memos, interview transcripts, articles by the alternative media producers and logs from social media messengers. Participant observations were conducted in the settings where the alternative media producers were based. The first author of this article spent a total of 16 weeks with the informants (14 weeks in Moscow, 1 week in Helsinki, Finland, and 1 week in Izhevsk, Russia). The observations covered weekly editorial meetings and informal hangouts of the media producers (40 hours) and an estimated total of 150 hours of their daily work. In addition, formal semi-structured interviews were carried out with 15 selected participants (6 from *DOXA*, 5 from *Avtonom* and 4 from *Discours*). A single interview lasted for about 1 hour 15 minutes on average. The participants observations and interviews were further complemented with social media messages (exchanged during the period of the participant observations, and, additionally, messages exchanged in the summer and autumn of 2019) and a series of materials written by the alternative media producers – mostly as part of their own production, but also in external media outlets. To select the social media messages and the written materials, theoretical sampling was used.³

The data were analysed with the use of discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis. Using the discourse-theoretical analysis approach (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007; Van Brussel et al., 2019), the study began by outlining a series of relevant theoretical concepts that were re-read through the lens of DT. Instances of these theoretical concepts, presented earlier in this article, are hegemonic state discourse, the nodal points of centrality and unity, the performance of resistance and the war of position. Following the procedures of qualitative research, these theoretical concepts were used as sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1969, p. 7), in order to avoid that these theoretical concepts silenced the data. When theoretical concepts are used as sensitising concepts, they become more open, allowing researchers to identify patterns in the data. For this purpose, coding procedures, as outlined by Saldaña (2009), were used. To further strengthen the quality of our analysis, we applied what Glynos and Howarth (2007) call a retroductive

approach, with theoretical framework and empirical data cross-fertilising each other in several iterations of theoretical and empirical development and refinement.

The research project was also strongly driven by a number of ethical considerations, particularly aimed at preventing harm to the participants. The research participants were anonymised and any indications of physical spaces of their work and leisure were dropped. At every stage, the first author, who collected the data, also ensured both the consent of the informants to taking audio or written records and the disclosure of the purpose of his presence, as well as his institutional affiliation.

The counter-hegemonic struggles of three alternative Russian media

The analysis of the case study on the three alternative media outlets produced three answers to the questions how they deal with the Russian state (discourse). First, the state is still seen within the logic of Gramsci's *forward trench*, which legitimates the development of critical voices (that, in turn, ultimately de-naturalise the centrality and unity nodal points). Second, the state continues to remind alternative media of its presence by deploying the vast discursive-material, ideological-repressive apparatus at its disposal, forcing the alternative media to respond, which in turn weakens the state's centrality nodal point. And thirdly, despite the obviously unequal forces, these alternative media develop and perform their own identities and spaces parallel to those of the state, thus constructing a practice-based alternative to the hegemonic state discourse.

Alternative articulations of the state discourse

The three alternative media are locations where the hegemonic state discourse is critiqued. This also implies that the hegemonic state discourse and its nodal points of ordered unity and centrality become visible and de-naturalised through these critiques. As a system, the state was articulated through signifiers such as *regime*, *machine* or *mechanism*. This was especially the case of *Avtonom* as an anarchist media project, as is visible here: 'The enemy of humans and humanity is the state as an organised system of power, coercion and hierarchy'⁴ (*Avtonom.org*, 8/8/2017). Even in alternative media that expressed a softer attitude to the state, such as *Discours*, the system metaphor remains present: 'We are constantly experiencing clashes with the stupidity and absurdity of the state system' (Participant 1).

As a system, the state is still seen to hold agency. It was repeatedly emphasised, for instance, through the use of signifiers such as '*vlast*', which can be translated from Russian both as 'power' and 'authority'. The agency is mainly articulated in neo-pluralist terms, with the state articulated as protecting its own privileged position in the political process through the suppression of dissent: 'If the state television describes us as traitors and crazy students, it means we our doing [our job] well' (Participant 2). Conceived as a powerful agent, the state is also characterised with ubiquity. Especially *Avtonom* participants expressed confidence that they were constantly surveilled by the state security services.

