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Back in the U.S.S.R.: Russian Popular Music in the Times of Military Censorship

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Abstract

The article deals with the field of popular music in Russia in the aftermath of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 focusing on the changing public perception and governmental response towards musicians who have taken an anti-war stance. It also documents and examines the efforts of state ideologists to create a patriotic music scene that could silence dissenting voices. The framework used juxtaposes contemporary tactics with Soviet-era practices of policing popular music. The music market in post-Soviet Russia has received relatively little attention among scholars. Following the trajectories outlined in the study of this area by (Biasioli 2023, Kryzhanouski 2022, Kukulin 2021, Wickström, Steinholt 2009), the paper offers a critical analysis of the current official discourse on Russian popular music. It examines the work of modern music censorship, which has emerged as the primary mechanism governing the Russian popular music market since the full-scale invasion began.

KEYWORDS: censorship, protest music, Russian popular music, oppositional art, anti-war songs

Introduction

In 2003, Sir Paul McCartney gave his first concert in Moscow on the Red Square, attracting an audience of about 50,000 people. The final song, unsurprisingly, was "Back in the U.S.S.R." At the beginning of the footage (PaulMcCartneyVids 2008: 00:15), one can notice several quite significant figures standing shoulder to

shoulder and singing along in the front row: Yury Luzhkov, the former mayor of Moscow, his wife Elena Baturina, coincidentally considered the wealthiest woman of Russia, Soviet rock legend Andrei Makarevich, and the second president of the country, Vladimir Putin. This situation seems almost unimaginable in today's Russia, where the citizens still cannot realise "how lucky they are" with this "Back in the U.S.S.R." plot twist.

Reflecting on the event, Leslie Woodhead notes that it was a moment when "the men who had called rock'n'roll 'cultural AIDS' and banned the Beatles" (Woodhead 2013: 2) were enjoying McCartney's music in the heart of the country. McCartney was not the first foreign artist to perform in post-Soviet Russia, but it was his concert that symbolically marked the final transition from Soviet (cultural) dictatorship to a more open and democratic system. Even two decades later, in 2023, the state newspaper Moskovskij Komsomolets recalled this symbolism: "It's as if an optimistic bliss and confidence that good would inevitably triumph over evil was spread around the Kremlin. [The feeling] That peace and love are much stronger than hatred and war" (1) (Legostaev 2023).

The Soviet Union was widely known for its control over the field of culture, which, in case of both local and Western popular music, took the form of a crusade (see Bright 1985: 123-148) in the late seventies into the eighties. Ingvar Steinholt (2005: 42) describes the year 1982 as a moment when a "massive anti-rock campaign, the final and perhaps most aggressive repression programme launched against rock in the Soviet era" started. The situation repeated forty years later, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, when popular musicians of the Soviet times and the nineties, as well as young pop and rap artists, spoke out against the outbreak of the war.

FIGURE 1. Meme on music censorship posted in Aquarium Facebook page. USSR 1982:

Prohibited bands:
Aquarium, Mashina Vremeni, DDT.

Russia 2022:
Prohibited bands:
Aquarium, Mashina Vremeni, DDT.

Before to the beginning of the full-scale invasion, or the *special military operation* (abbreviated as SVO), as it is officially named in Russia, censorship in the country was sporadic and primarily targeted oppositional politicians, independent journalists, and human rights organisations. Despite Ilya Kukulin's (2021: 185-187) assertion that the relationship between the authorities and musicians in Russia during the 2010 could be already described as "the culture of ban", the cultural sector largely remained autonomous, allowing artists of diverse political persuasions to express themselves and even perform at the most significant state venues, such as the State Kremlin Palace, the Luzhniki Stadium, and the Olimpiisky Arena. Popular music, as observed by Marco Biasioli (2023: 683), was "the only cultural industry in Russia not subject to ministerial regulation, in which the free market alone defines production and distribution". This situation dramatically changed at the beginning of March 2022 when "military censorship" was introduced in Russia (Serebrjanaja 2022).

In the context of the Russian oppositional mediascape, the legislation "On Amendments to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation and Articles 31 and 151 of the Criminal Procedure Code of the Russian Federation" (2) (OVD-Info 2022) is referred to as the "law on military censorship" or "law on fakes" (hereafter "military censorship" will be used). In its official formulation, the statute purports to deter the dissemination of "deliberately false information about the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation" and extends its reach to public actions construed as "discrediting the Russian army and the actions of the government" (Serebrjanaja 2022). From the perspective of its authors, any information not sourced directly from the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation is assumed to be inherently deceptive. Besides, the public expression of anti-war sentiments or oppositional viewpoints, across any forum, could result in criminal penalties being imposed under the rubric of "fake news". This capacious interpretation of the law encompasses a diverse array of expressive mediums, ranging from social media posts—including the utilisation of the hashtag *"netvoine"* ("notowar")—to messages conveyed through clothing, badges, and even manicures (OVD-Info 2022). Moreover, the legislation empowers the Russian authorities to restrict access to a wide range of media, websites, and materials, particularly those associated with opposition, including the entities of Meta, Inc., whose services have been classified as "extremist" within the Russian Federation and remain accessible only via VPN services. Despite numerous criminal and administrative cases, the application of the law is at the same time characterised by selectivity and a lack of discernible logic. Consequently, people—with certain efforts—can persist in expressing dissent and using products formally prohibited by the law. Notably, there is no official martial law in the country (and, officially, no full-scale war but a special operation), which would bring about formal censorship restrictions, a fact regularly repeated

both by the president (who is known for criticising the Western world for the lack of freedom of speech) and by pro-state influencers. In this article, music censorship is understood in the vein of Martin Cloonan, who defined it as "a process by which an agent (or agents) attempts to, and/or succeeds in, significantly altering, and/or curtailing, the freedom of expression of another agent with a view to limiting the likely audience for that expression" (Cloonan and Garofalo 2003: 28).

