

Contemporary post-Soviet popular music: Politics and aesthetics

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Abstract

Popular music is produced, listened to and distributed all over the world. While there is no doubt that popular music studies, as well as popular music histories and the commercial popular music industry is predominantly Anglophone, popular music is not. This might seem like an obvious statement but looking at current discussions in the field of popular music studies it is a statement that needs to be made again. While there are exceptions, popular music studies in general have a problem with pseudo-universalism. As if the Western English-speaking mainstream reflected 'popular music' as a whole. This special issue of *IASPM Journal* focuses on popular music in the post-Soviet space, imagined as located between Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, but also all over the world in reproduction of sounds and the diaspora. The contributions challenge the Anglophone center of popular music studies.

KEYWORDS: popular music studies, Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, post-Soviet space, politics, aesthetics

Post-Soviet, post-socialist

What does it mean to examine post-Soviet popular music? The post-Soviet space includes ideas and materialities of regions and countries (such as the former DDR) deeply affected by the Soviet Union between WW1 and 1991. These countries and regions are not only those that were part of the union, like Ukraine or Kazakhstan, but also include those under the influence of Soviet politics like the Eastern parts of Germany, Hungary or Poland. The concept, post-Soviet space, draws on

postcolonial theory to explore how society and culture develops under the influence of the (past) rule of the Soviet Union over a large area and different cultures and societies (Spivak et al. 2006).

The context of the post-Soviet space does not neatly correspond with post-socialist Europe. For example, Yugoslavia was a socialist state but not under Soviet influence. Romania under Ceausescu's rule also separated itself from the Soviet Union. But most of the post-Soviet space is also post-Socialist. Because this issue focuses on post-Soviet space, and the popular music of that space, it also is based on the idea that space matters. The histories of the languages, regions, countries and conflicts analyzed in the issue defies ethnic and national boundaries. Further, they express negotiations of gender, race, nationalism, etcetera and are all affected by the post-Soviet space, thus how the influence of the Soviet Union is manifested and resisted in culture today.

This themed issue of *IASPM Journal* seeks to explore how popular music has been an important field for political and aesthetic negotiations in post-Soviet space during the past years. With the rise (and fall) of illiberal governments in Hungary and Poland, the failed revolution in Belarus and the ongoing war in Ukraine, popular music in the post-Soviet space has plenty of political material.

Symbolic uses of popular music in post-Soviet space have previously included the 'singing revolution' in Estonia, music for several revolutions and a war in Ukraine and the current diaspora of Russian popular musicians. Additionally, more popular expressions of popular musical politics and aesthetics of the post-Soviet space can be seen in the Eurovision song contest (Baker 2008). This issue aims to address how politics and aesthetics are currently articulated in post-Soviet popular music, relying on previous findings in the research field (Mazierska 2016, Miszczyński & Helbig 2017, Blüml et al. 2019, Hansen et al. 2019). Its contributions focus on articulations of power and nationalisms, resistance, revolution or ambivalence both in popular music's representations of power and politics. Contributions focus on different genres and different types of post-Soviet spaces, including references to Russian rock (Gololobov et al. 2014, Wickström 2014), Ukrainian popular music (Helbig 2014, Sonevytsky 2019) and Belarussian popular music (Survilla 2002), popular music in Caucasus and Central Asian former Soviet republics (Klenke 2019, Merchant 2015) as well as the post-Soviet diaspora and the online space. In times when authoritarian and illiberal governments are expanding or defending power in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, popular music enables significant circulation of political meanings through aesthetic expression.

In this issue, the post-Soviet space is thereby not regarded as strictly geographical, but it extends online and to diasporas all over the world. Popular music constructed as part of it, through themes, languages, sounds or imaginary, interact with music and politics inside and outside of this space. The contributions this issue makes to popular music studies are not limited to empirical knowledge about popular music in the post-Soviet space. For example, the theorization of community in Florian Coppenrath's article by introduces the concept *tusovka* that can be applied to other popular music spaces than the post-Soviet and rival those of *scenes* or *tribes*. The analysis of how censorship of popular music has returned in Russia in the article by Ekaterina Ganskaya holds importance in many countries today as illiberal governments are increasing censorship and manipulation of

culture all over the world. These are only two examples of the contributions the issue makes to core discussions in popular music studies today.

Outline of the issue

The authors of the issue represent different disciplines and work in different countries with different backgrounds. In the call for papers, scholars from popular music studies, ethnomusicology, musicology, Slavonic and East European studies but also from the wider field of humanities and social sciences such as sociology, political theory, media studies, gender studies and more were welcomed. Their approaches therefore differ but they share an interest in the politics and aesthetics of the popular music in post-Soviet space.

