

The Literature Curriculum in Russia: Cultural Nationalism vs. The Cultural Turn

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Abstract

In Western educational systems, the question “Why study literature in school?” has been raised in connection with the theoretical development often summarized as “the cultural turn.” The author strives to contribute to this discussion by examining the development of educational discourse in Russia. During the Soviet period, literature was – together with history – the subject most heavily influenced by the dogmas of Soviet state ideology. As such, literature enjoyed great prestige and was a compulsory and separate subject from the fifth to the eleventh school years. Since 1991, the educational system has undergone radical reform, but the number of hours devoted to literature has not changed significantly. This would suggest that literature still is perceived as an important means of incorporating children into the national and political community. The target of this study is to identify authorities’ specific aims in devoting so much time to literature in school, as well as to elucidate in what way literature is to achieve these aims. Russian guidelines for the development of literature curricula published in the years 1991–2010 are examined to see just how literature is legitimated as a secondary school subject. Based on this material, the author draws conclusions about the rhetorical practices and ideological development of curricular discourse, its relationship to Soviet educational thought and the extent to which the cultural turn has influenced this sphere.

Keywords: Russian education; secondary school; literature; curricular guidelines; required readings

Introduction

Teaching literature in school is by its very nature a tricky endeavor. On the one hand, the canonical works taught remind us of the ultimate transcendence of the individual. The fact that a particular writer is taught in school means that this person's views, intentions, experiences, feelings, politics and aesthetics have surpassed their contextual situatedness, overcome the forces attempting to marginalize them, and have emerged as the dominant cultural discourse. In this respect, masterpieces represent the ultimate manifestation of individual agency. In the intimate experience of reading, individual agency is also accentuated – reading is a process which cannot be controlled from outside, and in which the inherent hermeneutical openness of art allows for unexpected – and sometimes perhaps even unwelcome – interpretations.

On the other hand, literature is, together with history, a subject particularly well-suited for implementing the covert and overt agenda of state-administered education. These include objectives such as the Foucauldian subjectification of individuals by means of surveillance mechanisms, “the naturalization of a civil identification with the national political community over time” (Bénéï 2005: 9), and maintaining the dominance of the ruling political, economic and military elite (Apple 2004). Teaching literature in school means negotiating a path in this field rife with conflict and paradox.

In Russia, literature is a compulsory, separate subject from the fifth to the eleventh school year. This would suggest that literature is perceived as an important means of bringing children into the national and political community. The target of this study is to identify authorities' specific aims in devoting so much time to literature in school, as well as to elucidate in what way literature is to achieve these aims. Governmental guidelines used in curriculum development are helpful in this regard. They might reveal very little about what is actually happening in school, but they can tell us more about the normative foundation legitimizing state power. In literature guidelines, the question “Why read literature in school?” may or may not be addressed explicitly, but the passages describing literature as a school subject do provide useful insights into the authoritative discourses concerning the relationship between the nation (the people and their culture), citizenship (the rights and responsibilities of the citizen) and state power.

This study analyzes Russian guidelines for the development of literature curricula in order to discover how they legitimate literature's existence as a secondary school subject. Based on this material, I will draw conclusions about the rhetorical practices and ideological development of curricular discourse, its relationship to Soviet educational thought and the influence of the cultural turn.

“Literature” as a School Subject in European Education

The unchallenged position of literature in the curriculum is a rather recent one. Literature was first introduced in elementary and secondary education in Europe as part of Latin and Greek classes, aimed at the elite. Later, poetry began to be read in the vernacular as a way of practicing elocution (Guillory 1993: 101). It was only in the nineteenth century, and in many areas as late as the early twentieth, that a national history of literature was included in school curricula. This was the result of the rise of cultural nationalism and worries about working class unrest, and was intended to promote patriotic values and virtues.

This stage often coincided with the establishment of a general educational system for all social classes, not only the privileged (Heathorn 2000). According to Ball et al. (1990: 49) in Great Britain, English as a subject now had purposes that were seen as stretching from “meeting the demands of industrial competition to reinforcing national solidarity.” It was at that point that schools began to demand an established list of national masterpieces, spurring a debate over what should constitute the literary canon – a secular version of the ecclesiastical practice of discriminating between divinely inspired scriptures and others (Gorak 1991: 64).

Historically, then, the introduction of vernacular literature as a subject of study in the educational system is closely linked to the ideas of the German Romantics, specifically the ones of J. G. von Herder, who saw a unity between a nation (Volk), its language and literature, and regarded literature as an expression of a nation’s specific character (Volksgeist). The proponents of such ideas invested literature with an enormous amount of cultural capital. A new profession was born, literary history, whose practitioners had the task of keeping the records of this rapidly growing field of cultural production (Bourdieu & Johnsson 1993). Although cultural nationalism did not pursue a political agenda in the strict sense, its ambition to revitalize national culture coincided in many ways with one of public education’s own institutional aims: to foster loyalty to rulers and create a common set of values.