Cultural censorship in general, and particularly during wartime, is not unique to the Soviet or Russian Ministry of Culture; the same patterns were observed in the countries of the Eastern Bloc, South Korea (The New-York Times 1975), Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, the UK (see Kirkegaard et al. 2017), or—in more recent contexts—in the USA during the Iraq War (Esteve-Faubel et al. 2020) to name a few. The Oxford Handbook of Music Censorship (Hall 2017) traces the history of music censorship from the eighth century. Throughout history, various institutions have been responsible for censorship, including the state, the church, grassroots public organisations, and private companies such as record labels and radio stations. While analysing the situation in contemporary Russia one must consider the specifics of the country's media landscape: the state has a virtual monopoly over all existing media resources, most importantly television and the press. Moreover, private companies, like record labels, radio stations, and production centres, are controlled by individuals with close ties to the state, and movements which are presented as grassroots (for example, *CyberDruzhina* ("Cyber Squad") and other pro-government activists) are typically coordinated from above. Furthermore, the decision of foreign companies, labels, services, and platforms to cease their operations in Russia has made it easier for the state to suppress the dissent voices. The apparent arbitrariness in the application of the laws reveals a strategic use of legal instruments to foster a climate of fear and compliance, while ostensibly maintaining a façade of legal normality. At the same time dissemination of information that contradicts the official government stance or criticises government institutions have become more of an unspoken rule, the violation of which can result in up to 15 years in prison.

Music market in post-Soviet Russia—not to mention its state after 24 February 2022—except for the works of (Biasioli 2023, Kryzhanouski 2022, Kukulin 2021, Wickström and Steinholt 2009)—has received relatively little attention among the scholars. Despite the complexity and breadth of issues that make it difficult to understand the underlying restrictions and regulations that govern contemporary Russian music market, it is essential to document and analyse the phenomena. This article endeavours to address this research gap providing a detailed analysis of the mechanisms that regulate the contemporary Russian music industry after the outbreak of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, it posits that the strategies adopted by the state are not novel, but rather updated versions of tactics previously employed in the USSR, including the establishment of lists of banned artists and the creation of a legal alternative to the voices of opposition.

Cancel culture and unwanted artists

The "elimination of Russian culture" (RBC 2023a; Pelehackaja 2022), often attributed by Vladimir Putin, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Slabiev 2023), and the state propaganda to the "Western world" (which is the USA, the UK, and the European Union), is, ironically, clearly expressed within the borders of the Russian Federation. Many artists who are now banned or marginalised inside the Russian cultural space used to be celebrated figures in the pre-war past, both in terms of commercial success and symbolic value: from Yury Shevchuk, the frontman of the DDT rock band, often regarded as a legend of Russian rock music and one of its founding fathers, whose lyrics were included in school curricula for history and literature (Rossiyskaya Gazeta 2013), to Manizha (Manizha Sangin), who represented Russia in the Eurovision Song Contest in 2021.

In contemporary Russia, the categorisation of performers as "undesirable" (Fontanka 2022) through the use of blacklists was first documented in the summer of 2022. In July, Fontanka newspaper, focused primarily on regional news of Saint Petersburg and the Leningrad Oblast (region), published a list of twenty-nine artists "whose performances in Russia were allegedly considered undesirable" (ibid.). The list, according to their unnamed sources, "was distributed among concert promoters" (ibid.). Despite the uncertain reliability of the list, as indicated by phrases like "supposedly" and "to our knowledge", and lack of hard evidence of its existence, the list received widespread dissemination across both oppositional and state-owned media. While the term "undesirable" suggests a nebulous realm where an artist's status is neither outright banned nor officially endorsed, in practical terms, it results in a de facto prohibition of concerts and public engagements within the country.

The practice of creating lists of banned artists can be traced back to the Soviet Union. They were first instituted in 1931 and remained in effect until the dissolution of the USSR. A key difference lies in their status and mode of dissemination: the Soviet ones were formally sanctioned and distributed directly to the editorial boards and cultural venues like houses of culture and discotheques ("dance clubs" in Soviet terms), and were therefore barely accessible to the general public. In contrast, the authenticity and origins of the current lists remain unverified, and yet they have gained significant attention and appear to be influencing the decisions of regional promoters and organisers. Engaging with artists included in the list may result in tangible repercussions for them as well as for the owners of bars, clubs, and concert venues. These may include heightened scrutiny by regulatory bodies and the potential suspension of the venue for a period of up to ninety days.