In these critiques, the state is articulated as a forward trench and as a protector of the status quo. Even if the state's nodal point of centrality is rejected by the alternative media outlets – as they see themselves (and civil society) as equally central – there is a clear

acknowledgement of the difference in the power positions of the state and alternative media. The political is thus conceived as a battleground between the privileged state actors and the unprivileged civil society actors. The space for alternative media (and civil society) participation then becomes dependent on the willingness of the state to give ground in the ongoing war of position. Should the state retreat, the civil society thrives: 'In the 90s, when the state < ... > had to deal with self-preservation, there was a space for liberty – "guys, we don't care about you, do what you please"' (Participant 3). By contrast, a more proactive stance of the state in the war of position entails fewer opportunities for civil society.

Attacks by the state

The state does not remain a passive object of critique, but responds to what is seen as a potential threat. Supported by the coercive and ideological apparatus at its disposal (e.g. police, border patrol or state-controlled media), the various departments of the state are capable of direct action in the ongoing war of position, thus reproducing the holistic notion of the state and its centrality. At the same time, the state's imposing actions provoke evasive reactions from the alternative media that also undermine the nodal point of state centrality by problematising the contradiction between the state's unethical behaviour and its claim of being the legitimate centre of society.

Importantly, the state also imposes itself through the legal frameworks. Especially relevant for the field of media, it is up to the state to legally recognise media outlets as *mass media* based on a formal set of criteria. For many media outlets, such recognition brings some highly desirable privileges such as the ability to send official requests to bureaucratic institutions and to possess press cards which provide their holders with certain benefits. The looked-for status forces media producers to comply, although, as we will show below, there are ways to evade these state strategies.

The state's responses are (at least partially) discursive, triggered by particular signifiers and their definitions. One example is the signifier of extremism, which according to the Russian law includes a wide range of activities – primarily related to spreading information that incites or justifies violence, however not including violent acts themselves. Critical accounts (Richter, 2011) highlight the vagueness of the definition of extremism. Yet, the penalties for media producers are rather heavy and may range from fines to closures of media outlets that received 2 warnings from the state regulator about 'extremist' content within 12 months.⁵ Even in case a certain organisation mentioned by a media outlet is banned in Russia as extremist, and the medium fails to mention this fact, an official warning may be issued. Such legal repercussions are seen by some informants as part of the state's self-protective tactic: 'This is a danger hanging upon [us] like a sword of Damocles'. Another example of the state's legal-semiotic politics is the status of the 'foreign agent', imposed on NGOs, mass media and individual media producers that receive funding from international organisations and foreign governments. The label forces its recipients to conduct a more scrupulous and frequent financial reporting, otherwise imposing heavy fines or forcing them to dissolve. Furthermore, mass media who report about 'foreign agent' organisations are obliged to mention this stigmatising label. Naturally, many domestic civil society groups are keen to avoid these repercussions and reluctantly reject foreign funding.

The war of position, levied at the level of discursive articulations, is also supported by the state's material coercive apparatus. Physical violence against alternative media producers by law enforcement agencies is one example, sometimes in their capacity as media producers and sometimes as the result of other forms of their civil engagement. Since many of the producers were invested in a variety of causes, taking part in public assemblies and protests was not uncommon. Although those protests were rarely violent, the use of police force has been frequent, and thus the resulting bodily harm and physical constraints, such as fines, detentions or arrests.

The state's monopoly on violence goes hand in hand with the monopoly on border control and the freedom of movement. In 2012, a prominent Finnish-born activist and a member of *Avtonom* editorial team had his residence permit annulled over alleged calls to overthrow Russia's constitutional order. His subsequent deportation to Finland virtually ended his longstanding engagement with Russian activism, which took a toll on *Avtonom*. As one participant said, at our interview conducted in 2018, 'He performed a very important function of an organiser < ... > That the authorities have deported him as the "enemy of the Russian state" has affected *Avtonom* very negatively'.

Also (the access to) physical space is an object of state intervention, at the expense of civil society groups. Venues that host alternative media are perpetually endangered and thus highly mobile. On one occasion, *Discours* was evicted from a café in central Moscow after the community helped to organise an auction in support of political prisoners; the event was stopped by the riot police and the café was shut down soon after. A similar occurrence happened at an anniversary party of *DOXA*, where fundraising in support of an arrested PhD student was supposed to take place. After receiving calls from the police, the host venue bailed out, forcing *DOXA* to look for a new spot. The alternative media have experienced similar pressure from public libraries and universities that initially welcomed them but later cancelled the agreement.