Marco Biasoli and Thomas Drew write about Ukrainian musicians in the first article of the issue. Through interviews, they examine, how Ukrainian independent popular music, after Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, has contributed to nation-building and nation-branding. They argue that musicians have employed different tactics to tie their music to Ukraine, using Ukrainian language, folk motives, lyrical political messages, political performance and video projections, speeches, flags, and more.

In the following article, Ekaterina Ganskaya writes about the (return of) censorship of popular music in Russia after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The article focuses on the changing public perception and governmental response to musicians with an anti-war stance. Further, the article documents the efforts of state ideologists to create a patriotic music scene, juxtaposing contemporary tactics with Soviet-era policing of popular music.

The next article by David-Emil Wickström analyses the songs of war published in the first phase of the war in Ukraine after the full-scale invasion. The author argues that Russia and Ukraine are engaged in memetic warfare where (musical) memes posted to social media are used as tools to both spread and combat dis- and misinformation. Also, the social media spread of music videos has become a tool for garnering support, especially for the Ukrainian cause.

The fourth article of the special issue written by Joanna Zienkiewicz discusses nationalism in Polish popular music. Based on sonic, lyrical, and visual analysis, Zienkiewicz explores how the populist-enabled mainstreaming of "turbo patriotism" was subverted in Polish popular music. The author finds that the subversion of popular music in Poland exists in contexts of traumatic histories, post-communism, and that alternative visions of Polishness were put forward.

Dinara Yangeldina, in the fifth article, analyzes the work of racial signification in a music video trilogy by Russian rapper Timati: the Teymuraz trilogy. Yangeldina argues that the figure of Teymuraz is part of Russian hybrid aesthetic populism and a racial translation. The popular music videos in the article are analyzed as shaped by proximity, populism, post-irony, and appropriation of the voices of the subaltern – not the representation of their voices through resistance.

The next article, written by Polina Dessiatnitchenko, examines Azerbaijani hip-hop articulations of the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Dessiatnitchenko bases the analysis on fieldwork in Azerbaijan and analysis of song lyrics. The findings highlight the significance of the martyr figure prevalent in Azerbaijani hip-hop songs about the conflict and places hip-hop listeners into the conflict's history.

By foregrounding the figure of the martyr, the songs thematize the topic of sacrifice, triggering affects at the core of mobilization and patriotism.

In the seventh article, Libbie Katsev analyzes gender in two Belarusian music videos from 2020, framed by their creators as commentary on the 2020 protests. Katsev discusses the music videos as defamiliarization and allegory, arguing that they undermine the state's hegemonic version of reality. Also, the music does present new gendered, intimate relations that music directly sets in motion. The article concludes that the music videos become a lens through which to think about the gendered dimensions of music's role in political upheaval.

In the final contribution, Florian Copenrath investigates informal and organic hip hop collectives in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. The author uses the concept of *tusovka* – describing a meeting-based, organic sociality. Drawing on two examples of hip-hop collectives in Bishkek, the article argues that *tusovka* can make a theoretical contribution to the wider field of popular music studies' theory building. Helping us to decenter our understanding of popular music making by resisting the idea that there is a Western "norm" in relation to which we should understand music making in other places.

In the Open Section of the issue, Leigh Shields, Austin Moore and Chris Dewey explore contemporary approaches to the use of distortion within drum and bass production. They investigate online video tutorials created by professional drum and bass producers and online content creators to gain insights into their common working practices when using distortion in their work.

In the book review section, Lee Caplan discusses Con Chapman's *Kansas City Jazz: A Little Evil Will Do You Good*, Eva Dieteren reviews Eric Wolfson's *Fifty Years of the Concept Album in Popular Music: From The Beatles to Beyoncé* and Magdalena Fuernkranz considers *Remixing European Jazz Culture* by Kristin McGee.

There is also an 'in conversation' piece between Fred Hosken and Journalist, producer, professor, and hip-hop storyteller Dan Charnas, about his 2023 book *Dilla Time: The Life and Afterlife of J Dilla, The Hip-Hop Producer Who Reinvented Rhythm*, a biography of James Yancey, describing a key influence on hip-hop sound whose life and artistry has been sanctified and mythologized since his tragically premature death in 2006.

The future of popular music

In this issue popular music is analyzed, as well as music video, interviews and wider genre formations. Social media is included in the material, as well as interviews and political and social discourse affecting music culture. Gender and racism, as well as nationalist expressions, resistance to those, and the meanings of popular music in armed conflict are discussed. All these themes hold relevance for popular music studies *outside* of the post-Soviet sphere. In re-reading the articles in October 2024, I find myself hoping that this issue does not become an affair for only those interested in the "region". Rather, I hope that popular music studies allows itself to be touched by the analytical and theoretical innovations made by authors working on popular music outside of its disciplinary core.

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