The practice of spreading lists of such kind, being portrayed as insider information, has gained attraction among various independent authors and bloggers. The lack of verifiable sources does not diminish the impact of such documents, as entities ranging from promoters to regional radio stations, music platforms, and even karaoke bars (Strogal'schikova 2022) reportedly use them as guides for action. The lists include not only Russian and Ukrainian artists who have openly opposed the full-scale invasion and the regime of Vladimir Putin, but also unexpected inclusions, such as the song *"Kievskij malchishka"* ("A Fella from Kyiv") by Natasha Korolyova, a pop-singer of Ukrainian origin who used to support the Orange Revolution in 2003, but who is now known for her loyalty to the Russian

government; or the song "American Boy" by the defunct 1990s pop-band Kombinaciya (presumably for the lines *American Boy, uedu s toboi, Moskva proschai* ["American Boy, I'll leave with you, bye-bye Moscow"]). This kind of information not only results in the growth of the audience of the authors who share it, but also contributes to self-censorship within the music industry.

At the same time, all of the songs and artists that appeared on the lists—except from those who intentionally removed their music from the platforms—can be found on state-controlled streaming services like Yandex Music and VK Music, not to mention less legal platforms like torrent-trackers and leak Telegram channels. The phenomenon resembles the impact of the "Parental Advisory" labels introduced by Tipper Gore in the United States. Similar to how warning labels for explicit content inadvertently increased sales for performers among young audiences (Grow 2015), blacklists in Russia could serve as a form of promotion for the artists listed. Engaging with the work of these artists is not just a musical choice; it becomes an act of symbolic support. For listeners, tuning into the music of these artists is a way to express solidarity with them, turning their music consumption into a statement against censorship and restrictions imposed on cultural expression: in either symbolic (the very fact of listening) or material terms (for example, by using a VPN while watching or listening to a particular artist in order to bypass YouTube's ban on monetising views from Russia) to public listening of "unwanted" artists (an activity that may result in fines and initiation of administrative proceedings) (Kostereva 2022).

In contrast to Ukraine's comprehensive ban on reproduction of popular music produced in Russia (Rzheutska 2023) (it is prohibited to reproduce musical material created in Russia on television, radio, in hotels, restaurants, cinemas, public transport, etc. This prohibition does not apply to private practices, such as home listening. Furthermore, it does not affect streaming platforms, where music of Russian origin can still be found), Russian musical policing is quite selective. There is no transparent or comprehensible mechanism that governs the process. The phenomenon of targeting artists in Russia has evolved into a seemingly self-sustaining and indiscriminate process, lacking discernible rationale or coherent direction. In addition to direct state control over artists, they are being monitored by the so-called "concerned citizens", pro-state activists, who are writing denunciations claiming to prosecute a particular person. Thus, a punitive state practice is reframed as an ostensible response to public demand.

The situation of Ukrainian artists in Russia illustrates a stark shift in the Russian media landscape. This is particularly true for those who previously enjoyed regular airplay and market presence but spoke out against the war following the onset of the full-scale invasion of their country. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian artists have played a significant role in shaping the Russian pop music scene, frequently featuring prominently in the Russian music charts (and vice versa). The music industries of the two countries were deeply intertwined, and even after the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Donbas in 2014, these ties were not broken. Ukrainian artists have continued to receive music awards and had consistent rotation and popularity on Russian radio and federal TV, (see Bulycheva 2017; TSN.UA 2017; Gazeta.ru 2019). For instance, Ivan Dorn's song *"Stytsamen"* has been played on the radio over 7,000 times since 2015 (Mozhem Ob'jasnit' 2022). However, following his immediate active support for the Armed

Forces of Ukraine, both the song and the artist disappeared from the airwaves in Russia. The decision to stop airing this artist's music is part of a larger trend of broadcasters taking swift action against artists who have publicly expressed opposition to the war. A similar pattern is observed with Ukrainian singer Svetlana Loboda. Her song *"K chertu ljubov"* ("To Hell with Love") received its last play on 13 March, and notably, this occurred on regional rather than federal air. Subsequently, her other popular songs also disappeared from radio stations (ibid.), as did any mention of the singer after 2021. In contrast, Ukrainian artists who chose not to publicly comment on the war seem to avoid such censorship. (for example, Yolka (Elizaveta Ivantsiv), Ani Lorak (Karolina Kuiek), Mari Kraimbrery (Marina Zhadan)). Moreover, Anna Asti (Anna Dzyuba)—who has chosen to continue her career in Russia without addressing any political issues—heralded as "the artist of the year" (Gudoshnikov 2023) hails from the Ukrainian city of Cherkasy.

The situation was clarified when the Russian Media Group (RMG), a prominent media conglomerate, issued a press release formally announcing the termination of collaborations with certain Russian and Ukrainian artists. This decision was attributed to what the RMG management described as the artists' "arrogant, contemptuous attitude towards Russian listeners" (Kutepov 2022). Given that all media holdings, including RMG, in contemporary Russia are controlled by individuals closely affiliated with the state, it can be assumed that the opinion expressed by the head of RMG Vladimir Kiselev reflects the actual position of the state.