Within the academic discipline of literary criticism, the nationalistic view of literature as developed by Georg Gervinus in his *Geschichte der deutschen Nationalliteratur* (1835–1842) was soon challenged, for example by the fathers of comparative literature. They replaced the narrow, nationally-focused approach with a search for universal patterns and currents, studying the movements of ideas, motifs and symbols. By the early 1980s, literary scholars had thoroughly torpedoed the nationalistic, romantic and implicitly elitist heritage of their own profession: the concept of the canon has been questioned, and non-canonical writers who represent socially disadvantaged groups such as women, racial, ethnic and sexual minorities have since entered academic syllabi. The elevated position

of the Romantic genius has been undermined by reader-oriented criticism and structuralism. As a result, the study of elite culture has given way to a booming field of cultural studies, with its anthropological, rather than quality-based and normative definition of “culture.”

These ideas, often referred to as the “cultural turn,” parallel an ongoing devaluation of the liberal arts in general, and literature in particular. Some critics see a causal relationship between the former and the latter, blaming universities’ curricular changes for the drop in the number of students majoring in humanities. If universities disseminate the view that literature functions as the privileged elite’s tool for political manipulation, students might feel discouraged from studying it. Others, like John Guillory (1993: 45), looks for the reason for this crisis in the humanities outside the campus, in the economic reality facing the professional and managerial class, where the cultural capital of the old bourgeoisie is no longer required.

The Cultural Turn in Governmental Guidelines – Western Points of Reference

The theoretical development of the cultural turn has influenced school culture as well – to varying degrees in different countries (for a European overview, see Pieper 2006). However, the image of the literary genius as the quintessential expression of national identity and his work’s benevolent influence on young minds has not been eradicated. In school documents and practice, the time-honored position of the “literary genius” continues a theoretically uneasy coexistence with the cultural turn’s more radical ideas. In the UK’s secondary school program for English (*National Curriculum 2007*), for instance, this coexistence reveals itself in the following description of “cultural understanding”:

Through English, pupils learn about *the great traditions of English literature* and about how modern writers see the world today. Through the study of language and literature, pupils compare texts from *different cultures and traditions*. They develop understanding of continuity and contrast, and gain an appreciation of the linguistic heritages that contribute to the richness of spoken and written language. Comparing texts helps pupils to explore *ideas of cultural excellence* and allows them to engage with new ways in which culture develops. (p. 62, italics added, K.S.)

In this passage, just mentioning the “great tradition of English literature” in the first sentence refers explicitly to a nation-centered set of ideas. Elsewhere, a pluralistic view of culture is promoted, where the one culture is as good as the other, and different ideas of cultural excellence are allowed. However, only the English tradition is referred to as “great.” Moreover, in a later section that lists compulsory reading, only texts from the English literary heritage are specified by their authors’ names. The curriculum leaves the choice of works from other cultures up to the teachers’ discretion, or leaves open the possibility of omitting

them all together because of time constraints. This gives a strong indication of which texts are considered most important (p. 71).

The documents that regulate the teaching of literature in Sweden suffer from similar incongruities, which Magnus Persson has documented in detail (2007). The 2000 nine-year compulsory school curriculum states that “[c]ulture and language are inseparable from each other. Language is the site of a country’s history and cultural identity. Moreover, language reflects the multiplicity of cultures that enriches and shapes society” (*Swedish curriculum 2000*, Translations here and elsewhere by the author, K. S.). Mentioning “multiplicity,” the curriculum’s authors display an awareness of the cultural turn’s critique of hegemonic power structures and the privileging of the majority culture. At the same time, providing social cohesion and integration remains one of the school system’s main functions, and here, majority culture plays a decisive role. The first two sentences demonstrate that this situation has been taken into consideration. The result is a curriculum that helps to shape schools as a means of developing and transmitting cultural heritage – a thought grounded in the ideas of cultural nationalism. When it comes to defining exactly which cultural heritage this is, however, the text is rather vague, since then the nationalistic overtones would become too obvious. The curriculum does not include any required reading at all, leaving the choice to teachers and anthology editors. In Western societies, this is not uncommon: often the establishment of a school canon on a national level is avoided – this is the case in the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Spain, for example (*Eurydice*).

Compared to the British and Swedish curricula, the French expresses its preference for French literature more explicitly: “Each year, pupils are invited to read numerous classic works, mainly French and written in French, but also European, Mediterranean or more broadly global” (*Collection Textes de reference 2009*: 9). In practice, however, the curriculum’s detailed list of required reading, which includes many English, German and even Russian canonical works, makes it more pluralistic than the British one. One can detect the influence of the cultural turn in the curriculum’s inclusion of documentary texts, as well as images and film.