As much as the precarious position of the alternative media forced them to comply with the restrictions, they found numerous ways to bypass them. In doing so, they undermine the nodal point of centrality in the hegemonic state discourse, as the state becomes one of the many (albeit forceful) actors in the political realm. We find one example in dealing with legal requirements. For instance, *Discours* was able to obtain the coveted press cards by registering its namesake almanac without having to publish it – so far, *Discours* has only functioned as a website whose registration is not legally required. Another example is receiving funding from foreign organisations while avoiding the undesirable label of 'foreign agent'. An informant described a complicated tactic, in which the community would receive a grant from an international foundation for a joint project; it would 'basically be a media project, but in the end we will hold an event, so formally [the sponsor] would fund [only] this event', thus helping this alternative media outlet to avoid the 'foreign agent' status.

Alternative media performances that deterritorialise the arbolic

The counter-hegemonic tactics of alternative media are not limited to their explicit critiques and their evasions when the state turns against them. They also perform alterna-tivity and produce resistance to the arbolic logic embodied by the state through redrawing discursive boundaries, which counters the nodal point of ordered

homogeneity. Arguably, by contesting political identities, re-signifying spaces and developing alternative structures, alternative media engage in a deterritorialisation of the arbolic logic of the state, also performing decentralisation and blurring boundaries (Munro & Thanem, 2018).

One tactic is the contestation of previously taken-for-granted positions. Here, we particularly draw attention to *DOXA*, where this contestation consisted in the re-articulation of the student as a subject with a set of political demands. It needs to be mentioned that this re-articulation happened against the backdrop of a heated public discussion about political neutrality of universities in 2019, with the motto ‘the university is outside of politics’ repeatedly articulated within the academic establishment and in mainstream media (Penskaya, 2019; Polyakov, 2019). While it was claimed that the motto signified the attempt to defend academic freedoms from institutional political actors, the idea, arguably, imposed the logic of sedimentation, fixating the student as a static subject of the discourse on educational hierarchies with minimal participatory agency:

The purpose of being part of the university is not to struggle against the ‘bosses’, but to perform a formidably difficult intellectual labour <...>The only choice the university offers to you <...> is the right to choose your study program by selecting particular courses. (Polyakov, 2019)

DOXA’s response followed the logic of re-activation. Understanding themselves as ‘agents of critique’ (in the words of one respondent), *DOXA* addressed power relations on many levels of the university life. In one of their more prominent series of coverages, *DOXA* focused on alleged harassment of students by university staff. In another instance, they supported a campaign against a new grading system that made it easier to expel students from the university. Then, amidst the demonstrations against electoral fraud in 2019, *DOXA* provided extensive coverage of students’ arrests and trials. In doing so, the medium extended the arena of contestation to public spaces, streets and squares, where the new student subjectivity could be expressed on new, political terms, as opposed to the subordinated position of someone whose choice is limited to technical issues such as course selection. In this newly articulated subject position, the student is an active subject of the democratic process that stretches well beyond the university and its campus. The alternative medium acts as a tribune for a collective expression of this position: ‘The university is not an administration or a commercial enterprise, but a community <...> As a community, we must defend our right to be free’ (*DOXA* chat logs, 28/7/2019). At the same time, there is an invitation for its active enactment on campus, too:

Participant 4: There was a [police] raid in my student dorm. I’ve talked about it to my roommate; he said, ‘So what? This is police, this is the way they behave, we live in Russia’. Everyone knows what is going on but [they] don’t consider it strange. Our task is to show that, guys, this isn’t ‘just happening’, look at what exactly this means.

Spatiality constituted the second enactment of the war of position, relating to the willingness of the alternative media to foster spaces of their own, outside the state control. Asked about their dream venue, various media producers gave a strikingly similar account, which included a space for both collective work and sociality, such as friendly hangouts and networking. Furthermore, in the summer of 2019, some *DOXA* participants were considering renting an apartment and moving in together, in what would become a

space which the participants would finally be able to signify in their own way. This may remind of Bey's (1991) notion of temporary autonomous zones as safe spaces for creative reimaginings of power structures, free from the material presence of the state, where the community's own practices would be made possible.

In the absence of spaces of their own, the alternative media used available public venues. Some of them were already in use by other civil society groups. For instance, in the late 2010s, *Avtonom* held a series of lectures related to the anarchist agenda, hosted by a well-known venue for human rights projects whose credentials largely ensured the safety of participants. In other cases, the alternative media stayed in commercial venues, but often re-signified them by their physical presence. *Discours* held its weekly meetings in a small bar, sometimes taking over most of the available room. *DOXA* opted for another centrally located bar, popular with young Muscovites who were attracted by a likeminded crowd, affordable food and drinks, and an unpretentious and cosy interior design. The sense of safety, togetherness and a comfortable self-isolation was strengthened by a literal transformation of the bar into a *safe space* protecting its guests from the state: during at least one demonstration in 2019, it sheltered protesters who tried to escape detention.