Agents of foreign influence and enemies of the state

The Russian presidential administration, commonly referred to as AP in Russia, employs a systematic approach known as *metodichka* (a pejorative term for "manual") to direct media coverage of the war and related events. This system involves the regular issuing of detailed guidelines to state-controlled media outlets comprising not only news coverage and TV but also popular bloggers and nets of anonymous and authorised Telegram channels (3), effectively shaping their narratives and influencing the emotional responses they are intended to elicit from viewers, readers, or listeners. These manuals, being dispatched almost daily, precisely delineate the desired portrayal of specific news items, often steering the tone towards evoking particular emotions in the audience (see Aljukov et al. 2022; Verstka 2023). This practice, wherein state-affiliated authors are directed on how to accurately portray certain phenomena, has as well its roots in Soviet-era policies.

To avoid further popularisation, official Soviet music criticism of the sixties–eighties tended to ignore prohibited or semi-legal artists. In today's Russia, on the contrary, the activities of musicians who left the country and/or condemned the full-scale invasion are under close media attention. Not only tabloids and media covering celebrities' lifestyle, but publications positioned as socio-political regularly cover news ranging from the health issues of a particular performer to prices for their concerts. In contrast to the Soviet critical discourse, the content produced by current state propagandists frequently veers towards a rhetoric that can be characterised as hate speech, diverging significantly from objective reporting or balanced commentary.

One of the most striking illustrations of this phenomenon is the transformation in the portrayal of Alla Pugacheva. Once revered as the Primadonna of Soviet and then Russian popular music, she turned into a "runaway burden" (Media Khabalki 2022) as soon as she left the country and then appealed to the Ministry of Justice asking to be claimed *inoagent* ("foreign agent") of "her beloved country" (Pugacheva 2022) after her husband Maxim Galkin, a comedian and showman, was given this status. Galkin, after starting to speak out in favour of Ukraine, was not only claimed a "foreign agent" but also outed by the editor-in-chief of state-owned international news television network Russia Today (RT) Margarita Simonyan (Boldireva 2022) during a live on Russia-1 TV channel: "A man who, as everyone reliably knows, is gay, as a diversion, for personal enrichment, for a career path, marries an elderly woman and convinces his entire audience that they truly love each other", Later, Simonyan motivated her words with a desire to point out the dishonesty of the celebrity (ibid.).

In 2012, Vladimir Putin endorsed the inaugural of the "foreign agents" law (officially called "On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent") (Saakov 2012). This legislation empowered the Russian Ministry of Justice to designate the status of "foreign agent" to non-profit organisations and media entities perceived as antagonistic to the state and engaged in political activities for their alleged funding from abroad (that is, "being paid to critique the country"). These organisations were subsequently required to register in a special roster, label all their publications with a specific disclaimer, and submit detailed reports on their activities.

However, as the political landscape in Russia grew increasingly authoritarian, the scope of the law expanded significantly. This escalation became particularly evident six months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when amendments to the law broadened its application, allowing the Ministry of Justice to classify any individual or entity as a "foreign agent" even if they were "perceived as being under foreign influence" (BBC Russia 2023). Furthermore, the law introduced the concept of "individuals affiliated with foreign agents", encompassing a wide range of associations, including founders, managers, members, or employees of organisations designated as ones. Being under foreign influence can be translated as "having a wide audience and translating oppositional agenda" (ibid.).

The implementation of this law is more symbolic than systematic. The Ministry of Justice's practice of announcing new additions to the list of foreign agents almost every Friday has become routine and more of a random nature. For instance, the youngest person designated as a foreign agent at the time of writing was only 19 years old. The Ministry of Justice has created a dedicated form on its website that allows individuals to formally propose a particular candidate for classification as a foreign agent. Nineteen-year-old Marat Nikandrov revealed that he completed the aforementioned form, submitting his personal data "just for fun" (Starikov 2023), out of sheer boredom. The following Friday after submission, he was included under the pretext of "intending to act as a foreign agent" (ibid.).

To the present day, 20 December 2023, the unified register encompasses 754 organizations and individuals. This list is not limited to political or journalistic circles and includes individuals from various fields, such as the former Chairman of the Russian Government (Mikhail Kasyanov), a Nobel Peace Prize laureate

(Dmitry Muratov), and even a milkmaid from the Tula region (Elena Agafonova). The primary criterion for inclusion in this list, often ironically regarded by the oppositional audience as a form of acknowledgment, has nothing to do with actual or alleged foreign funding. It encompasses acts such as "expressing support for Ukraine", "voicing opposition to the special military operation", or even "demonstrating a willingness to collaborate with foreign entities" (Oficial'nyj internet-portal pravovoj informacii 2022). For example, rock-singer Zemfira (Zemfira Ramazanova) was included in the register for her "concert activities in 'unfriendly' countries and statements against the special operation" (RBC 2023b) and Leva (Igor Bortnik), the frontman of the Bi-2 band, was targeted because he "spoke negatively about Russia, its citizens and authorities" (Khabidulina 2023).

While Ramazanova, Bortnik, or the frontman of the Little Big band Ilya Prusikin could be barely considered oppositional artists in the pre-war epoch, some were claimed enemies of the state for the second time in their careers, which was immediately reflected not only in the media but also in memes (Figure 1). Of the three pillars of Russian rock—Yuri Shevchuk, Andrey Makarevich, who sang along with Paul McCartney with the president 20 years ago, and Boris Grebenshchikov, who more than once performed his songs in the Kremlin Palace—two left the country and were recognised as foreign agents, immediately "turning into traitors to the motherland" (Tsargrad 2023) by the state media.