The Subject “Literature” in Russian Education

In Russia, ideas borrowed from European Romanticism, idealism and nationalism have exerted a tremendous influence on the understanding of national identity, and of the role of literature in its formation. In Russia, the Romantic period coincided with the appearance of a mature secular literary language, a process delayed by the historical dominance of Old Church Slavonic as the standard written language. Beginning in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the idea of a separate Russian identity independent of Western European models developed, and

literature became both the vehicle for and one of the arguments used by those who sought to further this process (Rabow-Edling 2006). This cultural nationalism was articulated primarily by those who opposed the prevailing autocracy – it glorified the nation, not the state – and as a result it was not incorporated into the curricula of state-sponsored educational institutions.

As was the case in most Western European countries, vernacular literature in Russia did not become an important secondary school subject until the twentieth century. Since the Russian Revolution, however, the importance of the legacy of the nineteenth-century oppositional intelligentsia, the view that literature is inseparable from the very idea of Russianness has only increased. The early Soviet period saw an unparalleled expansion of comprehensive education over the course of just a few decades, which managed to raise the literacy rate from thirty to almost one hundred percent (Lovell 2000: 13). This expansion coincided with an urgent need to accelerate social integration in the multiethnic and socially diversified areas under Soviet rule, a need that translated into the project of creating a “new Soviet man.” Literature played a crucial role in this process. Although the ideology behind the project was declared to be internationalist, it was in practice nation-centered/imperialist – as were educational policies in most European countries at that time (Schleicher 1993: 24).

Moreover, it was explicitly Marxist-Leninist, which explains the sometimes awkward interpretations of literature as taught in Soviet schools. Russian popular culture abounds with anecdotes, jokes and satirical references to the hackneyed phrases that were a common feature of literature classes. In a radio program devoted to a discussion of the required readings in Russian secondary schools, teacher Arkadii Busev describes the Soviet teaching practices in the following way: “The [literature] program was ideologized when we lived under communism. It was organized in such a way that from Old Russian literature to Gorky, the communists were predetermined to seize power; it even came to such absurdities as interpreting Pushkin’s poem ‘October has already come’ [1833] in such a vein.” (“Parents’ Meeting,” 2009).¹ A new Soviet curriculum emerged, emphasizing the social engagement of authors of works already inscribed in the prerevolutionary canon, diminishing the role of ideologically wavering ones, and adding new socialist realist works to the list.²

After a period of radical methodological experiments during the 1920s, a decree issued by the Central Committee in 1931 put an end to pluralistic and democratic approaches. Literature became a separate subject, independent from Russian, and a detailed list of required reading replaced the more flexible curricula of previous decades. The list was revised at several points in Soviet history, but the general outline remained relatively unchanged. Even after the disbandment of the Soviet Union and the concomitant denunciation of Marxism-Leninism, it is still possible to detect the influence of Stalinist-era curricular choices in contemporary literature programs.

In Soviet schools, literature mainly functioned as a means of moral, social and patriotic up-bringing [vospitanie], rather than an introduction into a sphere of knowledge. Soviet pedagogues had no problems answering the question “Why exactly do we study literature in school?” In his book *The History of Literature Teaching in the Soviet School* (1976, English translation 1980), Professor Ia. A. Rotkovich writes:

A group of colleagues at the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences provided the correct answer to this question. As Titov correctly emphasized, the purpose of literature teaching is to turn pupils into cultured readers. But these readers should be truly cultured, i.e., should be highly educated people who were developed in every way. They must be oriented toward the complexity of life and the social struggle, must consciously determine their position in it, must be able to evaluate a work, must understand the patterns of the historical development of literature, and must master the language of literature; they must be communist-minded and sensitive people, people with a Marxist-Leninist world view. (99)

After 1991, the Marxist-Leninist world view lost its legitimacy and the desire to instill communist-mindedness and awareness of class struggle disappeared. The question of literature’s place and role in the school curriculum now resurfaced. Instead of just one correct answer as there had been during the Soviet period, a host of different, competing answers emerged. Many feared that it would be difficult for the subject to recover from its Marxist-Leninist past. Among teachers, the general consensus is that literature has lost its former significance in the educational system. V. A. Viktorovich writes in his introduction to the volume *Why Literature in School* (2006a: 5): “We speak a great deal today, and legitimately so, about the declining prestige of the school teacher on the one hand, and our ‘philological’ subject on the other. The society and the state obviously underestimate the importance of education in general and literary education in particular.” One tangible manifestation of this declining prestige was the decision in 2008 to abolish literature as a compulsory subject in entrance examinations to all forms of higher education – only Russian and mathematics are now required. Another controversial innovation is the standardized achievement test [EGE, Edinyi gosudarstvennyi ekzamen], replacing the former elaborated literary essay with a multiple-choice test on factual knowledge.

