

**Burning Bridges: Ambivalent metaphors of Russian state power as seen through the symbolism of bridges as contentious political spaces.**

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**Abstract**

In Russian folklore, the transition between life and death is symbolized by a fiery bridge, *Kalinov Most*, guarded by a multi-headed dragon, *Zmey Gorinich* (Propp, 1986). However, the bridge also points to new beginnings, as it has come to symbolize weddings and unions. This paper argues that this ambivalence of symbols remains, and in post-Soviet space, bridges serve as much to consolidate as to divide. Two years ago, a neologism appeared in Russian social media: “to go walk on a bridge”. It was an obscenity uttered at perceived enemies, wishing them the same fate that befell Boris Nemtsov, a leader of the political opposition assassinated on Bolshoy Moskvoretsky Bridge in Moscow. This, in sharp contrast to the way symbols of bridges in the late Soviet epoch were seen as facilitating cultural exchanges between Russia and the United States, evident in such popular televisual events as the *Telemosti*—“Tele-bridges.” New bridges in Russia no longer hold this sway: the ostentatious construction of the Russkiy Bridge was subject to vast cost overruns and materials theft in preparation for the 2012 APEC Summit in Vladivostok. The Bridge of Kerchensky Bay connecting the Crimean Peninsula to mainland Russia reveals yet other geopolitical ambitions. However, as Russian society becomes more polarized along political lines, this paper investigates how various actors have attempted to reclaim the space of the bridge, seeing themselves as heroes metaphorically slaying the dragon. St. Petersburg—a city of bridges modeled after European cities such as Venice and Amsterdam—became a site of such an action when the art group *Voyna* painted a giant phallus on the Liteyniy drawbridge as it was being raised opposite the Federal Security Service, and in oppositional circles, the Bolshoy Moskvoretsky Bridge is now called the Boris Nemtsov Bridge, where supporters hold a daily vigil.