For many artists, the choice to stay in Russia and continue to speak out represents a fundamental political stance. A prime exemplar of such resistance within the Russian cultural milieu is Yuri Shevchuk, whose entire career has been marked by a consistent opposition to the regime.

With the outbreak of the current war, Shevchuk maintained his commitment to the audience and continued touring with his band DDT. His candid monologues interspersed between songs during a performance in his hometown of Ufa drew the attention of law enforcement and resulted in legal proceedings: "The motherland is not the president's ass that one must lather and kiss all the time. The motherland is a beggar, an old woman who sells potatoes at the railway station. That is what motherland is", said the singer being cheered by the 10,000 people crowd and one day later was accused of discrediting the Russian army (Realii 2022: 00.28–00.40). The report, which was subsequently submitted to the court, was compiled in the artist's dressing room immediately after the show. His stature in Russian society and culture seems to somewhat eclipse even presidential authority. The case was notably dismissed three times by the courts, indicating a reluctance to directly confront his influential position.

In contrast to other prominent figures of the Soviet rock, Shevchuk has retained a significant degree of symbolic capital being a respected figure not only among the listeners with oppositional views but also among those who support the full-scale invasion and President Putin. One potential explanation for Shevchuk's continued freedom and avoidance of designation as a foreign agent, despite his quite explicit position, lies in the state's and propaganda's reluctance to provoke discontent among their key audience. The proceedings were only initiated when a judge of extreme loyalty to the state assumed control of the case. This resulted in dissatisfaction among both loyal and oppositional audiences (Ponomareva 2022). Ultimately, Shevchuk was fined 50,000 rubles (approximately 830 USD at the then-

current exchange rate) for "discrediting the Russian armed forces" due to his statements on what the motherland actually is.

In a historical parallel that resonates with current events, DDT first encountered censorship in 1982 for their song "*Ne strelyai" ("*Don't Shoot"), interpreted by authorities as a critique of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Later, Shevchuk speculated in an interview conducted by another so-called foreign agent, Katerina Gordeeva:

> The first gig of DDT was in Ufa in the State Petroleum Institute in May 1982. It was the first and the last gig of DDT of the Ufa convocation. After that, we were banned and completely closed down. And we sang there the very 'Don't shoot!' Peace, love, rock'n'roll. And 40 years later: May, a gig in Ufa, and the same thing after the gig: we are banned. Look, if that's not mysticism, then what is it? Exactly forty years have passed, that's a whole life. It means we are cool. We have not veered around in the most important thing: we do not lie to our audience and get a bash on the bonce from time to time (Skazhi Gordeevoi 2022: 21.44–23.35).

In this assertion, the singer not only acknowledges the persistence of historical patterns but also addresses his authenticity as a performer. The pursuit of his band acts as the main indicator of the authenticity of their craft. Within the contemporary Russian music scene, the borders of authenticity are not defined by the conventional dichotomies of "mainstream versus independent" or "art versus commercialism" (Shuker 2022: 46). Rather, they are defined by the political stances of a certain performer. It is notable that while the authenticity of musicians who adopt anti-war positions is generally unquestioned, those who espouse pro-state views are often perceived as inauthentic by default, by both oppositional audiences and supporters of the current regime (see below).

Sudden change of views

A relatively recent practice that has developed in the Russian cultural field is involuntary public repentance. Apparently, what was unexpected for the authorities was not only the duration of hostilities but also the number of people who made anti-war statements. The unanticipated adverse reaction from celebrities and ordinary people may partly explain the relatively late introduction of censorship practices. As claimed by independent media (Rejter et al. 2023), the government seeks to return the influencers from abroad and to lure supporters with an active opposing position.

In the wake of their departure from Russia, numerous artists promptly organised events to support Ukraine. Notable among these were musicians Noize MC (Ivan Alexeev) and Monetochka (Elizaveta Gyrdymova), who conducted a series of charity concerts aimed at raising funds for Ukrainian refugees called Voices of Peace, having collected €340,000 by ten concerts (Mamikoyan 2022). Two other major charity enterprises were Oxxxymiron's (Miron Fedorov) live-streamed R-A-W (Russians Against War 2022) and Stand with Ukraine, a collaboration between

the rapper FACE (Ivan Dremin), rock bands Nervy and Pornofilmy (Shanina 2022). These three concert-series managed to raise a remarkable €667,000 for charity organisations helping Ukraine. Live broadcasting of those European concerts facilitated a dual mode of dissent: these concerts were streamed on YouTube (which inexplicably still remains the only foreign media platform available in Russia without VPN), allowing for the transmission of protest messages while also enabling those who had left the country to express their dissent through the live chat feature on YouTube.

For those who—for any reason—did not leave Russia there are diverse methods of pressure to make the musicians change "their minds". Financial and even psychologic pressure has become a lever of persuasion of artists in the country (Rejter et al. 2023). A particularly striking example is the band Zveri. The group's frontman (Roman Bilyk or Roma Zver (Roma the Beast)), who hails from a mixed Russian-Ukrainian family and spent his early years in Donbas, has been vocal in his support for Alexei Navalny and his opposition to the regime, particularly Russia's military actions in Ukraine (in 2014 as well as in 2022). After the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, Zveri posted a statement on Facebook condemning the war. In addition, Bilyk spoke out against the war on his personal Instagram account. This stance has led to the cancellation of their concerts (the biggest of which was the one planned for the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, where the pro-governmental band Chizh & Co replaced Zveri a few days before the very show). Both posts have since then been removed or made private.