In spite of these gloomy signs, in general literature’s status seems unthreatened. The curriculum of 2010 stipulates an increase in the number of hours devoted to the subject per week – from two hours per week to three hours per week in grades five and six. It continues to be a compulsory, separate subject from grades 5 to 11. The subject of literature seems to have survived the profound social and ideological transformations of the post-Soviet era, readjusting to new demands from state and society.

Required Readings in Russian Secondary Schools

In 1990, Minister of Education Eduard Dneprov was charged with the restructuring of the Soviet educational system. His ideas were liberal, and his influence is apparent in the Law on Education passed in 1992. The law granted individual schools considerable financial and ideological autonomy and diminished state control over textbooks and programs. Although Dneprov was forced to step down in 1992, his ideas continued to wield great influence on the course of reforms over the next two decades (Eklof et al. 2005: 8). The Russian Academy of Education participates actively in the process of redeveloping the curriculum: it provides pedagogical expertise, as well as that related to specific subject matter covered in the various fields of study. The first syllabi were adopted in 1997 (Compulsory Minimum of Secondary Education), but were described as preliminary until a project to develop a National Curriculum was finished. This project was completed in 2004, titled “The Federal Component of the State Standard of Secondary Education.” It began to be revised almost immediately, however, and a “second generation” of curricular guidelines has already begun to be published, the first appearing in 2010.

The most striking aspect of the literature syllabi published so far is their detailed lists of required readings. Not only is every single work specified, the number of hours that should be devoted to its study in class is also given. This is a legacy of the Soviet school system, notorious for its bureaucratic zeal. The most common criticism of the Soviet literature program, that it covers too much, is currently being addressed. The Curriculum of 2004 included thirty literary works of normal book-length (novels, plays, epic tales), as well as numerous poems and short stories. When spread across the five years of secondary education (grades 5 to 9), this meant that all Russian school children were to read six canonical works a year, such as Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* and Lermontov’s *Hero of Our Time*. In the most recently published *Model Programs of Literature* (2010), this number has been diminished almost by half. The reading list could best be described as a revised Soviet canon, focusing on nineteenth and twentieth century masterpieces. The founding texts by nineteenth-century Marxists (e.g., Geogrii Plekhanov) and the socialist realist pieces of the twentieth century (e.g., Ostrovsky’s *How The Steel Was Tempered*) have been replaced by émigré and dissident literature of the twentieth century (e.g., by Ivan Shmelev and Alexander Solzhenitsyn).

In the 2004 syllabus, the selection process is mentioned explicitly: “The main criteria determining which fictional works are to be studied are their high artistic value, humanistic orientation, positive influence on the pupil’s personality, correspondence to the aims of his development and age specifics, and also the cultural and historical traditions and rich experience of our country’s education.”

(Dneprov & Arkad'ev 2007: 15). The idea that a work's "positive influence on the pupil's personality" can be established once and for all pertaining to all prospective readers reveals a view on literature as "self-interpreting," i.e., that literature is understood to transfer its ennobling moral values more or less automatically to all readers, regardless of their shifting frames of reference (Persson 2007: 116, with reference to Gerald Graff). Reader-oriented theories had obviously failed to impress this curriculum's authors.

However, in 2010, these ideas do make an appearance. In the section listing the learning objectives of the subject "literature," grades five to nine, we read: "Literature as an art of the verbal image is a special mode of knowing the world, which differs from the scientific model of objective reality in a number of important ways, such as a high degree of emotional influence, metaphoricality, ambiguity, associativeness and incompleteness, *which presuppose the active co-authorship of the reader*" (*Model Programs of Literature 2010*: 4, italics added, K. S.). While acknowledging the ambiguity and incompleteness of literary works, the curriculum is nevertheless rather explicit about precisely which interpretations of the works are relevant to the learning process. The first learning objective listed concerns the ideological function of literature, for which humanism, nationalism and civic consciousness are the key values. From 2004 to 2010, the overall view of what literature's tasks and functions should be has not changed much. In the latest version, however, a greater awareness is apparent regarding the unpredictability of the reading process and the importance of teaching in terms of accomplishing didactic goals.

If reader-oriented criticism has had some impact on the Curriculum of 2010, other aspects of the cultural turn are conspicuously absent, such as its call for a revision of the literary canon, aiming at social diversity. The 2004 Curriculum listed one (!) female (the poet Anna Akhmatova) out of 112 authors specified by name, and the 2010 version also listed one (the same) out of 74. Even taking into account the prevalence of male authors in the Russian canon, this number is remarkable: canonical authors such as Marina Tsvetaeva, Evgenia Ginzburg and Nina Berberova have been deliberately omitted.³ The French Curriculum of 2009, which is comparable in size and overall orientation, includes nine female writers.