The third way in which alternative media performed alternativity concerned their organisational structure. Their internal arrangements, based on the elimination of positions of authority, were developed as a form of rejection of state hierarchies and the production of alternative, non-institutional spaces for participation. For *DOXA*, discursive struggles against university administrations went hand in hand with the subversion of the logic of the state: in the words of one participant, 'every [Russian] university is hierarchically organised. It is, in essence, the model of the state'. *DOXA* participants demonstrate awareness of the importance of performing alternative structures in the ongoing war of position in the following excerpt:

Horizontal student movements are needed precisely to subvert conventional political categories and reconstruct the political imagination <...> [S]tudent movements can lead to reconfiguration of the democratic action and civil solidarity. (Aramyan et al., 2019)

DOXA's internal structure was designed to re-configure democratic action through a more flexible structure, where leadership could be contested through democratic procedures: 'We have a horizontal editorial team because in the case of a serious conflict everything will be decided through a vote' (*DOXA* chat logs, 2/10/2019). These practices helped extend participation beyond institutional politics, refusing to accept the centrality of the state. The idea of performing structures parallel to the state was equally relevant for anarchists, given their focus on self-governance. One participant from *Avtonom* recalled periodic anarchist assemblies (*veche*), popular with Moscow activists in the 2000s, 'when a hundred people sat down in a circle and decided on [different] matters. Say, organising the Labour Day demonstration or solving conflicts'. A similar intentionality can be seen in *Discours* that has developed a sophisticated mechanism of collegial decision-making, allowing registered website users to vote in favour or against incoming content.

Conclusion: beyond the hegemony of the state (discourse)

In this article, we combined a theoretical discussion of the state-as-a-discourse with an empirical investigation of its counter-hegemonic articulations and performances by

Russian alternative media. One important starting point is that the actions of these three alternative media outlets were not necessarily explicitly directed against the state. Nor did they elaborate a detailed counter-hegemonic discourse. In fact, they occasionally reproduced the hegemonic discourse on the state. Still, we argue that their actions – or performances – reflected a system of meanings that contradicted and thus re-articulated the hegemonic discourse on the state.

We still identified three types of resistance which combined signifying and material practices: at the level of the *critique* on the hegemonic state discourse, its *evasion* and the *performance* of alternative political practices and identities. These three forms of resistance against the hegemonic state discourse all carried a subversive potential (Butler, 1990), opening up new ways of signifying society and its structures. Discussing gender, Butler pointed to the interconnection of signifying and material practices and the particular importance of the latter: as she observed in relation to the gendered subject, ‘the “doer” is variably constructed in and through the deed’ (Butler, 1990, p. 142). We may expand Butler’s argument to social actors in general (see Laclau, 2000) and to the state in particular. This allows us to argue that the counter-hegemonic practices of the three alternative media enlarged the discursive and spatial field of signification by contesting the hegemonic state discourse. In other words, they deprived the state of the exclusive control over its own discursive articulation by de-naturalising the nodal points of state centrality and unity.

To be sure, the state was eager to protect its power position and identity, deploying the large toolbox at its disposal, from ideological interventions to physical violence, often with undesirable consequences for those who performed alternatives. We should thus avoid romanticising this kind of resistance, but we should also avoid underestimating its importance. The efforts of these counter-hegemonic actors deconstructed the *idea* of a unified and stable adversary, but replacing it by an articulation of the state characterised by substantial internal diversity and a variety of internal contradictions. More importantly, their resilient resistance frustrated and contested the centrality of the state through the performance of multiplicity. Through this ongoing war of position, alternative media reclaimed the disparate elements occupied by the state and redefined them in their own way, suggesting the persistence and resilience of counter-hegemony, even in difficult circumstances.

Notes

1. The centrality of the state as societal actor needs to be discriminated from the state’s organisational mode, which can be more centralised or more decentralised.
2. Oppositional media can also be – and often are – mainstream media.
3. By theoretical sampling, we mean the selection of data based on their relevance to one’s research question (Mason, 1996, p. 93). In our case, we focussed on the content where the identity and participatory politics of the media outlets were most visible.
4. The original quotes in Russian were translated by the first author.
5. The warnings may also be issued for other kinds of what the law calls ‘abuse of the freedom of information’ and may lead to shutdown of the media outlet through a court ruling.

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