In a notable turn of events, propagandistic Telegram channels recently disseminated a video purportedly showing the singer performing an acoustic show for Russian soldiers in occupied Donbas, followed by the release of a song satirically criticising those who have left the country or do not align with its current political direction. Data analysts who have examined the video have not been able to conclusively verify its authenticity (Vorobieva 2023).

This sudden and stark shift in the frontman's political expression is widely speculated to result from intense external pressure (Polovinko 2023). This theory is further supported by scheduling upcoming concerts at two of Russia's largest venues: the Otkritie Arena in Moscow (capacity of 45,360 people) and the Gazprom Arena in St. Petersburg (capacity of 68,000 people). Given the current political climate, it seems implausible that an artist known for oppositional views would be permitted to perform at such locations without some form of concession or change in stance. And if a significant part of the group's fans remained disappointed to the extent that this action was actively discussed in the news programs on Russian media in exile, then patriotic bloggers as well saw selfish motives in this act:

> Frankly, it was unexpected to meet Roma the Beast in the trenches of Donbas. It doesn't matter what line it is; it doesn't change the essence.
> Many who know the history of 'Zveri and SVO' rightly recall the Facebook post dated February 24, which was there until recently. For the no-to-war position, there was a fair request: 'One should not collect money from the Russians after throwing mud at them.'

> The history of Zveri is much more profound. And 'gourmets' remember what Roman said about the Russian state and society in 2019–2020. But let bygones be bygones…
> It is acceptable that Roman has matured, thought, and seen a lot. And that the concert in front of the fighters is not an opportunistic move (go338 2023).

The strategy adopted by Bilyk (along with several other celebrities and bloggers) fails to achieve its intended effect, as illustrated by the aforementioned quote. This move leads to a paradoxical shift in audience dynamics: those who previously valued the performer's anti-war stance begin to withdraw their support. Simultaneously, a new "patriotic" audience fails to materialise, deterred by scepticism regarding the artist's prior oppositional views, what is perceived as a mark of insincerity.

Among the ways to get indulgence from the Russian authorities, and with it the opportunity to continue working, journalists (Rejter et al. 2023) name "helping the right children" (meaning foundations and volunteer activities related to helping children from Donbas) or participation in cultural initiatives encouraged by the state (for example, theatrical productions and propagandistic films). For example, Diana Arbenina, known for supporting Ukraine since Euromaidan in 2013, spoke out against the full-scale invasion and started performing her protest song *"Ne molchi"* ("Don't Be Silent") during the concerts. After this, her tour was cancelled, and in the spring of 2023, pro-Kremlin activist Vitaly Borodin turned to the Prosecutor General's Office with a request to check Arbenina for violation of the article of the criminal code "on discrediting the Russian Armed Forces" (Radio Svoboda 2023). A duet with the wife of a Russian soldier in Ukraine during one of her shows looks like a forced measure, a compromise with the state that allowed her to continue working and stay in the country.

As a source from the independent media Meduza (Rejter et al. 2023) notes: "The level of intimidation of people for whom creativity in Russia remains the main source of income is off the charts". According to them, artists are "clinging to the remnants of the profession with all their might". This form of forced self-censorship effectively fuelling the apparatus of state regulation, can be seen as one of the most productive means by which artists and producers are silenced. A similar phenomenon occurred among Soviet musicians, who were deliberately avoiding political themes what resulted in a notable depoliticisation of the Soviet rock music (Cushman 1995: 92-103).

Well-paid patriotism

Along with the attempts to censor, hide, or decrease the popularity of music with protest potential, the government tries its best to create a patriotic music scene. In examining the trajectory of Russian popular music, it is evident that it has retained a legacy of political loyalty to the state, a characteristic deeply ingrained from its Soviet predecessor. In the Soviet era, the performing arts, particularly music, were under the patronage and financial support of the state, with a stringent censorship apparatus in place to oversee and control the content of songs.

During the late 1960s, the Party established a state-sanctioned form of rock music through Vocal-Instrumental Ensembles (VIA), as a response to the burgeoning

popularity of both Western and local rock. This move was part of a broader strategy to offer an alternative that aligned with state ideology while appeasing the growing appetite for contemporary musical styles. Drawing parallels to the present, Russian censors and music producers are seen as orchestrating a similar approach. They are actively involved in cultivating a music scene that echoes state propaganda, endorsing pro-state and pro-war sentiments.

The authenticity of patriotic performers in Russia, especially those espousing state-sponsored narratives, is subject to scrutiny from the opposition and segments of the pro-Kremlin audience. This scepticism is fuelled by various journalistic investigations revealing that patriotism, colloquially referred to as "Z-patriotism" (Latin letters Z, V and O are considered to be the symbols of the "special military operation") in Russia, is often lucratively compensated.