Although the authors of the 2004 Curriculum purportedly strove to adjust required readings to make them more age-appropriate, few of the works listed were originally aimed at a junior audience. Although some fairy-tales and fables are present, the bulk of the reading consists of canonical works that target an adult audience, and one which was often socially privileged. In the 2010 Curriculum, however, efforts have been made to select works with some relevance to children and teenagers. Special sections focus on literature about animals (e.g., Jack London's *White Fang*), literature describing the world from a child's perspective (e.g., *Childhood* by Leo Tolstoy) and the theme of childhood in Russian and

foreign literature (including *The Ransom of Red Chief* by O. Henry, among others).

As in most European countries, the list of required reading concentrates on literature originally written in the nation's majority language, or in languages considered to be its historical predecessors. For instance, the Russian curriculum includes *The Tale of Igor's Campaign*, an epic poem from medieval Kievan Rus' written in the vernacular Slavonic of that time. In the Curriculum, *The Tale* is listed under the heading "Old Russian Literature" – a proposition which is at best problematic. "Old Ukrainian Literature" or "Old Belarusian Literature" would be equally correct, since not only Russia, but also Ukraine and Belarus claim to have their origins in Kievan Rus'.

All three versions of the post-Soviet curriculum include a section on "Foreign Literature," which invariably list masterpieces from the West European canon such as works by Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Goethe, Molière, Byron and Saint-Exupéry. None of the texts are to be read in their entirety, and the section constitutes only a small portion of the overall curriculum. By equating "foreign" with "West European," this of course excludes masterpieces from the neighboring Chinese, Persian and Arabic cultures, as well as the former Soviet republics. In so doing, the Curriculum's authors make a clear statement about the Russian nation-state's preferred cultural affiliation.

In accordance with the declared aim of a fostering a multi-ethnic civic consciousness, a separate section is devoted to "The Literature of the Peoples of Russia," consisting primarily of Soviet-era poets from ethnic groups still present within the Russian Federation today. Most of the non-Slavic ethnic groups, the Tatars constituting a notable exception, did not write in their native languages before 1917 and written national literatures developed only after that time. This is one explanation for the focus on the Soviet period.

It is significant, however, that the Buriat, Kalmyk and Ossetian groups have oral epic traditions. Excerpts from these were included in the 2004 curriculum, but were eliminated in 2010. When faced with the task of reducing the curriculum, the authors gave precedence to works written in a Soviet-Russian cultural context, rather than those constitutive of separate national/ethnic identities, and from periods when the Russian influence was weaker or non-existent in these cultures.

The section "The Literature of the Peoples of Russia" clearly originates in the Soviet curriculum, in which works from the non-Russian Soviet republics contributed to the concept of a common, supra-ethnic Soviet identity. This included pieces by the Ukrainian and Georgian national poets Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861) and Shota Rustaveli (ca 1172–1216). These and other authors from neighboring post-Soviet countries are now absent in the Russian curriculum. This would suggest an understanding of literature as a subject being spatially and temporally restricted to the contours of the present nation-state. The expression "Peoples of Russia" is not synonymous with "ethnic minorities". The exclusion of

Shevchenko and Rustaveli implies that Ukrainians and Georgians are not “peoples of Russia,” despite the fact that large minorities do live inside the Russian Federation. The curriculum allots space only to those ethnic groups who constitute the titular populations of administrative units.

The changes made to the curriculum in 2010 show an effort has been made to emphasize literature’s nationalistic aspect. The texts from the second half of the twentieth century are an example of this. Russian literature during this period is characterized by two major reactions to Stalin’s coercive cultural policies: representatives of “village” prose expressed resistance to forced modernization, the romanticization of factories and Soviet internationalism by praising simple village life in covert nationalistic terms. Representatives of liberal urban prose, on the other hand, focused on human rights, targeting the absence of a rule of law and freedom of speech – to the extent the censors allowed them.

In the 2004 curriculum, village prose and urban prose were rather evenly represented in the section listing literature from the second half of the twentieth century. It also mentioned works by authors of non-Russian ethnic background who wrote in Russian (Chingiz Aitmatov, Fazil’ Iskander). In 2010, however, liberal critics of Stalinism such as Evgenii Evtushenko, Andrei Voznesenskii and Varlam Shalamov are absent, while “village” authors such as Valentin Rasputin and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn have a stronger presence – both pursued a Russian nationalist political agenda parallel to their writing careers.

The list of literature from the first half of the nineteenth century also shows similar changes. In the 2004 curriculum, most entries only mention the authors’ names, leaving the precise choice of work open. In 2010, all works are specified; much more often than not, these express patriotic sentiments. Anna Akhmatova, for instance, is represented by the poem “Native Soil.”⁴ In her poetry, Anna Akhmatova most forcefully protested against state-administered patriotism. She voiced the anguish of Stalin’s victims in “Requiem”, making a clear distinction between “our motherland” and “theirs”. Susan Amert has convincingly demonstrated the intertextual references in “Requiem” to the “unofficial national anthem” of the Stalinist period, “Song to the Motherland” (Amert 1992: 43). In line after line, “Requiem” negates the ostentatious claims of the song, for instance by contrasting the song’s “freely breathing” people to the people of the poem, who are “more breathless than the dead.” The inclusion of “Native Soil”, but not “Requiem” in the curriculum makes sure that Akhmatova’s mockery of state-sponsored patriotism goes unnoticed.

Why Study Literature in School?

What arguments support the presence of literature in the school curriculum in general, and this specific nationalism-tinged selection of literature in particular? Following Persson’s study of the Swedish curriculum (2007), I have extracted

passages from the three post-Soviet curricula, grades 5–9, that provide the answers to these questions. In comparing the lists, a pattern emerges, correlating loosely to the paradigms discussed by Ball et al (1990: 76) with reference to the English.⁵ In all these versions of the curriculum, three types of arguments underlie the reasoning:

1. Arguments based on society's desire to mold the individual according to norms facilitating human interaction and political stability,
2. arguments focusing on the individual and his or her development,
3. arguments presenting the reading of literature as an end in itself: the question "why read literature?" is answered with variations on the theme "in order to become a better reader."

I have adhered to these categories in presenting the results below.

The 1997 Curriculum

The 1997 Curriculum is the most concise: it consists merely of a list of what is to be learned (required readings, facts from literary history, literary terminology) and a statement by the Ministry of Education outlining its view of literature as a school subject – its objectives and place in the curriculum as a whole. This text contains five separate arguments for studying (Russian) literature in school (Kalganova 1998: 3–10):

Pupils should read literature in school because it:

1. facilitates the formation of a humanistic worldview,
2. grants the pupils freedom when choosing their career,
3. supports the pupils in their search for the meaning of human existence,
4. has constructed and helped us to gain knowledge about the different worlds that humanity has experienced during its spiritual history,
5. and also because classical Russian literature is characterized by a high level of spirituality, civic consciousness and "universal responsiveness" [and the reading of such literature transmits these qualities to the pupils].

Thus, the subject is seen as a means of ideological upbringing (1) and (5), a resource in personal development (2), a guide to existential questions (3), and a means of cognition (4).

In the first statement, the term "humanistic" refers to a set of values that promotes the rights and the integrity of the individual, in contrast to the Soviet privileging of collective units such as "the people" and "the state" (Muckle 2005: 329). The first three statements, then, indicate and establish a dissociation from the Soviet collectivist heritage: during the Soviet period, both the pupils' choice of career and the meaning of human existence were areas in which the party administration strove to wield influence.

In the fourth statement, the expression “spiritual history” reveals an affiliation with nineteenth-century historicism, connoting the idea of a continuous dialectical spiritual development. In this case, this denotes both religious and cultural values. The expression recurs in discourse that is grounded in cultural nationalism, which since 1991 has become the most influential type of nationalism in Russia (Sakwa 2009). Like the first three statements, the fourth also contains an implicit repudiation of Marxism-Leninism, which rejected any autonomous spiritual realm of history, separate from the material one, based on the distribution of the means of production.

The fifth statement defines three characteristics of Russian literature, using terms strongly connected to cultural nationalism – spirituality, “universal responsiveness” and civic consciousness. The idea of Russian culture’s spiritual nature is a cornerstone in Slavophile philosophy. In 1880, Fyodor Dostoevsky expressed this idea in a speech he gave in connection with the unveiling of the Pushkin monument in Moscow. It was Dostoevsky who in this speech coined the expression “universal responsiveness” [vsemirnaia otzyvchivost’], referring to Pushkin’s capacity to assimilate foreign literary models and transform them into something quintessentially Russian.⁶ Finally, the term “civic consciousness” [grazhdanstvennost’] is a multivalent one. The Russian word may also be translated as “citizenship,” i.e., the relationship between a free citizen and the state in terms of rights and obligations. Since the nineteenth century, however, grazhdanstvennost’ has acquired a somewhat different meaning in Russia. It denotes a feeling of responsibility for the development of Russian civilization, a defining feature of the Russian intelligentsia. This sense of responsibility often led to conflict with the autocratic imperial state (Sakwa 2009 with reference to A. Walicki). While the first meaning of the word may be removed from cultural nationalism, the second one nevertheless constitutes one of its core values.

In the text, the notion of “classic Russian literature” is not questioned – “classic” is implicitly seen as an objective judgment of time. The text does not take into account the intricate process of canonization, in which the symbolic, social and economic capital of different groups and individuals come into play. The reverence shown to literary culture, which distinguished pre-revolutionary Russian and Soviet society, is undiminished in these documents. Even though the Marxist-Leninist heritage is less visible, literature is still assigned an array of ideological tasks: the first argument mentioned presupposes a need to form the pupils’ worldview. According to the politics of this document, this worldview should first of all be humanistic, and then culturally nationalistic.