In April 2022, a case in point was the musical patriotic rally *"Za Rossiju"* ("For Russia"), for which a staggering 95.3 million rubles (approximately one million USD at the then current exchange rate) from the federal budget was allocated. This expenditure represents the highest sum ever documented in Russia for financing a concert program, as per data available from the Government Procurement portal (EIS Zakupki 2023). The rationale behind such substantial state support was articulated by rock musician Sergei Galanin at the rally's inception: "The state should help patriotic cultural figures, and now we need to decide who and what product will produce with state money". Notably, Galanin's band SerGa, which performed in seven regions across the country, was the highest earner at the marathon, receiving 10.5 million rubles (approximately 225,000 USD at the then current exchange rate).

Artemy Troitsky, a prominent music journalist and vocal critic of the current Russian regime, categorises (Dako and Semenov 2022) most of these new-wave patriots as "B category" artists: one (if any) hit bands whose heyday was in the early nineties. That is, their embrace of pro-war content is largely driven by financial incentives rather than genuine conviction. Along with diverse critics and commentators, he observes that most artists participating in state-sanctioned events—such as concerts celebrating the annexation of Crimea or the so-called "returning of Kherson" (widely known by the ironical name *puting*, formed by the combination of the word *miting* ("rally") and the surname of the current president of the state)—had not previously achieved significant popularity or commercial success. So, the opportunity to perform at state events and receive substantial government funding is a plausible explanation for the enthusiasm displayed by these patriotic rockers who have ostensibly "suddenly switched on their heads and understood the situation".

Another layer of artists who took advantage of the new opportunities are performers long known for their support of president Putin and the state system: Oleg Gazmanov, Nikolay Rastorguev (Lube), Vadim Samoilov (Agatha Christie), deputy and singer Denis Maidanov, etc. For many of them, the support of the full-scale invasion became not only a way to earn money but also declare and prove their devotion to the state once again. Thus, Oleg Gazmanov announced the creation of a patriotic song competition "*Rodniki"* ("Springs"), citing the lack of such material in the realm of contemporary Russian popular music.

> We absolutely do not have enough uplifting songs; well, how much of this glamor can we bear? And now the whole nation sees it, and the whole country needs it. But music TV channels, music programs, and radio stations are so restricted that those who write such kind of content have practically no opportunity to show it.

Claims Gazmanov (Larina 2023). The project's website has already collected patriotic songs with the titles "*Gospod' segodnya dumaet po-russki!"* ("The Lord thinks in Russian today!"), *"Triedinaya Rus'"* ("Triune Ruthenia"), *"Krim s Rossiei v serdtse navsegda"* ("Crimea with Russia in the heart forever"), *"NATO, ne nado"* ("NATO, don't try").

In the description of the showcase, it is stated that "'Springs' is a tool for the formation of a patriotic environment, capable of creating a 'fashion for a patriotic song' on the wave of folk art, which determines the values, taste, and ideology in the field of musical culture of society" (ibid.). The state allocated 17 million rubles for Gazmanov's project (ibid.) (approximately 280,000 USD at the then-current exchange rate), a competition that was supposed to mark the beginning of a new wave of patriotic songs, and following its results a "gala concert" was held in the Stavropol Krai (region). The KPI indicators that the founders of the competition should have strived for are unknown, however, the official public page of the project in VKontakte (Russia's most popular social network platform) of the project consists of 31 thousand people, while the recording of the very concert was viewed by 79 people as at the time of writing (Rodniki 2023).

SHAMAN

It can be stated that there is still no powerful "new patriotic wave" in Russian music. As noted by Lev Gankin (2023), "just a disparate set of artists who supported the entry of troops into Ukraine, and even within this set, the events of February 24 and onwards became a noticeable source of creative inspiration for a vanishingly small part". Russian propagandists are concerned about their product's reach (and its unpopularity with the public).

In the context of Russia's contemporary pro-war music scene, the singer SHAMAN (Yaroslav Dronov) emerges as a notable figure whose origins, nevertheless, lie in the environment of Moscow's show business rather than the frontline realities of Donbas. Since 2013, he has been participating in diverse song competitions on the TV and sang in a cover band. Real fame came only with the beginning of the full-scale invasion. One of SHAMAN's biggest hits appeared on YouTube on 23 February 2022, the day before Russia invaded Ukraine (ironically, the first time he attracted attention was after performing a cover of a song by the Ukrainian artist ROZHDEN for The Voice TV show (The Voice Russia 2015)). Such a background has raised scepticism among even his nominal supporters. For instance, his visits to Luhansk and Mariupol were perceived as reactive measures to harsh criticism from Vladimir Kiselev (the head of already mentioned Russian Media Group and repertoire director of the VIA Zemlyane during the Soviet times) regarding his lack of "genuine support for the special military operation" (Kotikova 2023).

The importance of SHAMAN for the official musical landscape can be illustrated by the fact that showman Alexandr Gudkov was tested for inciting ethnic hatred—Article 282 of the Criminal Code "Inciting hatred or enmity, as well as humiliation of human dignity on the grounds of sex, race, nationality" which is punishable by up to 5 years in prison—for making a parody of SHAMAN's video *"Ya russkiy"* ("I am Russian") (Lamehov 2022).