The 2004 Curriculum

The 2004 curriculum contains more structured and elaborate information about the objectives and priorities of the teaching of literature. Justifications of

literature's place in the curriculum are found under the headings "General description of the subject," "Objects of the study of literature," and "Learning objectives." Since these statements often overlap, passages with similar meaning have been condensed to a total of seven arguments (Dneprov & Arkad'ev 2007: 14, 26, 94–96).

Pupils should read literature in school because it:

1. fosters a humanistic worldview, a civic and national consciousness, a patriotic feeling, love and respect for literature and the values of our country's culture, and because it molds pupils' spiritual character and moral standards,
2. helps pupils understand the categories of goodness, justice, honor, patriotism, and love to mankind and one's family; and that the nation's uniqueness reveals itself in a broad cultural context,
3. cultivates a spiritually developed personality, supports pupils' emotional, intellectual and aesthetic development, develops their figurative and analytical thinking and creative imagination,
4. instills basic notions about literature's particular nature as compared to other art forms. It also develops pupils' emotional perception of artistic texts, a culture of reading and their understanding of the authorial position, and also creates a need for independent reading of fiction,
5. trains pupils to perform a literary analysis of fictional works, using theoretical terminology and knowledge about literary history, and develops pupils' capacity to express their relationship to the readings,
6. develops pupils' oral and written language skills, and reveals the wealth of the national language,
7. complements other subjects, such as Russian language, the arts, history and civics.

Through these arguments, we see a vision of literature as involved primarily with cultural heritage, formation of personal and national identity, and the improvement of communication skills, one which is widely accepted internationally (cf. Persson 2007: 121; Ball, Kenny & Gardiner 1990: 67). Arguments based on the society's needs (collected in statements 1 and 2 above) are generally mentioned first under the respective headings, occupying considerable space. Arguments related to personal development are mentioned next, but are not elaborated to the same extent (cf. no. 3, 6 above). Arguments in which the reading of literature is taken for granted, and which argue that literature enhances reading skills (cf. no. 4, 5 above) go into great detail. They also emphasize the great respect shown to literature – which characterizes the curriculum as a whole.

The 2004 curriculum expounds on literature's moral function, and also promotes humanism and cultural nationalism, as the previous curriculum did. It places great trust in literature's capacity to inculcate values facilitating human

interaction (goodness, justice, love to mankind) and social integration (patriotism). Somewhat surprisingly, “tolerance of other nationalities” is not listed, an attitude which would forcefully promote social integration, and which in most Western societies is a common element in school policy documents. Instead, the call for patriotism is balanced only with a call to include an international perspective, in order to fully appreciate the unique aspects of national culture. The curriculum’s authors justify this emphasis on national values by pointing out that such values ostensibly were lacking during the Soviet period (Dneprov 2004: 44). Ethnic nationalism was strictly limited during the Soviet era, which also in some respects applied to Russian nationalism.

The 2010 Curriculum

In the 2010 curriculum, statements yielding answers to the question “Why study literature in school?” are found under the headings “The contribution of the subject ‘Literature’ to the achievement of the objectives of secondary education” and “Results of the study of literature.” A total of seven statements emerge after consolidating similar statements (*Model Secondary School Programs: 2010: 4–9*):

Pupils should read literature in school because it:

1. fosters a humanistic worldview, national consciousness and an all-Russian civic consciousness, patriotic feeling, love for one’s multiethnic motherland, respect for Russian literature and the cultures of other nations,⁷
2. provides access to the spiritual, ethical and humanistic values of Russian literature and culture, and the possibility of comparing them to the values of other nations; it also provides access to mankind’s universal values and to the Russian nation’s spiritual experience, and to the spiritual and ethical potential of multiethnic Russia,
3. molds a well-balanced, developed, harmonious, and emotionally rich personality, and improves a person’s spiritual and ethical qualities, develops the pupils’ intellectual and creative faculties and shapes their aesthetic taste,
4. helps pupils to understand, comment on, analyze and interpret the masterpieces of Russian and world literature, to articulate their own relationship to them and their assessment of literary works, to understand the authorial position and their own relationship to that position,
5. provides access to authentic artistic values, the opportunity to enter into a dialogue with authors of all backgrounds and generations, expands the pupils’ horizons regarding the wealth and the diversity of the arts,
6. develops linguistic culture and pupils’ communication skills,

7. supports the development of general learning skills, and the ability to develop coherent arguments.

These points remain relatively unchanged, as does their organization into groups focusing on society (no. 1, 2), the individual (3, 6, 7) and literature as such (4, 5). Greater attention is however paid to other nations in statements promoting patriotic feelings. Passages that might be interpreted as advocating tolerance are now included, cf. “respect for the cultures of other nations.” The comment about a “well-balanced personality” implies a continuation of Soviet pedagogical discourse (Muckle 1988: 9). In this discourse, it is associated with the project of creating a non-alienated new Soviet man, following Marx’s vision of workers’ liberation from the specialized training and monotonous work of industrial capitalism.