Despite being touted by Russian propaganda as a leading example of patriotic pop music, SHAMAN's appeal remains limited, particularly among the youth demographic it ostensibly targets. Moreover, his popularity—or lack thereof—is not significantly bolstered by appearances on state television, state-funded tours, or even a live duet of the national anthem with Vladimir Putin. Metrics such as chart performance and social media engagement further reflect his limited success; his songs have not achieved any chart success, and his videos often receive more dislikes than likes (for example, 150,000 likes versus 310,000 dislikes under the filmed on the Red Square video (SHAMAN: 2023b) for the song *"Mi"* ("Us"); 204,000 likes and 282,000 dislikes for *"Moi boi"* ("My battle") (SHAMAN 2023a); 1 million of likes and the same amount of dislikes for his landmark song *"Ya Russkiy"* (SHAMAN 2022), etc.).

While there are undoubtedly pro-war artists, many, like SHAMAN, did not enjoy significant pre-war success. This reality has been a source of considerable frustration for propaganda efforts. The lamentations within this circle, which are derisively referred to as the "howls" (Kovalev 2022) by the oppositional audience, focus on the lack of popularity for patriotic rap and the absence of widespread pro-war cultural events. Explanations for this shortfall range from blaming external factors like the US State Department and alleged anti-Russian biases in YouTube algorithms to various even more bizarre conspiracy theories.

Zakhar Prilepin, a famous writer and, today, an equally renowned propagandist, regularly speaks on music on his Telegram channel. The viewing and listening statistics he relies on has never been in favour of pro-war performers. Thus, in the first two days after the release of Oxxxymiron's video *"Oida"*, it received 2.5 million views (19 million as at the time of writing), while the video *"Gryaznaya rabota"* ("Dirty Work") by the pro-war rapper RICH received only 150 thousand (587 thousand as at the time of writing). The propagandist explains this gap by the "incorrectness" of the tastes of Russian youth:

> So that you have no illusions about the tastes, interests, and sympathies of young people who listen to rap (90 percent of young people listen to rap, regardless of whether we consider rap 'black music' or 'not at all music' or not).
> RICH is the only Russian rapper who supported the special operation and repeatedly performed in the LDNR. Digga, Husky, Sagrada spoke earlier, but they have been silent since March 24.
> The song 'Dirty Work' has already been heard more than once in minibuses, compact cabs, military bases, and militia: our fighters love it.
> It has 150 thousand views on YouTube in 2 months. However, virtually all the top patriotic Telegram channels posted a link to it.
> The most popular protest rapper, who immediately spoke out against the special operation and donated money to Ukraine—Miron Fedorov, Oxxxymiron—posted 1 (one) day ago an anti-war song with the words 'I killed

> the empire inside me,' and it already has about 2.5 million views. Number 1 in accelerating. In a week, there will be 10 million.
> A considerable part of our youth is not entirely our youth. To put it mildly (Prilepin 2022).

The propagandist (who even proposed the formation of a committee "on investigation anti-Russian activities in the field of culture") (Berdnikova 2022) acknowledges that the strategy of creating patriotic musical content has ultimately failed. While the Soviet VIAs were effectively silencing dissenting voices, being the "soundtrack of stagnation" (Grabarchuk 2015) for the majority of Soviet citizens, contemporary pro-governmental performers created following the same goal have not achieved similar influence or success, and are unable to compete with artists of oppositional views.

Conclusion

The root cause of the lack of demand for "patriotic" music, Prilepin writes about, appears to be more straightforward: a significant portion of the Russian population does not resonate with the state-imposed destructive pathos and shows little interest in the cultural outputs it generates. As already mentioned music critic Lev Gankin (2023) succinctly described propaganda music:

> it is easy for me to imagine how a person imbued with the corresponding ideology can fall in love with the music of the 'special operation,' hearing ideas consonant with them, but it is very difficult to imagine the reverse process, in which the incentive to support the war become the songs of its propagandists.

Popularity, at least in terms of quantifiable metrics, of opposition musicians is also declining. There were no songs in the final charts for 2022 that could be labelled as anti-war: Russian invasion of Ukraine seems to have had virtually no impact on the content of local mainstream music. In contrast to the personal tops of the year compiled by music journalists (which included Noize MC, Oxxxymiron, Yuri Shevchuk, etc.) streaming platform users preferred more common popular repertoire: dance tracks, love songs, and rap about "thug life".

At the end of 2023, the biggest hit of the Russian chart (Apple Music 2023a) was the Tatar language song *"Pyala"* ("Glass") by Aigel (the soundtrack to the record-breaking series *"Slovo patsana"* ("Honour Bright")) released in 2020 and My Michelle's cover of the popular in 2000 song *"Zima v serdtse"* ("Winter in the Heart") originally performed by pop-duo Gosti iz budushchego. Despite all the attempts to ban Russian cultural presence, the songs reached second and fourth place in the Apple music chart in Ukraine (Apple Music 2023b).

This disengagement extends to the full-scale invasion itself, which, over the past year and a half, has failed to present clear goals or justifications to the Russian public. This scenario reflects a broader disconnect between state narratives and public sentiment, particularly in the realm of cultural and artistic expression: choosing between pro-war and anti-war music material, Russian listeners prefer the non-war one.

Endnotes

(1) All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. All transliterations are done according to the ISO 9 standard.

(2) The titles of the laws and official acts are given in their official version in the English language.

(3) After virtually all independent media were recognised as "extremist organizations" in Russia, as well as access to Meta company products was blocked, the main source of information for Russians became Telegram channels: both authorized media blogs and private, copyrighted and anonymous channels. Telegram channels are used not only by independent publishers and authors but also for propaganda purposes.

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