In post-Soviet curricular guidelines, the understanding of literature as a school subject remains fundamentally the same as during the Soviet period: literature is seen primarily as a means of moral, social and patriotic up-bringing. The most significant change is the replacement of the Marxist-Leninist terminology with one colored by cultural nationalism. The faith in literature’s capacity to imbue its readers with moral qualities remains, despite the lack of empirical evidence to support such a case.

The curriculum’s latest version shows minor signs of the recent theoretical developments within the field of literary criticism – reader-oriented theories are mentioned, as are the “cultures of other nations”, which might indicate a move towards the pluralism characterizing the British curriculum, for instance. Generally, however, the curriculum’s authors do not shy away from the quasi-religious pathos and nationalist pomp that post-war literary criticism has done its best to eradicate.

Within literary education, there are plenty of voices critical of state policy. Professor V. Viktorovich describes the situation thus: “Today, attempts are being made to execute an ideological volte-face, to replace the one single true doctrine with another. This reminds me of Platonov’s short story ‘The Innermost Man,’ in which an artist, a former icon-painter, portrayed St. George with the face of Comrade Trotsky. This current process, although moving in the reverse direction (from Comrade Trotsky to St. George the Victorious), does not change anything in the methodology: only the ideological contents should be replaced.” (2006b: 11p) Instead of a simple change of ideas, he advocates a shift from extensive reading to one that is instead intensive, emphasizing the intimate dialogue between reader and author, referring to Mikhail Bakhtin (Ibid.,15). In a recent discussion on the radio program “Parents’ Meeting” on the liberal channel Echo of Moscow, Evgeniia Abeliuk, a teacher, repudiates any attempts to force pupils to read anything at all. She regards literature exclusively as a source of pleasure (“Parents’ Meeting” 2009).

These passages articulate a view of literature based on the individual's perspective. This view is present in the curricula as well, in the statements focusing on personality development. However, this role is downplayed in favor of those focusing on society's needs. In the curricula, the state declares which values constitute the foundation of the social contract, and the values chosen inevitably limit the space of the individual's development. A Russian pupil's reading of the classics should not, for instance, lead to his or her questioning of Russian literature's spiritual character. Similarly, British pupils' reading of English classics should not end with them questioning their greatness. As long as the nation-state remains the primary site of political power, national literature is necessary in order to help legitimate this form of social organization. The Russian curriculum, with its stoic imperviousness to the cultural turn, exhibits a pragmatic stance. It does not allow critical perspectives to undermine the force of its argumentation or to give rise to theoretical incongruities. Instead, it retains an essentialist view of the canon, proclaims its authors' heroic status and uses terms like "patriotism" and "motherland," leaving no doubts as to why the state continues to invest in literary education.

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Notes

- 1 V. Viktorovich, a professor of literature, describes the situation in a similar fashion: "Since then, the whole history of literature was officially regarded as preparation for the formation of the 'only true doctrine.' Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol and Tolstoi were estimated as (there was such an expression) the progenitors of our idea. It was more difficult with Dostoevsky, but finally, after a long period of embarrassment, they included him as the glorifier of the insulted and the humiliated" (2006b: 11).
- 2 On the details of this process, see Rotkovich (1980) and Dobrenko (1997: 146-180).
- 3 As for now, the curriculum of grade 10-12 (senior secondary education) is not yet published. Authors and works discarded from the 5-9 curriculum might very well appear in the required readings for older pupils. However, grade 10-12 is not compulsory, and therefore the works listed here will reach a smaller number of pupils.
- 4 The title might evoke associations to nineteenth-century native soil conservatism, as promoted by Dostoevsky, for example. However, the poem lacks any reference to Russia or praise of any particularly Russian virtues. It is a low-key lyrical poem that laconically states

- our mundane relationship with the mud under our feet. In the last line, finally, the soil's "nativeness" is anchored in the ephemeral quality of our bodies – in the fact that, after death we turn into this very soil. For English translation of the poem, see Akhmatova & Thomas (2006: 171)
- 5 The categories used by Ball et al. are: "English as skills", "English as the great literary tradition", "progressive English" (English of individual creativity and self expression) and "English as critical literacy" (class conscious and political in content), (1990: 77-80).
 - 6 Cf. this quotation from the speech: "In fact, the European literatures had creative geniuses of immense magnitude – the Shakespeares, Cervanteses, and Schillers. But show me even one of these great geniuses who possessed the capacity to respond to the whole world that our Pushkin had. And it is this capacity, the principal capacity of our nationality, that he shares with our People; and it is this, above all, that makes him a national poet." (Dostoevsky 1994: 1291p).
 - 7 In Russian, "national" as in "national consciousness" refers to ethnicity, while "all-Russian" (obshche-rossiiskii) means "including all ethnicities residing within Russian Federation." "Russian" could not be used in this context, as it is an ethnic denominator, not a civic one.

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